

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

---

Bachelors' Theses

Dissertations, Theses, and Professional  
Projects

---

5-1937

## The Ethics of John Dewey

Edward W. Dooley

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/bachelor\\_essays](https://epublications.marquette.edu/bachelor_essays)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

THE ETHICS OF JOHN DEWEY

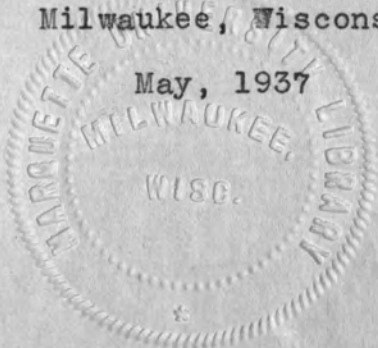
By

Edward W. Dooley

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty  
of the  
College of Liberal Arts of Marquette University  
in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May, 1937



## PREFACE

John Dewey exerts a rather remarkable influence on contemporary American philosophy and education. To consider the background of thought that is responsible for Mr. Dewey's philosophy and to make a particular study of the ethical ideas arising from it is the purpose of this thesis. To Dr. John O. Riedl who is largely responsible for the interest and the pleasure this writer has found in the study of philosophy, and without whose friendly cooperation this thesis would never have been possible, the most sincere gratitude and appreciation is extended.

E. W. D.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Preface.....	i
Chapter I. Introduction.....	1
Chapter II. Life.....	7
Chapter III. Works.....	13
Chapter IV. Philosophy.....	18
Chapter V. The Ethics.....	28
Chapter VI. Conclusion--Evaluation.....	41
Annotated Bibliography.....	49

...this, without which all progress becomes meaningless and all gain becomes shallow; fundamentals, a dearth of which destroys any sense of values conceived in the minds of men or built up in a material fashion as a plausible excuse for a materialistic existence.

It is usually conceded that in the colleges and universities of today the momentum of education has reached a new high peak of efficiency. Educating has become a dignified profession and educators as a group are held in a greater position of esteem and honor than they have ever before known. It has been a consistent goal of the honest and sincere teacher to bring out the best of another age and to develop a generation schooled in these fundamentals which contribute to and, in fact, constitute the mode of living most nearly approaching the "mediocrity-free career" which Horace suggested was the ideal mean of life. Some-

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of education in its most widely accepted applications, has no doubt always been to mold minds along the paths of straight, clear and purposeful thinking. Even in an age when knowledge as its own end has been widely discounted by a materialistic generation, educators have never ceased to be mindful of the fact that in certain fundamentals lie the value and the meaning of life; fundamentals, without which all progress becomes meaningless and all gain becomes shallow; fundamentals, a dearth of which destroys any sense of values conceived in the minds of men or built up in a material fashion as a plausible excuse for a materialistic existence.

It is usually conceded that in the colleges and universities of today the mechanism of education has reached a new high peak of efficiency. Educating has become a dignified profession and educators as a group are held in a greater position of esteem and honor than they have ever before known. It has been a constant goal of the honest and sincere teacher to blot out the sophistry of another age and to develop a generation schooled in those fundamentals which contribute to and, in fact, constitute the mode of living most nearly approaching the "mediocritatem auream" which Horace suggested was the ideal mean of life. Educa-

tion has indeed been a most potent factor in molding the minds of men to straight thinking and to right living.

With these facts in mind, it is little wonder that the student--any student--in the vast educational system of the present era should wonder at certain trends of modern thought. It is hardly surprising that he should be amazed and somewhat bewildered at certain of the activities going on in that very educational system to which he has turned for enlightenment. Has not philosophy always offered men who think some solution for their problems? Has not philosophy always been the bottomless well out of which all fundamentals spring in a never ceasing flow of wisdom and security? Has not all human strife and stress been soothed in at least a theoretical manner by the influence of thought and introspection which knew no materialistic boundaries and which sought unlimited solace in things beyond reach of the human grasp? In short, has not all good philosophy offered solutions which were as ageless as time itself? The student of today has begun to wonder.

Truly enough, this venture into the realm of restless insecurity has been gradual. But if it has been gradual, it has nevertheless been definitely and undeniably progressive, if the term progressive may be used in that certain sense. Early modern philosophy and contemporary philosophy have proceeded on and on into an appalling abyss of obscurity and insecurity. The study of all things in their ultimate causes as viewed in the light of human reason has be-

come almost an impossibility in view of the fact that ultimate causes are no longer accepted as tangibly or intellectually satisfactory; and in view of the fact that the grasping mind of today is assured by many self-styled thinkers that the very validity of its reasoning faculties and processes is a thing of very serious doubt. Will Durant assures the young initiate today that:

Human understanding had become too great for the human mind. All that remained was the scientific specialist who knew "more and more about less and less" and the philosophical speculator who knew less and less about more and more. The common man found himself forced to choose between a scientific priesthood mumbling unintelligible pessimism and the theological priesthood mumbling incredible hopes. (1)

The type of thinking contained in the passage quoted above is typical of the recorded sludge which the student of today is asked to accept as sound and basic. Charges and accusations from the pens of contemporary philosophers laying waste any sound recognition of traditional values are as numerous as the sands of the ocean. Felix Adler makes bold to inform his readers that:

The standards and the commandments which were taken as the unquestioned guides and the attainment of religious values have proved to be the formulated customs and taboos of ancient folk ways and tribal mores. Where then is man to find satisfactory guides to those values which the religious souls have cherished? Do those values still remain the Supreme Object of the religious quest? Does there indeed exist such a divine Being, setting the goals and furnishing the religious guarantees of achieving them in this life or the next? (2)

- 
1. Durant, Will: The Story of Philosophy (New York: Garden City Publishing Co. 1933) Preface to Revised Edition, page VI.
  2. Adler, Felix: in Essays in Honor of John Dewey (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1929) page 24.

Adler disposes rather succinctly if not uniquely of some two thousand years of satisfactory thought. He upsets the apple cart of a profoundly satisfying sense of values.

The axe of modern and contemporary thought thus likewise descends upon the religious convictions which most men have chosen to regard as sacred. The fact that religion has for centuries been an unshakable prop in human security and contentment is of little moment. Witness the words of Henry W. Schneider:

I could sum up my contentions by saying, if religion ever again becomes a decent formula wherewith to embellish a comfortable life, it would cease to be degenerate. (3)

Religion today must, therefore, cease to be a part of man's life and system of thought. Furthermore, religion with its inherent convictions is at once degenerate.

Too vigorous protest against these blanket unbelievers and gross skeptics would be impossible. The modern trend of thought is definitely destructive to security and peace of mind. Heraclitus would smile at the obscurity of present day thought. He might, however, be jealous of the fact that moderns have developed his obscurity to a degree which would make his own efforts seem puny and insignificant.

John Dewey of Columbia University is an outstanding example of a contemporary philosopher and educator. Everything we might say of Dewey will naturally not have universal application, but it is a fact that a more typical ex-

---

3. Schneider, H.W.: in Essays in Honore of John Dewey, page 351.



ample could not be found anywhere. Townsend expresses accepted opinion as to Dewey's present day influence:

His (Dewey's) philosophical theory will go far to explain the very unusual degree to which he has been able to affect the cultural habits and intellectual outlook of a whole generation. (4)

But in a book dedicated "to those who wonder at the subsistence of our foundations," Harvey Wickham offers very little encouragement as to the intelligibility of Dewey's thought:

A world famous philosopher said recently in a private conversation: "I have been making an intensive study of John Dewey for the last six months trying to find out what he means. I give it up."

To labor the point of John Dewey's influence in the present economy would be futile. Educators, not only in America but abroad have felt and continue to feel Dewey's guiding hand, not only in the physical aspects of modern educational systems but indeed in the very systems of thought and senses of values which these educators themselves propagate. The twentieth century is perhaps not cognizant of the fact that a surprisingly dominant figure has been dictating to them and, more especially, has been swaying the rising generation. The next century will wonder at the fact that one mind could have been so influential.

But Dewey is very definitely American however much his influence might be felt in other parts of the civilized world. Present day historians only echo accepted opinion in reasoning that Dewey is uniquely and definitely American

---

4. Townsend, H. G.: Philosophical Ideas in the United States (New York: American Book Co. 1934) page 234.

and that he could be nothing else. Durant points out<sup>5</sup> (but only in reiteration of Santayana and others) that Dewey speaks, writes and thinks as a "practical man," typical of the "hard headed" American business man. John Dewey is definitely American--a product of those same factors which are responsible for the American nation.

Assuming, then, that John Dewey is American and is influential in American thought, it is expedient that we should examine his thought and weigh his dictates so that an honest conclusion and an unbiased judgment may be made. Does Dewey offer a rational system of thought, a sound explanation for such a system, and is the system itself anchored securely to the immovable pillars we term ultimate causes? Can we seek and hope to find in Dewey's economy a sense of security and a system of ethics which is at once livable and justifiable?

To answer these questions shall be the purpose of this thesis.

After having followed the usual plan of study in operation even at the present day, Dewey was educated at the University of Vermont where he was granted a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1879. Even at the early age of twenty, he manifested an interest in philosophy; or perhaps it would be more correct to say that his early training in the Univers-

5. Biographical data were taken chiefly from the following books: Walt Whitman (Chicago: A. V. Bonine Co. 1906), vol. 2, page 747; Dewey, John, "From Eclecticism to Experimentalism," in Contemporary American Philosophy (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1930) vol. 2, page 13-27.

5. Durant, Will: The Story of Philosophy, page 531.

## CHAPTER II

## LIFE

John Dewey's name has appeared in Who's Who in America since the year 1903. That he is now accepted as an American institution is probably the most significant fact disclosed in an examination of his life. No one will deny that not every American institution or influence--especially if it be an intellectual influence--is deserving of note; for American influences are usually comparable to American fads from a standpoint of duration. Dewey, however, was here yesterday, is, oddly enough, here today and will apparently be here in spirit at least for many tomorrows to come.

John Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont, October 20, 1859.<sup>6</sup> He was the son of Archibald S. and Luciana A. Dewey. After having followed the usual plan of study in operation even at the present day, Dewey matriculated at the University of Vermont where he was granted a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1879. Even at the early age of twenty, he manifested an interest in philosophy; or perhaps it would be more correct to say that his early training in the Univer-

---

6. Biographical data were taken chiefly from the following books: Who's Who in America (Chicago: A. N. Marquis Co. 1936) vol. 19, page 723; Dewey, John: "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in Contemporary American Philosophy (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1930) vol. 2, pages 13-27; Townsend, H.G.: Philosophical Ideas in the United States, pages 233-234; The Encyclopedia Americana (New York: Americana Corp. 1932) vol. 9, page 47.

sity of Vermont which labored under the influence of the dominant Scotch school, was the factor which turned Dewey's volatile mind into speculative channels.

A Mr. H. A. P. Torrey gave Dewey his first insight into philosophy and it was, perhaps, Mr. Torrey's deference to the priority of religious beliefs over conflicting philosophies (athing Dewey was hard put to understand) which set Dewey's mind to wandering into the then forbidden labyrinths of doubt. As Dewey himself puts it:

There was a firm alliance established between religion and the cause of "intuition." It is probably impossible to recover at this date the almost sacrosanct air that enveloped the idea of intuitions; but somehow the cause of all holy and valuable things was supposed to stand or fall with the validity of intuitionism; the vital issue was between intuitionism and a sensational empiricism....a factor in developing in me a certain scepticism. (7)

In a year of private study, Dewey made up his mind to pursue philosophy as a life-study and as his vocation. Prior to 1884, which year he entered Johns Hopkins for graduate work, he had submitted two articles to Dr. W. T. Harris, a Hegelian and the editor of the Journal of Speculative Philosophy. Dr. Harris accepted these articles and unhesitatingly encouraged Dewey "to try philosophy as a professional career."

Dewey's objection to the practice of couching a multitude of concepts in the vast receptacle of religion was an early factor in arousing his objections to the schematic thought which he met on every side. If it was an early

---

7. Dewey, John: in Contemporary American Philosophy, page 15.

factor, it was likewise an enduring factor which continued to mold his thinking, and this repugnance to religious absolutism is a point which cannot be stressed too strongly. He admits bluntly enough that he segregated religion from the problem of existence as it is when he says:

Social interests and problems from an early period had to me the intellectual appeal and provided the intellectual sustenance that many seem to have found primarily in religious questions. (8)

At Johns Hopkins, under George Sylvester Morris of the University of Michigan, Dewey was first introduced to Hegel and German Idealism. From his essay referred to previously<sup>9</sup> (see page 7 ) we would conclude that he became a rather ardent Hegelian, following a train of thought very prevalent in the 'eighties and 'nineties; but as he confesses later<sup>10</sup> he "drifted away from Hegelianism in the next fifteen years." Dewey, during this drifting process, undoubtedly became acquainted with a number of philosophers, ancient, modern and contemporary. Just how many of these men he took seriously or even bothered with at all is hard to say and his writings do not serve to clear up the point too well. He confesses that, "Upon the whole, the forces that have influenced me have come from persons and from situations more than from books,"<sup>11</sup> and this attitude of aloofness to the recorded thought of the ages is, we think, rather unmistakably stamped on both Dewey's writings and his formal

---

8. Ibid., page 20.

9. Ibid., pages 18-20.

10. Ibid., pages 20-21.

11. Ibid., page 22.

thought. He was certainly impressed, at least, by the works of Leibniz;<sup>12</sup> and no little by the theories of Charles Darwin;<sup>13</sup> we have reason to believe<sup>14</sup> that he studied most of the moderns, Kant, Descartes, Marx, Nietzsche et al. While it is impossible to prove that he never spent much time in consideration of ancient and medieval philosophers, the conclusion is readily reached by even a cursory perusal of his writings. If he did resort to ancient and medieval philosophy there is a great dearth of evidence to support the theory that these philosophies affected his thinking or writing to any extent. The greatest influence in all of Dewey's thought was that exerted by William James, the Pragmatist. Discussing the fact that he was little influenced by the writing of others, Dewey makes an exception in the case of William James:

....the great exception to what was said about no very fundamental vital influence issuing from books; it concerns the influence of William James. As far as I can discover one specifiable philosophic factor which entered into my training so as to give it a new direction and quality, it is this one. (15)

In concluding his intellectual biography and in support of the above observation that Dewey makes a rather definite break with the philosophies of his predecessors (a severance which indeed makes us doubt that he would con-

---

12. Cf. Dewey, John: Leibniz's New Essays Concerning Human Understanding (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Co. 1888) Preface, pages V and VI.

13. Cf. Dewey, John: The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1910).

14. Cf. e.g. Dewey, John: German Philosophy and Politics (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1915).

15. Dewey, John: in Contemporary American Philosophy, p. 23.

sciously allow any previous thought to sway him in the least) he makes the following observation:

I think it shows a deplorable deadness of imagination to suppose that philosophy will indefinitely revolve within the scope of the problems and systems that two thousand years of European history have bequeathed to us. Seen in the long perspective of the future, the whole of western European history is a provincial episode. (16)

Having completed his formal education at Johns Hopkins, Dewey was the recipient of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from that university in 1884. He held a chair in philosophy at the University of Michigan but received little attention prior to his founding what is popularly known as the "Chicago School," an educational unit affiliated with the University of Chicago. For a period of ten years--1894 to 1904--he devoted much of his energy to this enterprise in the field of educational theory and practice. He established an experimental school which caught the attention of school masters and educators far and wide. Townsend observes that:

His (Dewey's) influence on educational practice has revolutionized the methods and curricula of schools both public and private from kindergarten to university. (17)

Indeed, Dewey himself remarks that:

One point in my intellectual development is the importance that the practice and theory of education has had for me....Philosophers..have not taken education with sufficient seriousness....Philosophizing should focus about education as the supreme human interest in which..problems, cosmological, moral, logi-

---

16. Ibid., page 26.

17. Townsend, H. G.: Philosophical Ideas in the United States, page 234.

cal come to a head. (18)

Harvey Wickham contends (and he is not alone in this) that Dewey is much more of an educator than a philosopher:

In his theories on education, and in his practical endeavors to "rear the tender thought, and teach the young idea how to shoot," his real superiority has been manifested....Here is one whose heart, whose best has gone out to children, leaving only the husks for us grown-ups. He teaches how to shoot much better than how to think. (19)

Dewey's fame as an educator spread so much that he was called to Soviet Russia and China shortly after the World War, to set up educational systems for those countries.

In 1886, Dewey married Alice Chipman and has had six children two of whom have already died.

Having taught philosophy and education at the Universities of Michigan, Minnesota and Chicago, he went to Columbia University in New York in 1904 and has been identified with that institution ever since. For the past few years he has been Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia.

A most prolific and tireless writer, an educator and a world-wide lecturer, John Dewey's life has been one of devotion to his chosen work and of constant service in his particular field.

- 
18. Dewey, John: in Contemporary American Philosophy, pages 22-23.
19. Wickham, Harvey: The Unrealists (New York: The Dial Press. 1930) pages 199-200.



## CHAPTER III

## WORKS

John Dewey is one of the most prolific writers of the present day. His works are naturally not all philosophical nor are they all important to the present thesis. A complete bibliography of Dewey's works to 1929<sup>20</sup> lists in one hundred and six pages over four hundred books, pamphlets and published articles all from Dewey's pen. The bibliography was published in 1929 and Dewey has devoted much of the last eight years to writing and lecturing, having given up formal teaching to a great extent. These facts hint at the impossibility of making even a cursory survey of Dewey's works and point to the fact that only those writings having a direct bearing on the subject of this thesis can be given much consideration. A brief but significant list of Dewey's principal works, with dates of publications, follows:

School and Society, 1899; Psychology, 1887; Psychology and Social Practice, 1901; Moral Principles in Education, 1909; How We Think, 1910; German Philosophy and Politics, 1915; Democracy and Education, 1916; Essays in Experimental Logic, 1916; Creative Intelligence, 1917; The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy, 1910; Human Nature and Conduct, 1922; Experience and Nature, 1925; The Quest for Certainty, 1929; Re-

20. Thomas, M. H., and Schneider, H. W.: A Bibliography of John Dewey (New York: Columbia University Press. 1929).  
Above figures compiled from work cited.

construction in Philosophy, 1920; Philosophy and Civilization, 1931.

Besides these works, several of Dewey's essays and articles are very valuable in seeking an approach to his system of thought. Among these might be listed: "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," an essay in Contemporary American Philosophy; "The Development of American Pragmatism," an article in D. S. Robinson's Anthology of Recent Philosophy; also an essay or a credo published in a book of compiled credos titled Living Philosophies.<sup>21</sup>

One of Dewey's most important philosophical works is Experience and Nature. It is this book which such writers as Ratner, Townsend and Riley use as a source for the bulk of their source material. The work might also be correctly said to contain as definite and synthesized statement of Dewey's method as is available. Experience and Nature sets forth the empirical viewpoint, discusses the nature of ends, and sets up a certain rather vaguely defined sense of values. If in any work the high regard Dewey has for human nature as a study, nature and empiricism and the development of the experimental method, is clearly brought out, it is in Experience and Nature.

It is in his book Democracy and Education that Dewey really attempts a statement of his own philosophy. The major difficulty with Democracy and Education is that Dewey so subordinates the philosophical implications to his ideas

---

21. Living Philosophies (New York: Simon and Schuster.1931)

on the subject of education that it is difficult to ferret out the formal philosophy.

The work is technically an introduction to the Philosophy of Education. Education, Dewey says, is a cardinal requisite of life. It is a necessary part of a perfected democracy, for only in a nation of well versed individuals is real democracy possible. The young should be the first objects of the educator's interest. For secondary training is futile and useless without a solid foundation.

The empirical idea again comes to the fore in Dewey's insistence on the study of the sciences. The pragmatic stress is evident in the last few chapters where it is learned that the purpose of education is to mold the individual to a point where he is a useful cog in a highly functioning mechanism of democracy.

The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought is one of Dewey's works which affords the reader a good insight into both the meanings and the origins of many of the author's metaphysical implications. Of the series of essays, the one referred to in the title of the book is of major importance. In this we find that Darwin's ideas influenced not only all of philosophy in general, but that of John Dewey in particular. Dewey is unusually blunt and direct in his endorsement of Darwinian discoveries and in his admissions of his leanings toward these tendencies. The third essay in the group, "Intelligence and Morals," contains some ideas particularly appli-

cable to a thesis concerned with Dewey's ethics.

In the spring of 1918, Dewey gave a series of lectures upon the West Memorial Foundation at the invitation of Stanford University. He later expanded the lectures considerably and published them under the title of Human Nature and Conduct. This work is unquestionably the best available to one who would consider Dewey's ethical implications.

In the introduction, the author treats human nature, pathology of goodness, freedom and the value of science.

Part one of the work is devoted to a consideration of the place of habit in conduct. The influence of habit on will, character, customs, morality and psychology is discussed.

Part two is devoted to the place of impulse in conduct. This particular section of the work is more valuable to the psychologist than to the philosopher or moralist, but many of the observations of human nature, instincts and impulse are worth while.

Part three is concerned with the place of intelligence in conduct and is most useful to any ethical consideration. Good, the nature of aims, means and ends, future life and aims are thoroughly treated.

In part four the discussion of the good is continued and the pragmatic implications are evident. Morals as applied to human nature and events, the problem of free will and the necessary social aims of any system of morals are developed. The conclusion contains some rather remarkable

ideas all thoroughly discussed in Chapter V of this thesis.

The reader will derive a good idea of many other of Dewey's works not discussed here as he proceeds with this thesis. A thorough treatment of even some few of Dewey's works would be possible only in a treatise much more voluminous than is the contemplated length of the present thesis.

—John Dewey.

It is obviously not the purpose nor the intent of this thesis to evolve an exhaustive statement of Dewey's philosophical system if, indeed, Dewey may be said to have a synthesized system. Even if a complete statement of Dewey's thought were in order, it seems just a bit facetious to presume that any novice could succeed in ferreting out a comprehensive and a complete set of unified ideas which might be said to apply strictly to Dewey. Witness the protests of Harvey Wickham<sup>22</sup> or of Walter Scott McFitt<sup>23</sup> in regard to this difficulty. Read Townsend when he says that:

There is scarcely an unqualified, or, one is tempted to add, an unambiguous fog in his (Dewey's) philosophy. (24)

Or take the words of Dewey himself as proof that unity of system was never a point toward which he made any too evident progress. Dewey says:

Were it possible for me to be a devotee of any system (implying an impossibility) I am dubious of my own ability to reach inclusive systematic unity. . . I seen

22. Wickham, Harvey: The Dewey Idea, pages 196 ff.

23. McFitt, W. S.: "Instrumentalism at its Best," Education, Nov., 1923, vol. 34, page 152.

24. Townsend, H. G.: Philosophical Ideas in the United States, page 238.

## CHAPTER IV

## PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.

--John Dewey.

It is obviously not the purpose nor the intent of this thesis to evolve an exhaustive statement of Dewey's philosophical system if, indeed, Dewey may be said to have a synthesized system. Even if a complete statement of Dewey's thought were in order, it seems just a bit facetious to presume that any novice could succeed in ferreting out a comprehensive and a complete set of unified ideas which might be said to apply strictly to Dewey. Witness the protests of Harvey Wickham<sup>22</sup> or of Walter Scott McNutt<sup>23</sup> in regard to this difficulty. Read Townsend when he says that:

There is scarcely an unqualified, or, one is tempted to add, an unambiguous dogma in his (Dewey's) philosophy. (24)

Or take the words of Dewey himself as proof that unity of system was never a point toward which he made any too evident progress. Dewey says:

Were it possible for me to be a devotee of any system (implying an impossibility) I am dubious of my own ability to reach inclusive systematic unity....I seem

---

22. Wickham, Harvey: The Unrealists, pages 196 ff.

23. McNutt, W. S.: "Instrumentalism at Its Best," in Education, Nov., 1925, vol. XLVI, page 152.

24. Townsend, H. G.: Philosophical Ideas in the United States, page 235.

unstable, chameleon-like, yielding one after another to many diverse and even incompatible influences. (25)

It would seem to be the objective of this thesis then-- and a sensible objective at that--to consider John Dewey's particular philosophic leanings only in so far as they influence his system of ethics, the thing which interests us most. We shall attempt to outline Dewey's position, his broad background of thought and his intellectual tendencies so that his ethical system shall have a more full and understandable meaning.

Dewey is commonly referred to as a "pragmatist" or as an "instrumentalist." This is interpreted to mean that he is a "typically American philosopher"; a philosopher of "cash values." James Creighton furnishes a clear definition of the term pragmatism:

The term Pragmatism as employed in philosophy at the present time, denotes the general tendency to subordinate logical thinking to the ends of practical life and to find the test of truth of ideas in their practical consequences....One view points out that thought owes its origin to the needs and demands of the practical life. Thought is thus a tool or instrument that is always invoked to meet a particular crisis or problem resulting from a concrete situation. Thought ...does not aim at truth in general. Its business is to discover in concrete circumstances, the best means to the realization of some practical end that life demands. This..doctrine has been chiefly elaborated by John Dewey. (26)

As Creighton further points out, much of this pragmatic thought is rooted in the doctrine of evolution. Dewey bears out this contention when he says that the Darwinian

25. Dewey, John: "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in Contemporary American Philosophy, pages 21-22.

26. Creighton, J.E.: "Pragmatism," in The Encyclopedia Americana (New York: Americana Corp. 1932) vol. 22, page 502.

principle of natural selection cut straight under the philosophy of fixed first and final causes.<sup>27</sup> Because all organic adaptations are due simply to constant variation, there is no call for a prior intelligent causal force to plan and preordain them.

Classic logic set philosophy to proving that life must have certain values because of some remote goal. This view prevents looking the facts of experience in the face. Insight into specific conditions of value and into consequences of ideas is possible only when philosophy is a method of locating and interpreting the more serious conflicts in life and a method of dealing with them. Darwinian thinking has two effects: (1) It gives rise to many sincere efforts to revise traditional philosophic contentions; (2) By a new type of philosophic knowing distinct from science, man can attain knowledge of another kind of reality.

The greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods is the one effected by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the Origin of Species.

It is obvious, then, that the evolutionary influence was strong in forming the background of instrumentalism. Dewey makes further reference to four other "special points" that seem to stand out in his intellectual development.<sup>28</sup> One was the importance that the practice and theory of education had for him, and this idea cannot be overemphasized.

- 
27. Dewey, John: The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1910) pages 11-19.  
 28. Dewey, John: in Contemporary American Philosophy, pages 22-27.



A second was his early but constant aversion to the traditionally strong idea that there was some kind of a conflict in logic between science and morals. This aversion, he says, had no little to do with the development of his instrumentalism. The third and fourth points he mentions concern the influence of William James on his philosophy, a point mentioned previously but bearing repetition here. If James thought of life in terms of action, so would Dewey. The result of such an outlook would be a synthesis in a philosophy congruous with modern science and related to actual needs in education, morals and religion. Philosophers must, however, expect to reach no genuine integration of thought overnight. "To help get rid of the useless lumber that block our highways of thought and to strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future" should be the sworn objective of the true philosopher.

Bearing Dewey's influences and objectives in mind, it is now safe to proceed in this examination of his philosophy.

He has pointed out in a general way the method employed in reaching the conclusions which he will later attain. And these conclusions will follow, it must be observed, most naturally and logically from his initial state of mind. For just as Descartes could never hope to transcend the restricting bounds of an idealism because of the principles from which he proceeded, neither can Dewey expect ever to rise above and beyond the limited conclusions

which flow from a pragmatic outlook and from a universe conceived as melioristic. Nor does Dewey wish to supersede these confining limits. It is his aim to serve with and in a philosophy of service, and of usefulness; a philosophy of today with the tomorrow of the future to be considered only in terms of the fuller meaning that the future will possess and offer to posterity because it has been enriched by the materialistic heritages exacted from the present.

Woodbridge Riley has summed up the pragmatic economy nicely:

"The Western Goth, so fiercely practical, so keen of eye" has at last gotten himself a philosophy. It is pragmatism, the philosophy of practicality, the gospel of energy, whose prime criterion is success. It has been called a business philosophy which demands results; a bread-and-butter view of life which aims at consequences. In short, pragmatism furnishes a sort of speculative clearing-house which says that a philosophic theory must have cash value and be true if it works, false if it fails....Pragmatism..can almost be called Americanism. It expresses the national worship of the practical inventor, the pushing man of affairs....There is the ideal of democracy as a reënforcing factor....Dewey taught it (pragmatism) was instrumental--a useful tool for action. (29)

In an important and revealing article titled "The Development of American Pragmatism"<sup>30</sup> Dewey sketches briefly but thoroughly the progress of pragmatism from the time of Charles Sanders Peirce to the present day. Peirce took the term "pragmatism" from Kant, and meant by it the emphasis of the idea that the modification of existence by applying

---

29. Riley, Woodbridge: American Thought (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1915) pages 279-281.

30. Dewey, John: "The Development of American Pragmatism," in Robinson, D. S.: Anthology of Recent Philosophy (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Pub. Co. 1929) pages 431-445.

ideas or concepts to solve the problems and change the situations presented us in experience, is the real meaning of pragmatism. William James took up the work. He followed the English schools of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Mill, Bain and Hodgson, more than the paths laid down by Kant. He changed Peirce's conception by making the particular rather than the general consequences of an idea the test of its truth.

Truth, Dewey contends, in terms of the pragmatist, is achieved by submitting conceptions to the control of experience in the process of verifying them. Verification, whether it be actual or possible, is the definition of truth. Absolute truth, from a logical standpoint, is an impossibility. Pragmatism, in seeking truth, concerns itself not with antecedent phenomena but with consequent phenomena. Not the precedents but the possibilities of action are of real importance.

Dewey protests against the fact that James never attempted to develop a complete theory of forms or "structures" and of the logical operations which are founded in this conception. James was concerned primarily with the moral aspects of his theory. Here is where pragmatism and instrumentalism differ.

Instrumentalism is an attempt to constitute a precise logical theory of concepts, of judgments and inferences in their various forms, by considering primarily how thought functions in the experimental determinations of future consequences....It attempts to establish universally recognized distinctions and rules of logic by deriving them from the reconstructive or mediative function ascribed to reason. It aims to con-

stitute a theory of the general forms of conception and reasoning, and not of this or that particular judgment or concept related to its own content, or to its particular implications. (31)

Of this instrumental method--if we may call it that--

Riley comments:

Dewey holds that reflective thought has as the measure of its success the degree in which the thinking disposes of the difficulty. This is applied logic. It is the instrumental type of thinking. It has two advantages. Negatively, it wipes out the distinction between thought and fact, the hypothetical chasm between pure and applied logic which a false metaphysics created. Positively, it falls in line with the evolutionary process, wherein biology and social history disclose the fact that every distinct organ, structure or formation, every grouping of cells or elements, has to be treated as an instrument of adaptation to a particularly environing situation. (32)

Perhaps at this juncture it would not be amiss to turn our attention directly to that work in which Dewey insists that his philosophy is "most fully expounded."<sup>33</sup> In making this step, however, let us remember that (as is evident to some extent from the very title of the book itself) Dewey lays down his philosophic ideas in such a way that they cannot be reasonably divorced from his chosen and never-neglected field of education. The book in question is Democracy and Education; and this work together with Dewey's supreme regard for its content bears out his contention admirably that education is a compelling force in any philosophic system. It is also of great importance to note in passing that in seeking the philosophy of Dewey in terms of

---

31. Ibid., page 442.

32. Riley, Woodbridge: American Thought, pages 289-290.

33. Dewey, John: "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in Contemporary American Philosophy, page 23.

a completely developed method, most commentators turn to Dewey's Experience and Nature as the best expression of a complete synthesis. Joseph Ratner of Columbia University, who wrote the most exhaustive account of Dewey's philosophy in a work titled The Philosophy of John Dewey,<sup>34</sup> refers to Democracy and Education only three times in a book of some six hundred pages, and then the references are confined to two chapters devoted to education. Ratner places primary stress on Experience and Nature and The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy; in matters pertinent to ethics, he refers to Human Nature and Conduct. But taking Dewey at his word, we are able to find some rather lucid matter in Democracy and Education which will be of service in our attempt to understand the general trend of his thought.

The nature of philosophy, Dewey contends,<sup>35</sup> is essentially practical, for philosophy must ever be described in terms of the problems with which it deals. These problems originate in the conflicts and difficulties of social life. The subject matter of philosophy thus leads to an attempt to gather together the details of the world into a single inclusive whole. This synthesis will afford a type of thinking capable of influencing the conduct of life.

Experience is an ongoing, changing process. As such, it forbids the intelligent use of such terms as "completeness" and "finality." Totality can mean only continuity

34. Ratner, Joseph: The Philosophy of John Dewey (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1928) 600 pages.

35. Dewey, John: Democracy and Education (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1923) pages 378-387.

and an idea of ultimateness in philosophy is an absurd contention. As philosophy is thinking what the known demands of us and as it is a self-conscious process, it must reflect whatever genuine uncertainties there are in life. There can be no legitimate escape from these uncertainties, especially since most of them arise out of our experience.

Because it may be defined as "a theory of education," philosophy has a twofold purpose: that of criticizing existing aims and of pointing out values; and of interpreting the results of specialized science in their bearing on future social endeavor. Thus the connection between philosophy and education is too intimate to be regarded lightly. The former is definitely not an application of ready made ideas to some definite system of practice. It is rather an explicit formulation of mental and moral habitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life. Philosophy defined, then, is "a theory of education in its most general phases."

We have come most uniquely upon the horizon of Deweyan philosophy in the foregoing considerations. No one can mistake Dewey's intentions nor their probable consequences. His is a thoroughly practical and purposeful outlook. Let us put aside the ideas of totality and finality. Let us look to issues which owe their intrinsic values to the fact that finality merits only that consideration which will be necessary to reject it. Let us bow to uncertainty and in-

completeness--but not in an attitude of resignative worship. For ours is a pragmatic, a useful system. Knowledge is a tool, the use of which is the molding of purposeful thoughts, ideas and conceptions. Let the tender minded bow to an all inclusive system and unity. Let the tough minded progress in terms of the "here and now." As Arthur Kenyon Rogers puts it:

Here comes in the fundamental notion of Dewey's whole philosophy; it is an attempt to furnish a sound logical basis for progress--progress in the individual, but still more in the social world. (36)

## CHAPTER V

## THE ETHICS

Individuals flourish and wither away like the grass of the fields. But the fruits of their work endure and make possible the development of further activities having fuller significance.

--John Dewey.<sup>37</sup>

Of John Dewey's ethics we can make at least one unqualified statement: the system is consistent. For consistency lies in the carrying through to logical conclusions of any implications which find their roots in the basic premises and principles of a particular philosophy. And John Dewey, if his ethical implications are strange and hard and socially minded, has carried out in fine detail the metaphysical uncertainties which his philosophy would lead us to expect.

In considering this particular ethical system, it would at least be the part of good grace to recognize probably the most outstanding (we are tempted to say the only redeeming) single feature of its context, namely that quality of logical consistency of which we have spoken.

For a complete statement of Dewey's ethical implications we turn to his aforementioned book, Human Nature and Conduct. J. V. Nash refers to this work and its content:

John Dewey, in Human Nature and Conduct, has presented a theory of ethics which exhibits a relation to the

---

37. Dewey, John: Human Nature and Conduct (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1922) page 21.



older school of morals somewhat analogous to that which the modernist movement in religion bears to the traditional theological orthodoxies. Recent tendencies in psychology are here applied to the problem of conduct, and their implications thoroughly worked out. All supernatural sanctions are discarded and morality grounded squarely on evolution, human nature and social environment.

The Deveian system is remorselessly scientific and pragmatic; yet it flowers in spiritual values, expressed in the idealism of self-realization and human fellowship. The individual self merges into the social, without loss of its own sovereignty and autonomy. John Dewey seems to have performed the remarkable feat of bringing William James, the pragmatist, and Josiah Royce, the idealist, together in a friendly handclasp, while H. G. Wells hovers in the background, pronouncing benedictions out of God the Invisible King and Men Are Like Gods. (38)

The above is a remarkably succinct statement of exactly what further examination of Dewey's ethics will serve to bring out. The student who would endorse Dewey's system must be prepared to dispense with a world of any certainties. He must surrender at once fixed ends and final causes. He must learn to view religions and moral theories in their true light--the sham-colored light of priggish dogmatism. He must remember that he no longer retains his ethical individualism nor any such metaphysical freedom of will as he may have thought himself to possess. He must learn to recognize a new norm of morality which states: "So act as to increase the meaning of present experience,"<sup>39</sup> and he must know for once and for all that if he still aspires to heaven, "it is to the heavens of the earth and not of another world."<sup>40</sup> With this initial state of mind,

38. Nash, J.V.: "The Ethics of John Dewey" in The Open Court (Chicago: The Open Court Pub. Co. Sep., 1924)v.38,p.527.

39. Dewey, John: Human Nature and Conduct, page 238.

40. Ibid., page 16.

the inquisitor is now prepared to grapple with, if not to absorb, the Dewey system of ethics.

Dewey, the experimentalist and empiricist, approaches the subject of ethics from the side of biology, psychology and sociology. His accumulated results of research in these fields, he interprets in terms of humanism and ethics.

Human nature has always resented the yoke which moralists have attempted to place upon it.

Parents, priests, chiefs, social censors have supplied aims, aims which were foreign to those upon whom they were imposed, to the young laymen, ordinary folk; a few have given and administered rule, and the mass have in a passable fashion and with reluctance obeyed. (41)

The morality of theologians is equivalent to what Nietzsche termed "slave morals." "Generally speaking," says Dewey, "good people have been those who did what they were told to do, and lack of eager compliance is a sign of something wrong in their nature."<sup>42</sup>

However, this imposed rule in no sense came by deliberate design. "Any theory which attributes the origin of rule to deliberate design is false."<sup>43</sup> It was rather that the ignorance of human nature and its rightful claims bogged it down in a maze of false moral rules that have grown up. This was largely the result of a lack of scientific knowledge and of empirical facts. "Lack of the understanding of human nature is the primary cause of the disregard for

---

41. Ibid., page 2.

42. Ibid., pages 2-3.

43. Ibid., page 3.

it."<sup>44</sup>

The inherent evil in this situation was uprooted by "a decline in the authority of the social oligarchy (which) was accompanied by a rise of scientific interest in human nature."<sup>45</sup> Dewey might have mentioned here that the rise and progress of science was, more than any other factor, responsible for the decline of social oligarchy, and for the birth of democracy. Witness the effect of the invention of the printing press in this respect.

The discussion of social oligarchy usually leads Dewey to some few observations about the church. He now attempts to show how the Catholic Church, finding its system of morality unworkable, has got around it.

One of the most instructive things in all human history is the system of concessions, tolerances, mitigations and reprieves which the Catholic Church with its official supernatural morality has devised for the multitude. Elevation of the spirit above everything natural is tempered by organized leniency for frailties of the flesh. To uphold an aloof realm of strictly ideal realities is admitted to be possible only for a few. (46)

Dewey continues his protest against the separation of morals from human nature. One of the worst evils of this process is that human nature is left without any guide in the ordinary relationships of business, civic life, friendship and recreation. The result of this "driving morals inwards" will be the severance of morals from economics, politics and life in general. This method of treating mor-

---

44. Ibid., page 3.

45. Ibid., page 3.

46. Ibid., page 5.

als is also responsible for the problem of free will versus determinism. Neither position is tenable, Dewey believes, but there is an alternative. "All conduct is interaction between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social."<sup>47</sup> There are forces within man as well as outside of him and the problem of ethics is one of adjustment, intelligently attained.

Morals are not degraded by contact with material things. This is a mistaken idea. Much of the suffering and unnecessary slavery of the world is due to the inherited belief that moral questions can be settled privately in our minds apart from any practical application of knowledge in industry, law and politics. Thus:

It is impossible to say how much of the remediable suffering of the world is due to the fact that physical science is looked upon as merely physical....How much of the unnecessary slavery is due to the conception that moral issues can be settled within conscience or human sentiment apart from consistent study of facts and application of specific knowledge in industry, law and politics. (48)

"This," says Nash, "shows that Dewey would apply to ethics the pragmatic method which James applied to philosophy. In other words, the test of value of moral ideas is their result in practical action."<sup>49</sup>

Dewey again says: "Morals based upon concern with facts and deriving guidance from knowledge of them would at least locate the points of effective endeavor and would focus available resources upon them. It would put an end

---

47. Ibid., page 10.

48. Ibid., pages 10-11.

49. Nash, J. V.: "The Ethics of John Dewey," page 531.

to the impossible attempt to live in two unrelated worlds."<sup>50</sup>

Obviously, Dewey says, this view of ethics would not automatically solve moral problems or completely simplify life. But it would enable us to approach moral problems with a constantly growing fund of knowledge based on past experiences.

Thus, morals must be integrated with human nature and the two with environment. Out of this happy synthesis will evolve an ethical system which will be: (1) serious, but not fanatical; (2) aspiring but not sentimental; (3) adapted to reality but not conventional; (4) sensible but not profit-seeking; (5) idealistic, but not romantic.<sup>51</sup>

The part played by the phenomenon of habit in ethical considerations is so much stressed in Dewey's system that we cannot overlook it, despite the fact that much of the discussion is formally more psychological than ethical. Of his discussion of the place of impulse in conduct this psychological factor is even stronger and consequently of even less value to the ethical question.

Habits are compared to the physiological functions like breathing, digesting and the rest, with the distinction that the former are acquired while the latter are involuntary. The causes of habits are physical, not moral, and must be treated as such. Therefore, Dewey contends,<sup>52</sup> the moral problem is that of modifying the factors which

---

50. Dewey, John: Human Nature and Conduct, page 12.

51. Ibid., page 13.

52. Ibid., pages 19-22.

now influence future results. Changing the will of another involves altering objective conditions which enter into his habits. Personal traits are merely functions of, or arising from, social situations. It is impossible to change habits directly. This can be done only by changing conditions. Preaching good will, the golden rule or sentiments of love and equity will never accomplish the desired results.

The important thing here is, of course, Dewey's insistence upon the betterment of social conditions and of altering established institutions toward the end of influencing the character of the individual.

"For," says Dewey,<sup>53</sup> "we are the habit....Habits are demands for activity. They are the will." (Italics Dewey's) Habit even controls intelligence. Thus, "Reason pure of all influence from prior habit is a fiction." The final importance of habit now becomes evident. Individuals come and go, but their habits endure in the form of the institutions they have set up. Therefore, the kind of world our descendants will enjoy depends upon the habits we practice. Mere wishing for political, social or economic betterment will do little toward attaining that betterment. "There must be a change in the objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment, not merely on the hearts of men."

The problem of "means" and "ends" in Dewey's system

---

53. Ibid., pages 24-42.

would be unique in any philosophy save that which starts out from the premises we have come to recognize during the course of this thesis. Dewey expresses himself bluntly on the subject:

Means are means; they are intermediates, middle terms. To grasp this fact is to have done with the ordinary dualism of means and ends. The "end" is merely a series of acts viewed at a remote stage; and the means is merely the series viewed at an earlier one. The "end" is the last act thought of....The act which is next to be performed (is) the end. Means and ends are two names for the same reality....A distant end becomes a mere end, that is a dream. (54)

This conception of ends has definite implications which Dewey saves us the trouble of working out by himself giving a definite treatise further on in his discussion.

The ends of conduct are those foreseen consequences which influence present deliberation and which finally bring it to rest by furnishing an adequate stimulus to overt action. Consequently, ends arise and function within action. They are not things lying beyond activity at which the latter is directed. (55)

Realizing that he is at variance with many systems on this point, Dewey admits that numerous opposed moral theories agree in placing ends beyond action. But, he says, the notions of what these ends are differ greatly. Dewey dismisses these ideas as idealistic conceptions founded in fancy.

The doctrine of fixed ends-in-themselves at which human acts are directed and by which they are regulated persisted in morals and was made the cornerstone of orthodox moral theory. In fact, ends are ends-in-view or aims. They arise out of natural effects or consequences...."Ends" are perforce beginnings. (In the sense that no action terminates but in a subsequent action)....Theories of ends and ideals have

---

54. Ibid., pages 34-36.

55. Ibid., page 223.

confused and perverted the nature of ends. There is no such thing as the single all important end. (56)

Thus we have followed Dewey through his process of the total elimination of any final end.

To any individual or to any system which presumes to posit a final end or to base moral standards on the assumption that moral conviction and good faith justified striving toward an end, Dewey has this to say:

The doctrine of the isolated, complete or fixed end limits intelligent examination, encourages insincerity and puts a pseudo-stamp of moral justification upon success at any price....The doctrine of meaning well as the end (italics Dewey's) is contemptible. It is negative, self-protective and sloppy. Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever (italics mine) coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences. "Endless ends" is a way of saying that there are no ends--that is, no fixed, self-enclosed finalities. (57)

Dewey goes on to say that the tender minded of every generation have talked of fixed and final ends because they sought introspective solace from their ills in the feeling that the present is only a temporary period of troubled probation to be followed by one of unending peace and attainment. More practical minds accept the world as it is and set about framing ends out of an intelligence, and born of a very natural and laudable urge to root these ends in a philosophy of social betterment. Intelligence should not be squandered in endorsing theoretical fancies. "For the highest task of intelligence is to grasp and realize genuine opportunity, possibility."<sup>58</sup>

---

56. Ibid., pages 224-229.

57. Ibid., pages 230-233.

58. Ibid., page 234.



In moral matters, men still neglect the need of studying the way in which results similar to those which we desire actually happen. "Ends" become dreams in consciousness. But, says Dewey, "In fact (*italics Dewey's*) ends or consequences are still determined by fixed habit and the force of circumstances."<sup>59</sup>

Why do men thus deceive themselves by building up an imaginative system of non-existent entities? Because, says Dewey,<sup>60</sup> the acceptance of fixed ends in themselves is an aspect of man's devotion to an ideal of certainty. Man, in his tender mindedness, clings to something fixed because of a fear of the new and because of an attachment to his possessions. Love of certainty is a demand for a guarantee in advance of action. Dogmatism only turns truth into an insurance company. Fixed ends and principles are props for a feeling of safety, the refuge of the timid and the means by which the bold play upon the timid.

What of free will? Does man possess that power of psychological and moral selection or choice? Dewey not only denies metaphysical freedom of will in the individual but even denies that man has ever wanted free will.

What men have esteemed and fought for in the name of liberty is varied and complex--but certainly it has never been a metaphysical freedom of will. It contains three elements of importance: (1) Efficiency in action, ability to carry out plans, the absence of cramping and thwarting obstacles. (2)..The capacity to vary plans, to change the course of action, to experience novelties. (3) It signifies the power of desire and choice to be factors in events. Intelligence

---

59. Ibid., page 235.

60. Ibid., pages 236-237.

is the key to freedom in act. Study and foresight are the only roads to unimpeded action. Insistence upon a metaphysical freedom of will is generally at its most strident pitch with those who despise knowledge of matters-of-fact. They pay for their contempt by halting and confined action. If the world is already done and done for (in the sense that is an established entity) then the only freedom for which man can hope is one of efficiency in overt action. (61)

Knowledge and intelligence constitute freedom, not will.

Because through these two factors we are led to an emancipated realm of truth. Freedom is the "truth of necessity" only when we employ one "necessity" to alter another. This concept of freedom has definite ethical and moral implications. As Dewey expresses it:

Morality depends upon events, not upon commands and ideas alien to nature. But intelligence treats events as moving, as fraught with possibilities, not as ended, final. We use the foresight of the future to refine and expand present activities. In this use of desire, deliberation and choice, freedom is actualized. (Italics mine) (62)

Morality, then, is not something static--it is a process.

Morals has to do with all activity into which alternative possibilities enter and give rise to a difference between better and worse. Morals thus become and therefore are social. The question of ought is the question of better or worse in social affairs. "Morals is connected with actualities of existence, not with ideals, ends and obligations independent of actualities."<sup>63</sup>

Our ethical discussion will be complete with a consideration of Dewey's theory of the moral good. What is good?

---

61. Ibid., pages 303-310.

62. Ibid., page 329.

63. Loc. cit.

Good consists in the meaning that is experienced to belong to an activity when conflict and entanglement of various incompatible impulses and habits terminate in a unified orderly release in action. (64)

It is important to remember, here, our previous discussion of ends. In its own place no good or end is a means beyond itself. In the normal course of events good requires an estimate in terms of ends beyond itself. In doing so it becomes instrumental or extrinsic to some further but immediate end.<sup>65</sup>

Good is in no sense fixed. It is volatile, changeable, adaptable to situations. "In quality, the good is never twice alike."<sup>66</sup> Moral good coincides with the satisfaction of the forces of human nature naturally conceived. "Growth itself is the only moral end."<sup>67</sup>

There are many popular conceptions of the good, the Utilitarian, Epicurean and others. One of the most odious is the classical theory which results from the detaching of ends from empirical context. The "classical theories all agree in one regard. They all alike assume the existence of the end (italics Dewey's), the summum bonum, the final good, and the separate moral force that moves to that good."<sup>68</sup> But these classical notions are ludicrous and outmoded. They dissolve in the face of analytical processes. This is what we must recognize.

The good, satisfaction, "end," of growth of present

---

64. Ibid., page 210.

65. Cf. Dewey, John: Democracy and Education, page 279.

66. Dewey, John: Human Nature and Conduct, page 211.

67. Dewey, John: Reconstruction in Philosophy, page 177.

68. Dewey, John: Influence of Darwin on Philosophy, page 67.

action in shades and scope of meaning is the only good within our control, and the only one, accordingly, for which responsibility exists. (Italics mine) The rest is luck, fortune. And the tragedy of the moral notions most insisted upon by the morally self-conscious is the relegation of the only good which can fully engage thought, namely present meaning of action, to the rank of an incident of remote good whether that future be defined as pleasurable, or perfection, or salvation or attainment of virtuous character. (69)

We have thus considered the ethical system to which John Dewey subscribes. Emerging with his dictated categorical imperative, "So act as to increase the meaning of present experiences," we have approached as nearly as possible to both Dewey's moral implications and his norm of human action. There remains only the task of evaluating these findings by a method which is at once free from prejudice and bias and at the same time thoroughly sincere if not intelligent.

## CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSION--EVALUATION

Having considered Dewey's philosophy and ethics there remains only the task of considering that philosophy and ethical system in such a way that some sort of an evaluation will be possible.

Dewey has led us to some definite conclusions and placed us in a position that we must understand thoroughly. We have come to know a new sense of values. It is important that we place ourselves in the frame of mind to which Dewey subscribes. He would think of man as a cog in a mechanized and a melioristic universe. Solutions to everyday problems are no longer possible in the manner to which we have been accustomed. Injustice and inequality may still dog a none too pleasing existence, but this consideration, says Dewey, should not cause us to hesitate. Our duty is still very evident. We must continue to push forward, to advance the cause of present society and of posterity. If our progress is so insignificant that we fail in our chosen purpose, then the race may profit by avoiding the mistakes which contributed to our downfall. If we succeed, the progress of the race is advanced accordingly. To be a sacrificial lamb on the altar of human society is not a sad fate especially if society recognizes the worth of our contribution. But, Dewey insists, they do not serve

who only stand and wait. To stand and wait is "to rust unburnished, not to shine in use."

Some will protest that we exaggerate the implications of Dewey's instrumental method. But assuming that what is right is what is expedient, that we lack individualistic free will, that the end of life is certainly not to be sought in something beyond the grave, that the summum bonum is an illusion of grandeur, that to go beyond experience in developing a philosophy is to indulge in superstitious foolishness<sup>70</sup>--assuming these premises because Dewey has furnished them to us, what other logical conclusions are possible?

As has been pointed out, Dewey objects to the established ethical systems of the past. The proposed rule of "do good and avoid evil" was not sufficiently conducive to human conformity. To offset this lack of a binding and guiding force, religious ethical systems were established with their consequent dicta of moralities.

However, the established moral and ethical systems were never of much value for many reasons. In the first place, Dewey contends, the great majority of common people could never live up to these set moralities. The systems proposed were far too difficult and only such select groups as clerics and religious were able to abide satisfactorily under the proposed rules. Also, social abuses ran rampant and the established moralities served only to gloss these injustices with a veneer of righteousness, but not to

---

70. Cf. John Dewey's essay in Living Philosophies (New York: Simon and Schuster. 1931) pages 21 ff.

remedy them.

Thus, Dewey says, moral systems were too theoretical in form and never practical in application. Hypocrisy substituted on every side for sincerity in human relationships. The social ills which so obviously existed were wholly and wilfully neglected. Often the systems of morality were too formal and ritualistic, substituting these characteristics for the real and intrinsic purposes of any ethical system. Ritual was used to condone and to pacify.

It must be remembered in considering all of these accusations, that many of them are true--but only in effect, not in the causes that Dewey would attribute to them. Dewey emerged from a Calvinistic background and many of his impressions of the ethics involved in Calvinism were unfortunately very poor and definitely not conducive to conformity. But Calvinism as practiced was often full of deceits and was not seldom hypocritical. The attitude of Dewey's mind resulting from exposure to this influence had an unhappy effect on much of his later thinking.

As to the charge that people are unable to live up to established moralities, we wonder whether this is established in fact. Admittedly, many people do fail to live up to the moral standards they are supposed to observe. But might not this failure be due as much to personal irresolution and to human weakness as to any objective faults in the moral system itself? Plenty of people do live up to the established moralities and by so doing they disprove the

idea that such an ethical system is impossible in observance. It is not that people observe moral standards because they are saints; rather, they are saints because they do so.

Taking up the question of social abuses, we ask whether social abuses are part of any established morality. The answer is rather obviously negative. Social abuses exist, certainly, but not, as Dewey seems to think, because of any inherent evil of the Christian ethical system. They arise, on the contrary, because of man's refusal to observe the rules and regulations of this ethical system. They are not part of a system, but abuses of it.

It might also be well to remember in this connection that Dewey's outlook is materialistic and because of his natural bias he might be inclined to regard many things as evil or as unsatisfactory which are not intrinsically so. Poverty, meaning lack of money, is bad only when the absolute necessities of life are denied a man by virtue of the fact that he is totally unable to supply his wants and needs. A man with an inordinate desire for money as something good in itself, will naturally think that lack of a great deal of money is an evil in itself. The conclusion can hardly be said to follow. The same general applications may be made to suffering and to death. Many of man's most worthwhile virtues never come to light under ideal conditions. The presence of pain and suffering in the world has accounted for most of the self sacrifice, beneficence and



charity that man has at one time or another displayed. Death is evil and depressing only when it marks the cessation of all life and the end of all hope. Perhaps this type of reasoning will help to explain Dewey's never-ending objections to what he categorically regards as social ills.

We have considered Dewey's metaphysical background and found it based on evolutionary principles with the incumbent ideas of a universe existing without the necessity of a God and with a law and order not seemingly dependent upon any intelligent guidance. The question arises, is God necessary in the explanation of the universe or is evolution a satisfactory answer to the problem?

There can be little doubt as to the value of the strides that the evolutionary theory has made up to the present day. Evolution, as a theory, will unquestionably progress with the advance of science. But evolution is of two distinct kinds: (1) scientific evolution which seeks to determine the historical succession of the various species of plants and animals on earth; (2) materialistic and atheistic evolution, the first principle of which is the denial of a Creator. The first type has no quarrel with any Christian doctrine or any Christian ethical system. As a theory, it is progressive and enlightening. The second type, however, is obviously opposed to any Christian outlook. A Creator, or even an intelligent force is not admitted nor deemed necessary.

According to this second view, the fact that man can-

not account for the origin and existence of the universe or for the phenomenon of positive sequence is no proof for the existence of any such Creator or intelligent force. It is merely a reluctant admission on the part of man that his scientific probings have not as yet uncovered the exact nature of the origin of the universe. It is unable to account for the first beginning of the cosmos or for the law of its evolution, since it acknowledges neither Creator or lawgiver. No alternate explanation is offered. Man is merely told that he does not know simply because he has thus far been unable to unearth the answer to his query from the facts of science.

This materialistic type of evolution is an integral part of John Dewey's metaphysical background. It supposes that chance (or at least some undetermined unintelligent force) is sufficient to account for the origin and existence of the universe. If it admitted the possibility of an intelligence as the cause, it would admit a God and thus no longer be what it claims to be.

Dewey's strenuous objection to any such concept as the final good or the summum bonum has been pointed out. This is natural to a man like Dewey with his disregard of an after life. For assuming that what is good is what is in conformity with man's nature, and assuming that man's nature, like his identity, is something which terminates at the moment of death, it is obvious that there can be no final good. If death is the end of all, then obviously, as Dewey

would hardly regard death as something good in itself, any idea of a summum bonum would be incongruous.

The same general ideas apply to Dewey's conception of means and ends. There is no final end unless it be considered the last end of an immediate series of actions. For beyond any series of acts lies only a subsequent series so that the first series must be in preparation for the one to follow. Means, then, must be useful and expedient. Man is essentially social and thus the ends of his acts must be in conformity not with his individual nature but with the needs of society. Any socially useful means, then, may be considered a good means to an end which, if socially justifiable, is thus intrinsically justifiable.

Man's nature, according to Dewey, must not be regarded as a nature that is striving to conform to some mysterious guiding force. It is not a nature intrinsically drawn towards an ultimate goal and hence capable of recognizing any force which aids that progress as good and any force which impedes it as evil. Rather, man is a social animal. As such, he must direct his intelligence and his capabilities in such a way that these factors will serve to advance the progress of that society of which he is an integral part. To recognize this fact is to catch the underlying note of all of Dewey's ethical considerations. And to escape this fact is not possible when one proceeds from Dewey's principles.

In conclusion, it may be added that a consideration of

John Dewey's ethics has served to bear out one unavoidable point. Any ethical system, to be consistent, must evolve naturally and logically from the premises upon which that system of ethics is based. An ethics presupposes a metaphysical and a philosophical background. It can be divorced from neither of these. Thus to proceed from Dewey's background and from the foundation upon which that background rests, necessitates the endorsement of his ethics. To reject those premises is to establish a position from which Dewey's ethics may be legitimately challenged.

Schuster 1941

A brief expression of Dewey's many reasons for rejecting organized and established religion and a good illustration of his ideas on morality, heaven, etc.

Democracy and Education (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1916)

472 pp.

In this book, Dewey says, may be found a most nearly complete and correct account of his philosophy. The stress placed upon the historical aspect makes the philosophy contained rather hard to distinguish.

Ethics (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1920) 216 pp.

Dewey wrote this book in connection with J. M. Tufts. It is a history of the general idea of morality, a discussion of moral theory, and an application of the ideas involved to the moral life of action.

Experience and Nature (Chicago: Open Court, 1925)

1925] 443 pp.

A long, obscure and tedious work which is valuable in that it is the best explanation of all philosophy which Dewey has written.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

## I. Books, essays and articles written by John Dewey.

Common Faith, A (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1934)

87 pp.

In this short treatise may be found what most nearly expresses Dewey's ideas on the subject of religion or the possibility of a satisfactory religion for mankind.

"Credo," in Living Philosophies (New York: Simon and Schuster. 1931)

A brief expression of Dewey's many reasons for rejecting organized and established religions and a good insight into his ideas on immortality, heaven, etc.

Democracy and Education (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1916)

434 pp.

In this book, Dewey says, may be found a most nearly complete and correct account of his philosophy. The stress placed upon the educational aspect makes the philosophy contained rather hard to distinguish.

Ethics (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1926) 618 pp.

Dewey wrote this book in conjunction with J. H. Tufts. It is a history of the growth of morality, a discussion of moral theory, and an application of the ideas involved to "the world of action."

Experience and Nature (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co.

1925) 443 pp.

A long, discursive and tedious book which is valuable in that it is the best explanation of his philosophic method that Dewey has written.

"From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in Contemporary American Philosophy (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1930) vol. 2, pages 13-27.

A most lucid statement of the life, and intellectual influences which contributed to the development of Dewey's system of thought. It is an excellent approach to Dewey's philosophy.

"Fundamentals," in The New Republic (New York: New Republic Publishing Co.) Feb. 6, 1924, vol. 37, pages 275-279.

In which Dewey belittles the Catholic Church, the Bible and the idea of seeking security in an after-life. Security in methods of inquiry is the theme.

German Philosophy and Politics (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1915) 134 pp.

The book points out the influences of German philosophy etc. in present day thought.

Human Nature and Conduct (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1922) 336 pp.

The most valuable book obtainable in a consideration of Dewey's ethics. Dewey discusses such ideas as the good, ends, means, free will and all of the other human factors which contribute to an ethical discussion.

Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought, The (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1910) 309 pp.

The book gives a clear insight into the great influence that Darwin's theory of evolution has had on Dewey's metaphysics.

Quest for Certainty, The (New York: Minton Balch and Co. 1929) 318 pp.

This work is long and makes tedious, heavy reading. It is intended to be a study of the relation of knowledge and action.

Reconstruction in Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1920) 224 pp.

This book is something of a protest against what Dewey considers the weaknesses of previous philosophies, followed by a "reconstruction" of thought by the instrumentalist.

Address at the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy (1926) in Robinson, D. S.: Anthology of Recent Philosophy (New York: T. Y. Crowell. 1929) pages 47-55.

In this article Dewey reviews the development of pragmatism from C. S. Peirce, through James and completes the discussion with a good treatise on his own instrumentalism.

## II. Books, essays and articles written about John Dewey.

Adler, Felix: In Essays in Honor of John Dewey (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1929) 425 pp. pages 24 ff.

The book is a compilation of essays written by Dewey's former students and nowhere are effects of Dewey's thought so well expressed.

Creighton, J. E.: "Pragmatism," in The Encyclopedia Americana (New York: Americana Corp. 1932) vol. 22, page 502.

In this article may be found a most clean cut definition of the term pragmatism with some practical applications to Dewey's position.

Crissman, Paul: "Dewey's Theory of the Moral Good," in The Monist, Oct. 1928, vol. 38, pages 592-619

Crissman succeeds in capturing Dewey's idea of the moral good as well as any writer has been able to do. His criticism of Dewey's "good" is worth reading.

Durant, Will: The Story of Philosophy (New York: Garden City Publishing Co. 1933) pages 565-575, also Introduction.

Durant is too well known to require much discussion. His treatment of Dewey is fair enough but gives the impression of being haphazard comment.

McNutt, W. S.: "Instrumentalism at its Best," in Education, Nov. 1925, vol. 56, pages 149-153.

McNutt criticizes Dewey, especially because of an article Dewey had written entitled "Fundamentals," (see reference in Dewey's bibliography) in a manner both caustic and enlightening. McNutt's chief objection is to Dewey's influence in present day education.

Nash, J. V.: "The Ethics of John Dewey," in Open Court, Sept. 1924, vol. 38, pages 527-538.

The article amounts to a review of Human Nature and Conduct and may be used in conjunction with that work.

Riley, Woodbridge: American Thought (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1915) pages 279 ff.

Riley succeeds in capturing Dewey's thought and position as well or better than any of the commentators consulted.

Rogers, A. K.: English and American Philosophy Since 1800 (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1923) pages 388-405.

Rogers' treatment is discursive and rather thorough with the disadvantage of lacking suitable references to direct points under discussion.



Ratner, Joseph:                    The Philosophy of John Dewey (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1928) 560 pp.

Ratner's book is by far the most exhaustive treatment of Dewey's philosophy that has been written. Ratner proposes to present that philosophy in a form available to the lay-man, but the result is a heavy and not too lucid compilation of excerpts from Dewey's writings which the lay-man would probably not understand.

Schneider, H. W.:                In Essays in Honor of John Dewey.

The book is previously discussed under Felix Adler.

Smith, T. V.:                    The Philosophic Way of Life (Chicago: Chicago University Press. 1929) 234 pp.

Here John Dewey is made to uphold the Social way of life. The book is a poor reference.

Smith, T. V.:                    "Dewey's Theory of Value," in The Monist, July, 1922, vol. 32, pages 339-354.

A typical T. V. Smith article; not very helpful.

Thomas, M. H., and  
Schneider, H. W.:                A Bibliography of John Dewey (New York: Columbia University Press. 1929) 151 pp.

A complete list of Dewey's writings up to 1929 with a supplementary list of references.

Townsend, H. G.: Philosophical Ideas in the United States (New York: American Book Co. 1934) pages 230 ff.

Townsend is an historian worthy of note and his treatment of Dewey is very worth while.

Wickham, Harvey: The Unrealists (New York: The Dial Press. 1930) 314 pp.

Wickham is the de-bunker of recent philosophy and he spares no jibes nor any effort when he directs his pen at Dewey. The book is worth reading.

Who's Who in America (Chicago: A. N. Marquis Co. 1936) vol. 19, pages 723.

A good source for Dewey's biography.