

## THE ETHICS OF JOHN DEWEY

BY J. V. NASH

JOHN DEWEY, in *Human Nature and Conduct*, has presented a theory of ethics which exhibits a relation to the 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 the social environment.

The Deweyan 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 Like Gods*.

And yet, after all, the basis of the new ethics is not new: it is that of individual realization—or salvation, if you will—through fellowship and service. He who of old said: "I have come to let them have life, and to let them have it in abundance" (John x.10) also declared: "If anyone wishes to be first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all" (Mark ix.35). And Paul accomplished the synthesis of the individual with the social in the words: "We are individually parts of one another." (Rom. xii.5).<sup>1</sup>

Such was the message of another great religious teacher, denounced as a heretic by modern orthodoxy—the late George Burman Foster, who conceived the mission of religion to be "the formation of free and independent personalities, and a kingdom of such person-

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the recent Goodspeed translation of the New Testament.

alities, in which all are ends, and no one mere means, the relationship among them to be one of mutual love and service.”<sup>2</sup>

Such, too, was the lesson which Maeterlinck learned from the bees,—the articulation of the individual in the life of the group; a lesson through which he overcame the terror of death, and which lighted the pathway to the new Romanticism of which he is the prophet.

This is pretty close to Royce's vision of the Great Community, on which his dying eyes rested in the midst of a war-torn world:<sup>3</sup>

“Its members will not be merely individual human beings, nor yet mere collections or masses of human beings, however vast, but communities of some sort. . . . Ethical individualism has been, in the past, one great foe of the Great Community. Ethical individualism, whether it takes the form of democracy or of the irresponsible search on the part of individuals for private happiness or for any other merely individual good, will never save mankind. Equally useless, however, for the attainment of humanity's great end would be any form of mere ethical collectivism; that is, any view which regarded the good of mankind as something which masses or crowds or disorganized collections of men should win. . . . Loyalty, the devotion of the self to the interests of the community, is indeed the form which the highest life of humanity must take, whether in a political unit, such as in a nation, or in the church universal, such as Paul foresaw. Without loyalty, there is no salvation.”

Dewey approaches the subject from the side of biology, psychology, and sociology; interpreting the accumulated results of research in the fields of these sciences in terms of humanism and ethics.

The somewhat discursive treatment of his theme is explained by the fact that the book grew out of a series of university lectures delivered in California during the year 1918.

Moralists, says Dewey, have thought of human nature as essentially evil because it resisted the yoke which they tried to place upon it. “Parents, priests, chiefs, social censors have supplied the 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.”

The morality of the theologians, according to Dewey, would seem to be something akin to what Nietzsche called “slave morals.” “Gen-

<sup>2</sup> See *The Open Court*, June, 1922, and January, 1923.

<sup>3</sup> *The Hope of the Great Community*, posthumous essays by Josiah Royce, 1916.

erally speaking," he says, "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." Thus, "men have turned moral rules into an agency of class supremacy."

However, Dewey believes that there was in the beginning no deliberate design to rule by imposing moral rules upon the masses. He believes that ignorance of human nature and its rightful claims is the primary cause of the false moral rules that have grown up. The reason for this ignorance is that there was absolutely no scientific knowledge of any kind. "Lack of understanding of human nature is the primary cause of disregard for it."

He goes on to say: "A decline in the authority of social oligarchy was accompanied by a rise of scientific interest in human nature." Might it not be truer to the fact, however, to see in the rise of scientific interest, with the coming of the Renaissance and the spread of the new learning through the invention of printing, that which was really the chief factor in the decline of social oligarchy and the birth of democracy, which in turn opened the way for scientific inquiry into human nature? In other words, the advance of physical science broke down rigid class barriers and prejudices, so that there could be a free study of human nature.

Dewey states the purpose of his book as "a discussion of some phases of the ethical change involved in positive respect for human nature when the latter is associated with scientific knowledge."

His point is well taken wherein he shows that the separating of morals from physiology and psychology has resulted in a conventional goodness that is abnormal and pathological, because cut off from living roots in human nature. "The badness of good people . . . is the revenge taken by human nature for the injuries heaped upon it in the name of morality." Thus we find people who are "holy terrors." But such morality is usually negative, manifesting itself in insipidity of character, sham "respectability," and downright hypocrisy. It is a "drab morality," in which one dreads to be himself. Its great aim is avoidance of what is considered bad form, and in observing prohibitions, rather than in positive action that has ethical value.

He shows how the church, finding this system of morality unworkable, has got around it. The Catholic Church, with its supernatural morality, nevertheless allows many dispensations to the multitude and concessions to the frailties of the flesh. It is only the select few, who retire to monasteries, that attempt to live up to

the church's ideal morality. Protestantism has accomplished the same result by its emphasis upon "justification by faith," which winks at "daily lapses into the gregarious morals of average conduct."

Dewey speaks of "those forceful natures who cannot tame themselves to the required level of colorless conformity." Their attitude is usually unconscious, however, and "they are heartily in favor of morality for the mass, as making it easier to manage them. Their only standard is success, putting things over, getting things done. Being good is to them practically synonymous with ineffectuality; and accomplishment, achievement, is its own justification. They know by experience that much is forgiven to those who succeed and they leave goodness to the stupid, to those whom they qualify as boobs."

This certainly is much akin to Nietzsche's idea of the superman, who is a law to himself, "beyond good and evil." This sort of character, however, according to Dewey, is very apt to degenerate into hypocrisy, since men of this type usually pay tribute to established institutions and are fierce "in their denunciations of all who openly defy conventionalized ideals."

Another evil result of this false morality is that those who rebel against it usually fly to the other extreme and identify freedom with complete licentiousness, and think that the way to realize their individuality is by the most abandoned gratification of their physical passions. "They treat subjection to passion as a manifestation of freedom in the degree in which it shocks the bourgeois."

Again, those few who do take seriously the idea of morals separated from the actual facts of human nature are apt to become "spiritual egotists." He says that "their exaltation of conceit makes them absolutely inhuman in their selfishness." William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, cites some examples of this type which bear out Dewey's statement.

In other cases, says Dewey, this ideal moral world becomes a refuge from the real world, into which men retire from time to time, sometimes offsetting the strain by "pleasurable excursions into the delights of the actual." History, to be sure, records many cases of individuals who have lived in alternating periods of piety and debauchery.

One of the worst effects of the separation of morals from human nature, thinks Dewey, is that human nature is left without any guide in the ordinary relationships of business, civic life, friendship, and

recreation. "In short, the severance of morals from human nature ends by driving morals inwards, from the public, open, out-of-doors air and light of day, into the obscurities and privacies of an inner life."

This driving inward of morality results in "the almost complete severance of ethics from politics and economics." The former is regarded as summed up in edifying exhortations, and the latter as connected with arts of expediency separated from larger issues of good."

This explains why there are today two schools of social reform, one based upon "the notion of a morality which springs from an inner freedom, something mysteriously cooped up within personality," holding that the way to change institutions is for men to purify their hearts. On the other hand, we have the school which maintains that "men are made what they are by the forces of the environment, that human nature is purely malleable, and that till institutions are changed nothing can be done." It is the old problem of free will versus determinism.

Neither of these views, Dewey believes, expresses the real truth. He holds that there is an alternative. "All conduct is interaction between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social. He believes that progress proceeds in two ways, and that "freedom" is found "in that kind of interaction which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something." There are forces within man as well as outside, and the problem of ethics is one of adjustment, intelligently attained.

Morals are not degraded by dealing with material things. Much of the suffering and unnecessary slavery of the world, he thinks, 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.

This shows that Dewey would apply to ethics the pragmatic method which William James applied to philosophy. In other words, the test of the value of moral ideas is their result in practical action.

According to Dewey, this view of ethics will do away with the dualism of which we have been speaking in morality. "It would put an end to the impossible attempt to live in two unrelated worlds." Again, it makes ethics a social, not an individual science, because "it would find the nature and activities of one person coterminous with those of other human beings, and therefore link ethics with the study of history, sociology, law, and economics."

He does not claim that such a view of ethics would automatically solve moral problems or make the moral life as simple as speeding down a lighted boulevard. It would simply enable us to approach moral problems with a constantly growing fund of knowledge based on past experience.

In short, morals must be integrated with human nature, and both with the environment. Then we shall have a science of ethics recognizing the continuity of nature, man, and society, and 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.

Such a point of view brings morals down to earth, and "if they still aspire to heaven, it is to the heavens of the earth, and not to another world."

He then goes into an extended discussion of various factors entering into human nature and conduct: (1) The place of habit in conduct, (2) the place of impulse in conduct, and (3) the place of intelligence in conduct.

Habits are compared to physiological functions like breathing and digesting, though the latter are involuntary while habits are acquired. Habits are social, for if an individual were alone in the world he would not be able to form habits. Psychologists agree with this; a child allowed to grow up separated from all human contact would not and could not develop a personality.

Dewey asserts that there is no such thing as "neutrality in conduct." "Conduct," he says, "is always shared," and so it is meaningless to say that conduct *ought* to be social, for it necessarily is social, whether good or bad.

Individuals come and go, but their habits endure; therefore the kind of world that our descendants will enjoy depends upon the habits that we practice. Simply wishing for the abolition of war, industrial justice, greater equality of opportunity for all, will not bring them about. "There must be change in the objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment, not merely on the hearts of men."

Desire, while a feeble thing, may set the ball rolling. "Every ideal is preceded by an actuality; but the ideal is more than a repetition in inner image of the actual. It projects in securer and wider and fuller form some good which has been previously experienced in a precarious, accidental, fleeting way." Thus, by occasionally seeing wild flowers, man came to desire the beauty the flowers, and

this led to cultivation of them making better flowers and in greater abundance.

The essence of habit he believes, "is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response." It means "special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilection and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts. It means will."

Although he rejects individualistic free will, he does hold that environment binds the will.

Taking up "Character and Conduct," he discusses free will and ideas of morality which have been widely accepted heretofore. Here are two characteristic sentences:

"A holiness of character which is celebrated only on holy-days is unreal."

"A virtue of honesty, or chastity, or benevolence, which lives upon itself apart from definite results, consumes itself and goes up in smoke."

We must recognize that in a changing world old habits have to be modified, no matter how good they have seemed to us. "Any observed form or object is but a challenge," and so it is with our ideals of justice, peace, human brotherhood, equality, or order. The new psychology will assist "in breaking down of old rigidities of habit and preparing the way for acts that recreate an environment.

He shows that customs are not formed by a consolidation of individual habits but chiefly because individuals face the same situations and react in the same way. An individual usually acquires the morality as he inherits the speech of his social group. This seems very evident. Certainly a man born in Turkey will acquire different ideals of morality from one born in Presbyterian Scotland.

Dewey believes that we have been unfair to the helpless child in forcing our beliefs upon it. "Education," he says, "becomes the art of taking advantage of the helplessness of the young; the forming of habits becomes a guarantee for the maintenance of hedges of custom."

Customs, says Dewey, have supplied the standards of personal activities; they "constitute moral standards." This seems to be true; the word *moral* itself is from the Latin "mores," which means *customs*, as in the famous exclamation of Cicero: "O tempora, o mores."

He criticises Westermarck for treating sympathetic resentment and approbation as pure emotions giving rise to acts. He declares that "feelings as well as reason spring up within action." It is



breach of or fidelity to custom that excites in us sympathetic resentment or approbation.

The different classes in society develop their own customs, which are their working morals, and each class believes it is right; but commerce, travel, communication, war, inventions in industry, etc., are constantly breaking up the old customs; "frozen habits thaw out and all are mixed again."

It is so with nations and races. Today nations and races with different moral standards are facing each other. "The demand of each side," he says, "treats its opponent as a wilful violator of moral principles, an expression of self-interest or superior might." (This was written in the year 1918.)

The discussion from there on is chiefly of psychological interest, until we come to the chapter on "The uniqueness of Good." By means of the true psychology, he believes, we have revealed to us the nature of good or satisfaction. "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." In other words, good is a resolution of conflicting elements, resulting in an action that gives us satisfaction. Many of our unifications, however, are merely temporary compromises. The good is not a stereotyped, monotonous thing. On the contrary, "the good is never twice alike. It never copies itself. It is new every morning, fresh every evening. It is unique in its every presentation."

In the chapter on "The Nature of Aims," he shows the pernicious effect of the idea of "fixed ends," which was the cornerstone of orthodox moral theory. We do not shoot arrows because targets exist, but we set up targets simply to make our shooting more significant and effective, and we keep changing the targets. Making motive or intention the touchstone of morals is equally futile. It makes them an end. Dewey would do away with such "ends" completely. Ends are in fact endless, "forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences." This he believes is equivalent to saying that "there are no ends—that is, no fixed, self-enclosed finalities."

In "The Nature of Principles," he criticises Kant's philosophy in certain particulars, but pays tribute to the moral value of Kant's famous rule of action, that the test of an act is whether an individual would want to make it a universal law. "Looked at in the light of reason, every mean, insincere, inconsiderate motive of action shrivels



into a private exception which a person wants to take advantage of in his own favor, and which he would be horrified to have others act upon. . . . Kindly, decent acts, on the contrary, extend and multiply themselves in a continuing harmony."

In *Desire and Intelligence* he maintains that "impulse is primary and intelligence secondary and in some sense derivative." Recognition of this fact, however, he thinks exalts intelligence, "for thought is not the slave of impulse to do its bidding. Impulse does not know what it is after; it cannot give orders even if it wants to. It rushes blindly into any opening it chances to find. Anything that expends it satisfies it. . . . Intelligence converts desire into plans, systematic plans based on assembling facts, reporting events as they happen, keeping tab on them and analyzing them." On the other hand, "nothing is so easy to follow as impulse, and no one is deceived so readily as a person under strong emotion. . . . Impulse burns itself up; emotion cannot be kept at its full tide."

In Part IV he states that conduct, when discussed under heads like habit, impulse, and intelligence, gets "artificially shredded." He now sums up the ethical problem. Very briefly, we see that morality is not something static—it is a *process*. His leading conclusion is that "morals has to do with all activity into which alternative possibilities enter. For wherever they enter, a difference between better and worse arises."

He would apply the trial and error method to ethics. "All moral judgment is experimental and subject to revision by its issue." Here again we see the ethical pragmatist. He scorns the old traditional school of morals which, while displaying anxious solicitude for a few acts, gives most others "baths of exemption," so that "a moral moratorium prevails for everyday affairs."

Morals, he declares, "means growth of conduct in meaning. . . . In the largest sense of the word, morals is education. It is learning the meaning of what we are about and employing the meaning in action." Again he hammers away at the idea of "fixed ideals." "If it is better to travel than to arrive, it is because traveling is a constant arriving, while that arrival which precludes further traveling is most easily attained by going to sleep or dying."

His empirical position is expressed again and again with the greatest force. Progress means "extension of the significance found within experience." We must not, however, expect such progress to bring us immunity from perplexity and trouble. If he were going to make a categorical imperative like Kant, he would say: "So act

as to increase the meaning of present experience." Experience, then, is our moral guide. But there can be no absolute imperative. Each case must be acted upon on its own merits.

The business man compares today's liabilities and assets with yesterday's, and it should be so morally with the business of living.

He discusses the relation of evolution to ethics, and believes that "the ethical import of the doctrine of evolution is enormous." Evolution means "continuity of change." The old fixed goal idea leads to pessimism and the war showed the bankruptcy of our old ethical standards. After all, man lives because he has the urge of living and not because of philosophical reasons for living. Even the experience of trouble and failure is valuable in furnishing us instruction. Humility is an aid to endeavor and we should prize every opportunity of present growth.

What is perfection? He believes it means "perfecting, fulfillment, fulfilling, and the good is now or never."

Plato, Aristotle, and Spinoza, made good and evil too much of intellectual abstractions. Utilitarianism was on a better scent but put too much value into the future. Good must be made a matter of social experience here and now.

Dewey's doctrine is not mere Epicureanism, which failed to connect good with the full reach of activities. That is true, he maintains, of all theories based on the individual self. It is not the residence of experience that counts, but the contents of the house. We must visualize a larger self and the way to help others is to give them opportunity to enlarge and strengthen their personalities. He would have us delivered from professional reformers and busybodies.

Since morals is concerned with everyday conduct, and "grows out of specific empirical facts," he has no good word for "supernatural commands, rewards, and penalties." Morals is a human thing; "it is that which is closest to human nature; it is ineradicably empirical, not theological nor metaphysical nor mathematical." Moral science is related to other sciences. He believes that even Spencer's ethics was too Utopian.

However, he points out that morality "resides not in perception of fact, but in the use made of its perception. . . . Perception of things as they are is but a stage in the process of making them different." And so morality begins with the use of our knowledge of natural law, and "use varying with the active system of disposition and desires."

Conflict is the goad which stirs us to observation and memory and instigates us to invention, but social hostility is not the road to social harmony. Darwinism has been perverted in making it appear to sanction war and brutality of competition. On the other hand, we should not profess smug satisfaction with things as they are, for to do so is hypocrisy. We should recognize existing facts and use them "as a challenge to intelligence to modify the environment and change habits."

He believes that the road to freedom "may be found in that knowledge of facts which enables us to employ them in connection with desires and aims." Freedom contains three chief elements: (1) efficiency in action, ability to carry out plans, (2) capacity to vary plans, to change the course of action, and (3) the power of desire and choice to be factors in events.

We do not use the present to control the future, he says, but "we use the foresight of the future to refine and expand present activities." It is in this use of desire, deliberation, and choice, that, for Dewey, freedom is actualized.

Finally, in the last chapter, he emphasizes the fact once more that morality is social. Our thinking is largely determined by factors outside our conscious mind. Our conscience is based on our feeling for the opinion of our fellows. Moral judgment and moral responsibility are the work of the social environment and show conclusively that our morality is social. The actions of an individual bear the stamp of his community just as does the language he speaks. This is simply a statement of fact, without saying that it is right, as when a man is socially admired just because he has made money. Mere blame or approbation does not determine underlying ethical values. "If the standard of morals is low, it is because the education given by the interaction of the individual with his social environment is defective."

The scientific study of human nature will give us the method and materials for true judgments on human conduct. The development of the science of human nature is, therefore, a matter of prime importance for a right understanding of ethics. Religion, he thinks, has lost itself in cults, dogma, and myth, instead of being a sense of the whole and a spontaneous thing. It has produced "an intolerable superiority on the part of the few and an intolerable burden on the part of the many."

Every act of ours must carry with it a sense of the whole to which it belongs and which in a sense belongs to it: yet we are re-

sponsible only for our own personal acts and are freed from the burden of responsibility for the whole. His last sentences are suggestive of Royce's idea in the "Great Community":

"Within the flickering inconsequential acts of separate selves dwells a sense of the whole which claims and dignifies them. In its presence we put off mortality and live in the universal. The life of the community in which we live and have our being is the fit symbol of this relationship. The acts in which we express our perception of the ties which bind us to others are its only rites and ceremonies."