

John Dewey's Pragmatism and Moral Education

Shulamit Gribov
Simon Fraser University

Dewey's views on education follow from his version of pragmatism. In this essay I shall argue that Dewey's pragmatism did not allow him to develop a coherent theory of moral education. Dewey's rhetoric suggests that his position on moral education can be associated with virtue ethics, yet, although he used conspicuously "moral" terms such as "virtues" and "habits" throughout his writings, this did not amount to a workable theory of moral education. For Dewey, virtue amounted to the cultivation of correct habits, which he deemed to be of primary concern to education. His views on habits (and consequently on virtues), however, are inconsistent. I shall show that the discrepancies in Dewey's views on "virtues" are not due to a mere sloppiness in writing but rather due to Dewey's pragmatism.

HABITS

Dewey saw all knowledge as acquired by scientific-like methods. This was one of the central theses of pragmatism. John Childs summarizes the pragmatic view on education:

[the pragmatic educators] hold that the entire program of the school should be permeated by the intellectual and moral attitudes inherent in the practice of experimental inquiry. They are united in the conviction that the young should be systematically nurtured in those attitudes and procedures which will dispose them in all aspects of their experience to test and "true-up" their ideas by whatever evidence bears on them.¹

The focus on the scientific method in education is coherent with pragmatic convictions regarding both reality and the nature of truth. Pragmatism identified inquiry with knowledge. That is to say, beliefs that are placed at the core of the definition of knowledge are tested and indeed acquire meaning only through the interaction between the believer and her environment. Unlike preceding philosophical systems (for example, Cartesian rationalism) which saw thought as categorically distinct from the external world, Dewey understood thought as a product of the interaction between organism and environment. Knowledge, on Dewey's view, had a practical instrumentality in the guidance and control of that interaction.

To Dewey, knowledge was essentially a result of scientific inquiry. The only moral knowledge one can seemingly talk about is developed through procedural inquiry with respect to moral reasoning. Since moral knowledge, as any other knowledge, emerges from experience, moral reasoning is guided by moral values or norms that prevail in a given society. While acknowledging this, Dewey simultaneously refuses to let any particular code of moral values be presented to students as mandatory. All of this is consistent with the pragmatic approach, which maintains substantive flexibility by assuming that scientific methods of reasoning are the most reliable.

Dewey accepted the fallibilism characteristic of pragmatism: the view that any proposition accepted as an item of knowledge has this status only provisionally, contingent upon its adequacy in providing a coherent understanding of the world as

a basis for human action. He maintained that an idea agrees with reality, and is therefore true, if and only if it is successfully employed in human action in pursuit of human goals and interests, that is, if it leads to the resolution of a "problematic situation."

It is unclear, however, how the success of the implementation of an idea can be evaluated, or how "human goals and interests" are established without a general framework that will provide a clue as to what counts as human interests. For Dewey, criteria (moral or other) are not logically prior or fixed since they can be, and often are, changed. They are not complete since central elements of moral judgment cannot be subsumed under them. And they are not directly applicable since principles cannot give us univocal direction on how we should behave in every circumstance. It seems that Dewey confuses universal moral principles with any kind of generalizable moral criteria by assuming that if principles are not directly applicable in every situation, they cannot provide an indirect standard of behavior by erecting a universal, if flexible, framework for moral action. For example, the term "murder" may include various, sometimes different, actions in different times or societies. It can be argued, therefore, that the rule "Do not murder" cannot be applied directly in every situation. It can, nonetheless, be suggested that "murder," as that which constitutes the intentional killing of an innocent person, is perceived universally as wrong. The discrepancies follow from variations in what can be counted as intentional and who is regarded as innocent.

Dewey's views on habituation and virtues are pragmatic as well. He saw virtues as certain kinds of habits demonstrated in particular circumstances. His definition is loose because what constitutes virtue varies in accordance with variations in circumstances, in communities, in people, and so forth. For Dewey, the identification of a habit as virtuous has to vary. This is so because a) habits are indispensable in the acquisition of knowledge since knowledge is gained by an "intelligent inquiry," and habits are necessary for the "intelligent inquiry," and b) because knowledge is gained only by the interaction between the learner and her environment. Thus, changes in the environment change the habits and change their status as virtues or vices as well. All habits are "dynamic," "propulsive," and "projective." "All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity and they constitute the self... they form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities."² The "demands for certain actions" may indicate that he views habits as dispositions to act, although it may be interpreted as an even stronger claim. The verb "demand" shows a stronger connection between habits and actions than what the term "dispositions" indicates. He explicitly says that "any habit is a way or manner of action."³

While allowing for the existence of habits "necessary to conduct every successful inquiry," he does identify the formulation of habits with principles, for he says explicitly that "principle is but another name for the continuity of the activity"⁴ and so is habit, which is "a manner of action."⁵ His principles differ from logical principles as analytic theorists see them, for Dewey rejected any possibility of *a priori* analytical principles, referring to them as "the philosophic fallacy" (DE, 160-1).

Jim Garrison remarks that, for Dewey, cognitive products can only be a result of “the artistic process,” and that Dewey saw in principles cognitive products, because for him any principles could evolve only as the formulation of certain habits.⁶ In other words, by formulating principles, the inquirer creates them. So, principles, which are no more than habits brought to the awareness of the individual who possesses them, are changing as they react to the changes in the environment. Such a conception of principles leaves them rather redundant, as if Dewey, although convinced of the inaptness of principles as normative guides, is unwilling to let them go, thus letting them be, while depriving them of any ability to intervene in the inquiry in any meaningful way.

Moreover, if the habits constitute the self and they are dynamic and projective, then so is the self. It is dynamic because it changes with changes in the physical and social environment of the person, and it is projective because the habits, which constitute the self, are projected into actions. Dewey describes habits as a “projective and dynamic” kind of “activity” that “systemizes minor elements of actions in some...subordinate form.”⁷ This description of habits is puzzling. Dewey argued earlier that habits are “a way or manner of action” and that any learning is gained through activity by way of forming new habits. If this is so, how can the influence of habits be limited to the ordering of “minor elements of action” in “some subdued subordinate form?”⁸ What else influences actions, and in what way is this additional element acquired? If it is different from habits, it cannot be acquired through the active learning that produces habits.

Intelligent activity for Dewey is an activity that is characterized by what he perceives to be “intrinsically moral qualities,” including “open-mindedness, breadth of outlook, assumption of responsibility for developing the consequences of ideas which are accepted.”⁹ These qualities are developed habitually, according to Dewey. According to Dewey, all our acts are potentially morally significant. If *all* our acts are of moral significance, *all* our habits are either virtues or vices.

Suzanne Rice, presenting Dewey’s views on habits and virtues, says: “Habits tend to be strengthened or diminished depending on whether they are exercised regularly.”¹⁰ But I wonder, if habits depend on the regularity of exercise, how can they modify action? Is not all of this supposed to be the other way around? If habits are “strengthened or diminished” depending on the regularity of their exercise, surely it is actions that modify habits. Since Dewey saw virtues as a certain type of habit, virtues are not merely dispositions to act but a kind of action. Fulfilling the double duty of dispositions and actions, for Dewey, virtues are both ends of activity and means to achieve further ends: “Virtues are ends because they are such important means. To be honest, courageous, kindly is to be in the way of producing specific natural goods or satisfactory fulfillments.”¹¹

The view of virtues as both ends and means is part of Dewey’s more general approach to ends as “ends-in-view,” that is, provisional ends that provide various possibilities for actions. “Ends arise and function within action.”¹² They are similar to principles in their role as organizers of action, but since actions cannot be ends in themselves because then they could not inspire another action, they serve as means

to the achievement of another end, which will be a means to the achievement of another, ad infinitum. He did not see a need for an external end for activity because he believed that activity itself is enough as a purpose. The continuity of human action organized toward provisional ends gives the action its rationality in Dewey's eyes.

On the basis of what he considered rational, Dewey rejected the notion of a fixed *telos*. As Jim Garrison points out, Dewey saw in the desire for a fixed end "a part of the quest for certainty."¹³ Dewey considered such a quest a sign of dogmatism. I find Dewey's position unwarranted. Dogmatism, strictly speaking, has to involve a belief in dogma, that is, a belief in an unprovable and unfalsifiable proposition. The quest for certainty does not necessarily commit one to belief in dogma. First, the quest might be unsuccessful, and the certainty might never be found. Second, even if the quest is successful, the certainty might be proved by means of non-dogmatic inquiry. There is nothing in the desire to find certainties that requires one to accept a belief in a dogma. Even assuming that Dewey does not refer to dogmatism in its strict meaning, but refers to a dogmatic method of inquiry as opposed to "intellectual activity" that is supposed to produce knowledge, it is unclear that the quest for certainty is dogmatic.

Dewey argued that knowledge consists in a network of interconnected habits. "Habit," says Dewey, "means that an individual undergoes a modification through an experience, which modification forms a predisposition to easier and more effective action in a like direction in the future" (*DE*, 339). Yet, habit is fixed in the previous experience and measures, so to speak, any future experience by the specifications of the previous one. Knowledge, on the other hand, considers changes in the new situation, thus providing flexibility that habits lack. Dewey suggests that knowledge "would represent... a network of interconnections of habits" which would "offer a point of advantage" with respect to any new experience, because it will allow for a "selection... made from a much wider range of habits" (*Ibid.*, 340).

It seems that knowledge gains its advantage of flexibility by the power of quantity: habit is fixed and inflexible because it is singular and provides a single point of view, while knowledge includes many different habits, thus providing a wide range of view points. There are several problems in this position. First, it is unclear in what way knowledge incorporates these various habits, that is, what makes the habits into a network of interrelations instead of a bunch of odd dispositions. Dewey does not offer any instrument to allow for the interconnection of the habits.

Second, it is not clear what qualifies Dewey's "knowledge" to solve the "problem presented in a new experience." For, even with the "wider range of habits," knowledge consists only in the habits formed by past experiences. It will only be successful if the new experience will be anything like one or more of the previous ones. But there is nothing in the group of habits, any more than in a single habit, that will qualify it to deal with totally new experiences. The "quest for certainty," when it does not rely on a dogma, but constitutes a structured theoretical framework, has advantages here over Dewey's knowledge. It has instruments, albeit not guaranties, to deal with new experiences.

Dewey's refusal to distinguish between ends and action influences his approach to virtues as well. Since, according to Dewey's conception, virtues are a kind of habit, they are subject to change with change of the environment in the same manner as habits: "All virtues and vices are habits which incorporate objective forces. They are interactions of elements contributed by the make-up of an individual with elements supplied by the out-door world."¹⁴ These objective forces are presumably the elements supplied by the external world, which is independent of the individual, hence, objective. It appears that he believed that any result incorporates in itself the process of its development. This belief follows from the same presupposition that principles are created through action.

In the same manner as he refuses to distinguish between process and product, Dewey refuses to see dispositions and actions as different categories of things. His rejection of such dualism may be consistent with pragmatism but it contributes little to our understanding of virtues, and even less to our ability to be habituated into them. If virtues are character traits worthy of being acquired, they must have certain qualities that make them desirable. To be desirable is to serve as an aim; something one wants to achieve.

When the distinction between activity and its aim is blurred, any activity is desirable by virtue of being an activity. I do not see how one can distinguish between virtues and vices (or between virtues and any other kind of habits) without the distinction between activities and aims. Dewey argued that the components of the moral domain, and consequently, of moral debate are matters of circumstances.¹⁵ Any issue of concern, or any debate can become in certain circumstances significantly moral. He does not explain, though, what circumstances will turn a non-moral issue into a moral issue. He does not stipulate the conditions (substantive, formal, linguistic, or other) that pertain to moral debate. Consequently, any habit can be deemed virtuous in a particular setting. It becomes difficult to decide what habits one would wish to acquire, but then again, such a decision, in Dewey's perspective, can only come into consideration during certain activity, which itself would be determined by many different factors that would serve both as ends to determine what habits should be acquired, and means toward the acquisition of those habits.

CHARACTER

Dewey's conception of what constitutes character follows from his conception of habits. In Dewey's view, habits interrelate in a mutually shaping and mutually contributing manner. He uses the term "interpenetration" to describe this relation. According to this view, even relatively simple activities, such as riding a bicycle, involve the interaction of numerous perceptual, intellectual, and physical habits. "Character is the interpenetration of habits," says Dewey. Without it "character would not exist," for the habits would exist in "isolated compartments."¹⁶

This view commits Dewey to equating changes in character, to a certain extent, with any change in habits. For instance, if I learn to ride a bicycle, I acquire some habits. Since habits exist in interpenetrative relations, the habits I acquire in learning to ride will change my character. Moreover, since habits "incorporate" the environment that created them, a change in the environment will change the character for

better or for worse. "The attained character does not tend to petrify into a fixed possession which resists the response to needs that grow out of the... environment. It is plastic to new wants and demands."¹⁷ Again, as in Dewey's view on knowledge, it is unclear how the character "interprets" habits and pulls them out of their "isolated compartments." What is present in the character that turns the fixed response of the single habit to the "response to needs that grow out of environment?"

VIRTUES

The idea of interpenetration of virtues is important in understanding their role in the development of a virtuous person. Different interpretations of virtues may lead to an appreciation of different people as virtuous. For example, it may be the case that any disposition in itself is insufficient for virtuous behavior. In this manner, a person can be courageous but lacking other virtues, and perhaps exercise her courage in an armed robbery. Thus, while courage can be considered a virtue in general, in this particular case, it is not. It is plausible, then, to assume that a certain character may become virtuous when virtues are connected in a coherent web of interrelations. Dewey stresses a similar point:

The mere idea of a catalog of virtues commits us to the notion that virtues may be kept apart, pigeon-holed in water-tight compartments. In fact, virtuous traits interpenetrate one another; this unity is involved in the very idea of integrity of character.¹⁸

The idea of the unity of virtues as involved in integrity of character is very promising. Unfortunately, Dewey did not develop it as fully as one might hope. Moreover, since, according to Dewey, the virtuousness of a habit is contingent on changes in the environment of the person, not much can be said about what constitutes virtue.

Writing about virtues, Dewey gives several possible candidates, such as "truthfulness, honesty, amiability," arguing that their value as virtues is due to their carrying "other attitudes with them." "To call them virtues in isolation," says Dewey, "is like taking the skeleton for the living body." He continues, saying, "To possess virtue does not signify to have cultivated a few namable and exclusive traits; it means to be fully and adequately what one is capable of becoming through association with others in all the offices of life" (*DE*, 357-8). Dewey assumes that fulfillment of one's potential is always positive; or since there is no other way to determine the moral value of a disposition, if a disposition contributes to "fully and adequately" becoming what "one is capable of becoming," this is a virtuous disposition. It seems that Dewey believed that the very integrity of character is a guarantee against character flaws.

Defining virtues only in the context of the full development of one's character, Dewey concentrates on the means of acquiring virtues. For him, means are more important than content because content can and indeed does change frequently, while means can be applied to different contents. Thus, virtues can be identified by the mean of their acquisition rather than by particular content.

With reference to the educational implementation of his views on moral development, Dewey stresses the importance of avoiding certain methods. He criticizes preaching of various kinds as ineffective, but does not suggest any specific alternative to a mere verbal dictation of morals. He clearly does not believe in moral

education as distinct from non-moral education (*DE*, 358-60). Since he is convinced that character, as a web of interpenetrating habits, incorporates the physical and social environment, anything done in school influences the moral characteristics of the student.

Anything taught and learned in school would have to contribute to the development of a student's character because it is part of her environment. But a child's environment is not limited to schooling; it includes any and all events in the child's life, and any and all events in her parents' lives; and the realm of influence grows with the development of the technology of communication. In such circumstances, the school constitutes a minutely small part of whatever is capable of changing the child's character. In this case, what is so special about schooling? Why concentrate on the teachers' role in character development instead of, say, the role of the entertainment industry? Dewey does not address this concern explicitly, but, from what he does say, we may conclude that he believes in the ability of an educational system to develop "desirable intellectual and emotional dispositions." He urges educators to accept their share of responsibility to ensure that their actions will bring about the desirable changes (*DE*, 180). The problem remains as to how the educator can determine what is desirable if she is not allowed to aim at any goals external to the learning activity itself. Furthermore, what modification would be beneficial to the student, if the desirability of dispositions is subject to the fine-tuning possible only during the process of the formation of those dispositions? The educator has to be part of the environment that creates the responses which lead to the formation of the intellectual and emotional dispositions, and, at the same time, she has to be able to observe the entire process from an external (to the process) perspective in order to determine the best course of action. This personality-split, however frequent and perhaps barely escapable for any teacher, is a promising recipe for misconceptions and misunderstandings.

HABITS, CHARACTER, MORAL EDUCATION: THE CONNECTIONS

The formation of habits in Dewey's theory has to be seen as part of his view of the connection between knowledge and practice. Dewey saw in the connection between knowledge and conduct the most important task of teachers. On his view, any learning requires the active participation of the student. By "active participation," Dewey means physical as well as mental activities. Believing that psycho-physical dualism is a source of great damage in education, Dewey dismisses any separation between mental and physical activities as miseducational, asserting that "It would be impossible to state adequately the evil results which have flowed from this dualism of mind and body, much less to exaggerate them" (*DE*, 141).

This belief in the "evil results of dualism" is connected to his view of the acquisition of habits in a very peculiar way. Dewey rejected the body-mind dichotomy. Thus, changes in the physical environment can cause changes in the mental "environment" which can change the character. That much we saw above. Now two additional elements come into play. First, it is not only morally significant changes in the environment which change the character. Rather, any changes in the environment change the character because a) any learning is habit-forming and b) any habit is morally significant, insofar as any learning is morally significant, for "all

education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral" (*DE*, 360). Second, Dewey asserts that the environment shapes habits and consequently character, but he also claims that the formation of habits is the only way to learn. It follows that any teaching-learning connection has moral implications. The claim is coherent with Dewey's overall views on education, but I do not see how he can support it. Claims about the influence of the physical environment on learning are to be supported by empirical evidence. Dewey, nonetheless, resorts to a construction of somewhat coherent theory without empirical evidence.

According to Dewey, since habits are formed and changed almost constantly, and any "values which are desirable in education are themselves moral," we constantly form and change desirable habits, and, what is more important, constantly change our perception of what desirable habits are. Eventually, if there are no distinct goals toward which one can aspire, the development of one's character to become "what one is capable of becoming" indeed appears as the only desirable aspiration. The danger is in Dewey's assumption that to become what one is capable of becoming is intrinsically good. It hardly can be otherwise if he defines desirable character as "character which not only does the particular deed socially necessary but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth" (*Ibid.*, 360). It is the "continuous readjustment" part that worries me. Taken to its full extent, continuously readjusting character does not influence society but is influenced by it. In the final account, it seems that Dewey did not distinguish between the moral and the social.

-
1. John L. Childs, *American Pragmatism and Education* (New York: Holt, 1956), 283-84.
 2. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Holt, 1922), 21.
 3. John Dewey, "The Theory of Inquiry," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 21.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 353. This book will be cited as *DE* for all subsequent references.
 6. Jim Garrison, "John Dewey's Theory of Practical Reasoning," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 31, no. 3 (1999): 291-312.
 7. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 31.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. *Ibid.*, 357.
 10. Suzanne Rice, "Dewey's Conception of "Virtue" and its Educational Implications," in *Philosophy of Education 1996* ed. Frank Margolis (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 357-58.
 11. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 35-36.
 12. *Ibid.*, 154.
 13. Garrison, "John Dewey's Theory of Practical Reasoning," 295.
 14. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 16.
 15. See discussion in John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), 144-45.
 16. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 29-30.
 17. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 174.
 18. Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, 115.