

Dewey and the Issue of Change

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In his article, Aaron Schutz analyses John Dewey’s evolving thought surrounding the rise of militarism and fascism in Germany in the early to mid-twentieth century and its implications for education.¹ Schutz engages aspects of Dewey’s works that are often omitted from the Dewey canon in the discipline of education. In my response, I focus on a few points in Schutz’s argument but mostly aim to engage in a collaborative spirit with some of the broader questions that his discussion raises in relation to Dewey’s thinking about change.

As Schutz explains, in the book *German Philosophy and Politics (GPP)*, written in the run-up to WWI, Dewey developed the view that the rise of militarism in Germany could be explained by particular cultural circumstances. Based on his theory of habits, Dewey thought that these circumstances enforced certain customs and ways of thinking in German society that made it particularly—or perhaps even uniquely—prone to fascism. In Schutz’s exposition, *GPP* is introduced as the precarious intellectual endeavor to “pin down” the intellectual and moral substance of an entire culture, which Dewey appears to embark on somewhat against his own better judgment. Dewey had started to question German idealism—and particularly its absolutism—in the late nineteenth century. WWI led him to eschew his earlier admiration of German idealism more forcefully, as can be observed in *GPP*. To that end, some argue, Dewey potentially stretched his critique of Immanuel Kant in ways that neglected, for example, the latter’s own commitment to democracy.²

In his paper, Schutz argues that “Dewey’s primarily ‘culturalist’ vision of social action and change” found its limitation during WWII, where it failed to explain convincingly how “even apparently ‘healthy’ societies might go mad, and go mad quite rapidly.” My first point of discussion pertains to the label “culturalist” in relation to Dewey’s thinking.

In addition to his rejection of idealism, and against the trend at the

time, Dewey was opposed to contemporary evolutionary psychology. He argued that biology could not fully account for differences between groups in terms of how they do things, their morals, and their ideas. The immediate environment—material, social, cultural—played a critical role in Dewey’s understanding of development. This opposition also appears to have been an important motivating factor for Dewey’s thinking in *GPP*, where he states: “The vogue of evolutionary ideas has led many to regard intelligence as a deposit from history, not as a force in the making.”³

Dewey’s desire to counter thinkers like Herbert Spencer—whom he disliked openly and who quite successfully defended a view that foregrounded innate traits and tendencies in development while diminishing the role of culture—might have led him slightly to overemphasize the role of culture, in an attempt to counterbalance. This certainly appears to be the case in *GPP*, where, as convincingly shown by Schutz, the emphasis falls on nurture over nature. Nonetheless, I believe Dewey’s own evolutionism was generally more sophisticated than that.⁴ In my reading, rather than embracing a one-sided “culturalism,” or aligning with the biological determinism of many contemporary naturalists, Dewey’s thinking is closer to multi-inheritance theories of evolution emerging today.⁵ Therein, mind and culture constitute each other and co-evolve; nature and nurture, and nature and culture, cannot be separated. These feedback-loops are at the heart of Dewey’s thinking surrounding habits and change. Therefore, I would question to what extent thinking of Dewey as a “culturalist”—or a “naturalist” for that matter—adds to our understanding of his thinking, in particular without considering what Dewey understood by “culture” and “nature.”

What strikes me as important here, however, is that Dewey’s focus on the co-evolution between habits and circumstances leaves little space for radical qualitative, rather than gradual quantitative, change. That Dewey’s commitment to progressivism and continuity had its limitations comes out forcefully in Schutz’s analysis of Dewey’s difficulty with explaining the historic events that occurred toward the end of his life. Dewey emphasized that the relationship between the individual and her environment is mutually transformative. Adaptation, he writes in *Democracy and Education*, “is quite as much adaptation of

the environment to our own activities as our activities to the environment.”⁶ Despite that, and despite my questioning of the label “culturalist” above due to its dualistic implication, I would argue that Dewey’s thinking is probably closer to what Stetsenko characterized as viewing humans as “responsive rather than deliberate and proactive,” than the more radical post-Darwinian evolutionism of someone like Vygotsky, who ceased to think of human behavior in terms of “adaptation” altogether.⁷ This does not mean that Dewey did not think that action is deliberate, but rather that action is a deliberate response tied to given circumstances. Growth is organic, continuous, gradual. Swift social change initiated by thinking agents is difficult to conceive in a Deweyan perspective. “Ideas, thoughts of ends, are not spontaneously generated. There is no immaculate conception of meanings or purposes,” Dewey writes in *Human Nature and Conduct* (HNC). “Every ideal is preceded by an actuality” (HNC, 20).⁸

This leads me to my second point for discussion: the role of institutions, which feature in Schutz’s paper in two ways—as environments for democratic growth and as safeguards against anti-democratic threats.

According to Dewey, democratic institutions foster flexible and intelligent habits; undemocratic institutions form habits that are inflexible and mechanistic. He writes: “Until we know the conditions which have helped form the characters we approve and disapprove, our efforts to create the one and do away with the other will be blind and halting.” (HNC, 18). Yet, when “perverse habits” emerge, neither individual nor environment are entirely to blame; this would create “an unreal separation of man from his surroundings, mind from the world” (18; 17). There exists a feedback-loop between environments and habits. Consequently, Dewey argues, “we cannot change habit directly, but we can change it indirectly by modifying conditions, by an intelligent selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfillment of desires” (19). This ties back to Dewey’s idea of change as gradual and slow. Most importantly, however, this makes schools, which offer purposefully selected educational environments to direct or steer growth, particularly significant. Fittingly, his analysis of Germany in *GPP*, which, as Dewey explains, is an exemplar of “the social conditions under which ideas propagate and circu-

late,” begins with an exposition of the institutional and political organization of Germany, for example, how schools are organized and how institutions interact (GPP, 145).

Aside from their function as environments for democratic growth, Schutz’s argumentation implies that institutions play an important safeguarding role in democracies. As Schutz posits in the penultimate section of his article, in Dewey’s later writings, he somewhat complicated his earlier argument about the “cultural sickness” of Germany. While maintaining large parts of his original argument, Dewey did acknowledge the role of other factors in the rise of fascism or totalitarianism, such as force or propaganda. This has important implications for democratic education today, which Schutz begins to address at the end of his paper. In addition to creating the circumstances where the habits required for ensuring a democratic way of life are formed, democratic education must also focus on the protection of stable democratic institutions that are able to “step in” if needed.

After these brief thoughts about the role of institutions in democracy, my third and final point for discussion concerns the role of philosophy in Dewey’s idea of social progress. Building on his conviction of the “continuity of nature, man and society,” Dewey argued that philosophy ought to be tied to a certain time and place (hence, his critique of Kant’s transcendental idealism)—a conviction that appears crucial to his *GPP* argument (HNC, 6). Dewey opens *GPP* with this sentence: “The nature of the influence of general ideas upon practical affairs is a troubled question.” He continues, “I believe that very much of what has been presented as philosophic reflection is in effect simply an idealization, for the sake of emotional satisfaction, of the brutally given state of affairs, and is not a genuine discovery of the practical influence of ideas” (GPP, 140; 142). The purpose of philosophy, in Dewey’s view, is to make sense of the status quo in a manner that helps to re-establish continuity in our understanding of our environment. This assertion is reminiscent of William James’ description of philosophical ideas as “Denkmittel,” or rather, “means by which we handle facts by thinking them.”⁹

Dewey rejects the idea of social change through mere thinking or “will”

independent from reality and habits (HNC, 21). “I do not believe, then, that *pure* ideas, or pure thought, ever exercised any influence upon human action” (GPP, 142). Philosophy does not directly affect how people think and act. If it did, swift social change would be much easier to conceive (which was perhaps an idea that Dewey began to ponder towards the end of his life, as noted by Schutz). Dewey did, however, believe that philosophical ideas might gradually and slowly shape a culture’s habits of thinking and action, which is evidenced by his argument in *GPP* pertaining to the “Kantian” way of thinking seeping into the minds of people *through* undemocratic institutions (in other words, institutions that do not encourage intelligent inquiry, which have generated conditions for the emergence of inflexible habits). According to Charles Howlett and Audrey Cohan, Dewey’s belief in the indirect influence of philosophy undergirded not only his conviction that German society was prone to fascism and militarism but also his overblown optimism that pragmatism would prevent similar developments in America. “The problem, unfortunately, was that his plan was excessively optimistic in view of the hostile environment in which it was proposed. The method of intelligence was no match for ultranationalism.”¹⁰

REFERENCES

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- 3 John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915), in John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1882-1953, vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 140. Hereafter, this work will be cited as *GPP* in the text.
- 4 Aline Nardo, “The Evolutionary Foundations of John Dewey’s Concept of Growth and its Meaning for His Educational Theory,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 64, no. 6 (2018): 852-870.
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7 Anna Stetsenko, *The Transformative Mind: Expanding Vygotsky's Approach to Development and Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511843044>; Aline Nardo, “Exploring a Vygotskian Theory of Education and Its Evolutionary Foundations,” *Educational Theory* 71, no. 3 (2021): 331-352. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12485>

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9 William James, *Pragmatism* (Dover Publications, 1907/1995), 65.

10 Howlett and Cohan, *John Dewey*, 50.