

**Out of Plumb, Out of Key, and Out of Whack
Social Ethics and Democracy for the New Normal**

Cultural Lag

John Dewey proposed soon after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that citizens of techno-industrial nations suffer from “cultural lag” (LW 15, 199-200; cf. LW 4, 203-228).¹ He had in mind a sort of moral jet lag, a condition in which most of the basic alternatives we have on hand to think and talk about moral and political life, from customary moralizing to sophisticated theorizing, were developed, canned, and pickled on a shelf so long ago that they now lag far behind the multi-faceted problems that our values must speak to.

These preserved values chaff at empirical investigation, yet they are ironically asked to deal with techno-industrial material developments and systems—including our infrastructure for rapidly transporting people and viruses—that were built with the help of a scientific empirical methodology that has moved us many “time zones” beyond the conditions in which our preserved values and beliefs initially developed. Our moral imaginations are nourished in this conflicted social matrix, in which we reach for prescientific values and beliefs that are ill-suited to twenty-first century entanglements. It is as though our thoughts and attitudes were formed in a distant time zone, yet we refuse to reset our watches or to rise with the antipodal sun, bent on maintaining, in poet Billy Collins’s words, our “proper slice of longitude.”² The result is a curiously intractable sort of moral jet lag.

The failure of many countries, most visibly the U.S., to effectively navigate climate change exemplifies this cultural lag. In *Reason in a Dark Time*, Jamieson explores an implication of cultural lag for climate change.³ At least in the Anglophone world, the commonsense prototype of a harmful activity—one for which we ought to feel and be held responsible—is one that has

¹ 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 series abbreviation followed by volume number, and then the page number. For example: (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* (1925–1953).

² Billy Collins, *The Trouble With Poetry and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 2005).

³ Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—and What it Means for Our Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 5.

negative consequences that are immediate, localized, intentional, and directed toward individuals. But this conception of responsibility for harm is eerily out of step with the actual conditions of contemporary lives in complex systems. For example, the greatest harm caused by local greenhouse gas emissions is long-term, widely distributed, unintentional, and not directed toward individuals. Partly on this basis, Jamieson concludes that climate change presents challenges that “go beyond the resources of commonsense morality.”⁴ In this context, our cultural lag is characterized by inherited moral and political concepts and theoretical frameworks that are too narrow, homogeneous, and individualistic to adequately meet global problems of techno-industrial societies, exemplified by a lack of fit with anthropogenic climate disruption.

Damaging our atmospheric commons is analogous in several respects to spreading a novel virus. Alongside parallels such as political polarization, incompetent leadership, acquisitiveness, manufactured doubt, and collective narcissism, analogues between climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic shed some light on why many have disastrously downplayed both, dismissed them as a hoax, or at least felt little personal responsibility for either. Of course there are disanalogies: unlike most greenhouse gas emissions, it is technically possible to trace the spread of SARS-CoV-2 between individuals, and unlike the fossil fuel-based business model, viral contagions are not as obviously propped up by powerful vested interests. Nevertheless, like many complex problems of twenty-first century life, fueling a pandemic is generally not intentional or directed toward individuals, and it has downstream and far-flung effects that are not immediately apparent. The jet-lagged idea that moral responsibility does not extend to these systemic harms deadens moral and political perception, with lethal effects. Such stilted perception is a sure route to miserable behavior because foresight and critical appraisal are abandoned to the inertia of mechanical habits unsuited to the intricacies of on-the-ground conditions.

Pandemics are nothing new, but our globalized commercial and transportation infrastructure has dramatically increased the rate and scope of pandemics, even as modern epidemiological methods and experimental techniques are placing in our hands some of the arts by which we can intelligently intervene in the spread of contagions. Until we can muster more widely shared trust in pooled social intelligence, guided by the disclosures of patient and collaborative scientific inquiry, behaviors will remain tragically out of sync with contemporary conditions. Absent such organized experimental communication, avoidable deaths will continue.

⁴ Ibid., 6.

Our collective responses to the new normal of global disruptions are, in James's words in *Pragmatism*, "out of plumb and out of key and out of 'whack'."⁵ The American philosophical tradition that includes James and Dewey has long sought to compensate for the excesses of America's hyper-individualism and its anti-naturalistic distrust of experimental intelligence. In this brief analysis of our morally jet lagged response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we draw heavily on two highly articulated intellectual resources for America's moral, political, and educational recovery: Jane Addams's social ethics and Dewey's deeply democratic theory of moral and political deliberation.

Freedom-loving Americans and the Pandemic

The aversion of many to social distancing protocols is due in large part to anti-scientific dismissiveness, hyper-politicization, self-absorption, and recklessness on the part of political representatives. This is infuriating but perhaps not philosophically very interesting. What is more philosophically interesting arises from the general fact that people earnestly impute meanings to social and political events using ideas that others can barely conceive without caricature, and they use these ideas—ideas that are very often out of "whack" with on-the-ground conditions—to rationalize, justify, and sanctify their conduct. What makes most sense to people is typically due to others with whom they share identities and life experiences, and from whom they have inherited their basic intellectual scaffolding. Their ideational scaffoldings operate as neural paths of least resistance. With their rationalizing ideas in place, people avoid facing realities that might upend their pretenses, and they deny whatever they *need* to deny in order to stay their course. This is how people become ideally positioned to be, in Dewey's words, "profoundly moral even in their immoralities" (MW 10, 217). To the degree that we disclose, criticize, evaluate (in light of actual conditions), and transform such habituated beliefs, values, and outlooks, we can own them imaginatively in the service of nonreactive democratic inquiry that sympathetically faces realities. In turn, insofar as habits own us mechanically, democracy is a farce because deliberate choice in that case is indistinguishable from mere impulsion.

These general philosophical and psychological observations are relevant to a deeper understanding of the large minority of morally jet lagged Americans who are averse to physical distancing, mask protocols, vaccination mandates, and testing requirements as infringements upon

⁵ William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Longman Green and Company, 1907), 37.

freedom. A group that habitually conceives politics primarily in terms of liberty, and (when convenient) conceives liberty and rights only negatively as *freedom from* governmental interference (not positively as *freedom to* effectively achieve shared goals) will be predisposed to balk at even lukewarm mandates and lackadaisically applied regulations.

Instead of simply dismissing anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers as ignorant outliers, we must learn at least three lessons from the tragedies that have ensued from this hyper-individualistic hangover:

1. A comprehensive and conscientious pandemic ethics must grapple multidimensionally with competing intractable factors. In addition to their anemic notion of liberty, critics of mask requirements, vaccine mandates, and physical distancing as “violating my freedom” are missing other relevant ethical and political concepts and values. Perhaps most obvious is the virtue of social responsibility. Additionally, if we are going to deal responsibly with pressing issues of risk and vulnerability, then we have to grapple with *equality* of access to health care, of exposure, etc. For example, triage decisions in a pandemic are often “tragic, terrible, and haunting” for caregivers, and these are based on contestable values. When a narrowly utilitarian value of saving lives in the most efficient way possible is employed, then equity may be sacrificed, leading to greater disparities in the healthcare system and a disproportionate number of deaths.⁶ We must also grapple with issues of fairness (including issues relating to resource scarcity—such as ventilators, testing, vaccines, high quality masks, and antiviral drugs), duty/obligation (e.g., do health care workers have a duty to treat?), and rights—beyond negative rights not to be interfered with—such as rights of health care workers and industries co-opted toward the public cause.

2. There are far more interesting and positive things to be said about freedom. Are “freedom loving American” anti-maskers safeguarding and defending “the freedom that our forefathers fought for,” a popular outlook that journalists encounter at every turn? We recently visited the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford,

⁶ Ari Ne’eman, “I Will Not Apologize for My Needs,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/opinion/coronavirus-ventilators-triage-disability.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

Virginia. Listening to radio interviews with anti-maskers on the drive home, we were dismayed by the juxtaposition of remembered sacrifices with such a hollow, negative, and reactionary cry of freedom. Taken together with other tendencies with which this view of freedom bears a familial resemblance, and acknowledging the risk here of stereotyping, does it champion freedom to (1) treat thought, inquiry, and science as an effete waste of time, (2) stoke rage and resentment, (3) react to non-whites as the scapegoat causes of life's evils, (3) bend religion toward propping up superficial doctrines, (4) shoot down “do gooder” regulations designed to foster social and environmental welfare, (5) set our national aspirations in accord with our worship of what James called “the bitch goddess, success” (LW 2, 161), and then (7) remove educational opportunities for examining all-of-the-above by reducing education to nothing but another unstable, market-funded service sector of the industrial economy? If these tendencies actually stifle freedom as experienced by individuals, then raggedly individualistic cries for liberty signal the antithesis of freedom rather than its apotheosis. In stark opposition, like all advocates for a liberal cultural education in an uphill struggle against anti-intellectual rancor, Dewey dedicated his life to *liberating* moral and intellectual individuality.

3. Massive suffering could be prevented if a positive *social ethics*, in Addams’s terms, predominated over these lagging myopic conceptions that stem from what Dewey called our “ragged individualism” (LW 5, 45). Admittedly, almost any concerted, early, and unwavering collective action bolstered by a coherent moral and sociopolitical outlook could have saved lives, regardless of whether this outlook was excessively individualistic. In the next section we argue that a social ethics, exemplified by Addams and Dewey, is most adequate to the situation at hand.

Social Ethics for Social Goals

Young people are saying to themselves: “Wait a minute. I’m young, I’m healthy. The chances of my getting seriously ill are very low. And in fact, it is about a 20 to 40 percent likelihood that I won’t have any symptoms at all. So why should I bother?” What they’re missing is something fundamental: By getting infected themselves — even if they never get a symptom — they are part of the propagation of a pandemic. They are *fueling* the

pandemic. We have to keep hammering that home, because, as much as they do that, they're completely relinquishing their societal responsibility.⁷

If grappling with anthropogenic drivers of rapid global disruption such as global pandemics, climate change, antibiotic resistance, and invasive species is the new normal, it is at least continuous with the older normal, such as the global wars, pandemics, and economic crises that marked Dewey's decades. In January 1919, toward the beginning of the 1918-1920 H1N1 flu pandemic that infected about a third of the world's population and killed over 50 million people, Dewey had to bail his son out of a San Francisco jail on the eve of their departure for Japan and China. Sabino had allegedly been caught without a mask during the pandemic (1919.01.21 (03858): Alice Chipman Dewey to Evelyn, Jane, & Lucy Dewey).⁸ Some of the Dewey children caught the flu; all luckily recovered. A couple of months earlier, on November 11, 1918, the Armistice was announced ending the Great War. Dewey would soon be angered and disillusioned by the Treaty of Versailles which "won the war but lost the peace," but for the moment the Deweys breathed a sigh of relief, in part because this meant Sabino would not be drafted. The day before the Armistice, their daughter Jane wrote to her sister Lucy from San Francisco that "We still go around masked and all meetings are verboten so there is nothing doing and I may as well quit" (1918.11.10? (02269): Jane Dewey to Lucy Dewey).

Most of these are familiar concerns, so it is unsurprising that there is nothing radically new in advocating for a shift away from our culturally lagging moral narrowness toward a more cooperative and responsive interdependence better suited to systemic problems. Over a century ago, Dewey saw that the then-rising consumer economy of enclosure and commodification reinforced lives in which our imaginative energies are spent on thin and superficial personal dramas rather than being invested in shared goods that have breadth and depth. Commercial interests have "interwoven our destinies" (MW 10, 193), he observed, and these interests have

⁷ Anthony Fauci, Opinion, *New York Times*, July 21, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/opinion/anthony-faucicoronavirus.html?action=click&algo=top_conversion&block=trending_recirc&fallback=false&imp_id=454142847&impression_id=962711446&index=7&pgtype=Article®ion=footer&req_id=45941315&surface=most-popular.

⁸ 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.

been shaped and directed by a toxically individualistic outlook that dangerously narrows our sympathies and lags behind contemporary circumstances.

Dewey concurred with neo-Confucians that individual and society emerge from each other; neither is derivative of the other. But he consistently placed more emphasis than neo-Confucians on the realization of individual capacities. Dewey's "emergent individualism" (LW 5, 89) is reflected in his letters and essays from China and Japan that celebrated Japanese aesthetics while critiquing the feudal communitarianism of that era, which subordinated individuals to the emperor as the symbol of communal life (in MW 12). Dewey was sharply critical of extremes when "concrete individualities" are swallowed (MW 9, 65), such as when hospital workers in Xi'an reportedly enforced China's zero-Covid policy during a 2021-2022 lockdown by refusing "to admit a man suffering from chest pains because he lived in a medium-risk district. He died of a heart attack."⁹

The practical stupidity of hyper-individualism has grown exponentially over the past century, not least because Earth's population has increased from 1.8 billion to 7.8 billion while annual greenhouse gas emissions have increased tenfold and the average human lifespan has doubled.¹⁰ But the failure to democratically educate and engage "cooperative individualities" (LW 5, 75) has long toppled our successes. It was as true in 1922 as it is in 2022 that we need to move toward a social ethics, and we need to shift toward democratic deliberation in politics and policy. To negotiate the increasingly tangled systems in which our relationships inhere, we must bring meaning and a renewed sense of responsibility to what is otherwise no more than the "flickering inconsequential acts of separate selves" (MW 14, 227). When we respond by scaffolding educational curricula onto individualistic consumerism and employer specifications, we perpetuate the problem.

Dewey came to these realizations in Chicago in the 1890s through his friendship with Jane Addams. A philosopher, social worker, international peace advocate (winner of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize), and community organizer, Addams cofounded Hull House on the West Side of Chicago as a settlement house for European immigrant women in 1889, and Dewey joined its

⁹ Li Yuan, "The Army of Millions Who Enforce China's Zero-Covid Policy, at All Costs," January 12, 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/business/china-zero-covid-policy-xian.html>; accessed January 12, 2022.

¹⁰ Steven Johnson, "How Humanity Gave Itself an Extra Life." *The New York Times*, April 21, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/27/magazine/global-life-span.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>; accessed January 23, 2022.

Board of Trustees in 1894. Addams and Hull House underscored for Dewey the ever-growing happiness to be “found simply in this broadening of intellectual curiosity and sympathy in all the concerns of life” (LW 5, 422). Like Addams, he came to see democracy not just as a way of formally arranging political and legal machinery through elected representatives—as a “substitute for war,” Rep. Richard Gephardt once remarked—but as a “personal way of life” (LW 14, 288) that breaks down exclusionary social barriers and opens up diverse points of contact. Taken as “conjoint communicated experience (MW 9, 93)¹¹, democracy as a way of life reinterprets, reevaluates, and transforms its own formal machinery. This is why, for Addams and Dewey, it was not enough merely to passively affirm, with Kant, that all humans should be equally respected for their innate dignity. They urged that we must actively establish conditions—through communicative, caring engagement—in which capacities are fulfilled instead of being arrested by denied opportunities and socially imposed limits.

James Baldwin wrote, “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction.”¹² Crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the international movement for black lives, endless cycles of terror and retribution, gun violence, persistent poverty, and the intensifying effects of anthropogenic climate change are catalyzing public recognition that we are indeed inviting our own destruction by continued failure to seek systemic explanations and cooperative ways forward. These developments have contributed to wider recognition that public health, racial justice, national security, personal security, sustainability, and the blessings of liberty are superordinate *social goals*—that is, goals we can only achieve together—that must be worked for across intergroup conflicts.¹³

It is too early to prophecy, but spots of enlightenment may have spread because of recent shocks. Alas, we cannot safely assume that subsequent structural changes will themselves be of an enlightened sort. For example, in some countries such as Hungary we see an autocratic rather than a democratic turn in Covid-19 responses,¹⁴ while in the U.S. a navel gazing, reckless, and racist dog-whistling politics continues to bristle at cooperation. But there are some signs of wider

¹¹ Parysa Clare Mostajir, “‘Conjoint Communicated Experience’: Art as an Instrument of Democracy.” *The Pluralist* 17, no. 1 (2022).

¹² James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

¹³ Muzafer Sherif et. al., *The Robbers Cave Experiment: Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

¹⁴ Lukasz Gruszczynski, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and International Trade: Temporary Turbulence or Paradigm Shift?,” *European Journal of Risk Regulation* 11, no. 2 (2020): 337–342.

readiness to give coherent and positive meaning to the relationships that twine us up with each other and with natural systems.

Of course, a crisis at the scale of a global pandemic offers endless tragic examples of how prior inequality is exacerbated by public health emergencies. For example, in the first waves of the pandemic, Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths occurred at substantially higher levels among people of color,¹⁵ and minoritized workers suffered greater economic harm due to the lockdown measures aimed at controlling virus transmission in the U.S.¹⁶

Another group that has been impacted disproportionately by the pandemic, both directly by Covid-19 and indirectly by the subsequent lockdown, is people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. According to The Hastings Center, an ableist perspective in medicine has contributed to a context in which health care disparities and mistaken views about quality of life have led to undertreatment, and even the denial of critical care for patients with Covid-19.¹⁷ In many cases, scarce resources and overwhelmed health care systems led to triage decisions that were biased in favor of abled people, resulting in the further marginalization and death of people with disabilities.¹⁸ Some U.S. states developed triage plans to help doctors make decisions regarding limited resources, sometimes factoring in cognitive abilities among their criteria for preferment.¹⁹ In sum, people with disabilities may be deprioritized for treatment even as they are more at risk of becoming infected and experiencing complications.

People with disabilities are also more likely to be harmed by politics and policies aimed at mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. Not only are people who need the assistance of others with daily living in more danger of contracting the virus, but they are less able to access the aid of

¹⁵ CDC, “Covid-19 Hospitalization and Death by Race/Ethnicity,” accessed November 24, 2020, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html.

¹⁶ NPR, “Minority Workers See Highest Levels of Unemployment From Covid-19 Crisis,” accessed November 24, 2020, www.npr.org/2020/06/05/870227952/minority-workers-see-highest-levels-of-unemployment-from-covid-19-crisis.

¹⁷ Katie Savin and Laura Guidry-Grimes, “Confronting Disability Discrimination During the Pandemic,” accessed November 24, 2020, www.thehastingscenter.org/confronting-disability-discrimination-during-the-pandemic/.

¹⁸ Abigail Beall, “The Heart Wrenching Choice of Who Lives and Dies,” accessed November 24, 2020, www.bbc.com/future/article/20200428-coronavirus-how-doctors-choose-who-lives-and-dies.

¹⁹ Mike Baker, “Whose Life is Worth Saving? In Washington State, People With Disabilities Are Afraid They Won’t Make the Cut,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/coronavirus-washington-triage-disabled-handicapped.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>; Mike Baker and Sheri Fink, “At the Top of the Covid-19 Curve, How Do Hospitals Decide Who Gets Treatment?,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/us/coronavirus-covid-triage-rationing-ventilators.html>.

others under lockdown conditions. Workers with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the epidemic's economic fallout,²⁰ and the increased reliance on technology while more employees are working remotely has made employment and access to services increasingly difficult for people with disabilities. This is due in part to disparity in access to the internet and computers, along with difficulty in some cases managing the proliferation of complicated technologies and applications.²¹

In order to maintain democratic policies that permeate communities and countries, genuinely valuing all lives, we need the help of a social ethics for a broader moral community. To the frustration of earnest utilitarian and Kantian ethicists seeking to justify crisp principle-driven prescriptions about how we should act and assess (which they equate with “doing ethics”), adaptive pragmatists like Dewey and Addams take the good, right, and virtuous to be determined experimentally, contextually, and democratically, rather than primarily by conformity with antecedently determined law or by ciphering aggregate well-being.

For Addams, a proto-ethicist of care, “social” ethics emerges from family and community relations and culminates in democratic community. Attacking individualism on empirical grounds, Addams believed that a moral theory true to psychology must be a “social” ethics. Furthermore, an ethics based on the recognition of the social nature of the self will make for better, more empathetic, moral and political decisions. M. Regina Leffers writes that for Addams, “it would not make sense to talk about having an ethical position independent of relationship to self, other, or community. At this within-relationship-matrix of her position we find a dynamic principle of respect for self and others.”²²

Addams discussed this method of social interaction via the idea that social ethics has evolved as a natural mode of human interaction. It is thus unencumbered by an individualistic self-interest that she believed was forced into existence by the unfettered capitalism and industry of the late 1800s. A precursor to the mothering metaphor of the ethics of care, Addams noted that

²⁰ Allison Norlian, “Workers With Disabilities Disproportionately Impacted by Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Forbes*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/allisonnorlian/2020/06/22/workers-with-disabilities-disproportionately-impacted-by-covid-19-pandemic/?sh=2ec52f91ad15>.

²¹ AAPD, “Technology,” accessed November 24, 2020, www.aapd.com/advocacy/technology/.

²² Regina M. Leffers, “Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey Inform the Ethic of Care,” *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (1993): 73.

relationships within families serve as the foundation for ethical relationships that grow in expanding circles to include neighbors and community. She also observed during her years at Hull House in Chicago that a social ethics is routinely practiced by those least influenced by the warping influence of big business, power, and money:

A very little familiarity with the poor districts of any city is sufficient to show how primitive and genuine are the neighborly relations. There is the greatest willingness to lend or borrow anything, and all the residents of the given tenement know the most intimate affairs of all the others. The fact that the economic condition of all alike is on a most precarious level makes the ready outflow of sympathy and material assistance the most natural thing in the world.²³

Among Chicago's immigrant populations, Addams observed people living together under common conditions who normally were as naturally sympathetic toward each other as a parent would be to a child. She saw the model of the family expanded in these neighborly relations to encompass all social levels, infusing individuals with a sense of belonging and care outside of their immediate connections. Drawing from these experiences, she theorized that as we grow out of families into diverse neighborhoods and wider communities, the family claim is broadened to include the social claim (or the state or democratic claim). This is swimming *with* the current of our social nature and psychology, not against it.

In Addams' world of rapid population growth and increasingly associated living, she came to see social ethics both as a natural consummation of human interaction and as an imperative mode of conduct for the survival and flourishing of individuals, families, and states. To live in close association and diverse communities, to live socially, means to learn to act together for shared ends and values. In her 1902 book *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams asserted that only those oblivious to actual circumstances fill themselves with pride in their personal morality (as in "I'm not a racist") in the face of the acute need for a social morality in which we join forces for practical reform of institutional structures.²⁴ In Dewey's words in *Human Nature and Conduct*, "what sort of self is in the making" must be identified with the question "what kind of world is in the making" (MW 14, 150).

²³ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

Dewey learned this vital lesson from Addams and Hull House, and it informed his approach to ethical and sociopolitical theories. Mainstream ethical and sociopolitical theorists, then and now, assert *a priori* that their job is to show which antecedently defended, (relatively) static principles should govern choice. They emphasize getting the theory all worked out and then impersonally deciding whose values measure up to its supreme metric. Start with getting the theory right, and the rest follows! For both Addams and Dewey, in contrast, ethical and sociopolitical theorizing should not be understood 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” (LW 13, 303).

The disanalogy between moral and logical or mathematical problems spotlights what is perhaps the most distinctively “pragmatist” feature of Dewey’s ethical outlook: his insistence that our choices and deeds are essential players in the moral situation. In contrast with British empiricism’s notion of a receptive mind behind a veil of ideas, Dewey argued that our encounters with the world are creative. Consequently, what is good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious cannot be completely ascertained prior to acting and reviewing.

Social ethics requires that we gauge the health of our democracy by attending to the wellbeing of all our populations, especially those most marginalized and minoritized. Dewey urged that “only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual” (LW 10, 348). Accordingly, envision a community or country whose leaders called for an Addamsian response to the pandemic: rather than hyper-politicization, there would be a strong community response aimed at protecting the most vulnerable among us by consulting our best experimental research and learning our way toward agreed-upon social goals. Imagine that this response occurred within a more resilient and mature nation that valued equity in healthcare and economic security above ragged individualism. Then evaluate the actual American response in light of what was possible.

Public Deliberation, Wicked Problems, and The Democratic Role of Experts

Soon after his 90th birthday, Dewey was feted at his alma mater, the University of Vermont. Too tired to rise and speak to the crowd in Burlington, he simply said: “I’m thankful for the privilege of living on this good planet, Earth. But living on this Earth has become the supreme challenge to

mankind's intelligence” (1975.05.25? [22283]: Herbert W. Schneider to American Humanist Association).

From the foreshortened perspective of living memory, we are indeed in unprecedented times with the Covid-19 pandemic, heaped on top of preexisting conflicts, disparities, divisions, and drift. Those of us who work in universities are struggling to help students respond reflectively and resiliently to the needs of our time. We try to help them face the shared problems that most concern us, chart a course to clarify and interpret what is going on from a wide social perspective, and critically inquire into these problems with fresh hypotheses. In these ways, we hope, with Dewey, they will be enabled to *take part* in events “instead of being overwhelmed by them” (MW 13, 280).

In the face of circumstances that overwhelm them, people tend to behave much like pinballs ricocheting around a machine. When we are reactively tossed around, we do not inquire and communicate, so we are unable to take part in democratically redirecting the course of emerging events (about which more below), unless democracy is reduced to the formal mechanics of “one person one vote,” with duties exhausted at the polling booth. When we are overwhelmed, we get caught up in a reactive cascade that leads us to oversimplify situations, neglect context, take refuge in dogmatic absolutes, ignore possibilities for finding common ground, assume privileged access to the right way to proceed, and shut off inquiry. In this way, we make the worst of our native impulses toward social bonding and antagonism, and we make it impossible to debate and achieve controverted social goals.

Detached calculations of optimal welfare by policy analysts (e.g., 1922, MW 14, 139-145) may aid public deliberation, but they should not simply be hung on a rack for the public to take down and wear without thought. Nor should expert analyses merely be translated into directives to those wielding executive power.

At the same time, Dewey rejected the populist alternative that we make choices based on how forcefully one group can drive home their point or sell it in the marketplace of ideas (cf. MW 8:443-445). He rejected the false dilemma—stemming from a lingering dualism going back at least to Plato—between aristocratic command-and-control decisions by society’s enlightened few, on the one hand, and extreme populist mob rule, on the other hand. This purported dilemma is yet another iteration of our cultural lag. Against the aristocratic view, Dewey urged that back-and-forth communication across differences is necessary for effective decisions that raise the general

level of public intelligence. Meanwhile, he recognized the problem of populist clans of self-seeking individuals who are cut loose from communication with experts. Public processes fail to meet problems when the day is carried by individuals or groups who pretend to diagnostic expertise that they in fact do not have. A free democratic community cannot be maintained by populist masses, as these trend toward totalitarianism.

Democratic communication about public problems, regardless of the formal political institutions such communication may plan and prescribe, maximizes the chance that we might find paths that respect legitimate interests, evaluations, and evolving identities of different individuals, institutions, and groups. When “the decider” ignores stakeholders, this raises suspicions about aims, interests, and background assumptions. An autocratic approach also raises issues of transparency and accountability, and it predictably leads, as Dewey observed in *The Public and Its Problems*, to myopic, unworkable policies (LW 2, 235–372). When a decision-making process is more than nominally democratic, it strategically seeks out frictions and divergent voices, and it gains legitimacy and direction by evaluating them for their instrumental bearings, criticizing them, and incorporating them.

In opposition to elite rule by technocratic experts, Dewey consistently warned against *overreliance* on top-down, expert-driven decisions, and *where practicable* he advocated participatory processes that enlist communities in social learning and knowing, fostering a public spirit of consultation to uncover troubles and to organize the expertise to deal with them. “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches,” Dewey wrote in *The Public and Its Problems*, “even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (LW 2, 364).

Like the person wearing the shoe, stakeholders and their proxies are in a better position than detached experts to speak for themselves about how the difficulty pinches.²⁵ Those who directly experience the pinch of the problem legitimately demand inquiry and a response, and they are contributors to embodied social knowledge. However, as discussed, problematic situations do not come prepackaged with one party’s preferred explanations, their specific “reading” of the problem, or their proposed solutions. Moreover, all explanatory schemes are susceptible to the “availability heuristic,” the well-studied psychological tendency to fall back on readily remembered mental shortcuts. Add this to the long list of reasons that a democratic public cannot

²⁵ Cf. Melvin Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

avoid failures. Nevertheless, when experts and stakeholders appeal to each other and work in concert, a democratic method can reach its potential to be creative, critical, and self-corrective by raising questions, imagining alternatives, putting ideas to the test, and disclosing differences that might otherwise have escaped notice. At the same time, democratic participation can reduce apathy, build community, and create consummatory value from what had been a Babel of meanings (LW 2, 324).²⁶

As long as communication has not completely broken down, Dewey held that a democratic education, initially learned at a neighborly scale, can at least somewhat curb our tendency to overreach—that is, to presume that the problem *came* with our formulation of it. He held that we can curb this fraught tendency *enough* to underwrite participatory decision making. Conversely, if we wish to sabotage public discourse and inoculate ourselves against communicative planning, adaptive problem-solving, and growth, then here are three diabolical rules we might codify. First, treat our conclusions as *foregone* conclusions. That is, they are the conclusions that *any reasonable person (or person with the right commitments)* would eventually come to if they are sincere and rightly informed. Second, assume a single cause for a complex outcome and ignore multiple conjoint variables (i.e., commit the logical fallacy of causal reductionism), then insist that our proposed solution is the single definitive one. Finally, insist that we are simply unpacking the straightforward meaning that we *found* right there in whatever is happening. This ensures that we will never see our diagnosis of the problem as itself *at issue*.

The popular anti-democratic habit of acting as though any well-intentioned and rightly informed person would formulate the problem or event *our* way leads us to act as though the real problem is that *they* do not get the problem. In sharp contrast to such moral fundamentalism, Dewey observed that the way we *make sense* of a problem is inextricably *part* of that problem, so he wisely emphasized imaginative democratic intelligence and inquiry over the kind of placeless and faceless rationalistic demonstrations that are endemic to non-experimental moral and political theories.

²⁶ For reasons such as these, Bryan Norton advocates renewed emphasis on the education of facilitators to more effectively separate the diagnostic wheat from the chaff in public inquiries. See Norton, *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change: A Guide to Environmental Decision Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Research in recent decades on “wicked problems,” beginning with Rittel and Webber²⁷, has developed this Deweyan democratic and pluralistic spirit in ethics, politics, and policy. Without canvassing the many senses of “wickedness” in the policy literature, at least two necessary features can be identified that cut through the noise: when we say a problem is wicked rather than benign and straightforward, we hypothesize at least that (1) there is no single definitive solution and (2) the way we formulate a problem, and the way we appraise success in dealing with it, are themselves at issue. To the degree that problems are wicked, they are heterogeneous, so good analyses and reasons can point in different directions even in the absence of excessive “noise” or bias (cf. Kahneman 2021).²⁸ Consequently, when confronting wicked problems, as Norton observes, “it is necessary to problematize problem formulation itself,”²⁹ because in these cases even the most sincere and informed participants formulate problems and interpret facts differently. Many contemporary problems are candidates for wickedness in this sense, especially in the complex systems implicated by global pandemics and structural injustice.

Dealing effectively with such entanglements requires a genuine transformation of deeply entrenched habits, systems, and institutionalized practices. Such a transformation appears a distant, and receding, hope to most public intellectuals today. Yet Dewey argued that it was not a mere pipe dream to *still* believe we can democratically secure better lives (LW 5, 269), in part by creating conditions—especially through our schools, but also through our everyday behaviors and institutional policies—for open-ended, thoughtful communication and participatory decision-making. Instead, too many exercise reactionary habits that substitute vitriolic antagonism for moral and sociopolitical debate. It is as if we have deliberately sat out to codify a toolkit of rules to sabotage any chance that argumentation, debate, and persuasion will result in social learning.³⁰

Dewey did not have to live through our current iteration of resentment-driven misogyny in order to be saved from Pollyanna optimism here. His later writings reveal a chastened, worldly-wise philosopher who nevertheless doggedly urged us to experiment with how far we can go to

²⁷ Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169.

²⁸ On “noisy” judgments, see Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass R. Sunstein, *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2021).

²⁹ Bryan Norton, *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change: A Guide to Environmental Decision Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 37.

³⁰ Cf. Anthony Weston, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox* (Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

create a context for shared inquiry—not only verbally arguing, but also “on-the-ground experiments in living.”³¹

Inspired in part by a critical embrace of the social ethics of Addams and Dewey, contemporary work in the ever-expanding American philosophical tradition that includes theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins³² emphasizes that we improve our epistemic position when we democratically inhabit the standpoint of intersecting identities, while challenging those who invite destruction by acting as though only their own experiences, habituated values, and concerns have overriding force when perceiving, diagnosing, and ameliorating problems. Instead of developing a theory that determines in advance which valuational standpoints and idealizations are worth taking up, the new normal of wickedly complex problems calls for the arbitration of deeply democratic practice within and across political units. Through it we may learn our way together toward a healthier, more just, more secure, more peaceful, and more sustainable future.

John Dewey Bibliography

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 series abbreviation followed by volume number, and then the page number. For example: (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.

³¹ Mark Johnson, *Morality for Humans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 126. Cf. Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986).

³² Patricia Hill Collins, “It’s All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1998): 62-82; Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

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