

Dewey on Virtue

Timothy H. Smith
Hofstra University

Perhaps Rice's excellent analysis of Dewey's view of virtue can be more fully appreciated in reference to his conception of experience. As Rice notes, for Dewey, virtues are species of habits; and inasmuch as all knowledge and educative growth emerge out of experience and habit, the development of virtue and character needs to be connected to the central role of experience in the educative process.

Though most experience for Dewey is non-cognitive, and does not consciously enable us to perceive connections among or between phenomena, he provides us with two basic criteria we can enlist to help us plan the educative process. These are identified as the principle of continuity, and the principle of interaction.¹ These two principles not only relate to planning and selection of academic content, but equally to our educational efforts to develop virtue and character, and good habits in general.

The principle of the continuity of experience reminds us that all experience has a backward and forward dimension. To the extent that there are significant discontinuities between children's lives and deliberate education within the school, growth is impeded; and radically diverse experiences, even within the school's program, can be genuinely miseducative. In a similar fashion, the principle of interaction recalls for us that both internal and external factors in experience must interlock and be given equal attention for the educational process to advance. This principle in turn is violated if the educational program leans too heavily on desires, interests, and predispositions, on the one hand, or on the other, if academic content is presented apart from concern for its educative connection with such internal experiential factors.

A major theme implicit in Rice's analysis acknowledges the systemic nature of Dewey's thinking which, along with his conception of experience, long ago foreshadowed important elements in more recent postmodern philosophy,² or what is sometimes termed "new paradigm" epistemology.³ Systems thinking is a fundamental departure from our Cartesian/Newtonian heritage and represents a radical epistemological shift from that which has predominated since the Enlightenment. One major feature of this orientation — and of Dewey's thinking — involves a rejection of the sharp dualisms that have characterized the nature of so much philosophy since the time of Descartes. The principle of the continuity of experience is but one expression of this rejection, and a fuller appreciation of its relation to knowledge acquisition in general is elaborated in Dewey's later work.⁴ Relativity theory and quantum theory, in particular, developed in the past century, led Dewey to appreciate the inadequacy of much dualistic thought as a means of characterizing experience, or as a way of understanding nature and human nature in their ecological interdependencies. As Rice has observed in this connection, not only does Dewey see all education as moral in nature, but habits and virtues themselves are web-like in their organic interconnectedness in disposition and in conduct. That we can and

do make distinctions between the moral and the non-moral, or between virtues as ideals or ends, and virtues as means, does not signify their ontological or epistemological status as isolated categories. Rather, such distinctions enable us to focus upon one set of concerns or interests apart from others as a way of helping to clarify issues involving dynamic multidimensional aspects of experience. Thus to celebrate any virtue as an ideal apart from the context relevant to it, or in isolation from other virtues, violates the experiential continuum giving it specific meaning; in addition, such a celebration fails as well to perceive the essence of virtue as exhibited in character. As Rice points out, what may be judged as an act of generosity in one context may well be even a vice in another, or at least not an unqualifiably virtuous act. A wealthy person who gives to charity at year's end on the recommendation of an accountant, may indeed benefit the charity in the short run. But if such giving were solely predicated on personal benefit, its virtuousness is not identical with an act of giving where private gain is not served, or served only in part. Further, in a wider economic context, if the rich give to charity primarily as a means of rationalizing their simultaneous political effort to curtail a more equitable public distribution of goods and services where vast social inequities exist, then it is arguable that such generosity is more like a vice than a virtue.

Isolation of virtues from one another or from context is also reductionistic and tends to render their behavioral expression mechanical. In this sense, efforts to teach virtues as explicit lessons apart from their relation to the experience of those who are to learn them, rob their meaning of vital personal significance, and ultimately reduce their social worth. At best such efforts lead students to ascribe virtues hollow verbal authority, or to accord them such literal meaning as to make them narrow mechanistic rules to follow. Any strong normative authority that might eventually be attached to virtues is thereby weakened, as is their possibility for emerging into refined and mature status in character. As Green has pointed out, in a technologically advanced and individualistic society such as we live in today, this kind of pedagogical orientation toward formation of moral conscience might well make the learning of virtue a miseducative experience. In short, if schooling facilitates the growth of a weak ritualistic conformity to compartmentalized virtues, it encourages a view of them as instrumental to the placating of authority at best, and undermines their larger social significance and relationship to the good life.⁵

The educative milieu provided by schools must acknowledge, as Dewey notes, that "moral life cannot go on without the support of a moral environment."⁶ But to insist on such an environment is to recognize the responsibility of schools to try to create an atmosphere of moral concern that permeates all aspects of school life. As Power has observed, "In our individualistic American culture we have paid little attention to the moral quality of our institutions,"⁷ and we have tended to see the institution of schooling itself as a place where individuals come together largely for pragmatic purposes. We need to recognize that the term "community" can signify much more than a collection of people, and that a sense of community can be consciously cultivated to stimulate relationship and cooperative activity "committed to collective norms of caring, trust, and shared responsibility."⁸

Sichel elaborates on the significance of this broader framework for conceptualizing morality in her recognition that there is an intimate connection as well between moral development programs within school and the wider social and political environment. A constructive moral ethos within any school community will be undermined by educational policies whose economic and political dimensions do not both acknowledge and support its cultivation.⁹ As one institution among many affecting the development of character, it is readily agreed that the school cannot be a consistent positive force in the life of children if high priority is not given to adequate resources creating a decent and humane environment; but it is equally essential to a healthy moral climate that the claims of justice and the value of caring relationships be integrated and rendered meaningful in experiential terms. This point is politically dramatized by, among others, Etzioni. In endorsing commitment to the communitarian movement at large in the United States today, Etzioni calls for a significant reduction in our emphasis on rights, and a corresponding increase in emphasis on social responsibility. Such a shift in priorities is seen as one important way to arrest social fragmentation and decline in cooperative and altruistic behavior so especially apparent in schools in our large cities. Though many of his particular recommendations are controversial with regard to issues of rights, Etzioni is persuasive in arguing that only if the schools can find ways to establish moral communities fostering close relationships, non-democratic authoritarian groups and institutions are bound to increase in number and influence in response to the human need for affiliation and longing for intense communal activity.¹⁰

In any event, there are two lines of criticism worth noting here that bear upon seeming weaknesses in Dewey's overall conception of virtue and character development. In emphasizing in so much of his work the role of the method of intelligence and of the scientific method itself as a model for thought, he did not seem to acknowledge adequately the non-rational dimensions of moral development, especially the value of relationship and connection featured so centrally in feminist literature. And, second, Dewey may be judged to have been too optimistic with respect to the malleability of habits, both as aspects of human nature and of institutions at large.¹¹ In individuals as in institutions, all too commonly, a crisis mentality seems to prevail wherein change emerges only in response to a blatantly direct and immediately perceived threat.

Furthermore, in underscoring the non-rational and contextual aspects of the moral life, Blum documents in detail the extraordinary importance and relevance of Gilligan's work¹² in stimulating the growth of an ethic of care as a legitimate addition to the historic ethical traditions emphasizing abstract justice, duty, and calculative effort on behalf of the greatest good for the greatest number. In adding the voice of care and responsibility to the voice of rights previously dominant in ethical theory and moral development, numerous other feminist scholars have recently enriched both areas of concern to education. And insofar as Gilligan herself originally recognized the relevance of both the ethic of justice and care in mature morality, Giarelli and Chambliss argue that her inclusive vision is more consonant with Dewey's ethical orientation than Kohlbergian theory.¹³

As one such feminist, Elizabeth Minnich writes in this connection, a new way of thinking needs to be more greatly emphasized which, while building on Dewey's insights,

explores connection, complementarity, relationality within the matrix of experience where we are called to practice both care and justice...[and] to retrieve and revalue all aspects of the meaning of being human...in the name of our fullest unique and common potential.¹⁴

In affirming affiliation, relationship, and communal association as central to moral development, and in highlighting these dimensions of life in connection with the spiritual, the feminine, and the ecological, such feminist writers have enriched Dewey's legacy even as they have built upon it. In reminding us that virtue is indeed more caught than taught, they also reinforce Dewey's view that moral education, like poetry, "teaches as friends and life teach, by being, and not by expressing intent."¹⁵

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1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 33-50.
 2. See, for example, the Philosophy of Education Presidential Address by Clive Beck, "Postmodernism, Pedagogy, and Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994), 1-13.
 3. For one of the first uses of this term to characterize systems thinking as postmodern critique, see Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).
 4. See John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949); and Sidney Ratner et al., eds., *John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley: A Philosophical Correspondence, 1932-1951* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964).
 5. Thomas F. Green, *The Formation of Conscience in an Age of Technology: The John Dewey Lecture 1984* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 9-12.
 6. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1934), 345.
 7. F. Clark Power, "Just Schools and Moral Atmosphere," in *Ethics for Professionals in Education*, ed. Kenneth A. Strike and P. Lance Tarnasky (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 148.
 8. *Ibid.*, 159.
 9. Betty A. Sichel, *Moral Education: Character, Community, and Ideals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 170 ff.
 10. Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 163-91.
 11. One dramatic, if tragic, example today of this second point — that is, of the intractability of indurate habit — is revealed in the large percentage of adults who continue to smoke in the face of overwhelming evidence of its harmfulness, and in the extent to which governmental forces in turn have been unable as yet to mobilize consensus around policies or programs to save literally hundreds of thousands of lives.
 12. Lawrence A. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 215-67.
 13. J. M. Giarelli and J. J. Chambliss, "John Dewey on Moral Development and Education: Conception and Legacy," *Discourse* 9, no. 2 (1989): 82-103.
 14. Elizabeth K. Minnich, "Can Virtue Be Taught? A Feminist Reconsiders," in *Can Virtue Be Taught?* ed. Barbara Darling-Smith (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 81.
 15. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 346-47.