

Understanding Dewey's Ethics

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Ethical discussion frequently oscillates between the view that there are absolute ethical laws that are innately reasonable, and the view that all values are subjective and irrational. John Dewey sought a position that avoided both of these extremes, one that understood ethics to be both contingent and reasonable.

In particular, Dewey disagreed with the notions that values are necessarily subjective and irrational. He thought that values could be objectively studied, since valuing is simply a form of behavior that can be studied like any other observable behavior. He also thought that valuing could itself be evaluated, since it is possible to consider a value in relation to the conditions from which it emerged and the consequences to which it leads. For instance, one might study the social conditions under which a given approach to social conflict evolved and the consequences of adopting that approach. Approached in this way, ethical inquiry is similar to scientific inquiry. As in other areas, Dewey shied away from drawing a rigid distinction between the two, viewing ethical and scientific inquiry as not essentially different in kind.

This conception of ethics allows it to be understood as both contingent and reasonable, thus avoiding both polarized positions. However, it also opens up the possibility that ethics will be conceived in overly absolute ways, just as science is sometimes conceived, thereby creating a new absolutism. It is this misreading of Dewey that Matt Pamental sees in Christine McCarthy's article and attempts to "head off" in his clear and nicely-crafted article. In what follows I will summarize and briefly respond to his arguments. Although I will consider the merits of McCarthy's and Pamental's interpretations of Dewey, my main concern will be with the practical significance of the issues at stake.

SUMMARY AND RESPONSES

Pamental's first point is that McCarthy leads one to take Dewey as a consequentialist, which he was not. He should not be considered a consequentialist because: a) He gave other factors equal weight, such as character and duty; b) He explicitly argued against utilitarianism, accusing it of being based on an impossible psychology; c) He argued that the value of overt conduct (a consequence) cannot be judged independent of character or motive.¹

It is indeed important to understand that Dewey was not a simple consequentialist. This has been a frequent misinterpretation of pragmatism from Bertrand Russell onward. The point could perhaps be made in a more general way by noting how Dewey thought of the relation between means and ends. For Dewey an "end" was a means. That is, an end or aim serves to guide an act to its conclusion. This conception of having an aim viewed it as a means to acting in a coordinated and continuous manner. Of course a "means" was also an end, when viewed more locally, since it is a sub-goal within a larger act. Seen in this way, an "end" cannot

be external to the act if it is truly the end of the act. Dewey's way of thinking of means and ends in independent functional terms, which was central to much of his thought, implies that he was not a simple consequentialist who would adapt means to ends without considering the goodness of the means themselves.

In any event, when I read McCarthy's article I did not get such a strong sense of emphasis on ends irrespective of means. She mentioned that ethical researchers might study "the consequences of adopting this or that mode of behavior" and quoted Dewey regarding studying conditions and consequences, but that is about it.² I think Pamental has performed a service in heading off this misinterpretation, but I am less sure the criticism applies to McCarthy's essay.

Pamental's second point is that McCarthy did not properly place inquiry in the context of life experience, or organism-environment transactions.

This point is also important. Viewing thinking as emerging out of, and stimulated by, the emotional turmoil of conflicted action and as having the function of enabling disorganized activity to proceed is important for moral inquiry because placing ethical inquiry in context allows it to be understood as both interested and fallible. It makes ethical problem-solving interested in resolving the practical conflict from which it emerges. It also makes the conclusion of an inquiry a fallible hypothesis that may or may not resolve the conflict when implemented. I take this point to be a good correction to McCarthy's discussion.

Pamental's third point is that McCarthy accepts moral propositions having the wrong form because she has not properly understood the relation between means and ends. She accepted propositions such as "x is better than y" as resulting from ethical inquiry when she should have limited herself to propositions of the form "x is better than y as a means to end z." The latter form makes clear that such statements are relative to ends, again helping to place ethical judgment in context. It says that when we consider whether something is good we should investigate what it is good for. Considering what it leads to, rather than just saying it is good in itself, is also necessary if scientific inquiry is to make a contribution to ethics, since science tells us about causal relations between actions and consequences. Learning about causal relations can be helpful for ethics because it tells us whether a means-end relation is likely to work out. Thus, science is relevant to propositions of the second type, but not to those of the first type.

I think Pamental is right in criticizing the first form of proposition as inconsistent with Dewey's thought. For example, Dewey warned that propositions resulting from ethical inquiry "are not rules in the sense that they enable us to tell directly... the values of given particular ends."³ I am less clear whether Pamental is right about the form that Dewey *did* indicate, since Dewey was far from clear on this issue. He wrote, somewhat opaquely, that empirically grounded general propositions "are rules of methodic procedure in the conduct of the investigations that determine the respective conditions and consequences of various modes of behavior," which seems consistent with Pamental's form.⁴ I conclude that Pamental has at the very least begun a useful clarification of the issue.

Pamental's fourth point is that McCarthy gives the impression that ethical inquiry will result in "objective moral truths in the sense of timeless, decontextualized verities" or "universal and absolute generalizations." He argues that McCarthy has Dewey wrong here because Dewey viewed moral propositions as "general rules of thumb, and not universal principles."

While the point about the instrumental function of principles is a good one (Just what it is good for I will outline in a moment), I think Pamental may be in danger of reacting to McCarthy's tone but perhaps not to what she explicitly states. McCarthy quoted Dewey several times to the effect that moral principles are tools of inquiry, not dictates. I do not believe she claimed that they were "timeless, decontextualized verities" or "absolute generalizations," these being Pamental's words. Nor did Dewey oppose the idea that there are general, universal moral principles (that is, general principles that are stated in a way that is widely understood in the same way). For example, he wrote that "individualized ethical judgments require for their control generic propositions, which state a connection of relevant conditions in universal (or objective) form...and it is possible to direct inquiry so as to arrive at such universals."⁵ The issue is not whether moral principles take general, universal form but how one uses them. A carpentry tool may be useful for a variety of tasks (general) and still be regarded as a specific tool with specific uses, rather than as the answer to all of a carpenter's prayers. I suspect that Pamental is correctly reacting to the tone of McCarthy's essay, although not, so far as I found, to her explicit claims.

Finally, Pamental criticizes McCarthy for suggesting that moral principles may be "verified" when she should have concluded that they are merely "warranted," since that is all we can know about an empirical hypothesis.

I thought all of the parties confusing on this issue. McCarthy, Pamental, and Dewey, all sometimes refer to beliefs as "verified" or "confirmed," and at other times as "warranted."⁶ To focus on Dewey, in particular, he wrote about the "experimental corroboration, or *verification*" of an idea in *How We Think*, and about seeking an "empirically *verifiable*" theory of behavior in *Human Nature and Conduct*.⁷ Dewey was clearer on this issue after writing his *Logic*, where he elaborated the idea of "warranted assertability."⁸ One reason for the confusion among all of the parties seems to be vacillation between psychological and logical points of view.

DOES IT MATTER?

No matter who has the better interpretation of Dewey, it is important to understand that ethics can be contingent, reasonable, and an aid to perception, rather than a set of absolute commandments. Pamental has helped remind us of the dangers of an overly imperial view of ethics and warned against considering ethics as a kind of answer machine for generating proper lines of behavior.

This leaves at least somewhat unresolved the issue of the relation between science and ethics. As noted previously, Dewey did not make a hard and fast distinction between the two, although he recognized a functional difference. Thought in any area, insofar as it is genuine thought, involves deliberation in the

context of potentially competing aims.⁹ In this sense, all real thought has ethical aspects since it emerges when there is a conflict of aims. Thought also involves attention to consequences, to the meaning of events (what they are a means to). In this sense all thought has “scientific” or means-ends aspects. As a result, there is no rigid distinction between ethical and scientific thought. However, science as an institutionalized activity has the function of investigating instrumental or causal relations, while ethics has the function of finding out how to resolve social conflicts involving conflicting aims between different groups or individuals. Thus, there is a difference in focus. Each of these functions ideally aids the other, the results of ethical inquiry helping to guide science, while the results of scientific inquiry help in judging the plausibility of ethical suggestions. The present discussion seems to be partly about clarifying these relations.

A final issue concerns the implications of this discussion for moral education. McCarthy seems to want to introduce something like values clarification and didactic instruction in moral knowledge. For example, she suggests that we should teach children the “process of evaluating values” and notes that there is a “public obligation to teach such moral knowledge as may be had.”¹⁰ Pamental, borrowing from Dewey’s *How We Think*, emphasizes the inculcation of more general character traits associated with good problem-solving, such as open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. Although his essay’s educational implications are a bit vague at the end, I think he is onto something. The way to educate children morally is to make them co-participants in setting up the social order of the classroom or school, subject to their abilities to understand the issues and limited by their stakes in them. They should help to resolve their own social problems as they emerge, with adult help and guidance when necessary. Careful inquiry into experienced relational problems in which all parties have a voice and answers are likely to be actually implemented in practice would foster traits like those Pamental mentions. In later grades one could include some of the things McCarthy mentions, such as studying the origins of different ethical codes and the consequences of adopting them in various situations, but for this to make sense it should be based on earlier experience in being a practicing moral agent.

1. See John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1922).

2. Christine McCarthy, “Dewey’s Ethics: Philosophy or Science?” *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999): 341.

3. Dewey, *Theory of Valuation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), 57.

4. *Ibid.*, 58.

5. Quoted in McCarthy, “Dewey’s Ethics,” 346.

6. See Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 221 and McCarthy, “Dewey’s Ethics,” 345.

7. Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston, MA: D. C. Heath, 1910), 77, 83; and Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 173.

8. See Dewey, *Logic, The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938).

9. See Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*.

10. McCarthy, “Dewey’s Ethics,” 356-57.