Is Deweyan Growth Egalitarian?
Learning as Reciprocal Transparency

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In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey asserts that our moral interest in growth—learning of the sort that creates more learning—commits us to a form of equality, wherein all have "equable and easy" access to this very experience.[1] In this essay, I develop replies to two objections owing to John Rawls that challenge the normative connection between growth and equality of a democratic form. Each objection, if sound, would show that elitist and aristocratic distributions of growth in school or society would be morally legitimate and sometimes even obligatory ways to optimize Dewey's conception of our single and fundamental moral interest.

The first objection claims that each person lacks a reason to advance growth for all where it does not advance growth for oneself. Against this first objection, which follows Rawls in appealing to the "separateness of persons"[2], I argue that a commitment to growth entails promoting valuable states of affairs—advancing *growth full-stop*—rather than *growth for oneself*. The second objection, call it 'the problem of elitism,' claims that if growth aims to promote valuable states of affairs, then, as Rawls argued, it may sometimes *necessitate* offensive treatment of poor maximizers by treating them unequally. Against the second objection, I argue that once our concern is directed to realizing valuable states of affairs, then we are committed to an ideal of "reciprocal transparency:" the capacity of actors to mutually understand one another's acts to advance growth. Only actors equal in the capacity to perform the same types of significant acts for advancing growth—are fully reciprocally transparent. Thus, growth in its ideal form always aims at creating equal capacities to realize growth itself, with departures only justified by advancing it for actual learners.

Before closing, I formally sketch what we need to know to assess the extent to which the agentive capacities of pairs of individuals are equal. Fi-

nally, I conclude that the value of learning as its own end entails an egalitarian interpretation of education's positional value at odds with those standardly advanced by liberal theorists. By addressing each objection, I aim to motivate a future exploration of the justification for Dewey's normative commitment to growth as a moral and political ideal.

DEWEYAN GROWTH AND THE PROBLEM OF EQUALITY

Before turning to the analysis and extension of Dewey's view, it is instructive to consider some of what it will bracket. First, in what follows, I take for granted a view of Dewey's pragmatism founded upon a single normative ethical commitment to "the formation of a faith in intelligence, as the one and indispensable belief necessary to moral and social life."[34] Robert Talisse has argued that there are reasons to think that this normative ethical commitment requires justification beyond what Dewey provides, if it is to form the end of public education.[5] I think Talisse is right, but I postpone a reply to this worry until a future work. Instead, I focus here on clarifying and establishing the relation between the commitment to learning as its own progressively realized end and equality in the ideal distribution of the capacity to learn. Learning to learn, at least in educational institutions, is often enough treated as our fundamental ethical commitment. As Joseph Stiglitz and Bruce Greenwald have argued, it may also be an appropriate aim of societies and economies looking to innovate and thrive.[6] In what follows, I argue that to the extent this is so, schools and societies should also aim toward equality in the distribution of growth, as a matter of normative necessity. If this much can be shown, a Deweyan approach that explicitly foregrounds the ideal of growth warrants further serious consideration at the intersection of education and justice.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey's most substantial work on politics and learning, both growth and equality are central. For Dewey, "there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education."[7] Framed as such, growth, for Dewey, is our single and highest ethical end: it is subordinate to no other end

and is valuable for its own sake—relative in value only to itself. Dewey's decision to close *Democracy and Education* by proclaiming that "[i]nterest in learning from all of the contacts of life is the essential moral interest" punctuates the point, presaging the passage above that "faith in intelligence" is the "one and indispensable belief necessary to moral and social life."[8] As David T. Hansen argues, "interest" in the singular, for Dewey, is synonymous with growth, and stands in contrast with plural "interests" due to its fundamental moral status.[9] As such, it is rightly read, for Dewey, as constitutive of the *public* interest and is the natural aim of public schools and democratic society.[10]

Part of understanding the public interest, as Dewey sees it, is understanding its necessarily egalitarian character. By Dewey's lights, we ought to reject forms of human association "lacking reciprocity of interest," promoting instead those that encourage learning not just for oneself but also for others on "equable and easy terms."[11] Dewey claims that this vision always involves a joining of fates: "An environment in which some are limited will *always* in reaction create conditions that prevent the full development even of those who fancy they enjoy complete freedom for unhindered growth."[12] For Dewey, we are *always* committed to the fullest realization of others' capacities to grow, through the content of our own commitment to growth. Thus, we are each to strive to avoid "a confusion in which a few will appropriate to themselves the results of the blind and externally directed activities of others."[13]

Against Dewey's frame, two famous forms of objection, each owing to Rawls and untested in the educational literature on Dewey, suggest that equality, at least in a democratic form, is not internal to growth, providing a backdrop against which to clarify and strengthen Dewey's vision.[14] In what follows, I aim to establish against these objections that an attractive conception of equality is internal to the commitment to growth—learning as its own end.

TWO PROBLEMS FOR DEWEYAN GROWTH

First, suppose growth is as Dewey claims. Should a powerful individual ever undermine the equal growth of others to increase the objectively valuable

power to grow in her individual life? Contrary to Dewey's unargued claim that everyone's growth is held back by the stifling of any, it seems highly plausible that more learning of the sort that supports learning is at least sometimes, if not often, created for some where others toil, providing the material conditions for the elite few to realize this end, even if in relative isolation from the labouring many. Is the goal of individually hoarding growth, then, sometimes consistent with Dewey's highest ideal, contrary to his desired egalitarian frame?

I want to suggest that it *is* consistent, if, as Rawls once argued, the ethical values that guide our lives are only *for* the individuals doing the valuing. In his critique of utilitarianism, Rawls argues that it is an error to apply principles of individual rationality and prudence within a life across lives because the lives of persons (and therefore their interests) are separate:

> This [mistaken] view of social cooperation is the consequence of extending to society the principle of choice for one man, and then, to make this extension work, conflating all persons into one through the imaginative acts of the impartial sympathetic spectator. Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons.[15]

Rawls' stated target is utilitarian conceptions of the common good; but his objection applies also to all other teleological views that call individuals to serve an interest in common. It applies that is, to all views that call each to serve an ideal of the good *full-stop*. The objection claims that values and interests of agents are always and only *for* individuals—that good is always "good for" someone or other, who enjoys the good (or privation) in question—and never just good *full stop*. The call to advance growth, the objector claims, should always be followed with the question: "For whom?" Couched in Deweyan terms, my interest in promoting the good *for me*, even if defined by growth and requiring some social interaction, need not involve advancing it for all equally. Any categorical appeal to promoting an overarching ideal must earn its moral status *for each* in response to this demand.

The separateness of persons may sound like a purely metaphysical

thesis of personal identity, but it cannot be without committing the naturalistic fallacy.[16] A description of one's identity entails nothing on its own about what interests one should or should not advance, without taking a stand on that further ethical question. Rawls' argument from the separateness of persons, then, depends at a deeper level on a theory of value. A genuine obligation to work upon a common project regardless of the location of our various human-sized bodies, it should be obvious, would make the descriptive fact of the separateness of persons irrelevant to refuting teleological doctrines. So, what is crucial for Rawls' argument to succeed is the denial of the existence of any ultimate and unifying good that all are called to realize in common. For Rawls, that values are *for* individuals must also not lead us to see those values as harmonizing *for each* in a common ethical aim. Otherwise, promoting the good for individuals would lead us to discover a good *full stop* that *for each* is just better to promote in common.

Perhaps the best way to reject a normative demand of cooperation toward a common ideal is to appeal to the modern platitude, accepted by Rawls, that we know of *no such good full stop*. If we accept this platitude, then it will be a brute descriptive fact that I am simply committed to what I am fundamentally committed to, where I am located, here and now, which need not be the same as what you are ultimately committed to, here and now. Rational deliberation, in this case, will always seems to proceed from values *for me*, even if some of my values are about your life and vice versa. For practical purposes, there is no common scale of ethical value upon which the values of each are rightly seen as harmonizing. Due to the lack of harmony, it follows that *more value full stop* is not always better *for each*. The teleological claim that more good is simply better, it seems, does not hold *for individual actors*. This no-harmony thesis amounts to an assertion of the practical incommensurability of value between agents. If morality is to be reinstated under these conditions, some different basis of value, such as a social contract between individuals pursuing various conceptions of the good may appear most plausible. Contract strategies, of course, like Rawls', face their own challenges establishing the ethical priority of rights and duties over all ideals of the good, without claiming themselves to

be a higher ideal of the good.[17]

If we assume Dewey's normative commitment to growth (which is an admittedly very limited reply), we are committed to a different conclusion—that promoting *growth full-stop* is best. For Dewey, ethical value *for each* is just not defined in the practically incommensurabilist way that motivates the separateness of persons and contractualist morality. For Dewey " … in *reality* growth is relative to nothing" and it is "*the* essential moral interest."[18] If learning to learn is *the* moral and ethical value that guides each normatively, then each is called to promote its content by learning from the world. This, however, cannot be a solitary aim only for one's own sake, where others exist. Wherever any sees an individual learning to learn, then, *to succeed as a learner perceiving that individual,* one should also see *value* in that individual's activity, as part of responding to the reality one perceives. To the extent that the individual one witnesses grasps insights that generate further learning, one should see more value as present in that individual's activity rather than less. For Dewey, it is in these cases that we manifest "more growth" and make moral and intellectual "progress" through our activity within a value-laden world.[19]

On Dewey's starting point, failing a reason to hive-off individuals' interests within the world from which we learn, the metaphysically simplest view is that, for each, promoting more growth is just better. Failing further considerations, then, the normative value of *growth-for-each* entails that promoting valuable states of affairs—*growth-full-stop*—is best. Dewey, consistent with this reading, explicitly rejects the idea that a group of individuals could have "interests 'of its own' … so that its prevailing purpose is the protection of what it has got."[20] If this is right, then, assuming the value of growth, as Dewey claimed, each is called to co-operate toward the same end: promoting growth together as a community of learners or what Dewey calls "*reciprocity* of interest."[21]

The reply to this first objection does not yet render a plausible notion of democratic equality internal to growth. This fact will count, for many, as a reason to introduce the priority of growth-for each and a contractualist model of political morality to regulate our community of learners. It is here that the second problem, what I call Rawls' "problem of elitism" for a politics of the

common good gains its traction.[22] If we aim to promote growth *full stop*, whether in school or society, then, Rawls' student will claim that "Among the relevant aspects of the problem are men's different productive skills and capacities for satisfaction. It may happen that maximizing aggregate welfare [growth for Dewey] requires adjusting basic rights to variations in these features."[23] It may require, for example, distributing more resources to those who are better situated to maximize the good of growth.

If poorly situated maximizers, due to their social or material condition, can be used most efficiently as mere means to promote the elites' educational growth, then doing so, the objector claims, on these assumptions, is *morally necessary*, even if Dewey would protest. This, after all, is what is demanded if we aim to promote the common good without restriction. If more growth occurs empirically through a hierarchical classed structure, then for all Dewey has shown, we are required to advance it. In such a case, "reciprocity of interest" demands working together on "numerous" and "varied" shared projects toward the "full" and "free" realization of an unequal community—whether in school or society.[24] Rawls' student will claim that some other individualist model of educational formation is required to protect equality from the aristocratic implications of a growth-based politics of the common good.

I believe that this second Rawlsian objection stands against Dewey's view as stated. If Dewey does not clarify or augment his account of growth, then he will be forced to appeal to non-growth considerations to address this consequence, introducing questions of where, when, and why to trade growth off for egalitarian distributions of this value. To avoid this conflict between growth and equality, which mirrors the liberal tension between freedom and equality, an alternative strategy that renders equality internal to the value of learning to learn is necessary.

GROWTH AS RECIPROCAL TRANSPARENCY

To this end, recall that we are committed to the objective value of growth and that more growth is real moral *progress*. A further fact is of great

import: Individuals who aspire to grow should also acknowledge that there is objective value in gaining insight into individual *acts* as they are manifest in the world. The world relevant to growing is not only constituted by mere physical *events*, as Dewey well understood. Only if I can discern what other individuals do, which involves knowing why they do what they do, how they do it, the moral significance of what is done, and what it is like for them to act as such, do I fully understand what is occurring in my community. This fact is true of every individual who acts alongside others. So, if our ideal is learning of the sort that sustains learning, then an ideal of reciprocal transparency, a relation characterized by the capacity to mutually understand one another's acts, for the sake of promoting growth as our shared aim follows. The term of art, 'reciprocal transparency' is introduced to denote this conjunction of mutual understanding alongside an assessment of the significance for growth of what is mutually understood.

If our goal is to learn about and from our world to sustain learning, then we should recognize, in the ideal case, that it is objectively better for any two individuals standing in relation to each other to have equal agentive capacities: capacities to passively perceive and actively engage with others, to realize the shared goal of advancing growth. Only with such capacities of insight and action, which Dewey dubbed "habits", can we become transparent to one another as actors and thus most fully contribute to the intersubjective aspects of learning to which it is objectively valuable, on this frame, to contribute. These capacities involve not only those of scientific and social scientific observation, which are central to knowing what occurs and how, but also the arts of intersubjective interpretation and communication characteristic of the humanities and fine arts, which allow insight into why an agent acts and what it is like for her to do so. If this is correct, then wherever there is a community of learners, the growth we should aim at in ideal form is always a growth in relations of reciprocal transparency and, therefore, equality of agentive capacity in this holistic sense.

By attending to the ideal of reciprocal transparency, we unearth the moral truth in Dewey's ambiguous and often hazy talk about the "evil" of one-sided exchanges of "stimulation and response": Inclusive, balanced exchanges are

those wherein we have the capacity for mutual understanding of the sort that most fully realizes growth.[25] But if the best state of affairs is not only one that has the most educational growth, but also that grows *equals* in agentive capacity, then we can see that the second Rawlsian objection is misplaced: the ideal of equality of capacity to learn is internal to learning as its own end, wherever other actors exist.

RECIPROCAL TRANSPARENCY: TWO-DIMENSIONS OF PAIRS

What do we need to know to assess the relative presence or absence of reciprocal transparency in relationships in school or society? I think there are important formal differences in promoting reciprocal transparency between and across pairs of individuals. Due to constraints of space, here I consider only the former, which I take to be the basic case, with the latter derivable from it. Two formal properties constitute reciprocal transparency between pairs of individuals. The first, grounded in an empirical theory of learning to learn inter-subjectively, assesses the capacities and commitments of the actors, their beliefs, desires, projects etc. and the probability of those commitments and capacities to advance the growth of equals. Call this first dimension, which refers to the potential of various properties for advancing holistic learning between equals, the "fecundity" of the commitments and capacities. The upper limit case of perfect fecundity is an omniscient and omnipotent actor, one who knows how to do all that one could do to sustain perfect learning in any context and who desires to do so perfectly. The lower limit is cognitive death—a non-actor with no capacity to sustain learning from any experience, an actor, *at best*, trapped in a "solipsism of the present moment."[26] Short of either limit case, we approximate this ideal, always and only in degrees.

The second level of assessment incorporates the first, adding the capacity for mutual understanding at a time. The extent to which each actor in a pairwise relation can understand the other's acts weighted by their significance for advancing growth constitutes the completed index of reciprocal transparency. If perfect mutual understanding of acts, as we have suggested above, in

the limit case, involves knowing exactly what it is like to perform any act an agent might perform, in context, then the upper limit of mutual understanding is being able to *become* the actor one seeks to understand. The lower limit of mutual understanding, where one is not capable of understanding *any* property of any act, is again, a case of cognitive death, at least in that context. The upper limit case of perfect reciprocal transparency, then, formally combines perfect mutual understanding between actors *and* perfect fecundity. The upper limit, in effect, is a kingdom of omniscient agents who sustain perfect growth and who know each other perfectly, *becoming* identical to a single perfect learner sustaining learning. The lower limit, again, is cognitive death. Short of either limit case, we achieve reciprocal transparency in degrees—theoretically as a ratio of the admittedly lofty upper limit.

These two levels of assessment provide the formal index of the value of pair-wise relationships under growth as reciprocal transparency at a time. By combining measures of growth at times, we may develop descriptive and predictive measures across time. The formal structure of this pair-wise two-dimensional ideal provides for a level of pluralism in the ways a relationship may concretely enable valuable growth, while at the same time maintaining an egalitarian focus. Some mutual understanding of actors may be more valuable due to the number of commitments understood, some due to the level of significance of only a few commitments. It may be more important, for example, for me to be able to understand only a few of the Secretary of Education's most significant types of acts or the most important teachings of a great teacher, than many other act types in my community for the sake of growing equals. Still, a relationship in which I can understand many acts of more modest significance may be more important in the end for advancing our egalitarian goal.

On this framework, the capacity to learn is a positional good, one whose value is determined in part relationally, but only in the sense that it is intrinsically valuable to stand in certain kinds of egalitarian learning relations. This cooperative account departs, therefore, from Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift's treatment of the "partly positional" value of education understood in competitive terms, where I gain and you lose where I have more education

and you less.[27] On this account, our failure to realize the capacity to learn as equals, across a life, is a failure to be recognized by each as a limitation of the world we share.

Due to this fact, moving resources to promote the growth of equals is not an offensive case of "leveling down"—blinding the sighted to create equality, for example—both because we see it as our shared project and because of the aspirational role of fecundity in our ideal. Fecundity ensures that where we redistribute and trade-off opportunities, we do so only if each better enjoys the presence of egalitarian growth by the trade, projected over actual lives.[28] Apparent departures, then, where some with more capacity are provided greater resources, for example, to research medical conditions or conceptual barriers to mutual understanding, are justified on this ideal, only if they are merely apparent. Departures are justified, that is, only if they advance the growth of those unequally situated toward equality in their lives.

Due to limitations of space, I do not consider questions of the distributive shape of reciprocal transparency across sets of pair-wise relations in a population. I note only that it is more complex formally than in the basic pair-wise case, which forms the units of value and overarching ideal we aim to bring about for each under this Deweyan frame. Like the task of justifying Dewey's normative ethical starting point, I leave the task of developing these more detailed distributive implications to a future project. For now, I have argued that Dewey's commitment to growth as a normative ideal of learning to learn provides the seeds of an egalitarian vision, one that for withstanding canonical Rawlsian criticisms without appealing to the idea of a social contract deserves further exploration. If correct, the foregoing entails that anywhere that an individual, institution, or society aims to cultivate an ethos of learning to learn, first and last, then a commitment to equality in the distribution of growth follows.

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1 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 88.

2 See, for example, Iwao Hirose, *Moral Aggregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially Chapter 4, "Aggregation and the Separateness of Persons." In *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), Rawls refers to the "separateness of life and experience" (p. 191) that marks the "distinction of persons" (p. 191) as a reason to reject classical utilitarianism.

3 John Dewey, "The Development of American Pragmatism," in *John Dewey: The Later Works 1925-1953 Volume 2 1925-1927* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2008), 21.

4 For a consideration of this and alternative ways of reading Dewey's pragmatism, see: Gonzalo Jover, "*Democracy and Education* then and now: 'De-pragmatizing' and 'ultra-pragmatizing' readings of John Dewey's pedagogy," in *Dewey in Our Time: Learning from John Dewey for transcultural practice,* eds. Peter Cunningham and Ruth Heilbronn (London: UCL Press, 2016), 48.

5 Robert Talisse, "A Farewell to Deweyan Democracy," *Political Studies* 59 (2011): 509-526.

6 Joseph Stiglitz & Bruce Greenwald, *Creating a Learning Society: A New Approach to Growth, Development, and Social Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

7 Dewey, *Democracy & Education*, 51.

8 Dewey, *Democracy & Education*, 360.

9 David T. Hansen, "Dewey & Cosmopolitanism," *Education and Culture* 25, no. 2 (2009), 128.

10 Hansen, "Dewey & Cosmopolitanism," 133.

11 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 85, 88.

12 Ibid., 202 (emphasis added).

13 Ibid., 88.

14 For treatments of other issues related to Dewey and Rawls, see Betty Weitz, "Equality and Justice in Education: Dewey and Rawls," *Human Studies* 16 no. 4 (1993): 421-434; James Scott Johnston, "Schools as Ethical or Schools as Political: Habermas between Dewey and Rawls," *Studies In Philosophy of Education* 31 (2012):109-122; Eric Thomas Weber, "Dewey and Rawls on Education," *Human Studies* 31, no. 4 (2008): 361-382.

15 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 27.

16 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007).

17 Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 196.

18 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 51 (emphasis added), 360.

19 Ibid., 51, 46.

20 Ibid., 86.

21 Ibid., 85.

22 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 508-509.

23 Ibid., 508.

24 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 85, Cf. 86.

25 Ibid., 84.

26 Hilary Putnam, "Why Reason Can't be Naturalized," *Synthese* 52, no. 1 (1982), 20.

27 Harry Brighouse & Adam Swift, "Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods," *Ethics* 116, no. 3 (2006): 471-497. For others who endorse the competitive view of education as an at least partly-positional good, see Debora Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," *Ethics* 117, no.4 (2007): 623-648; William S. Koski and Robert Reich, "When Adequate Isn't: The Retreat from Equity in Educational Law and Policy and Why it Matters," *Emory Law Review* 56 (2007): 545-617.

28 I take it that the value we respond to inheres in actual whole lives, rather than lives that are merely possible. Any duties to future generations I see as generated via transitive relations between generations (i.e., generation A has a duty to B which has duties to C, rather than from A to C directly, if A's and C's lives don't overlap chronologically).