JOHN DEWEY: EDUCATION AS ETHICS, ETHICS AS EDUCATION[1]

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Abstract: John Dewey was arguably the most influential philosopher of education in the twentieth century. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the timeliness of Dewey's philosophy of education for us today with respect to the organic relationship between ethics and education that Dewey saw, by showing the centrality of education for Dewey's philosophy, that is, how for him, indeed, all philosophy is philosophy of education; further, how all education is moral philosophy; and hence how all philosophy pertains to moral education. Central to Dewey's understanding of both education and ethics is his notion of 'growth': education creates the conditions for students' ongoing growth, and the promotion of growth defines 'ethics.' Dewey's message is an important one for us today when there are such strong tendencies to reduce education to mere technical training: such training, for Dewey, is neither education nor ethical.

Keywords: John Dewey

Dewey on ethics of education

What is the relationship between ethics and education? It is appropriate to turn to the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey for an answer to this question for several reasons. Dewey is among the most influential philosophers of education internationally, but also 2015 marks the 100th anniversary of his most significant work on education, *Democracy and Education*. Indeed, Dewey is perhaps the most studied philosopher in the world today, and much of the interest in him focuses upon his philosophy of education. This should be no surprise since Dewey claimed that all philosophy is ultimately philosophy of education – the very idea of 'philosophy' is fundamentally tied to the very idea of 'education.' Indeed, according to Dewey, "Philosophy may be defined as the general theory of education; the theory of which education is the corresponding art or

practice" (MW7, p. 303).[2] The relationship between philosophy and education is thus an intimate one. One finds such a view in Plato, for whom, Dewey notes, "Philosophy and education were organically connected." However, Dewey laments, "The vital bond of union has long since been broken" (LW5, p. 292).

Dewey also claimed that all education is moral education, that is, the central aim of education is the improvement of human character and conduct. The term 'moral education' is thus, in one sense, a redundancy, since all education is ultimately moral, that is, has a moral end or purpose, and hence it is not to be contrasted with non-moral education, which for Dewey, does not exist. In another sense, though, the term simply underscores that point, that all education is moral. Hence, all philosophy is ultimately moral education: "Whenever philosophy has been taken seriously, … it signified achieving a wisdom which would influence the conduct of life" (MW9, p. 334).

It is my aim here to demonstrate the timeliness of Dewey's philosophy of education for us today with respect to the organic relationship between ethics and education that Dewey saw, by showing the centrality of education for Dewey's philosophy, that is, how for him, indeed, all philosophy is philosophy of education; further, how all education is moral philosophy; and hence how all philosophy pertains to moral education.

Dewey would agree with Aristotle especially when Aristotle claimed that ethics "does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the [other sciences], for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use" (*Nicomachean Ethics* II, p. 2). Like those in the ancient and medieval traditions, Dewey held that the purpose of all learning is ultimately to make persons better, although he disagreed with them about the meaning of 'better.' Indeed, classical thinkers assumed that 'better' requires a 'best,' an assumption found, for example, in Thomas Aquinas's fifth argument for the existence of God. Dewey, by contrast, was a meliorist and contended that improvement was possible without some conception of a 'best' or ultimate 'Good,' identified in Christianity and other religions with 'God.' (We will see later how Dewey's claim is possible.)

Furthermore, Dewey agreed with Aristotle regarding the importance of habits: knowledge is to be used for the improvement of habits, whereby we do good as a matter of 'second nature' and take delight in doing so. Without good habits we would find ourselves paralyzed by the countless decisions that we constantly must make: good habits free us to devote our intelligence and

energies to solving problems that could not be anticipated and for making decisions regarding those matters outside of one's routine. Indeed, there is a substantial body of scholarship on Dewey that interprets him as part of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, and in other respects (e.g., Sleeper, 1986). (He is also often interpreted as a sort of utilitarian or consequentialist, but certainly never as a deontologist, Kantian or otherwise.)

Traditionally, though, notions of 'good' and 'better' were understood teleologically, that is, by reference to what were imagined to be the true and proper ends for which we, both as humans and as individuals, were created. Dewey, too, was a teleological thinker, but he extensively criticized philosophers, like Aristotle, who dichotomized ends, the subject of *theoria*, or theoretical reason, and means, the subject of *phronesis*, or practical reason. For Dewey the effective positing of ends is always in light of available means, what he termed "ends in view," and ends posited as ideals independent of the means for achieving them are empty and serve no effective moral end: they do nothing to make us or our world better. As Dewey writes:

> To profess to have an aim and then neglect the means of its execution is self-delusion of the most dangerous sort.…When we take means for ends we indeed fall into moral materialism. But when we take ends without regard to means we degenerate into sentimentalism. In the name of the ideal we fall back upon mere luck and chance and magic or exhortation and preaching; or else upon a fanaticism that will force the realization of preconceived ends at any cost. (MW12, p. 121)

In other words, the separation of ends from means can easily lead to ideological oppression.

Dewey understands 'good' and 'better' in terms of 'growth.' Indeed, for him, "growth itself is the only moral 'end'" (MW12, p. 181). Growth is qualitative, not quantitative: it pertains not just to our biological bodies but to the quality of embodied experience. Growth is, for Dewey, increasing "richness of meaning, and its [experience's] revelation of new possibility" (LW17, p. 65) — i.e., the capacity to see within experience itself new possibilities for living more fully. It is the enhanced capacity "for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality" (LW13, p. 28), that is, the increased ability to experience one's world in an ever-increasing order of richness, intensity, and complexity. Growth is an expanding sense of wholeness, or integrity, of experience, a deepening feeling of meaningfulness in life. Thus, education is the cultivation of those habits that

foster a deeper and richer experience of meaning in life, and what fosters such cultivation is also what Dewey understands by the 'ethical.' Education is thus inseparable from ethics, and the ethical is also inseparable from the aesthetic: 'ethics,' 'education,' and 'aesthetics' all refer in different ways to the same process, namely, the promotion of human growth, understood as the enrichment of human experience, the deepening of feelings of meaningfulness in embodied living.

Furthermore, the imparting of information and the instruction in certain skills without consideration of the moral ends for which such knowledge and skills are to be used, is not education, for Dewey, no matter how sophisticated they might be, but merely technical training. He feared already in his own day that colleges and university were devolving from institutions of higher education into glorified trade schools, producing human resources for industry rather than educating people for growth and meaningful lives, as well as for responsible democratic citizenry, as we shall see later.

Dewey saw education as thoroughly continuous with life and vehemently opposed the notion that education is preparation for living, especially for earning a living: "the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education" is, Dewey claimed, "'Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life'" (EW4, p. 50): "education … is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (EW4, p. 87). Education is not preparation for life but is life itself in its deepest expression.

The fullest life, a life of growth, is one of ongoing education: it is living that continuously makes itself maximally open to future, richer, more intense, more complex, and better integrated experiences. To be fully alive is to be a life-long learner.

Because of his claim that all education is ultimately moral, it might seem odd that the word 'ethics' or 'ethical' never appears in the text of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (MW, p. 9). (It appears only in the titles of several works cited in Dewey's references.) He did, however, write two entire books on 'ethics,' in which he takes 'ethics' and 'morality' synonymously (LW7, p. 9) and describes how both pertain to the process whereby we educate ourselves and others, in the manner just described, to live richer, more integrated lives. He explains that both 'ethics' and 'morality' can be taken in a two-fold sense: they refer on the one hand to the current rules governing a society, but on the other hand they refer to our critical reflection upon and improvement of those rules (LW7, p. 10).

Education, as fundamentally a moral enterprise, needs to take the two terms in both senses. In order to grow, students must understand and be able to contend with the restrictions that their societies places upon them, but for Dewey there is no intrinsic value in conforming to the rules of conventional morality for its own sake. Ethics is not to be found in mere conformity to moral principles and rules, whether they come from social convention or from philosophy. Moral principles and rules are important instruments, or conceptual, analytic tools, for facilitating growth, but like all tools, however, one needs to know their appropriate application. Moreover, conventional moral norms commonly conflict, and growth thus requires an intelligent ability to adjudicate such conflicts. Thus, ethics is not just about acting 'rightly,' that is, in conformity with certain principles or rules — in this respect Dewey distinguishes the (moral) 'right' from the 'good' (LW7, pp. 214-17). Rather, ethics involves the appropriate use of such principles and rules for the promotion of growth.

Experience, democracy, and science

Ethics, then, for Dewey, is in the service of growth, and growth pertains to the qualitative enhancement of experience. In his later book on philosophy of education, *Experience and Education*, Dewey thus argues that every sound educational theory must begin with a theory of experience (LW13, pp. 11-16). It is a mistake, though, to think that experiences are inherently educational, as when people cliché-ishly claim, "we learn from experience." Sometimes we do, but sometimes we do not. Some experiences, especially traumatic ones, can retard growth. As Dewey notes, "Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted" (LW13, p. 11). He goes on to say, "when and *only* when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing" (LW13, p. 20). Experiences need to be structured in order to be educative, and that is the function of the teacher: to help structure the students' experiences so as to open them to new experiences, with ever-increasing richness, complexity, and integrity.

Dewey thought that another common mistake in the educational theories of his day was to assume that experiences are strictly personal and even private,

and this (false) assumption is the basis for a false dichotomy between the personal growth of students and the demands of society. The war between so-called 'traditional' and 'progressive education' is based largely upon this false dichotomy, according to Dewey. Advocates of 'traditional education' claim that the main purpose of education is the transmission of culture and cultural norms (e.g., Hirsch, 1987; 1996) , and they criticize advocates of 'progressive education,' such as Dewey, for feeding children's narcissism, that is, preoccupation with their own experiences, understood as private, and of ignoring the duties and requirements of social, civic life. Advocates of 'progressive education,' often following Rousseau, see cultural traditions and social demands as stifling children's creativity and growth and thus imagine that growth requires liberation from social norms.

Dewey did consider himself an advocate of progressive education but not in the sense that is rightly criticized. "All experience is ultimately social," Dewey claims (LW13, p. 21), both in its context and in its communication. Every experience occurs within a social context, even those of Robinson Crusoe, whose every effort aims to regain contact with others. Furthermore, we continuously choose which experiences we will share and not share with others: Crusoe longs for someone with whom to share his experiences. Dewey does not deny that we often feel a tension between our personal needs and social demands, but this does not mean that the two are fundamentally dichotomous. One of our deepest needs is to feel socially integrated and hence to overcome such a tension between self and others. Indeed, a major aspect of the sense of wholeness that is entailed in 'growth' is such a sense of social integration: a feeling that my needs and interests are continuous, or at least harmonious, with those of others. Discontinuity, in the form of fear, suspicion, and mistrust, on the other hand, is a major impediment to growth, needing to be overcome. There is no dichotomy or inherent conflict between the individual and the social, for Dewey, a point that he especially argues in *Individualism Old and New* (LW5). Humans are from the very beginning social creatures: socialization begins already in the womb. Healthy societies nurture healthy, creative individuals, and reciprocally healthy, growing individuals are necessary for healthy societies. Similarly, for Dewey, culture is continuous with nature, the central point of Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (LW1), which later Dewey claimed should have been entitled "Culture and Nature" (LW1, p. 361). Culture is life consciously modifying itself and the environment in order to bring about greater possibilities for growth and increased richness and integrity of experience: it emerges from nature, from human life itself, and is not some

supernatural force, or 'spirit,' imposing itself upon nature, in the dichotomous manner in which it is often imagined.

Moral education thus begins, for Dewey, with cultivating the student's attunement to social life, to others, that is, by fostering the student's senses of sympathy and compassion. One grows by realizing that initially felt conflicts between personal needs and social demands are ill-interpreted. What others want from and desire in life is not fundamentally different from what I want from and desire in life, and so much of growth entails transforming what we individually experience initially as 'mine' into 'ours.' Others, 'society,' cease to be experienced as barriers to personal growth but become increasingly understood as necessary for it and hence as ontologically continuous with oneself.

So, we have seen so far how moral education consists, for Dewey, not in learning 'correct' ethical principles or rules but in learning appropriate uses and experimentally reconstructing such principles and rules in the service of growth, understood as the increased capacity for richness and wholeness in future experiences, which are always both personal and social.

Another common criticism of Dewey's philosophy of education is that the notion of 'growth' is too vague to provide an effective basis for educational policy and planning or for any sort of integrated curriculum (e.g., Bloom 1987; Hirsch 1987, 1996). This criticism, I believe, stems from a failure to connect Dewey's understanding of education adequately with two other central notions in his philosophy: 'science' and 'democracy.' 'Education,' 'science,' and 'democracy' must all be understood in relation to one another. Once we understand these connections, then it becomes clear that Dewey provides extensive detail regarding what a curriculum aimed at promoting the growth of students looks like.

Science, for Dewey, is not a matter of knowing the world in a detached, disinterested, 'objective' manner. As Richard Rorty (1981) has famously shown, Dewey rejected the notion that knowing is a matter of representing or 'mirroring' the world. The activity of science is continuous with the efforts of living, human creatures to bring about more stable relationships with their environment, both natural and social. Discontinuity between an organism and its environment creates, as Charles Peirce had already described, the feeling of 'irritation,'[3] a sign that the organism is in danger. The task of intelligent, scientific inquiry then is, first, to transform vague feelings of irritation into well-defined 'problems,' second, to bring existing knowledge to bear upon those problems so as enable one to formulate hypotheses regarding the causes of the irritations, and hence

the theoretical resolution of the problems, and third, to test the hypotheses experimentally and thus actually to solve the problem. The method of science, again as Peirce had already described, is thus the best method for relieving the irritations of life compared to three other methods tried by mankind, namely, the method of tenacity, whereby one simply clings to past beliefs in the stubborn hope that eventual they will prevail; the method of authority, whereby one dogmatically appeals to some authoritative text or personage; and the *a priori* method, whereby one acts merely in accord with what 'seems rights' or 'sounds good,' without looking for experimental verification of one's hypotheses. These other three methods all inevitably fail. The empirical testing of her hypotheses, by contrast, keeps the scientist open to experiences that will confirm or contradict her hypotheses and thus is more conducive to growth than the other methods, which arbitrarily close off future experiences.

Education, therefore, for Dewey, is to be scientific in the manner just described. It begins with students' felt irritations and the problems of life that they themselves — not the teacher — find most pressing. It then encourages students to bring to bear all relevant, available knowledge, regardless of discipline, in the formulation of hypotheses, which are then tested experimentally in the experienced world — the laboratory of life — keeping themselves open regarding the results.

Social life produces many irritations, which are to be addressed, according to Dewey, in the same scientific manner. Such irritations might stem from conflicts between persons' needs and wants, on the one hand, and social expectations, on the other, as I discussed previously, from disagreements between individuals, or ever from contradictions produced by the efforts to apply different moral principles or rules to a problematic situation. Ethics pertains preeminently to such social conflicts, as we saw, as part of our effort to attune ourselves to social life, and thus involves the application of scientific, experimental method to their resolution. Such an application of scientific method to social life is what Dewey means by 'democracy.'

Democracy is thus not merely one political form alongside others but the application of scientific method to moral, social life, that is, to the effective resolution of the irritations — the disagreements and conflicts — that emerge from people living together. Democracy is not a matter of ideology but of practical, pragmatic, effective, but fallibilistic resolution of public problems, in accord with the experimental method of science. Indeed, in *Freedom and Culture* (1939),

Dewey lists several features that science and democracy share: "freedom of inquiry, toleration of diverse views, freedom of communication, the distribution of what is found out to every individual as the ultimate intellectual consumer, are involved in the democratic as in the scientific method" (LW13, p. 135). Democracy is openness to the public testing of informed hypotheses in solving public problems. As Dewey wrote on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, in "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us" (1939):

> Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past. For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. (LW14, pp. 229-30)

So, moral education — and recall that, for Dewey, all education is fundamentally moral: it is about the improvement of character, conduct, and habits — is to be guided by the principles of science and democracy. Students are to be taught the methods of scientific, experimental inquiry and, as responsible democratic citizens, to apply those methods to public life. Much more, of course, can be said about what both 'science' and 'democracy' entail, but what I have said here only briefly is sufficient, I believe, to indicate that these notions provide more than what is required for effective educational planning and policy and the creation of coherent, effective curricula. Students are to be taught moral principles not as abstractions to be memorized but as ideas to be used and tested in the actual solving of social problems that they themselves feel and identify as problems.

Conclusion

John Dewey was one of the most prolific writers in the entire history of philosophy, in large part due to his long, healthy life. He wrote about every aspect of philosophy — metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, politics, logic, aesthetics — but his writings all revolve around and point toward one thing: moral educa-

tion, understood as learning how to grow as a person, how to open and refashion oneself so as to experience the world with ever-increasing richness, intensity, complexity, and wholeness, and hence how to experience living in an ever-more meaningful manner. Such then is the central issue to which all matters concerning educational curriculum and policy are to return constantly: what are the tools, both material and conceptual, that our students most need and are most useful to them in order to grow in the manner Dewey so describes?

Clearly one set of tools will not be equally appropriate for all students, and so the central challenge of the art and science of teaching – and Dewey did think that education is both an art and a science – is the proper matching of learning tools to students. Teaching is an art insofar as it requires an aesthetic sense for the wholeness of living and a feeling for what fits an individual student, but it is also a science insofar as it requires constant empirical testing of the teacher's best hypotheses regarding what will best work for each student – experimentation. Obsessive efforts to standardize curriculum thus, for Dewey, are unscientific, because they undermine the need for such experimental testing and readjustment of one's methods, and they poison the educational process: nothing kills education more than a priori efforts to determine in advance for each and every student what constitutes his or her growth, and whatever stands in the way of growth is what Dewey understood as 'unethical.'

So one of the most important ways in which Dewey's philosophy of education is so relevant today is that it provides powerful conceptual resources for resisting the move that we see in so many countries toward standardization of educational curricula, often in the name of a business-like notion of 'efficiency,' whereby students are conceived as uniform products, to be produced in assembly-line fashion. Such efforts, Dewey shows us, only effectively and efficiently poison students' vital love of learning and kill the spirit of education as growth. Such so-called 'education' is, for Dewey, immoral; indeed, as we have seen, it is not even education.

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NOTES

[1] This paper was written for and presented at the conference "Ethics and Education," co-hosted by the Faculty of Education and the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw, 21 November 2015.

[2] I use here the standard format for citing Dewey's writings in his collected works. EW = *Early Works*; MW = *Middle Works*; LW = *Later Works*. The first number pertains to the volume, and the second number, to the page(s).

[3] "The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle inquiry" (Peirce 1877, p. 5).

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