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Beyond Moral Fundamentalism: John Dewey's Pragmatic Pluralism in Ethics and Politics

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Abstract: Drawing on unpublished and published sources from 1926-1932, this chapter builds on John Dewey's naturalistic pragmatic pluralism in ethical theory. A primary focus is "Three Independent Factors in Morals," which analyzes good, duty, and virtue as distinct categories that in many cases express different experiential origins. The chapter suggests that a vital role for contemporary theorizing is to lay bare and analyze the sorts of conflicts that constantly underlie moral and political action. Instead of reinforcing moral fundamentalism *via* an outdated quest for the central and basic source of normative justification, we should foster theories with a range of idioms and emphases which, while accommodating monistic insights, better inform decision-making by opening communication across diverse elements of moral and political life, placing these elements in a wider context in which norms gain practical traction in non-ideal conditions, and expanding prospects for social inquiry and convergence on policy and action.

Keywords: Dewey, pragmatism, ethics, ethical pluralism, ethical monism, moral fundamentalism, wicked problems, pragmatic pluralism, naturalism, moral imagination

Even as we confront increasingly complex problems that demand fine awareness, moral sensitivity, and rich responsibility (see Nussbaum 1990, 148-167), many have inherited a stark one-way-street moral and political mentality: Those going the right way ("us") feel constantly endangered by others ("them") coming the wrong way, and each is convinced that the other has misread the signs. Such *moral fundamentalist* habits can cause people to oversimplify situations, neglect context, assume privileged access to the right way to proceed, ignore relevant possibilities for convergence, and shut off inquiry (Johnson 2014; Norton 2015). Moral fundamentalism, which logically requires the traditional monistic view that there is a single right or ideal way to formulate moral and political problems, also makes the worst of our native

impulses toward social bonding and antagonism, driving the us-them wedge even deeper and depleting social capital (Putnam 2000) while making it harder for us to debate and achieve controverted social goals like justice, freedom, security, health, and sustainability (see Thompson 2010).¹ Meanwhile, exacerbating the one-way moral mentality, techno-industrial civilizations have arranged social networks and media communications into an infamous echo chamber that insulates “us” from having to learn anything new from “them” (Karsten and West 2016).

We must cultivate better cultural and cross-cultural conditions for dialogue, debate, and persuasion so that we can deal more intelligently and competently with complex and widely shared local, regional, national, and global problems (cf. 1927, LW 2:366). Over a century after Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* (1916, MW 9), faith in the educative capacity of experience remains our best hope. Social inquiry and problem-solving are more honest, open, collaborative, rigorous, and productive when youths learn to be patient with the suspense of reflection, distrustful of tunnel vision, aware of the fallibility and incompleteness of any decision or policy, practiced in listening, and imaginative in pursuing creative leads.

Philosophical research can help to create a shared cultural context in which we cultivate these conditions for sustained, communicative social inquiry. Drawing on unpublished and published sources from 1926-1932, this chapter builds on Dewey to argue that traditional ethical monism tends to stymie this creative possibility by legitimizing the “one way” feature of moral fundamentalism and that a deep pragmatic pluralism can accommodate valuable monistic insights without unduly exercising and reinforcing moral fundamentalist habits.²

Dewey’s Pragmatic Pluralism in Ethical Theory

In ethics, pluralism implies affirmation of multiple values. Strong pluralists such as Williams (1985), Taylor (1982), Noddings (2013), and Appiah (2017) hold that ethical monism abridges

moral life and edits out the diversity of situational tensions that mark real, unsettled circumstances.³

Values typically conflict and get in the way of each other, and, according to the strong pluralist it would be an exceptionally easy case in which tensions could be resolved by appealing to a supreme value, principle, standard, law, concept, or ideal that devours whatever is of moral worth in the rest of our concerns. A strong pluralist position is well stated by Haidt and Bjorklund: “Monistic theories are likely to be wrong. ...If there are many independent sources of moral value..., then moral theories that value only one source and set to zero all others are likely to produce psychologically unrealistic systems...” (2008, 215).⁴

Strong pluralists, especially in the pragmatist tradition, also tend to reject the quest for a self-sufficient “ideal theory,” as Rawls (1971) called his idealized “original position” approach to a well-ordered society in which free, equal, and autonomous rational contractors fully comply with the requirements of justice.⁵ This now-traditional ideal theory approach is exemplified by Rawls, Nozick (1974), and arguably Dworkin (2000). Recent critics include, to various degrees, Mills (2005, 2017), Anderson (2009, 2013), Pappas (2008, 2018), Sen (2009), Valentini (2012), and Appiah (2017). Anderson, for example, has influentially argued that Rawls’s approach to an ideal society blinds us to race-based and other social injustices to a degree that is “epistemologically disabling” (2013, 5).⁶ These strong pluralists propose shifting to a non-ideal starting point for sociopolitical inquiry. They do not, of course, object to idealizations in ethics, a subject recently canvassed in Appiah’s *As If: Idealization and Ideals* (2017), but they do insist that values have to be appraised in light of the particular experiential contexts and purposes that generated them, and most advocate, in Pappas’s (2018) words, a shift “toward a more nonideal, contextualist, problem-centered, and inquiry-oriented approach.” Pappas writes: “There are as

many problems of injustice,” Pappas writes, “as there are problematic situations suffered in a particular way.” And even a plausible ideal theory, Appiah urges in his melioristic plea for non-ideal (partial compliance) theories, “doesn’t help much in the circumstances of an actual non-ideal world” (2017, 120; cf. 163).

Among pragmatists, such as Kitcher (2014), Johnson (2014), McKenna (2018), Pappas (2018), Thompson (2015), and myself (2003), pluralism is additionally an experimental *method* of moral and political inquiry. But pragmatism is not necessarily “a method of ethics” in the sense crystallized by Sidgwick: “a rational procedure for deciding what we ought to do” (Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014). Norton’s “heuristic proceduralism” comes close (2005, 2015), but like other pragmatists he is critical of rational procedures that fail to fathom the extent to which we are all frogs in Zhuǎng Zǐ’s well, inescapably limited and guided by our particular standpoints, contexts, and purposes. Moreover, like Kitcher and Johnson, Norton is focused on ethical inquiry as an experimental process rather than merely as incessant verbal argumentation. What Kitcher (2014) calls “the ethical project” is a process in which, as Johnson explains it, we actively try out “various modes of behavior (verbal and nonverbal), various institutional structures, and various life strategies.” Verbal forms of argumentation remain important for philosophical ethics, but ethical theorists have neglected the way experiments in living *also* constitute “arguments” for and against various practices. Certain practices either address or fail to meet shared problems. Such “arguments,” Johnson adds, are enactive embodied, and embedded (Johnson 2014, 126), and they should be more central to the future of ethical theorizing.

Our actual experiments in living assuredly involve ideals and idealizations through which we appraise moral alternatives, as Appiah has argued (2017), but they must proceed without

access to a non-contingent perspective or an ideal standpoint untainted by particular human drives, habits, and choices. Ethical inquiry is unended, and what we count as progressive or regressive is ultimately, in Kitcher's words, "something people work out with one another. There are no experts here" (2014, 286). Instead of another iteration of the old escape through faith or reason to an antecedently established "aperspectival position" (Johnson 2014, 120), the pragmatic pluralist embraces in her methodology the fact that when we ask different questions, we see different connections and possibilities. As is often observed, to ask the Kantian question (What is my duty?) or the utilitarian question (Which actions help us do the most good we can do?) is not to ask the Aristotelian question (Which character traits contribute to the *eudaemon* life?). To appropriate Heisenberg, what we observe is not the moral situation in itself, but the situation exposed to our method of questioning (see 1958, 32).

Nevertheless, as Kitcher and Johnson observe, rejection of aperspectival ethics "in no way keeps us from making reasonable claims about" the relative suitability of certain "values, principles, and practices" over others (Johnson 2014, 129; Kitcher 2014, 210). Given our actual contingent and non-ideal starting point, pluralism is a strategy for more conscientious moral and political inquiry into what we should deem progressive and regressive, especially, I have argued, when our moral deliberations and choices are informed by broadly attentive, vital, and appreciative imaginative rehearsals and moral artistry (Fesmire 2003). If comparison to an ideal world of agents fully compliant with the demands of justice makes us more sensitive to the particular pinch of an injustice and helps us singly or collectively hunt for ways to settle difficulties, creatively scope out alternatives, and picture ourselves taking part in them, then for the pragmatic pluralist it is a valuable heuristic. But it is the wrong starting point.

Dewey built on his more general theory of operative intelligence to chart a course making the best of our inescapable contingency and provincialism. He contended that no matter how carefully elaborated one's supreme moral principle (e.g., Gewirth 1978), it will rarely focus one's attention on all the relevant situational factors that one ought to note and deal with. He shared the spirit of James's pluralism: "The word 'and' trails after every sentence. Something always escapes. 'Ever not quite' has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness" (1977, 145). The problem with ethical monism is not just that its usefulness to moral understanding is limited; indeed, the articulation of one-sided idealizations of incompatible theories may be a personal or collective help in specific contexts (see Appiah 2017). What is worse, from the standpoint of Deweyan moral epistemology, is that the traditional monistic quest for a single rational ruler to impose order on deliberation tends, as an unintended consequence, to enable the one-way feature of moral fundamentalism. More specifically, far from being an antidote to what J. Baird Callicott wittily dubs pluralism's "multiple personality disorder," monism tends to obstruct individual and communal inquiry into relevant situational features that "escape" our often-useful abstractions and idealizations. Of course monistic ethical theorists, in sharp contrast with prototypical fundamentalists, usually believe they have much to learn from those who disagree with them. But traditional monists hold that their moral house can, with some renovations and touch-ups here and there, fully accommodate whatever they need to learn. Using Dewey as a platform, I am arguing that it cannot. Even when we are aware, like Nozick, that we are "idealizing greatly" (1974, 151; cf. Appiah 2017, 119), we may be taken in by the putative value of our armchair theoretic clarities at the price of rendering actual moral and political problems more opaque.

Dewey asserted that “the growth of the experimental as distinct from the dogmatic habit of mind is due to increased ability to utilize variations for constructive ends instead of suppressing them” (1929, LW 1:7).⁷ Accordingly, he saw variability in valuing and valuations as a useful starting point for further inquiry, rather than as a worrisome deviation to be squelched or intellectually standardized in the name of ethical truth. He held that there is no universal compass that allows us to rationally (or faithfully) navigate the social world, but through ongoing shared inquiry we can nevertheless steer reliably between the absolute and the arbitrary (cf. Elgin 1997).

As Dewey framed his pluralistic ethical theory, his central questions were: When we are morally conflicted, is this a superficial hesitancy that would invariably dissolve if only we could conduct our reasoning correctly, marshal the right data, or pray harder? Or is the experience of moral conflict often rooted in something deeper and intractable, a conflict *intrinsic* to the situation? Are a plurality of approaches to moral decision-making justified, or should we strive for a one-size-fits-all approach that organizes moral cognition under a single blanket category of good, right, or virtue? Do these blanket concepts spring from the same empirical source in our moral experience, or do they express distinctive roots of moral life? If leading moral concepts express independent forces with different roots, do these roots ultimately jibe well with each other (i.e., are they fully compatible)? Or do they get at cross purposes, often pulling us in different and seemingly legitimate directions, leaving us in a muddle about what to do? In sum, are there inherent conflicts as well as practical incommensurabilities between underlying primitive springs of moral action? If so, how can we practically manage and evaluate the normative claims made on us by these forces?

Dewey's partial and typically-for-him-programmatic answer to these questions pivoted on the thesis that there are "independent variables in moral action" (1930, LW 5:280), these several experiential factors are in tension with each other, and they are reducible neither to a single right or ideal starting point for moral inquiry nor to an ultimate foundation tethered to changeless universal truths. He did not simply assert the platitude that each vying monistic model has some truth to it; he developed and explored a hypothesis partially explaining how conflicting persistent values relate to one another and how they might be put into communication with each other without being hypostatized. Or alternatively, he suggested *how functionally isolated theories might be critically appraised within a wider normative context even as they sustain their distinctive selective emphases as idealized partial mappings or models of the terrain of moral action*. When divergent models of normative ideals are held to be true "independent of what they lead to when used as directive principles" (QC, LW 4:221), dogmatism results. But when normative models are understood as communicative and revisable experiments in living, as what Dewey in *The Quest for Certainty* called instrumentalities of direction, then he thinks they will mature through ongoing interactive engagement with the world and be truer to the mark.⁸

In the remainder of this chapter I explore Dewey's thesis, from its inception as a hypothesis in the 1920s to its elaboration in the early 1930s. Several standout features of Dewey's brand of strong axiological pluralism will play a role in subsequent analysis: Dewey's theory rejects aperspectival positions and is marked by a naturalistic emphasis on the embodied context of moral action as a need-search recovery process (see Johnson 2018). He consequently emphasized conscientiousness, not native conscience, and he rejected the split between a moral realm sharply marked off from a non-moral realm, observing that actions are so interconnected

that any choice potentially has moral significance (1932, LW 7:170). He avoided extreme moral skepticism and extreme moral particularism (see Pappas 2018), and his outlook concurs with more recent strong pluralists that moral problems often admit of more than one approvable solution.

Moving to the four features central to what follows, (a) Dewey argued that moral uncertainty is often a sign of conscientiousness; (b) this uncertainty arises in part from conflicts between heterogeneous sources of moral action—irreducible basic factors in morals—to which reasonable moral agents ought to pay attention; (c) our choices and deeds are essential players in the moral situation, so what is good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious cannot be completely ascertained prior to acting and experimentally reviewing;⁹ (d) although moral clarity and conviction are important (see Neiman 2008), moral fundamentalism robs them of their virtue and should be rejected in all forms, no matter how sophisticated, because there is no one right or ideal way to think *in advance* about moral or political problems and hence rarely a single “theoretically correct” diagnosis of any particular moral or political problem.

Three Independent Factors in Morals

On November 7, 1930, Dewey gave an address in English before the French Philosophical Society in Paris. As his French colleagues recognized in the ensuing discussion, he gave them “a première of his new ideas” (quoted in LW 5:503). The presentation was promptly published as “Trois facteurs indépendants en matière de morale.”¹⁰ In the 1960s, Jo Ann Boydston translated the French article back into English for *Educational Theory* as “Three Independent Factors in Morals,” which eventually appeared in the critical edition (LW 5:279-288).

Soon after Boydston’s translation appeared, an unpublished and undated typescript (mss102_53_3) was found in the Dewey archives at Southern Illinois University, titled in

Dewey's hand "Conflict and Independent Variables in Morals" (**figure 10.1**).¹¹ **<place fig. 10.1 on the facing page opposite the callout; credit below image should read: Used by permission of Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.>** The first five pages of the typescript were likely presented in 1926 or 1927 to a philosophy club at Columbia University (Dewey to Horace S. Fries [1933.12.26 (07682)]). Pages 6 to 12 closely track the French article, but there are several substantive revisions in Dewey's hand that do not appear in the critical edition. Pages 1 to 5 and page 13 remain unpublished. Dewey was likely reworking the typescript for an English publication. He instead incorporated the basic insights into the 1932 *Ethics* (LW 7), albeit in a less theoretical form that he judged to be better suited to the pedagogical and practical needs of undergraduate students (Dewey to Horace S. Fries [1933.12.26 (07682)]). In what follows, I incorporate material from the unpublished typescript whenever it offers a unique angle or metaphor that clarifies a point or adds something philosophically substantive.

In the 1930 presentation, Dewey hypothesized that each of the primary Western ethical systems (represented for him by Aristotle, Kant, and the British moralists) represents a basic, non-arbitrary force or factor of moral life: aspiration, obligation, and approbation, respectively. Each factor is expressed in that system's leading fundamental concept: good, duty, and virtue, respectively. Each system seeks to bring divergent forces wholly within the logical scope of its own monistic category or principle. Other factors are subordinated and treated as derivative. For example, Kantians declare a trait to be virtuous because it maps to what is antecedently determined by autonomous reason to be right or obligatory. Yet, as examined here, Dewey contended that aspirations, obligations, and approbations are distinctive phenomena that cannot be blanketed by a single covering concept.

The subject matter of ethics is popularly taken to be about getting people to do the right thing when they are otherwise inclined. Accordingly, easy and uncomplicated cases such as “Should he embezzle the money?” are often spotlighted as prototypical, even though such cases are not usually occasions for much deliberation. Dewey recognized untangled cases in which habituated rule-following is best and excessive deliberation a waste of time, or worse, signifies a manically imbalanced character (1932, LW 7:170). Such trade-offs are unavoidable. Moreover, although Anscombe in her watershed “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958) put it far more succinctly with her exceptionless prohibition against murdering the innocent, Dewey recognized that deliberation can at times lead us into temptation via ad hoc rationalizations (cf. Appiah 2017, 132). Additionally, recent moral psychology has revealed—with an experimental rigor that Dewey again left programmatic—the extent to which “moral reasoning” too often amounts to little more than a self-justifying ineffectual “rider” atop the headstrong “elephant” of habituated intuitions (Haidt 2012).

Any adequate defense of Dewey’s general position requires some hedging of this sort, but his opening assertion in the 1930 presentation is uncomplicated: moral situations are not just *occasions* for uncertainty about what to do; problematic moral situations more typically *justify* our uncertainty. “Moral experience is a genuine experience” of real, systemic conflicts (in Koch 2010, 2.2270), so we generally *ought* to be reflective. And yet, Dewey argued, traditional moral theories have treated moral conflict as specious. Moral philosophers have acknowledged angst, but with their “Special Powers in their Special Armchairs” (Kitcher 2012, xix) they have for the most part postulated “one single principle as an explanation of moral life” (1930, LW 5:280), a correct standpoint from which we will in principle see that our initial hesitancy was based on momentary ignorance.

Because morally uncertain situations require us to reconcile conflicting factors, Dewey urged that “It is not without significance that uncertainty is felt most keenly by those who are called conscientious” (Dewey, undated ms, 13). Should a fifteen-year-old girl have an abortion? Should a soldier shoot upon command? Should a security analyst blow the whistle on government intrusions into privacy? Should John have had the affair with Anzia? To see these questions through the lens of only one factor—as at bottom a matter of rights not downstream consequences, of duty not virtue, of what is right not what is good, of what I should do and not who I should become—risks bringing deliberation to a premature close. When competing monistic concepts vie as bottom lines, this can of course elicit fruitful tension and dialogue. Pluralists, for their part, disagree with each other no less emphatically, but they are also committed in principle to nuanced perception and engaged problem-solving because they are keenly aware that their diagnoses have not precisely captured all that is morally or politically relevant.

Under the “one way” assumption legitimized by traditional ethical theorizing, conflict and diversity are merely apparent. A real situation may seem to be a quagmire, the supposition runs, but closer examination, or more data, or comparison to an ideally just or egalitarian island world of rational albeit hapless contractors (see Dworkin 2000), will reveal that there had been a right or fair path through it all along. Uncertainty is seen mostly as a “hesitation about choice” between the moral and the immoral: we assume we must choose the good (vs. evil), will the obligatory (vs. giving way to appetite, inclination, and desire), or do the virtuous (vs. the vicious). “That is the necessary logical conclusion if moral action has only one source, if it ranges only within a single category” (1930, LW 5:280). “We may be in doubt as to what the good or the right or the virtuous is in a complicated situation,” but under the restrictive one-way

assumption “it is there and determination of it is at most a purely intellectual question, not a moral one. There is no conflict inhering in the situation” (Dewey, undated ms, 3).

Yet conflicts are rarely so superficial that a correct rational analysis could, even in principle, sweep the path clear toward what is “truly” good, right, just, or virtuous. In Latour’s (1993) terms, “imbroglios” typify moral experience: moral predicaments are entanglements of often-incompatible forces. We are typically tugged in multiple ways, so one-way theorizing or decision-making at best leads to normative prescriptions that ignore factors relevant to our choices. This relative incommensurability of forces presents a practical problem, not primarily a theoretical one.¹²

Dewey acknowledged that “he exaggerated, for purposes of discussion, the differences among the three factors, that indeed moral theories do touch on these three factors more or less, but what he wanted to emphasize was the fact that each particular moral theory takes one of them as central and that is what becomes the important point, while the other factors are only secondary” (1930, LW 5:503). His point, then, was that there is a false hidden premise driving all projects that claim to give an account of metaethics and normative morality in terms of one supreme root. Each primary system misses, at least at the theoretical level, the inherent conflicts that constantly underlie moral and political action as irreducible forces, as when desired goods conflict with binding social demands. We should instead foster ethical and political theories that (a) lay bare and classify these practical conflicts within a wider “framework of moral conceptions” that puts basic roots in communication (1932, LW 7:309); (b) place these elements in a wider experimental context in which norms—e.g., responsibility, self-respect, and authenticity, for Dworkin (2011)—gain practical traction in the entanglements of nonideal conditions; and (c) expand prospects for convergence on policy and action.¹³

Note, importantly, that Dewey nowhere *reduced* moral life to a triumvirate of root factors; he did not have a universal, cover-all ethical theory. He wanted to emphasize that, having long ago unseated the monarch of *custom*, Western moral philosophers continue to contest which monarch of *reason* shall rule from the old throne and issue truths about how we ought to live. What philosophers should do, in contrast, is to surrender the monarchical quest altogether so that we might “attend more fully to the concrete elements entering into the situations” in which we must act (1930, LW 5:288). In philosophy as in agriculture, we are in need of more polyculture, to borrow Vandana Shiva’s image, not more monoculture.

Dewey’s central question in the 1930 presentation was: Is there a single empirical source of moral action, or are there plural sources? His hypothesis was that moral problems require us to reconcile and coordinate “heterogeneous elements” (in Koch 2010, 2.2270) that include “at least three independent variables in moral action” (1930, LW 5:280) which “pull different ways” (Dewey, undated ms, 4). The variables are independent in the sense that one variable is neither logically derivable from another nor translatable without remainder into the terms of another. Hence the inadequacy, for Dewey, of any ethical theory analogous to a logical theory or mathematical theory that can solve any relevant problem with the right method or procedure.

Compare to Korsgaard, who says “Ethical truth is comparable to logical truth” (2014; cf. 1996). Dewey insisted in opposition that there is no logically right method in morals any more than there is a right map in cartography as some fixed and final charting of changeless territory, or a right climate model, isolated from an inclusive context, specified purposes, and objective results (see 1938, LW 12:138-39, 399). It is not possible to theoretically settle moral problems in advance of their occurrence because each variable in moral action “has a different origin and mode of operation,” so “they can be at cross purposes and exercise divergent forces in the

formation of judgment.” “The essence of the moral situation is an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator” (1930, LW 5:280).

What ethical theory can do, despite (and at times perhaps even because of) its one-sided idealizations and emphases, is to help lay bare “the factors causing [problems] and thus make the choice more intelligent” (in Koch 2010, 2.2241-2.2245). In the contemporary ambit of Kitcher and Appiah, Dewey approached and evaluated ethical and political theories not on analogy to logical or mathematical problems but as experiments in “living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others” (1938, LW 13:303).

The 1930 presentation can be read as a blueprint to Dewey and Tufts’ 1932 *Ethics*. Dewey approached his chapters (10-17) in the textbook with a conscious pedagogical goal: re-forge historical philosophic tools in light of contemporary needs so that students can use them to become more *comprehensively conscientious* in their deliberations and character development. Specifically, instead of egging on the outdated quest for a hierarchy that subdues variety among fundamental moral concepts, or merely venturing “an eclectic combination of the different theories” (1932, LW 7:180), Dewey’s approach was to help students become more perceptive of moral complexity, study and assess their own circumstances in light of prior systems, and competently use diverse theories as deliberative tools in predicaments that require practical coordination among disparate elements.¹⁴

Reification of Three Independent Factors into Three Foundation Stones

In a letter to Horace S. Fries [1933.12.26 (07682)] (**figure 10.2**), <place fig. 10.2 on the facing page
opposite the callout; credit below image should read: Used by permission of the Wisconsin Historical

Society, Horace S. Fries papers, Mss 518, box 1, folder 6. > Dewey identified the key conceptual shift he made between his 1908 *Ethics* (MW 5)—and by implication earlier works such as *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891, EW 2:238-388) and *The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus* (1894, EW 4:219-362)—and the 1932 *Ethics*. He had, he wrote, been committed in 1908 to a “socialized utilitarianism” that foreshortened moral action from the homogeneous perspective of the good. But he transitioned to a strong axiological pluralism that maintained the distinctness of variables in moral action, variables that are selectively emphasized—often to good effect—in leading abstract ethical concepts.

The new typology of “at least three” factors which are in some respects independent was the organizing principle of Dewey’s spring 1926 course in “Ethical Theory” at Columbia University. Sidney Hook’s lecture notes on that course contain clarificatory gems that emerge as Dewey surveys the history of ethical theory to lay bare “certain categories found to be involved in judgments which men actually pass in the course of moral conduct and which concepts have become the foundation stones of theories about ethics” (in Koch 2010, 2.2230).¹⁵ Where helpful, I draw from Hook’s notes in what follows.

To recap Dewey’s hypothesis, moral situations are heterogeneous in their origins and operations. They elude full predictability and are not controllable by the impositions of any abstract monistic principle. Moral life has at least three distinct experiential roots that cannot be encompassed in one ideal way to proceed. Hence, most importantly, there is no foundation stone of ethics, whether procedurally constructed or “foundational” in the now old-fashioned sense. The unpublished typescript clarifies the hypothesis: “The three things I regard as variables are first the facts that give rise to the concept of the good and bad; secondly, those that give rise to the concept of right and wrong; thirdly, those that give rise to the conception of the virtuous and

vicious. ...What I am concerned to point out [is] that the concrete conflict is not just among these concepts, but in the elements of the actual moral situation that, when they are abstracted and generalized, give rise to these conceptions” (Dewey, undated ms, 2).¹⁶ In this section, I clarify Dewey’s hypothesis by interspersing the three factors and concomitant concepts, as emphasized in the 1930 presentation, with the parallel chapters in the 1932 *Ethics* (chs. 11-13). I hope at least to expose Dewey’s own generalizations to scrutiny so that the promises and limitations of his approach can be critically evaluated.

First Factor: Good

The Good as a leading category in ethics arises from desires and aspirations. People have purposes they aim to realize; pervasive wants, drives, appetites, and needs that constantly demand satisfaction. Yet what *seems* good in the “short run” may not in fact *be* durably good. The isolated satisfaction we anticipate and crave may not be judged satisfactory when we take a wider view, so we need practice and wisdom to thoughtfully discriminate between the real good and the mirage. Consequently, the teleological conception of a good that approvably speaks to human aspirations is “neither arbitrary nor artificial” (1932, LW 7:309). When we act hastily without reflective foresight, we just follow the strongest inclination and fulfill a desire without taking its measure. “But when one foresees the consequences which may result from the fulfillment of desire, the situation changes” (1930, LW 5:282). Foresight involves judgment and comparison as we envision consequences *ex ante* and track them *ex post*.

The capacity to imaginatively crystallize possibilities and transform them into directive hypotheses is explored in Dewey’s theory of dramatic rehearsal in deliberation (e.g., 1922, MW 14, ch. 16; cf. Fesmire 2003, ch. 5). We rehearse in a developing social and historical context, and judgments can be “examined, corrected, made more exact by judgments carried over from

other situations; the results of previous estimates and actions are available as working materials” (1930, LW 5:282). Consequently, we learn to organize and thoughtfully prioritize desires, and this led historically to candidates for the “chief good,” the *summum bonum* (e.g., Aristotle 1999, Book I), such as hedonistic pleasure, Epicurean wisdom, success (e.g., Plato 1992, Book I; Plato 1960), egoistic satisfaction, self-realization,¹⁷ and asceticism. When this factor is uppermost, *reason* is conceived as “intelligent insight into complete and remote consequences of desire” (1932, LW 7:217). The contemplated action is right and virtuous because it is truly, far-sightedly good; it is wrong and vicious because it is short-sightedly bad.

As a contemporary example, in Singer’s hedonistic utilitarian approach to “effective altruism,” reason calculates the objectively best quantifiable way to “maximize the amount of good you do over your lifetime” (Singer 2015, 65; cf. 198n10).¹⁸ One need not be morally “on the clock” 24/7, but for Singer weighing your options to maximize the true, objective good that you do is what it *means* to be moral. For example, if you can work for Goldman Sachs and donate excess income to effective charities, you may do more life-saving good than if you espouse a deontological “do no harm” principle and refuse to participate in the capitalistic financial system due to its putative unfairness. The good you do *justifies* your participation, unless you could have aggregated more good in some other way. *If* struggling against structural inequalities adds up to the most good you can do, then it is justified, but fighting for justice is *not* good in itself regardless of its utility. For Singer, answering a moral problem bears a strong analogy to answering a math problem. It requires us to calculate payoffs and pitfalls, debits and credits, and thereby determine the objective good (145). For instance, what priority should we give to expenditures on decreasing existential risk (from asteroids, etc.)? Singer quotes Bostrom, who deduces via utility calculations that it should be our highest global priority: “If benefiting

humanity by increasing existential safety achieves expected good on a scale many orders of magnitude greater than that of alternative contributions, we would do well to focus on this most efficient philanthropy” (174).

Dewey responded to mathematizing approaches in the unpublished typescript: Appeals to “the dictates of conscience,” intuition, a moral calculus, moral law, or divine command acknowledge moral puzzlement, but they mask existential uncertainty when they presuppose “that the answer to a moral problem is already licit, like the answer to a problem in a text on arithmetic that it only remains to figure correctly.” Moral problems, Dewey held, typically bear little analogy to elementary arithmetic tasks in a schoolchild’s textbook, or to being stumped by a hard puzzle. When puzzling over the square root of 81, there is a clear-cut way to formulate the problem and a right solution to calculate, so the only real problem is temporary ignorance of the answer. In moral life, however, “Genuine uncertainty is an essential trait of every moral situation” (Dewey, undated ms, 1).

Dewey is not simply commenting upon the uncertainty due to the *difficulty* of a puzzle, or to lack of *access* to relevant information to plug into our diagnostic machinery. He contended that a typical quandary about which choice to make among viable alternatives cannot *even in principle* be definitively formulated and finally answered by assembling data and then calculating profits and losses on an accounting spreadsheet, as neo-Benthamites persist in supposing. Dewey should have acknowledged that utilitarianism’s economic-mathematical balancing model can function well as a heuristic for some purposes. What he rejected was the quest for a predetermined metric whereby we judiciously weigh matters so that the balance tips toward the good—many contemporary economists and policy analysts say “optimal”—outcome supported by a universal principle. Dewey acknowledged easy cases in which habituated rule-

following may economize deliberation, but insofar as an approach fails to prioritize sensitivity to context, creative social inquiry, and experimental understanding of complex underlying structures, its actual result is too often reminiscent of an offhanded criticism that Dewey once made about “popcorn” solutions: put the right amount in the right mechanism and you get some “unnutritious readymade stuff” that will not sustain anyone for long (1951.02.14 [14090]: Dewey to Max C. Otto).

Second Factor: Duty

The way we express our cares, make sense of situations, and deal with problems is acquired through interaction with the physical, cultural, and interpersonal environment in which we are at home. Classic Greek theorists acquired through a sociocultural medium their intellectual habits of pulling toward the good, just as Roman and British theorists acquired habits of pulling respectively toward the right and virtuous.

Dewey argued that the intimacy of the Greek polis supported teleological intelligence and the idea that laws reflect our rational ability to patiently set and achieve purposeful goals together. Accordingly, theories of the good made sense to the ancient Greeks. The vast conglomeration of peoples in the Roman Empire, however, supported the development of centralized order and the imposition of demands. As a result, in the historical transition from Greek teleology to Roman law, as exemplified by the Stoics, compliance with authorized duty was placed at “the centre of moral theory” (1930, LW 5:284).

The resultant jural or deontological theories cover a fact in ordinary human behavior: We unavoidably make claims on each other through living together, such as the control of desire and appetite, companionship and competition, cooperation and subordination. Others’ demands seem arbitrary unless they square with our own purposes, and our demands in turn seem arbitrary

to them. We don't like to have our desires impeded and regulated, sorted into the forbidden and the permitted. So "there finally develops a certain set or system of demands, more or less reciprocal according to social conditions, which are... responded to without overt revolt." In this way, Dewey proposed, authorized rights and duties evolve, and continue to evolve, through demands and prohibitions on others' behavior. "From the standpoint of those whose claims are recognized, these demands are rights; from the standpoint of those undergoing them they are duties." This "constitutes the principle of authority, Jus, Recht, Droit, which is current" (284).

According to Dewey, duty as a leading concept arises, then, from authoritative control which imposes a ban on individual satisfactions and temptations. As such, the concepts of duty and the right are in many cases independent, in both existential origin and logical operation, from the concept of good. The good pivots on the element of aspiration; the right pivots on the element of exaction.

Because imperatives often inhibit the satisfaction of desires, the concept of duty is not, as Kant recognized, "reducible to the conception of the good as satisfaction, even reasonable satisfaction, of desire" (1932, LW 7:214). Nonetheless, as Kant also recognized, there is no moral quality in being bound by an authority we deem ultimately arbitrary. When my young son was grabbing and picking flowers in a public garden a few years ago, we told him "don't pick the flowers." He experienced this as an imposition in which a good was curtailed. If he begins to concur that it is reasonable for his liberty to be thus restrained, what began as enforced compliance may be converted into something with moral standing, something *right*. It would then operate as a *moral* demand that he acknowledges he should not refuse to meet.

Dewey here distinguishes the *origins* of each root factor from its eventual *operations*. That which *operates*, say, as a good may have had its origins in duty. A demand that comes to

one as a duty operates via compliance, but one may eventually identify the injunction with an end one aspires to realize so that it operates as a good. If down the road my son desires to help that garden flourish, what began as an alien requirement that thwarted a desire to grab flowers, and may grow into something right to which he personally realizes the wisdom of submitting, may become a good. The same might eventually be said of his enforced duty to go to school. That is, cultivating the garden (or going to school) may enter his personal aspirations, despite its origins in obedience to communal regulations, “but when this happens, it loses its quality of being right and authoritative and becomes simply a good” (1930, LW 5:285).¹⁹ Moreover, there are hybrid theories which happily defy tidy categorization. Rule utilitarianism, for example, operates in the main via compliance with universal rules, albeit rules theoretically justified solely by the welfare they are supposed to maximize: if you aspire to maximize the good, then conform to the rule.

In sum, “the Good is that which attracts; the Right is that which asserts that we *ought* to be drawn by some object whether we are naturally attracted to it or not” (1932, LW 7:217). When the latter factor is uppermost, *reason* (or, for some deontologists, a presumed innate faculty of conscience) is conceived as “a power which is opposed to desire and which imposes restrictions on its exercise through issuing commands” (217). It is good and virtuous to do it *because* it is right; it is bad and vicious because it is wrong. In consequence, to the degree that a deontologist is a monist, there are no morally relevant aspects of virtue or good that cannot be organized under the concept of duty, right, law, and obligation. To will what is right *because it is right*, and not because it is prudent, is consequently a common idea in moral judgments, and the category of lawful duty and compliance with constraints of the right is thus taken by many to be the foundation stone of ethics.

In the 1932 *Ethics*, Dewey applies these insights to Kantian deontology. According to Kantians, what is morally Good “is that which is Right, that which accords with law and the commands of duty” (214-16). Contemporary representatives include Rawls (1971), Donagan (1977), Gewirth (1978), Darwall (1983), and Korsgaard (1996). Central to his conception of justice as fairness, for example, Rawls distinctively holds with Kant that a deontological principle of right must take priority over consequentialist concepts of good (1971, 31; cf. Freeman 2007, 72). Rawls references *The Critique of Practical Reason*: “the concept of good and evil must not be determined before the moral law..., but only after it and by means of it” (Kant 2002, 37). One should, contra Singer, struggle against inequality or strive to change an unjust system *independent* of the net utility of what you’ve chosen. For Kantian deontologists, the good is a path to the right, and the right gets its governing authority by reasonably obliging—or in Korsgaard’s idiom on the “source of normativity,” moral obligations are assigned by autonomous consciousness (1996; cf. Schaubroeck 2010). Fully complying with your duty and thereby at least attitudinally intending to uphold the rights of others is what it *means* to be moral.

In Dewey’s naturalistic and pragmatic view, how do social expectations take on justifiable moral authority? That is, how does Dewey reinterpret the locus and ground of rightfulness without falling back on God, the state, an inner law of pure practical reason, a law of nature, or idealized rational actors? The relationships that naturally bind us—say, as parents and children, friends, spouses or partners, and citizens—expose us to “the expectations of others and to the demands in which these expectations are made manifest.” This is equally true of social demands within institutions and political alliances. Explicit and implicit claims and demands are “as natural as anything else in a world in which persons are not isolated from one another but live in constant association and interaction” (1932, LW 7:218). Although a child, friend, spouse,

or citizen might be arbitrarily coerced into slavish conformity by despotic power, this is experienced as a brute imposition without moral standing. Expectations become *moral* claims because, even when inconvenient or exasperating, conscientious parents, friends, spouses, or citizens respond to relations of parenting, friendship, marriage, and citizenship as “expressions of the whole” to which they belong rather than as extrinsic impositions (218). “If we generalize such instances, we reach the conclusion that right, law, duty, arise from the relations which human beings intimately sustain to one another, and that their authoritative force springs from the very nature of the relation that binds people together” (219).

In his pragmatic-operational reconstruction of duty and the right, Dewey observed that in moral life we must meet the demands of the *situation*, which requires us to perceive and comprehensively respond to more than our own private satisfactions. The word duty is apt for those all-too-familiar occasions in which our own preferences or narrow desires run the other way, at cross-purposes from relational demands that should not be shirked merely because they may be irksome, discomforting, inconvenient, *or* perilous. Not only are Kantians right that we cannot rationally will a world of shoplifters or liars; they are also right to call for an inner sentinel alert to the exceptions we make of ourselves. Who better than Rawls, for example, for shining a light on the way we benefit from a practice while shirking to do our share in sustaining that practice for others? (cf. Appiah 2017, 203)²⁰ Kantians typically reject such aspectual pragmatizing as an abdication of morality; nevertheless, Dewey agrees with Kant that “to be truthful from duty is ...quite different from being truthful from fear of disadvantageous consequences” (Kant 1993, 15). In sum, duty, right, and obligation are concepts that serve an experiential function as *one* constant and distinctive stream of morals. Kant’s mistake was to hypostatize this factor and sharply separate moral conduct from our natural aspirations and

practical purposes, inferring that “All so-called moral interest consists solely in respect for the law” (14n14).

Third Factor: Virtue

Dewey asserted in the 1930 presentation: “Empirically, there is a third independent variable in morals” centered on praise and blame, approval and disapproval, reward and punishment (LW 5:285). “Acts and dispositions generally approved form the original virtues; those condemned the original vices” (286). Approving and disapproving attitudes, in all of their popular variability and inconsistency within and across social groups, mark the virtuous as an independent primitive factor in morals. This factor differs fundamentally, at least in principle, from the deliberative pursuit of ends—which virtue theorists regard as too intellectualistic—or the demand for compliance—which virtue theorists regard as too legalistic. When teleological thinkers consider social approval, it is their *ends* to which they are devoting effort. Meanwhile, deontologists use praise and blame as sanctions for right and wrong (Dewey, undated ms, 10). “But as categories, as principles, the virtuous differs radically from the good and the right. Goods, I repeat, have to do with deliberation upon desires and purposes; the right and obligatory with demands that are socially authorized and backed; virtues with widespread approbation” (1930, LW 5:286). Virtue ethicists extend this initial emphasis on acts that are praiseworthy or blameworthy to a search for consistency and coherence about which durable traits of character ought to be approved or censured. So they need some non-arbitrary standard of approbation to critique the “original” or spontaneous virtues and discover more appropriate and defensible ones. Typically they turn, like Anscombe, to some eudaemonistic conception of living well together.

In the Fries letter (**figure 10.2**), Dewey credited his unconventional meta-ethical typology—which upends simple categorization of Aristotle as a virtue ethicist, or Mill as an

aggregator of good consequences—to careful re-reading of eighteenth and nineteenth century British moral philosophers such as Hume, Smith, Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick. This re-reading unfolds in Hook’s 1926 course notes (in Koch 2010), and it led Dewey to a Jeekyll-and-Hyde recasting of utilitarianism: the Benthamite strain has persisted as a teleological orientation mired in “an untenable hedonism,” whereas Mill more securely received and renewed the torch of moral sentiment theory (e.g., Hume, Smith) by shifting the focus away from what we should *do* in pursuit of pleasures (e.g., Should I retaliate for what he did?) and toward cultivation of character (e.g., Should I *be* someone disposed to follow anger’s directives?). “Although Mill never quite acknowledges it in words, a surrender of the hedonistic element in utilitarianism” enabled him to develop, or mostly develop, a robust welfarist standard implicit in our approbations that favors “worthy dispositions from which issue noble enjoyments” (1932, LW 7:245).

For both Hume and Smith, sympathetic sentiments were the singular source of morality. Hume wrote in the *Treatise* (regarding moral judgment) that “Sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions” (1978, 618).²¹ Sympathy necessarily brings approval, while antipathy brings disapproval. That is, we approve because we sympathize, and whatever calls out this sentiment we call good. Still, it’s not *just* that we have antipathy toward Iago’s treachery; for both Hume and Smith, our moral sentiments are subject to correctives and regulation by rational considerations. Dewey observed of moral sentiment theory: “In individuals, the exercise of sympathy in accordance with reason—i.e., from the standpoint of an impartial spectator, in Smith’s conception—is the norm of virtuous action” (1935, LW 11:11).²² The job of reason, for Smith, is to inform and secure the correctives of an impartial standard of approbation so that it plays a formative role in critically reflective ends. *Reason* seeks “a *standard* upon the basis of

which approbation and disapprobation, esteem and disesteem, *should* be awarded” (1932, LW 7:255).²³

Published discussions of Dewey’s pluralism, including my own, have hitherto discussed utilitarianism of all stripes under the category of the good. But this is a half-truth, as becomes clear when carefully considering Smith’s approach to the problem of non-arbitrary standards that do not simply kowtow to customary ridicule and esteem. This problem is uppermost in sentiment theory, Dewey argues, “even when the writer seems to be discussing some other question” (1930, LW 5:286). Again, within sentiment theory what is good or dutiful is derived from what our sentiments approve and disapprove. We spontaneously sympathize with and favor benevolent actions that serve others, while ill will arouses antipathy. For Hume and Smith, ethical theory gives its seal of rational approval to the implicit standard in such judgments: “the Good must be defined in terms of impulses that further general welfare since they are the ones naturally approved” (Dewey, undated ms, 10). In this way, according to Dewey, Hume and Smith accounted for both aspiration (the good) and compliance (duty) in terms of what they took to be *the more fundamental fact* of approval and disapproval (virtue). Nineteenth century British utilitarianism inherited this legacy, as is especially evident in Mill’s focus on social sympathy, but in Dewey’s view it illogically tried to combine “Dr. Jekyll” with “Mr. Hyde”: (a) the pursuit of general welfare as the legitimate standard implicit in social approval (or reproach) of dispositions and practices with (b) the hedonistic notion that individual pleasure is the *summum bonum*.

In sum, Dewey holds that for monistic theories rooted in the third factor, a practice or disposition such as generosity, courage, honesty, industriousness, curiosity, or compassion may be judged good and dutiful because our moral sentiments approve (and ought legitimately to

approve) it as virtuous; a predisposition such as miserliness or retaliatory payback is bad and wrong because it is vicious (and rationally merits disapproval). To the degree that virtue theorists are monists—and Hume was a pluralist of sorts, at least with respect to fundamental conflicts among moral ends (see Gill 2011)—they infer that all morally relevant aspects of good or duty can be systematically organized under the concept of virtuous character traits, that is, traits we should approve because they are contributory to a rationally defensible conception of living and being well. Monistic virtue theorists hold that cultivating stable behavioral traits that are as virtuous as possible is what it ultimately *means* to be moral. Or, to update Dewey’s analysis, the virtue theorist must at least fictionalize (see Alfano 2013) reliably stable traits of character—the sort of traits that situational psychologists are now claiming we are incapable of exhibiting in the requisite trans-contextual way (Appiah 2008, ch. 2).

Conclusion: Beyond Moral Fundamentalism

Dewey concluded “Three Independent Factors in Morals” with a call for imagination to be more perceptive and responsive to the situations in which we must act. Moral problems are entanglements, so theories will be ill-suited to practical conditions whenever “zeal for a unitary view” oversimplifies and standardizes moral life (1930, LW 5:288). Striving for systematic coherence can be a philosophic virtue. The problem is that traditional monists oversimplify moral experience by abstracting some factor as central and uppermost, hypostatizing it, then treating this factor as the self-sufficient starting point for moral inquiry and the foundational bedrock for all moral justification. The popular habit of singling out one trump value among a wide range of values tracks the same pattern and perpetuates the same problems.²⁴

To summarize Dewey’s proposal, traditional concepts of good, duty, and virtue arise as distinct categories that express different experiential origins, and none operates as the bottom

line that can accommodate all that is of moral worth in the rest. Hence, no single factor of moral life is the central and basic source of all moral justification. When our moral deliberations (our reflective excursions into what is possible) begin with the troubled situation—with a practical predicament rather than a theoretical starting point (Pappas 2018)—we discover that diverse factors are already in tension with each other.²⁵ Our foremost practical need is for fine-tuned habits that enable us to continuously coordinate and comprehensively integrate these tensions. Theories and practices that place primitive experiential factors in interplay and open a communicative field between them can better inform our moral deliberations. Dewey sought to analyze leading categories through which ethical theories have concentrated attention on these vital factors, in order to put them in communication for the sake of more intelligent choices.

The primitive strands discussed herein are conceptually distinct and have independent sources, Dewey argued, but in actual experiences they are intertwined and “cut across one another.” Needs arise in which we must search for a way to reconcile them to each other by weaving them into a tapestry of action that more-or-less satisfactorily expresses the original tensions that set the problem at hand (Fesmire 2003, ch. 7).

In addition to such practical needs, there is a need for theoretical projects reconciling diverse factors. Such projects could change the terms of debate within and between ethical traditions. Dewey approached historical ethical theories, traditional codes of conduct, and legal history as data for inquiry, not as finalities to be accepted *or* rejected wholesale (1932, LW 7:179; cf. Koch 2010). Future research in ethics could follow him in rejecting zero-sum theorizing. This would open a door for research recasting ethical theories as compensatory emphases, in dynamic tension with other emphases.²⁶ Classic moral philosophies were forged in part as idealized tools to interpret and deal with social situations. Their enduring practical value

for personal and social inquiry can be liberated—and Dewey’s concern was to liberate, not to endorse or dismiss— by reforging traditional tools so that pretty good theoretical work stops getting in the way of better.

Dewey signaled a future for philosophical research in which we advance the growth of ethical traditions by rejecting both the quest for, and the tone of, finality in favor of experimentally developing robust communicative projects with distinctive dominant emphases, angles, and inferences. For example, Kant’s corpus as a whole was more empirically informed and humane than is revealed in standard readings (Louden 2002), and a modified, non-absolutistic, broadly Kantian pluralism in ethics, fronting rough conformity to duty, has been plausibly defended as more than an oxymoron (Hill 2000).²⁷ As Neiman observes, we do not have to flee to an otherworldly metric or fancied preestablished harmony to see that “sometimes morality and self-interest part company” (Neiman 2008, 20). The monistic Kantian inference that morality is thus *nothing but* autonomous willing in accord with universal law, or that conformity with duty is what morality essentially *is* (unlimited by the purpose at hand and wholly apart from whatever damage we imprudently though dutifully do), flows not from logic but from a hidden premise of theoretical correctness. That premise persists wherever anti-consequentialism is declared the victor in a theoretic prizefight, or wherever consequentialists overlook the practical bearings of attitudes and predispositions, of will. We enable this premise, or give it a “pass,” at the *cost* of finding practical footholds to secure dignity and respect.

Should we abandon the quest for theoretical correctness in ethics, and if so, what then? If being theoretically correct implies a completely enlightened ideal standpoint secured prior to confronting difficulties in particular contexts, a standpoint from which our general habits of moral thinking will be completely adequate to meeting every situation, then it is increasingly

essential that we should abandon the quest for it. If, on the other hand, one understands “correctness” in an operative sense, as in “The map to the pub was correct,” then it is a sensible ideal to strive for theories that help us to better navigate messy terrain (Fesmire 2015, 53-59).

The monistic quest for theoretical correctness can obstruct communication, constrict imagination, and underwrite bad choices. Getting beyond it would place ethical theorizing on a stronger footing, especially for dealing with those intractable and ubiquitous “wicked problems” in which problem formulation is itself among the key problems (because in these cases even the most sincere and informed participants formulate problems and interpret facts differently). When we see a moral or political problem only as given, not taken, the chief problem is presumed to be that others do not get the problem (see Norton 2015).²⁸ Or the main problem is presumed to be the general failure of the public, or of other nations, to adopt our brilliant solutions. Never mind the unnoticed parts of the mess occluded by our well-defended general principles, which are often assumed to be value-neutral and free of interest-driven rationalizations and inherited biases. If we think our diagnosis of the problem is incorrigible and has precisely captured all that is morally or politically relevant, then we will *predefine* what is relevant, and we will covertly prejudge alternative formulations.

What happens, then, to opportunities for learning our way together across a spectrum of values? In public disputes, from the local to the international, vying camps enlist enthusiasm through an evaluative conquest, restricting sympathies to a singular channel. They typically demand this to the logical exclusion of democratic attempts to secure shared footholds to achieve social goals. In this way, moral fundamentalism, logically propped up by monism’s assumption of theoretical correctness, offers a deep channel for our partialities and dearest inclinations, but it risks antagonism toward excluded standpoints, closure to being surprised by the complexity of

many situations and systems, neglect of the context in which decisions are made, and a related general indifference to public processes and integrative values. This is a recipe for failed communication and bad decisions.

Moral fundamentalist habits, and the monistic one-way assumption that exercises and reinforces them, are obstacles to cultivating habits of moral and political inquiry that are better fitted to contemporary predicaments. We cannot create static utopias, but we would be better off if we would experiment with how far we can go in creating a shared cultural context for inquiry that checks both our inveterate moral fundamentalism and the reactionary nihilism that is fundamentalism's mirror image. An actual result of opposing "their" moral fundamentalism with our own is to perpetuate the root problem. To ameliorate the morasses we face, we need a more genuinely radical approach: we need confidence and resistance without puritanical zealotry, courage in mediating troubled situations without expectation of absolute certainty, frank speech without fatalistic resignation or paralyzing guilt, and moral clarity without incorrigibility and oversimplification.²⁹

Works Cited

Citations of John Dewey's works are to the thirty-seven-volume critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. In-text citations give the original publication date and series abbreviation, followed by volume number and page number. For example: (1934, LW 10:12) is page 12 of *Art as Experience*, which is published as volume 10 of *The Later Works*.

Series abbreviations for *The Collected Works*:

EW *The Early Works* (1882–98)

MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924)

LW *The Later Works* (1925–53)

Citations of Dewey’s correspondence are to *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-2007*, published by the InteLex Corporation under the editorship of Larry Hickman. Citations give the date, reference number for the letter, and author followed by recipient. For example: 1973.02.13 (22053): Herbert W. Schneider to H. S. Thayer.

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Notes

¹ For example, Paul Thompson observes of the food movement that "Advocates of both biotechnology *and* organic systems too often compare the most advanced and optimistic interpretation of their favored approach to the least successful applications of the alternative" (2015, 252). The result has been dichotomized either/or thinking, which comes attended by tendencies to oversimplification, ignoring context, and quests for purity (cf. Boisvert and Heldke 2016).

² Monistic ethical theorists join pluralists in rejecting the arrogance that characterizes popular moral fundamentalist habits. Nevertheless, moral fundamentalism cannot logically stand without its monistic premise. I argue that we are better off without this premise. It is both empirically unwarranted and morally troubling, and there is little to be said in favor of it that cannot be accommodated by pragmatic pluralism.

³ It would be fruitful, thought beyond the scope of this chapter, to compare and contrast Dewey's form of pluralism with other contemporaneous styles, such as W.D. Ross's intuitionist pluralism in *The Right and The Good* (1930).

⁴ Haidt (2016) hypothesizes five moral foundations that operate as underlying universal intuitions: Care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation. Dewey cautioned against innatist/universal instinct theories, and Haidt's theory could be strengthened by restatement in terms other than innate and universal modular foundations. For development of this line of criticism, see Johnson 2014.

⁵ Rawls proposed a division of labor between ideal and nonideal theories. The former's job is to determine "what a perfectly just society would be like" (1971, 8-9), whereas nonideal theories are tasked with discerning principles to deal with nonideal conditions in which people do not comply with the principles of justice, as with war or racial oppression, or in which conditions make perfect justice unrealizable. We need to start by constructing an ideal theory, Rawls

thought, if we are to construct a moral compass for dealing with nonideal conditions. Anderson, Mills, Appiah, Pappas, and others are arguing that he was mistaken.

⁶ See Sullivan 2018 and Glaude 2007 to consider whether Dewey historically fared any better.

⁷ The idea that we should bring experimental method to bear on value inquiry traces most notably back to Hume's *Treatise*, the full title of which was: *A Treatise of Human Nature: being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method into Moral Subjects*.

⁸ Cf. Kitcher 2014 as well as Mill's (1986) *On Liberty* on "experiments of living" (65).

⁹ This is perhaps the most distinctively "pragmatist" feature of Dewey's ethical theory. Cf. Alexander 2013.

¹⁰ Originally published as "Trois facteurs indépendants en matière de morale," trans. Charles Cestre, in *Bulletin de la SFP* 30 (October-December 1930): 118-127.

¹¹ A copy of the typescript was available to Abraham Edel and Elizabeth Flowers, who introduced the 1985 critical edition of the 1932 *Ethics*. This typescript was subsequently misplaced until 2016, when it was retrieved in a careful search by staff at Morris Library, Special Collections, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

¹² I am indebted to Richard Bernstein for this insight (personal communication).

¹³ Rawls (1993) *hoped* to do this with his politics of "overlapping consensus" (1993), regardless of how one appraises his conception of "public reason" as a viable means to this end.

¹⁴ In his theory of moral judgment and knowledge (1932, LW 7, ch. 14), beyond my scope in this chapter, Dewey argued that the "comprehensive object" of moral choice is the option one foresees *ex ante* as most reliably expressing the situation's conflicting factors and recovering its dynamic equilibrium. Importantly, in Dewey's experimental view we must act and also see. *Revision*, review *ex post* is equally essential.

¹⁵ In these lectures, Dewey struggled with whether right and duty are fundamentally different concepts. For example, he explored Sidgwick's notion in *Methods of Ethics* that the right is the "Rational Good," which Sidgwick contrasted with a merely *natural* good (cf. Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014).

¹⁶ Dewey's typos silently corrected throughout.

¹⁷ Some commentators misrepresent Dewey's *mature* ethics as an ethics of self-realization. Not only would this be a monistic reduction, but he argues in the 1932 *Ethics* in a Kantian vein that self-realization as an ideal may deaden people to the experiences of others so that we value them like pleasures.

¹⁸ Singer's *The Most Good You Can Do* (2015) is among the most engaging and teachable books available in contemporary practical ethics.

¹⁹ Along these lines, yet outside my scope in this chapter, Edel (2001) argues that Dewey respects the independence of each factor while making the content of each "responsible to the idea of the good" (11).

²⁰ For Dewey the general social demand to do our fair share is justified in practice, not by compliance with the first principles of idealized contractors.

²¹ In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith (1790) followed Hume in tracing the source of morals to the principle of sympathy: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation" (I.I.2).

²² Often neglected by scholars drawn to Smith's (1790) influential treatment of sympathetic imagination, Smith discusses the "impartial spectator" in terms of prescriptions and approvals of the authoritative "judge within the breast" (VI.iii.17-19). He writes: "When we first come into

the world, from the natural desire to please, we accustom ourselves to every person we converse with [Yet] the fairest and most equitable conduct must frequently obstruct the interests or thwart the inclinations of particular persons, who will seldom . . . see that this conduct . . . is perfectly suitable to our situation. In order to defend ourselves from such partial judgments, we . . . conceive ourselves as acting in the presence of . . . an impartial spectator who considers our conduct with the same indifference with which we regard that of other people” (Smith 1790, III.ii.36; cf. Frierson 2006, 148-9).

²³ As deontologists fully appreciate, one’s own hankerings may run counter to the “comprehensive object” of moral choice. But akin to Foot, and taking a cue from Hume and Smith, Dewey was skeptical of the Kantian contention that our moral mettle is truly revealed only when we are motivated to pursue the comprehensive object by the force of reason independent of desire (Foot 1978, 161; cf. Trianosky 1990). Deweyan moral artistry (Fesmire 2003) does not rely on dispassionate pure reason (Kant), comparison to a world of agents fully compliant with the demands of justice (Rawls), detached moral bookishness (utilitarianism), or separation from the intimacy of our own yearnings (all of the above). Even in situations in which the comprehensive object has its origins in social demands, it is a matter of moral significance for Dewey that it be *desired* as (a hypothetical) good, not just coolly and disinterestedly assented to as dutiful.

²⁴ For example, in environmental policymaking economic criteria are typically presumed to have supremacy over other key values (aesthetic, spiritual, recreational, ecological, etc.). See Norton (2005, 2015).

²⁵ He states this most clearly in the unpublished typescript: “The three concepts in question represent forces that have different roots, not a common and single one. Because these forces pull different ways there is a genuine conflict—and a problematic quality pervades the whole situation” (Dewey, undated ms, 3).

²⁶ For example, with notable exceptions such as McKenna and Light’s *Animal Pragmatism* (2004) and the work of Paul Thompson (e.g., 2010, 2015), scholars working in the American pragmatist grain have taken a back seat to utilitarian and Kantian philosophers in responding to the far-reaching impact of human practices on other species and rising concern about animal use and treatment. Due to this neglect, the debate has been more anemic than it might have been. Abandoning the quest for a fully enlightened ideal standpoint may help us to secure a more comprehensive Rawlsian reflective equilibrium in animal ethics and in other areas of practical ethics.

²⁷ To my knowledge Kantian pluralism has yet to be substantively defended in the “strong” sense of pluralism advocated herein. [As an aside to readers of this pre-proof version: Nor am I sanguine that such a defense is imminent. It is a logical prospect, albeit a psychological stretch. Anti-naturalistic and absolutistic habits are deeply entrenched. -sf]

²⁸ It is a truism that people happily weigh in on matters concerning which they are incompetent, but no problem is so bad that we cannot make it worse through our way of dealing with it.

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