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Dewey's Independent Factors in Moral Action

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Abstract

Drawing on unpublished and published sources from 1926 to 1932, this chapter analyzes "Three Independent Factors in Morals" (1930) as a blueprint to Dewey's chapters in the 1932 *Ethics*. The 1930 presentation is Dewey's most concise and sophisticated critique of the quest in ethical theory for the central and basic source of normative justification. He argued that moral situations are heterogeneous in their origins and operations. They elude full predictability and are not controllable by the impositions of any abstract monistic principle. Moral life instead has at least three distinct experiential roots that cannot be encompassed in one ideal way to proceed. More specifically, Dewey hypothesized that each of the primary Western ethical systems (represented for him by Aristotle, Kant, and the British moralists) represents a basic, non-arbitrary force, or factor of moral life: aspiration, obligation, and approbation, respectively. Each factor is expressed in that system's leading fundamental concept: good, duty, and virtue, respectively. Yet he contended that aspirations, obligations, and approbations are distinctive phenomena that cannot be blanketed by a single covering concept. By exposing Dewey's own generalizations to scrutiny, the promises and limitations of his approach can be critically evaluated.

Three Independent Factors in Morals

On November 7, 1930, Dewey addressed the French Philosophical Society in Paris, giving what his French colleagues recognized as "a première of his new ideas" (quoted in LW 5, 503). He hypothesized that each of the primary Western ethical systems (represented for him by ancient Greek teleologists, Roman and German deontologists, and British moralists) represents an irreducible experiential factor or root of moral life: aspiration, obligation, and approbation. Each basic experiential factor is expressed in that system's leading fundamental concept: good, duty, and virtue. Each system seeks to bring divergent experiential forces wholly within the logical scope of its own monistic category while treating other factors as derivative. For example, rationalistic deontologists conceive a character trait to be virtuous because it maps to what is antecedently determined by reason to be right. Dewey, however, contended

that aspirations, obligations, and approbations are distinctive experiential/existential phenomena that often conflict with each other and cannot be fully blanketed by a single covering concept.

Sorbonne professor Charles Cestre immediately translated Dewey's 1930 English presentation, along with highlights from the ensuing discussion, and published it in *Bulletin de la SFP* as "Trois facteurs indépendants en matière de morale."[1] Decades later, in 1966, Jo Ann Boydston translated the French article back into English for *Educational Theory* as "Three Independent Factors in Morals," which she eventually included in the critical edition of Dewey's works (LW 5, 279–288).

Soon after Boydston published her back translation, an unpublished and undated typescript (mss102_53_3) was discovered in the Dewey archives at Southern Illinois University, titled in Dewey's hand "Conflict and Independent Variables in Morals."[2] A copy of this typescript was available to Abraham Edel and Elizabeth Flowers, who introduced the 1985 critical edition of Dewey's 1932 *Ethics* (LW 7; cf. Edel 2001). Pages 1–5 and 13 of the typescript remain unpublished, though these pages clarify several substantive points about Dewey's ethical outlook and offer unique angles and metaphors. The first five pages were likely presented in 1926 to Columbia University's philosophy club (Dewey to Horace S. Fries [1933.12.26 (07682)]). Pages 6–12 closely track "Trois facteurs indépendants en matière de morale," though Boydston decided not to include Dewey's substantive handwritten revisions for those pages in the critical edition.

Assuming that Dewey was reworking the typescript for an English publication, why did he never follow through? A plausible reply can be inferred from the fact that Dewey incorporated its basic insights into his chapters of the 1932 Dewey-Tufts *Ethics* textbook (LW 7, chs. 10–17). The "three roots" hypothesis in the 1930 presentation serves as an organizational chart for those chapters, especially Chapters 11–13. But he incorporated the three roots in a less theoretical form that he judged to be better suited to the practical and pedagogical needs of undergraduate students (Dewey to Horace S. Fries [1933.12.26 (07682)]. He set aside the theoretic key once it had served his pedagogical goal for the *Ethics*, which was to reforge historical theoretical tools in light of contemporary moral needs so that students can use them to become more comprehensively conscientious in their deliberations and character

development. Specifically, Dewey's goal in the 1932 *Ethics* was to help students become more perceptive of moral complexity, study and assess their own circumstances in light of prior systems, and competently use diverse theories as deliberative tools (reforged to see connections that had escaped our notice) in predicaments that require practical coordination among disparate elements.[3]

The theoretic key he left behind is among the most practically significant things Dewey ever wrote on ethics, and its significance has arguably increased as rampant moral fundamentalism and homogeneous narrowness continue to build walls of exclusionary oppression (see Collins 1998) and block the way to discovering shared toeholds to debate and achieve social goals like public health, justice, security, and sustainability. Moral fundamentalism encourages antagonism toward excluded standpoints, closure to being surprised by the complexity of many problems, neglect of the context in which decisions are made, obtuseness about one's own truncated framework, and a related general indifference to public processes and adaptive policies. It may be progressive in one dimension of a problem, but typically at the cost of being regressive with respect to concerns that are off the radar of our idealizations. These concerns are habitually overlooked or relegated as externalities.

Meanwhile, reactionary nihilism is merely moral fundamentalism's mirror image, setting up a false dilemma between nihilism and fundamentalism. Dewey rejected both of the principal alternatives on offer: moral monism (the quest for a single ethical ruler to govern deliberation) and moral skepticism (which takes the absence of such a ruler to spell the end of ethics). Instead of joining monists in an outdated quest for a theoretical hierarchy that subdues variety among fundamental moral concepts, or merely venturing "an eclectic combination of the different theories" (LW 7, 180), Dewey approached philosophical research into ethics as a way to help create a shared cultural context in which we cultivate conditions for communicative inquiry that refreshingly steers clear of any tendency to autocratically predefine what is relevant and to prejudge alternative formulations without dialogue.

In a letter to Horace S. Fries [1933.12.26 (07682)], Dewey identified the key conceptual shift he made between the 1908 *Ethics* (MW 5) and the 1932 revision. He had, he wrote, been committed in 1908 to a "socialized utilitarianism" that foreshortened moral action from the teleological perspective of the

good. This monistic consequentialism is also apparent in *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891, EW 2, 238–388) and *The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus* (1894, EW 4, 219–362). Note, importantly, that Dewey nowhere *reduced* moral life to a triumvirate of root factors; he did not have a universal, cover-all ethical theory. But by 1932 he had transitioned to a strong axiological pluralism that maintained the intellectual distinctness of variables in moral action, variables that are selectively—often helpfully—emphasized in key abstract ethical concepts.

Dewey's typology of "at least three" relatively independent factors in moral action developed in the 1920s as the organizing principle of his spring 1926 course in "Ethical Theory" at Columbia University. Thanks to Donald Koch's editorial work on *The Class Lectures of John Dewey* (2010), researchers have access to material unknown to Edel or Flowers, including Sidney Hook's class lecture notes on that 1926 course. Hook's notes take readers into the classroom as Dewey surveys the history of ethical theory to lay bare "certain categories found to be involved in judgments which men actually pass in the course of moral conduct and which concepts have become the foundation stones of theories about ethics" (in Koch 2010, 2.2230). The 1926 course—akin in its topic to a course in meta-ethics today in that it was "not concerned with what is specifically right, but with the category of right" (2.2230)—was organized around a hypothetical explanation for the variety of ethical theories.

In the 1926 course, Dewey struggled with whether right and duty are fundamentally different concepts. For example, he explored Sidgwick's notion in *The Methods of Ethics* that the right is the "Rational Good," which Sidgwick contrasted with a merely *natural* good (cf. Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014). Dewey said in the class's opening days:

> These remarks [identifying good, right, duty, and virtue as fundamental concepts that enter into moral conduct] presuppose the possibility of a hierarchy of these different ideas, i.e., all deduced from a supreme one. But an alternative is possible, i.e., that none are derivative or subordinate. They may be independent variables, i.e., ideas representing facts which while they overlap, are still intellectually distinct so far as the meaning of the four terms is

> concerned. The originality in the [Spring 1926] course will largely be concerned with the inability to find a single central notion from which the others can be derived or around which they can be organized. Two or three may be connected, but there are at least three independent variables.
>
> (in Koch 2010, 2.2231)

Urging that moral uncertainties arise from conflicts inhering in situations, and that moral problems do not come prepackaged with a correct formulation or a single justified course of action, Dewey in 1926–1932 broadened his scope beyond his prior focus on moral psychology in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922)—e.g., his theory of dramatic rehearsal in deliberation (see Fesmire 2003, ch. 5)—to encompass the wider scene of moral action. "Three Independent Factors in Morals" is Dewey's resulting conceptual map of the existential terrain of moral action. The essay foreshortens his mature ethical theory. In what follows, I draw on the aforementioned unpublished and published sources from 1926 to 1932 to clarify Dewey's analysis in "Three Independent Factors in Morals" of good, duty, and virtue as distinct concepts that in many cases express different experiential origins.

Is There a Conceptual Home Range of Moral Action?

Is there a single empirical source of moral action, or are there plural sources? This was Dewey's central question as an ethical theorist from 1926 to 1932—again, aside from any normative prescriptions or constraints regarding what specifically is good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious. His hypothesis was that moral problems require us to reconcile and coordinate "heterogeneous elements" (in Koch 2010, 2.2270) that include "at least three independent variables in moral action" (LW 5, 280) which "pull different ways" (Dewey, undated ms, 4). These variables are independent in the sense that one is neither logically derivable from another nor translatable without remainder into the terms of another. If Dewey is right that there are several empirical roots of moral action, then one radical implication is that any ethical

theory that strives like logical or mathematical theories to solve any moral problem with the single "right" method or procedure will be inadequate to the heterogeneity of moral experience.

In the 1930 presentation, Dewey began his analysis with a simplified binary of independent factors in morals before expanding to "at least" a trifecta. He operationalized the two most familiar "opposing systems of moral theory" by rejecting the false dilemma that binds them: either what's morally Right derives from what's Good (so we get a teleological morality of ends, where right action is defined as the means to the supreme good of *eudaimonia*, pleasure, self-realization, liberty, equality, sustainability, or the like), or what's morally Good derives from what's Right (so we get a deontological morality of laws, where right action is prescribed by "juridical imperative"). Dewey argued that "neither of the two can derive from the other," there is no "constant principle" tilting the balance "on the side of good or of law," and that both good and law are conceptions that "flow from independent springs" (LW 5, 281). Consequently, in moral education, learning to desire the good and learning to do one's duty are equally legitimate expectations, yet each frequently gets in each other's way and tugs in different directions. Reflective morality consists, then, in the capacity to determine a "practical middle footing" *between* practically incommensurable claims, "a middle footing which leans as much to one side as to the other without following any rule which may be posed in advance" (281).

Moral situations, in Dewey's view, are not just *occasions* for uncertainty about what to do; problematic moral situations more typically *justify* our uncertainty. "Moral experience is a genuine experience" of real, systemic conflicts (in Koch 2010, 2.2270), so we generally *ought* to be reflective. And yet, Dewey argued, traditional theories have treated conflict as specious rather than as part and parcel of moral experience. Moral philosophers have not failed to acknowledge angst, but they have for the most part postulated "one single principle as an explanation of moral life" (LW 5, 280), a correct standpoint from which we will at least in principle see that our initial hesitancy had been based on momentary ignorance.

If there is a unitary conceptual home range of moral action, moral conflict boils down to hesitancy on our part about what to choose. On that view, what is good or virtuous or right is already licit,

ready to be laid bare by intellectual analysis. But in fact morally uncertain situations require us to reconcile conflicting factors with multiple conceptual ranges. Consequently, Dewey urged: “It is not without significance that uncertainty is felt most keenly by those who are called conscientious” (Dewey, undated ms, 13). Should an expectant mother of triplets selectively reduce to twins? Should we globally follow a principle of per capita equity for carbon emissions? Should John have had the affair with Anzia? To see these questions through the lens of only one factor—as at bottom a matter of rights not downstream consequences, of what is right not what is good, of duty not virtue, of what I should do and not what kind of person I should become—risks lop-sided, partial, and exclusionary deliberation that pretends as a matter of course to have precisely captured all that is morally or politically relevant to the choice. In actual experience, it would be an atypically easy case in which tensions among values could be resolved by appealing to a supreme value, principle, standard, law, concept, or ideal that exhausts whatever is of moral worth in the rest of our concerns.

Under the narrow monistic assumption legitimized by traditional ethical theorizing, conflict and diversity are merely apparent (LW 5, 279–288). A situation may at first *seem* to be a quagmire, the supposition runs, but rigorous examination, or more data to feed into our utility calculations, or comparison to an egalitarian island of rational albeit hapless contractors (see Dworkin 2000), will reveal that (a) there had been a good, right, or fair path through it all along, and (b) the path’s goodness, rightness, or fairness overrides other considerations when it comes to justifying the choice.
In Dewey’s idiom, uncertainty on this monistic view is seen mostly as a “hesitation about choice” between the moral and the immoral: we assume we must choose the good (vs. evil), will the obligatory (vs. giving way to appetite, inclination, and desire), or do the virtuous (vs. the vicious). “That is the necessary logical conclusion if moral action has only one source, if it ranges only within a single category” (LW 5, 280). “*We* may be in doubt as to what the good or the right or the virtuous is in a complicated situation,” but under the traditional one-way assumption “it is there and determination of it is at most a purely intellectual question, not a moral one. There is no conflict inhering in the situation” (Dewey, undated ms, 3).

Yet contemporary moral and political conflicts are rarely so superficial that a theoretically correct rational analysis could, even in principle, sweep the path clear toward what is "truly" good, right, just, or virtuous. Entanglements of often-incompatible forces inhere in typical moral predicaments (cf. Latour 1993). It is typical to find ourselves tugged in multiple ways, none of which has overriding moral force. This relative incommensurability of forces presents, for Dewey, a *practical* problem that requires moral imagination and artistry (cf. Alexander 2013). For example, anyone who has worked on administrative policies for allocating faculty workloads at a university is at least implicitly aware that an institution or department can purchase greater aggregate happiness at the price of some unfairness. One can also demand an exactingly rational fairness in workload at the cost of some unhappiness. Is the job of the theorist to discern which of these ways of organizing reflection is the most justified? That is, is the theorist's job to show a priori which antecedently defended and relatively static principles should govern choice? A Deweyan alternative is not to override one of these conceptual frameworks on behalf of a purportedly more rational monistic framework, but to democratically elicit the generative possibilities of a situation that may be shackled by an overly legalistic approach that is insensitive to intractable tensions. In the Q&A that followed the 1930 presentation, Dewey admitted that

> he exaggerated, for purposes of discussion, the differences among the three factors, that indeed moral theories do touch on these three factors more or less, but what he wanted to emphasize was the fact that each particular moral theory takes one of them as central and that is what becomes the important point, while the other factors are only secondary.
>
> (LW 5, 503)

The central dogma of ethical theory is that any adequate account of metaethics and normative morality must be given in terms of one supreme root (Fesmire 2003, 2015). Yet proponents of each primary ethical system miss, at least in their explicit theorizing, the tensions that constantly underlie moral action as irreducible forces, as when binding social demands conflict with aspirations. Dewey

insisted that it is not possible to theoretically settle moral problems in advance of their occurrence because each variable in moral action “has a different origin and mode of operation,” so “they can be at cross purposes and exercise divergent forces in the formation of judgment.” “The essence of the moral situation is an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator” (LW 5, 280). Dewey’s alternative for future ethical and political theorizing would be to lay bare and classify these practical entanglements within a wider “framework of moral conceptions” that puts basic roots in communication (LW 7, 309), so that we might “attend more fully to the concrete elements entering into the situations” in which we must act (LW 5, 288).

From Three Factors to Three Foundations

To recap Dewey’s hypothesis, problematic moral situations are heterogeneous in their origins and operations. They tangle and diverge in ways that elude full predictability and are typically not controllable by the impositions of any abstract monistic principle. Moral life has *at least* three distinct experiential roots that cannot be encompassed in one ideal way to think about morals. Hence, most importantly for reconstructing traditional ethical theories, there is no universal foundation of ethics—whether procedurally constructed or “foundational” in the now old-fashioned sense—that would allow us to single out, in Thompson’s phrasing, “the most fully justified course of action, even in situations where beneficial outcomes are offset by costs, or where rights and duties conflict” (Thompson 2016, 70). Dewey’s unpublished typescript clarifies the hypothesis:

> The three things I regard as variables are first the facts that give rise to the concept of the good and bad; secondly, those that give rise to the concept of right and wrong; thirdly, those that give rise to the conception of the virtuous and vicious. …What I am concerned to point out [is] that the concrete conflict is not just among these concepts, but in the elements of the actual moral situation that, when they are abstracted and generalized, give rise to these conceptions.[4]

(Dewey, undated ms, 2)

In this section, I clarify Dewey's hypothesis by interspersing the three experiential factors and concomitant abstract concepts, as emphasized in the 1930 presentation, with the parallel chapters in the 1932 *Ethics* (Chapters 11–13).

Ends, the Good, and Wisdom

The Good as a leading concept in reflective ethics springs from desires and aspirations. People have purposes they aim to realize; pervasive wants, drives, appetites, and needs that demand to be satisfied. Yet what *seems* good at short range may not in fact *be* durably good. If only miracles would intervene to keep our choices from having their usual side effects! But in the universe we are obliged to inhabit, the *satisfaction* we crave may not be judged *satisfactory* when we take a wider view. So we need practice and wisdom to thoughtfully discriminate between the real good and the mirage. Consequently, the teleological conception of goods that approvably speak to human cravings and aspirations is "neither arbitrary nor artificial" (LW 7, 309). When we make hasty choices without intelligent foresight, we just follow the strongest impulse and fulfill an inclination without taking its measure. "But when one foresees the consequences which may result from the fulfillment of desire, the situation changes" (LW 5, 282). Intelligent foresight involves judgment and comparison as we envision consequences *ex ante* and track them *ex post*.

Dewey analyzes the imaginative capacity to crystallize possibilities and transform them into directive hypotheses in his theory of "dramatic rehearsal" in deliberation (e.g., MW 14, ch. 16; cf. Fesmire 2003, Alexander 2013, and Johnson 2019). We imaginatively rehearse alternative avenues for acting in a dynamic social context, and judgments can be "examined, corrected, made more exact by judgments carried over from other situations; the results of previous estimates and actions are available as working materials" (LW 5, 282). In this way, we learn to organize and prioritize desires with an eye to their bearings, and this led historically to candidates for the "chief good," the *summum bonum* (Aristotle

1999, Book I) such as hedonistic pleasure, success, wisdom, egoistic satisfaction, asceticism, and self-realization.[5] Wherever this factor is the dominant emphasis in philosophical theorizing, *reason* is conceived as "intelligent insight into complete and remote consequences of desire" (LW 7, 217). The envisioned action is right and virtuous because it is truly, far-sightedly good; it is wrong and vicious because it is short-sightedly bad.

As a contemporary example, take Singer's hedonistic utilitarian approach to "effective altruism." For Singer, reason objectively calculates the best quantifiable way to "maximize the amount of good you do over your lifetime" (Singer 2015, 65). Reason counters our emotive tendency to discount the lives of those who are physically or temporally distant. Singer argues that reason also checks our tendency to mistake "warm glow giving," as with the Make-a-Wish Foundation, with cost-effective philanthropies like GiveWell. One need not be morally "on the clock" 24/7, as this would reach a point of diminishing returns (what Singer calls the point of marginal utility). But weighing your options—say, alternatives for charitable giving—to objectively determine the most good that you can do, is what it *means* to be moral. If you can work for Goldman Sachs and donate your considerable discretionary cash to effective charities, you may do more life-saving and quality-of-life-improving good than if you strictly adhere to a deontological "do no harm" principle and refuse to participate in the capitalistic financial system due to its putative unfairness. The good that you do *justifies* your participation in the system, unless you could have aggregated more good in some other way. If struggling against structural inequalities by minimizing involvement in financial markets adds up to the most good you can do, then it is justified. But for Singer, fighting for justice is *not* good "in itself" independent of its utility.

For Singer, answering a moral problem is analogous to answering a math problem. It requires us to calculate payoffs and pitfalls and thereby determine the objective good (145). For instance, what priority should we give to expenditures on decreasing existential risk (from asteroids, climate change, etc.)? Singer quotes Bostrom, an Oxford utilitarian specializing in existential risk, who calculates that it should be our highest global priority: "If benefiting humanity by increasing existential safety achieves

expected good on a scale many orders of magnitude greater than that of alternative contributions, we would do well to focus on this most efficient philanthropy" (174).

In the unpublished typescript, Dewey included such mathematizing, neo-Benthamite approaches in a sweeping criticism of traditional moral philosophies: appeals to "the dictates of conscience," intuition, a moral calculus, moral law, or divine command acknowledge moral hesitancy and puzzlement, but they mask existential uncertainty when they presuppose "that the answer to a moral problem is already licit, like the answer to a problem in a text on arithmetic that it only remains to figure correctly." Dewey held that moral problems typically bear little analogy to elementary arithmetic tasks, or to being stumped by a hard puzzle. When calculating the square root of 25, there is a clear-cut way to formulate the problem and a right solution, so the only real problem is momentary ignorance of the answer. In moral life, however, the answers are not already licit.

In the undated manuscript Dewey wrote, "Genuine uncertainty is an essential trait of every moral situation" (Dewey, undated ms, 1). He is not merely remarking here on the uncertainty that arises from the *difficulty* of a puzzle, or to lack of *access* to relevant data to plug into our diagnostic machinery. Dewey contended that a typical moral choice among viable alternatives cannot *even in principle* be definitively formulated and finally answered by assembling information and then calculating profits and losses on a moral accounting spreadsheet. Utilitarianism's economic-mathematical balancing model can function well as a heuristic for some purposes. Dewey does not deny this. But he did challenge the aggregationist's obsession with predetermined metrics whereby we judiciously weigh matters so that the balance tips toward the good or "optimal" outcome supported by some welfarist principle. Insofar as such metrics economize deliberation without occluding morally relevant factors, then they are pragmatically valuable to that extent, but insofar as any approach fails to prioritize sensitivity to context, creative social inquiry, and experimental understanding of complex underlying structures, their actual results are too often reminiscent of an offhanded criticism that Dewey once made about "popcorn" solutions: put the right amount in the right mechanism and you get some "unnutritious readymade stuff" that will not sustain anyone for long (1951.02.14 [14090]: Dewey to Max C. Otto).

Right, Duty, and Loyalty

The way we express our concerns and make sense of problems is acquired through interaction with a sociocultural medium. Dewey argued that the intimacy of the Greek polis supported teleological intelligence and the idea that laws reflect our rational ability to patiently set and achieve goals together. Accordingly, theories of the good made sense to classic Greek theorists. However, the far-flung hodgepodge of peoples in the Roman Empire favored the historical development of centralized order and the imposition of demands. Consequently, in the transition from Greek teleology to Roman law, as exemplified by Stoic philosophers, compliance with authorized duty was placed at "the centre of moral theory" (LW 5, 284).

The resulting deontological or jural theories speak to a fact in everyday human behavior: we inescapably make claims on each other through living together. This includes the control of desire and appetite, companionship and competition, cooperation and subordination. Our desires are impeded and regulated, sorted into the forbidden and the permitted. These demands appear arbitrary unless they square with each other's purposes. So, Dewey proposed, "there finally develops a certain set or system of demands, more or less reciprocal according to social conditions, which are … responded to without overt revolt." In this way, authorized rights and duties evolve through demands and prohibitions on others' behavior. "From the standpoint of those whose claims are recognized, these demands are rights; from the standpoint of those undergoing them they are duties." This "constitutes the principle of authority, Jus, Recht, Droit, which is current" (284).

Dewey hypothesizes, then, that duty as a leading concept in morals arisesfrom authoritative control of individual satisfactions and temptations. As such, the concept of duty (along with the related concept of loyalty to what is *right*) is independent of the concept of good. The concepts of duty and good are independent both in their existential origins and in their logical operations. These concepts pivot on different elements: the good pivots on aspiration; the right pivots on exaction.

As Kant recognized, because imperatives often inhibit the fulfillment of desires, the concept of duty is not "reducible to the conception of the good as satisfaction, even reasonable satisfaction, of

desire" (LW 7, 214). Kant additionally recognized that there is no moral quality in binding our choices to an authority we deem ultimately arbitrary. Several years ago, my young son was happily picking flowers in a public garden, and we told him "don't pick the flowers." To him, our curtailment of this good seemed to be an arbitrary imposition. Asked about this a few years later, he said it was reasonable for his liberty to be restrained in this way. What had begun as compliance had been converted into something with moral standing, something *right*. He now acknowledged it as a *moral* demand that he should meet.

Taking these insights a step further, Dewey distinguished the *origins* of root factors from their eventual *operations*. For example, that which operates as a good that one sincerely aspires to may have originated as a duty with which one had to comply. Today my son wants to help that garden flourish. What began as an alien injunction that thwarted his desires developed into something right to which he personally realized the wisdom of submitting, and then it became a good that he pursued absent any requirement. The same might eventually be said of his enforced duty to do school work, which can also originate in obedience to communal regulations. When cultivating a garden or going to school enter one's personal aspirations "it loses its quality of being right and authoritative and becomes simply a good" (LW 5, 285).[6]

To summarize, "the Good is that which attracts; the Right is that which asserts that we *ought* to be drawn by some object whether we are naturally attracted to it or not" (LW 7, 217). When the latter factor is foremost, *reason* (or alternatively a presumed innate faculty of conscience) is conceived as "a power which is opposed to desire and which imposes restrictions on its exercise through issuing commands" (217). An act is good and virtuous *because* it is right; it is bad and vicious because it is wrong. To the degree that a deontologist is a monist, it follows there are no morally relevant aspects of virtue or good that cannot be blanketed under the concepts of duty, right, law, and obligation. To will and be loyal to what is right purely *because it is right*, and not because it is prudent, is consequently a common way of framing moral judgments, and the conception of lawful duty and compliance with constraints of the right is thus taken by many to be the universal foundation of ethics.[7]

Dewey applied these insights to Kantian deontology in the 1932 *Ethics*. According to Kantians, what is morally Good "is that which is Right, that which accords with law and the commands of duty" (214–216). Contemporary representatives include Rawls (1971), Donagan (1977), Gewirth (1978), Darwall (1983), and Korsgaard (1996). For example, central to his conception of justice as fairness, Rawls distinctively holds with Kant that a principle of right must take priority over consequentialist concepts of good (1971, 31; cf. Freeman 2007, 72). Rawls references *The Critique of Practical Reason*: "the concept of good and evil must not be determined before the moral law…, but only after it and by means of it" (Kant 2002, 37). One should struggle against inequality or strive to change an unjust system *independent* of any welfarist purpose such as anticipated net utility. For Kantians, the good is a path to the right, and the right gets its legitimate governing authority by reasonably obliging. In Korsgaard's idiom on the "source of normativity," on the Kantian view moral obligations are assigned by autonomous consciousness (1996; cf. Schaubroeck 2010). Complying with your duty and thereby at least attitudinally intending to uphold the rights of others is what it *means* to be moral.

Rawls or Korsgaard would reasonably wonder how social expectations take on justifiable moral authority on Dewey's naturalistic and pragmatic view. In other words, how does Dewey reinterpret the locus and ground of rightfulness without falling back on any of the traditional sources of normativity: God, the state, an inner law of pure practical reason, autonomous consciousness, a law of nature, or idealized rational actors? Dewey's general reply was that relationships naturally bind us to each other—as parents and children, spouses or partners, friends, and citizens. These relationships expose us to "the expectations of others and to the demands in which these expectations are made manifest." This is equally true of social expectations within institutions and political alliances. Explicit and implicit claims upon us are "as natural as anything else in a world in which persons are not isolated from one another but live in constant association and interaction" (LW 7, 218). Although a child, friend, spouse, or citizen might be coerced into conformity, they experience this as a brute imposition of power without moral standing. Social expectations become *moral* claims because, even when inconvenient or exasperating, conscientious parents, friends, spouses, or citizens respond to relations of parenting, friendship, marriage,

and citizenship as “expressions of the whole” to which they belong rather than as extrinsic impositions (218).

> If we generalize such instances, we reach the conclusion that right, law, duty, arise from the relations which human beings intimately sustain to one another, and that their authoritative force springs from the very nature of the relation that binds people together.
>
> (219)

In moral life we must meet the demands of the *situation*, and this requires us to perceive and comprehensively respond to more than our own private hankerings. The word duty is apt for the many occasions in which our own preferences run at cross-purposes from relational demands that should not be shirked merely because they may be irksome, inconvenient, *or* dangerous. In Dewey’s pragmatic-operational reconstruction of duty and the right, not only are Kantians right that we cannot rationally will a world of liars or thieves; they are also right to call for an inner sentinel alert to the exceptions we make of ourselves even as we make demands on others. Who is better than Rawls, for example, for shining a light on the way we benefit from a practice while shirking to do our share in sustaining that practice for others? (cf. Appiah 2017, 203). Though for Dewey, the general social demand to do our fair share is justified in practice, not by compliance with the first principles of idealized contractors.

Kantians typically reject Dewey’s style of aspectual pragmatizing and operationalizing as an abdication of morality. Nevertheless, Dewey agreed with Kant that “to be truthful from duty is …quite different from being truthful from fear of disadvantageous consequences” (Kant 1993, 15). Duty, right, and obligation are concepts that serve an experiential function as *one* among several constant and distinctive streams of morals. Kant’s mistake was to hypostatize this factor and sharply separate moral conduct from our natural aspirations and practical purposes, inferring that “All so-called moral interest consists solely in respect for the law” (14n14).

Approbation, the Standard, and Virtue

A third independent primitive factor in morals is centered on praise and blame, approval and disapproval, reward and punishment (LW 5, 285). "Acts and dispositions generally approved form the original virtues; those condemned the original vices" (286). This factor differs fundamentally, at least in principle, from both the deliberative pursuit of ends and the demand for compliance.

Deontologists use praise and blame as sanctions for right and wrong, while teleological thinkers acknowledge the instrumental importance of social approval and disapproval (Dewey, undated ms., 10).

> But as categories, as principles, the virtuous differs radically from the good and the right. Goods, I repeat, have to do with deliberation upon desires and purposes; the right and obligatory with demands that are socially authorized and backed; virtues with widespread approbation.
>
> (LW 5, 286)

Virtue ethicists search for consistency and coherence about which character traits *ought* to be approved or censured. This requires a non-arbitrary standard of approbation to critique the "original," socially preestablished virtues so that more appropriate and defensible ones can be discovered. Typically virtue theorists turn, like Anscombe (1958), to some eudaemonistic conception of living well.

In his 1933 letter to Fries, Dewey credited his mature meta-ethical typology—which complicates any simple categorization of Aristotle (1999) as a virtue ethicist, or Mill as an aggregator of good consequences—to his careful re-reading of 18th- and 19th-century British moral philosophers such as Hume, Smith, Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick. Hook's 1926 course notes (in Koch 2010) allow us to witness this re-reading as it unfolds. Dewey settled on a Jeckyll-and-Hyde reframing of utilitarianism: it's far better to be an inconsistent Millian than a consistent Benthamite. Whereas the Benthamite strain persists in its "untenable hedonism," at the cost of some consistency Mill received and renewed the torch of moral sentiment theory by shifting the primary focus of ethics away from what we should *do* in pursuit

of pleasures and toward cultivation of character. "Although Mill never quite acknowledges it in words, a surrender of the hedonistic element in utilitarianism" enabled him to develop, or mostly develop, a welfarist standard implicit in our approbations that favors "worthy dispositions from which issue noble enjoyments" (LW 7, 245).

Commentaries on Dewey's ethics, including some of my own, have tended to treat utilitarianism under the category of the good. But this is a half-truth, as Dewey revealed in his close readings of Smith and other 18th century sources of the utilitarian tradition. For British moral sentiment theorists like Hume and Smith, morality is founded on sympathetic sentiments. Hume wrote in the *Treatise*, "Sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions" (1978, 618).[8] Sympathy always brings approval, while antipathy always brings disapproval. We approve because we sympathize, and whatever elicits our sympathy we call good; we disapprove because we feel antipathy, and whatever calls out this sentiment we call bad. Nevertheless, in their theories of moral judgment Hume and Smith do not merely equate being praised with being praiseworthy. Dewey was especially interested in the way in which, for Hume and Smith, our moral sentiments can be corrected and regulated by rational considerations. Dewey observed of moral sentiment theory: "In individuals, the exercise of sympathy in accordance with reason—i.e., from the standpoint of an impartial spectator, in Smith's conception—is the norm of virtuous action" (LW 11, 11). The job of reason in moral judgment, for Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is to inform and secure the correctives of an impartial standard of approbation so that it plays a formative role in critically reflective ends. *Reason* seeks "a *standard* upon the basis of which approbation and disapprobation, esteem and disesteem, *should* be awarded" (LW 7, 255).[9]

Dewey spotlighted Smith's approach to this problem of non-arbitrary standards that do not merely bow to customary esteem and ridicule. Dewey argues that this problem is uppermost in moral sentiment theory "even when the writer seems to be discussing some other question" (LW 5, 286). Again, within sentiment theory what is good or dutiful is derived from what our sentiments approve as virtuous and disapprove as vicious. And according to Hume and Smith, what we spontaneously sympathize with and favor are benevolent actions that serve others. Meanwhile, ill will arouses antipathy. Ethical theory

extrapolates from this and gives its seal of rational approval to the implicit standard in such judgments: "the Good must be defined in terms of impulses that further general welfare since they are the ones naturally approved" (Dewey, undated ms, 10). This is the natural and non-arbitrary standard we arrive at when, in Smith's idiom, we take up the standpoint of a fully informed impartial spectator. In this way, moral sentiment theorists accounted for aspiration (for the good) and compliance (with duty) in terms of what they took to be *the more fundamental fact* of approval and disapproval (the virtuous and vicious). Mid-nineteenth-century British utilitarianism inherited this legacy, as is especially evident in Mill's focus on social sympathy. But in Dewey's view Mill illogically tried to combine "Dr. Jekyll" with "Mr. Hyde": (a) the pursuit of general welfare as the legitimate natural standard implicit in social approval (or reproach) of dispositions and practices with (b) the hedonistic idea that individual pleasure is the *summum bonum*.

To summarize, for monistic theories rooted in the third factor, a practice or disposition such as generosity, courage, honesty, industriousness, or compassion is deemed good and dutiful because our moral sentiments naturally approve it (and ought legitimately to approve it when considered from an impartial perspective) as virtuous; a predisposition such as miserliness or retaliatory payback is bad and wrong because it is vicious (and rationally merits disapproval). To the degree that virtue theorists are monists—and Hume was a pluralist of sorts, at least with respect to fundamental conflicts among moral ends (see Gill 2011)—they infer that concepts such as goodness, welfare, duty, and right can be systematically organized without remainder under a conception of virtuous character traits, taking these traits to be those we should approve because they are contributory to a rationally defensible conception of living and being well. Monistic virtue theorists hold that cultivating stable behavioral traits that are as virtuous as possible is what it ultimately *means* to be moral. Or, to update Dewey's analysis, the virtue theorist must at least fictionalize (see Alfano 2013) stable character traits. Situational psychologists and ethical theorists are currently debating whether we are capable of exhibiting these traits in the trans-contextual way that is required by strong monistic virtue theories (see Appiah 2008, ch. 2).

Conclusion

In the spirit of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method into Moral Subjects*, Dewey sought to bring experimental method to bear on value inquiry. "The growth of the experimental as distinct from the dogmatic habit of mind," he asserted, "is due to increased ability to utilize variations for constructive ends instead of suppressing them" (LW 1, 7). Accordingly, he saw variability in valuing and valuations as a useful entry point for further inquiry, rather than as a troublesome deviation to be flattened.

Dewey recommended abandoning the old quest for a completely enlightened ideal standpoint secured prior to struggling with difficulties in particular contexts, a standpoint from which our general way of thinking about morals will be fully adequate to meeting every situation with what is best in us. Our actual experiments in living assuredly involve ideals and idealizations—often one-sided--through which we appraise alternative avenues for acting, as Appiah has argued (2017). But they have always proceeded without access to a non-contingent ideal standpoint. What ethical theory can do, despite (and at times likely because of) its one-sided idealizations, is to help lay bare "the factors causing [problems] and thus make the choice more intelligent" (in Koch 2010, 2.2241–2.2245).

Dewey understood that ad hoc rationalizations can masquerade as intelligent deliberation. In Haidt's recent phrasing, so-called "moral reasoning" often amounts to little more than a self-justifying, ineffectual "rider" atop the headstrong "elephant" of habituated intuitions (Haidt 2012). This is from Dewey's angle an everyday deliberative vice. But at the other extreme, we may be like Hamlet in his indecision, "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act III, scene ii) so that we shirk responsibility for choosing. Excessive deliberation amounts to dawdling, or signifies a manically imbalanced character (LW 7, 170). Dewey observed a related tendency to slough off responsibility among intellectuals who retreat to remote abstractions even when immediate conditions require more than begrudging notice. Those who "devote themselves to thinking are likely to be unusually unthinking in some respects, as for example in immediate personal relationships" (MW 14, 137). Mike Parker humorously wrote in *Map Addict*: "I'm the one in the car with the map in his lap, …often at the expense

of seeing the actual landscape it depicts rolling past on the other side of the window" (2010, 2). Like Parker, moral and political philosophers tend to be more map-oriented than terrain-oriented. There are consolations of retreating from the ambient buzz, but at our *philosophic* best we do not escape from existential peril into symbolic formulations and indulgently remain there.

But how do we work out which choices are progressive or regressive? Dewey offers no pat answer to this question. Instead of offering yet another iteration of the old escape through faith or reason to an antecedently established "aperspectival position" (Johnson 2014, 120), Dewey embraced the fact that when we ask different questions, we see different connections and possibilities. As is often observed, to ask the Kantian question (What is my duty?) or the utilitarian question (Which actions help us do the most good we can do?) is not to ask the Aristotelian question (Which character traits contribute to the *eudaemon* life?). To appropriate Heisenberg, what we observe is not the moral situation in itself, but the situation exposed to our method of questioning (see 1958, 32).

As Dewey framed his pluralistic ethical theory, his central questions were as follows: when we are morally conflicted, is this a superficial hesitancy that would dissipate if only we could conduct our reasoning rightly, marshal enough data, consult our inborn moral sense, or pray harder? Or, is the experience of moral conflict often rooted in something intractable, a conflict *intrinsic* to the situation itself? Should we strive for a one-size-fits-all approach that organizes moral cognition under a single covering concept? Do the traditional blanket concepts of good, right, and virtue arise from the same empirical source in our moral experience, or do they express distinctive roots? If leading moral categories express independent forces with different empirical roots, are these roots ultimately fully compatible? Or do they pull us in different directions, leaving us in a muddle about what to choose? If there are practical incommensurabilities between primitive springs of moral action, then how can we practically manage and evaluate the normative claims made on us by these disparate forces?

Dewey's typically-for-him-programmatic stab at answering these questions pivoted on the thesis that there are "independent variables in moral action" (LW 5, 280), these diverse experiential factors are in tension with each other, and they are reducible neither to an ideal starting point for moral inquiry nor to

a changeless universal foundation. The three primitive strands that Dewey analyzed are conceptually distinct and have independent sources, but in actual moral experiences they intertwine and "cut across one another." For moral deliberation to be at all comprehensive, it must search for a way to reconcile conflicting variables to each other by weaving them into a tapestry of action that more-or-less satisfactorily expresses the tensions that originally set the problem at hand (Fesmire 2003, ch. 7).

Dewey developed a hypothesis to clarify how often-conflicting basic values relate to one another and how they might be put into communication with each other without being hypostatized. He thereby showed how functionally isolated theories can be critically appraised within a wider normative context even as these theories retain distinctive emphases as idealized partial mappings of the terrain of moral action. Maps are tools, so when these partial mappings of normative ideals are clung to as though they are true "independent of what they lead to when used as directive principles" (LW 4, 221), dogmatism is fueled and deliberation remains incomplete. But when normative models are reframed as revisable experiments in living (cf. Mill 1986), as what Dewey in *The Quest for Certainty* called instrumentalities of direction, then they can be progressively reformed through our interactions.

Dewey concluded "Three Independent Factors in Morals" with a call for our moral imaginations to become more perceptive and responsive to concrete situations. His insights from the early 1930s can be supplemented with contemporary research on DuBoisian "double consciousness," or better, Jose Medina's "kaleidoscopic consciousness" standing democratically in the intersections of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, nationality, and culture. Insofar as moral problems are entanglements, then "zeal for a unitary view" oversimplifies moral life (LW 5, 288). Striving for systematic coherence can be a philosophic virtue, and abstracting some factor of moral action as central and uppermost has great instrumental value. But when we hypostatize it, then treat this factor as the self-sufficient starting point for moral inquiry and the bedrock for all moral justification, we perpetuate the same problems as when we indulge in the popular habit of singling out one trump value or concern among a wide range of relevant values.[10]

In summary, Dewey hypothesized that good, duty, and virtue are distinct moral categories that express different experiential origins, and none fully includes all that is morally relevant in the rest. Hence, moral life does not have a single central and basic source of justification. Instead of beginning moral reflection with a single abstracted factor, Dewey proposes that we should begin our reflective excursions with a practical predicament in lieu of a theoretical starting point (Pappas 2008, 2019). In this way, we discover that diverse factors are already in tension with each other. Our foremost practical need is for fine-tuned habits that enable us to comprehensively coordinate and integrate these tensions. Theories and practices that open communication between conflicting factors can better inform our moral deliberations. Dewey consequently sought in his work in ethical theory from 1926 to 1932 to analyze the main categories through which ethical theories have concentrated attention on these factors, in order to put them in communication for the sake of more responsible choices.

Dewey doubtless hoped to inspire theoretical projects reconciling these diverse factors. Such projects could change the terms of debate within and across ethical traditions. Dewey approached historical ethical and sociopolitical theories as resources for social inquiry, not as finalities to be accepted *or* rejected wholesale (LW 7, 179; cf. Koch 2010). He thought that rejecting such zero-sum theorizing could open a door for research into classic moral philosophies as compensatory emphases, in dynamic tension with other selective emphases.[11] These monistic philosophies were forged in part as idealized tools to make sense of and navigate social situations. In "Three Independent Factors in Morals," Dewey reveals how their durable practical value can be liberated through philosophical research that at last gets over both the quest for, and the tone of, finality and instead rededicates itself to experimentally developing robust communicative projects with distinctive emphases, angles, and inferences.[12]

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[1] Originally published as "Trois facteurs indépendants en matière de morale," trans. Charles Cestre, in *Bulletin de la SFP* 30 (October-December 1930): 118–127.

[2] This typescript was subsequently misplaced and retrieved in 2016 in a careful search by staff at Morris Library, Special Collections, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

[3] In his theory of moral judgment and knowledge (LW 7, ch. 14), Dewey argued that the "comprehensive object" of moral choice is the option one foresees *ex ante* as most reliably expressing the situation's conflicting factors and recovering its dynamic equilibrium. In Dewey's experimental view we must act and also review *ex post*.

[4] Dewey's typos silently corrected throughout.

[5] Some commentators misrepresent Dewey's *mature* ethics as an ethics of self-realization. However, he argues in the 1932 *Ethics* in a Kantian vein that self-realization as an ideal may deaden people to the experiences of others so that we value them like pleasantries.

[6] Along these lines, Edel (2001) argues that Dewey respects the independence of each factor while making the content of each "responsible to the idea of the good" (11).

[7] Of course there are many hybrid ethical theories that defy tidy categorization. Rule utilitarianism, for example, operates in the main via compliance with universal rules, albeit rules theoretically justified on welfarist grounds: if you aspire to maximize the good, then conform to the rule.

[8] In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith (1790) followed Hume in tracing the source of morals to the principle of sympathy: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation" (I.I.2).

[9] As deontologists rightly emphasize, one's own cravings may run counter to the "comprehensive object" of moral choice. Taking a cue from Hume and Smith, Dewey was skeptical of the Kantian contention that our moral mettle is truly revealed only when we are motivated to pursue the comprehensive object by the force of reason independent of desire (cf. Trianosky 1990).

[10] For example, in environmental policymaking economic criteria are typically presumed to have supremacy over other key values (aesthetic, spiritual, recreational, ecological, etc.; see Norton 2005, 2015).

[11] For example, with notable exceptions such as McKenna and Light's *Animal Pragmatism* (2004), McKenna (2018), and the work of Paul Thompson (e.g., 2010, 2015), scholars contributing a pragmatic pluralist perspective have taken a back seat to the zero-sum theorizing of many utilitarians and deontologists in responding to the far-reaching impact of human practices on other species and rising concern about animal use and treatment.

[12] I am grateful to Oxford University Press for permission to draw, in revised form, from research that appeared in my article "Beyond Moral Fundamentalism: Dewey's Pragmatic Pluralism in Ethics and Politics," Chapter 10 of *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey* (2019).