

Intelligence for More than One: Reading Dewey as Radical Democrat

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How, they ask, is a thing like the equality of intelligence thinkable? And how could this opinion be established without disrupting the social order? We must ask the opposite question: how is intelligence possible without equality?

— Jacques Rancière¹

Even though there is no agreement among researchers on a definition of intelligence, it is treated most generally as a collection of certain abilities that may, for example, be called thinking, learning, adaption, and knowing. The very idea, though, shared by most if not all research into “intelligence,” is that intelligence is something you have more or less of, something that can be measured and tested and which can be used to predict your abilities to handle certain tasks, and the type of education and work you are best suited for. That even goes for the dividing of intelligence into different “forms of intelligence,” like “musical intelligence” or “relational intelligence” or “logico-mathematical intelligence.”² To take such forms into consideration, it is implied, will “help” you to take a place in a society fitted to such abilities.

Researchers dealing with “intelligence” seem to agree that intelligence is a structure with diverse dimensions, for example language or mathematical skills. In this structure there are in total three levels of intelligence. The so called g-factor is the highest form, or most general factor of importance for all kinds of intellectual operations but especially for nonverbal problem solving, like what is required for mathematical skills. The middle level compromises what is called “fluid intelligence,” including the general ability of visualisation, for example. The lowest level concerns certain primary mental abilities that can be observed and tested.³ In other words, psychometric research about intelligence establishes intelligence as a *hierarchically* organized mental structure. Such hierarchical structures allow tests to be developed that measure *levels* or profiles of intelligence where the outcomes from those tests are considered in terms of, for example, weak or strong capacities or performances.

Hierarchical understandings of intelligence not only seem to take for granted a natural (non-verbal) order of the mind but also to understand intelligence as an order of nature itself. For example, species are divided hierarchically in relation to their “intelligence” where “man” is the highest form destined to rule all others. Even if there are strong ethical arguments today about animal rights, the basic structure of societies is built on the very idea of humanity’s right to rule over other species. That is, intelligence is somewhat intermingled with how we understand nature, ethics, and power. It is often perceived as a precondition for the social, understood as such.

John Dewey discusses intelligence in an essay from 1910 in which he connects the idea of intelligence with a discussion of rationality, freedom, and democracy.⁴

In this essay he disconnects the idea of intelligence from having its source in nature (as a natural Law) or in a singular (rational) subject (Immanuel Kant). Instead, intelligence according to Dewey is “a method of adjustment of capacities and conditions within specific situations.” This way of seeing intelligence as a method rather than a faculty, Dewey argues, is necessary because nature does not carry with it a final secret to be discovered, no unchangeable order beneath it all, but is rather to be understood in its entirety as “an indefinite congeries of changes.” Man therefore needs the method of intelligence to sort out direction for social growth — “intelligence [which] relentlessly scrutinizes the consequences of every practice, and which exacts liability by an equally relentless publicity” (*IM*, 73–75). For Dewey, then, every action of intelligence is inherently bound to public responsibility for that action. The latter means that the method of intelligence does not operate in a vacuum but is a direct consequence of its publicity, to be judged for its truthfulness, for its worth by a public, by concrete individuals within a particular society. It is therefore connected to freedom and democracy: to freedom because it places the possibility of freedom in the actual working out of every concrete practice by the method of intelligence in reality; and to democracy because a society ordering itself in this way is inherently democratic. Intelligence is a method for one to gain control over nature at the same time as one’s responsibility increases in direct proportion to this control. It is an establishment of a social being in full control of its destiny, so to speak, and a being inherently responsible for its actions.

Ethics for Dewey are not based in a separate domain of categorical imperatives external to human action, from which actions are judged; rather, ethics constitute actions themselves. So the method of intelligence as the “discrimination of plural and concrete goods ... noting their conditions and obstacles” and as a method of holding human beings responsible for “their concrete use of powers and conditions” work against the establishment of “inequality and injustice among men” (*IM*, 76). Intelligence, then, is for Dewey another name for the exercise of equality and justice.

Dewey’s understanding of “intelligence” is quite far from the psychometric hierarchical understanding, which rather seems to legitimize inequality, or, at least to justify a hierarchical and distributive understanding of intelligence as a faculty or property and as something you have more or less of in your mind. In addition, intelligence is *not* to be reduced to structures of mental hierarchy regardless of the environment. For Dewey, intelligence directly connects with equality and justice as it is exercised in actual social contexts, which, in turn, has consequences for the democratic society and for real men and women in a social environment.

Criticisms of intelligence tests concern both the negative social consequences for the low scorer, and the environmental conditions of birth and upbringing, which influence the outcome of those tests — factors typically not taken into account by the psychometric “intelligence” tests. Interestingly enough, for Dewey intelligence is all about those environmental conditions, and how they can be “controlled,” put to use, and changed. In an essay from 1917, Dewey writes that the pragmatic theory of intelligence means the following:

Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or in that of the existent state of society, but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson. Action restricted to given and fixed ends may attain great technical efficiency; but efficiency is the only quality to which it can lay claim. Such action is mechanical (or becomes so), no matter what the scope of the pre-formed end, be it the Will of God or *Kultur*.⁵

Human actions are for Dewey, as has been shown above, already inherently ethical. Because they are not bound by pre-given ends they are simultaneously responsible and radically open. Different types of actions can even be distinguished in terms of whether or not they are open. Closed actions are mechanical, in a sense non-human, in that they do not require intelligence but only mechanical repetition of what is already the case. Mechanical actions just confirm what is already established as the end product of the action and therefore already determine the meaning of that action, hindering anything to be added or removed. In this view, there can be nothing new under the sun — nothing not already established as the truth of God or Culture. Intelligence, in contrast, is by necessity, according to Dewey, forward looking and creative to its core: “A pragmatic intelligence is a creative intelligence, not a routine mechanic.”⁶

In other words, Dewey establishes a distinction between creative and mechanical action and connects the latter to a type of society in which everything there is, *is* already, having its place in a given order, and in which this order is already understood or can be understood, already given meaning, in its entirety. In such a society there is no use for intelligence, only adjustment to what is already known. To use one’s intelligence, on the other hand, is to act such that something new is seen that was not there before. It is a radical break with “common sense,” with a society in which each and everyone already has its place. A democratic society, for Dewey, is in contrast a society in which intelligence has its say.

Social intelligence, in contrast to psychometric intelligence, is about actions not faculties, about creativity not properties of the mind, about outer social events not inner primary mental abilities that can be “observed.” Social intelligence is for Dewey, in short, not about hierarchical abilities of the mind at all but about justice and equality within social life. What also seem to follow from Dewey’s account is that one is essentially in charge of one’s destiny, as long as one uses the method of intelligence. Since intelligence is related to social actions and not mental faculties it is an *essentially and radically democratic* intelligence — it is for anyone to put to use.

In the following I want to explore in more detail two aspects of Dewey’s pragmatic intelligence: (1) the distinction between the creative and the mechanical, and the critique of the institutionalization of “the mechanical”; and (2) its consequences for the ways intelligence and the social, as such, are understood. I conclude the essay by highlighting some consequences of these ideas for schooling.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CREATIVE AND MECHANICAL ACTION

Georg Henrik von Wright distinguishes between two types of rationality that have been in use in the intellectual history of science.⁷ What he calls *pure reason*

concerns the means through which given ends can be reached, and deals with how effective particular instruments are in achieving those ends. Reason as pure reason has nothing to do with what is reasonable for us to believe (which constitutes the second form of reason), it is entirely about the effectiveness of its instruments. Von Wright claims that reason as pure reason is based on the concept of *Homo faber*, that is, the human being as creator of instruments to control and use nature. What is reasonable for us to believe, however, involves judgment of a type other than pure reason. What is reasonable for us to believe requires wisdom and is based on the human being as *Homo sapiens*, literally meaning “wise man.”

This distinction resembles the one between mechanical and intelligent action. In “pure reason” the world is given in terms of its ends, and the purity of reason functions as a means to effectively reach those ends. Such reason would fall outside the category of intelligence as laid out above. Reason as pure reason can be termed effective or instrumental but not intelligent. The other form of reason — that which is “reasonable for us to believe” — concerns intelligent behaviour in so far as its ends are open, and requires judgment in that something has to be taken into consideration that is not already settled. If already settled, if already given meaning, if already corresponding to a given end, no judgment would be required other than choosing which mechanical act would best serve a given end.

Intelligent behavior, then, seems closer to what is reasonable for us to believe, rather than pure reason, not least since the former and not the latter requires judgment. At the same time, the method of intelligence claims to be a method that is instrumental and effective in reaching the ends produced in the actions themselves. So the distinction between creative and mechanical is not between two forms of rationality, since that distinction seems to put too much stress on *believing* what is best in any given context. Instead action is based on reason as far as it is intelligent, that is, as far as it is effective and instrumental in reaching those ends that are worked out within a particular social and historical context through the method of intelligence. In other words, an action is based in reason as far as it is instrumental in establishing equality and justice. The method of intelligence, then, is a rational action to achieve equality and justice in concrete and actual changing reality, but it is not *pure*. Dewey writes:

It is often said that pragmatism, unless it is content to be a contribution to mere methodology, must develop a theory of Reality. But the chief characteristic trait of the pragmatic notion of reality is precisely that no theory of reality in general, *überhaupt*, is possible or needed. It occupies the position of an emancipated empiricism.⁸

In my reading, Dewey’s pragmatism not only occupies the position of an emancipated empiricism but, being a method of intelligence, it is also to be understood as a method of social emancipation. That is, insofar as the reality in which we live is organized in terms of inequality and injustice, the method of intelligence will break the crust of convention for such a reality by its claims of equality and justice. And such claims are open for anyone to put forward. The method of intelligence is not based on a hierarchy of mental faculties. It is creative not mechanical and therefore inherently democratic. What also seems to follow from

Dewey's pragmatism is that reality is just that. No extra faculty, no theory is needed. In other words, an emancipated empiricism needs no purity in reason, nothing that would make reason into something more than what it is, a way (that is a method) of moving ahead.

Richard Rorty picks up Dewey's emancipated empiricism in his critique of the very basis for an idea of purity in the first sense, which he calls the "God's eye view," or the notion of an unclouded mirror:

The notion of a human being whose mind is such an unclouded mirror, and who knows this, is the image, as Sartre says, of God. Such being does not confront something alien which would make it necessary for him to choose an attitude towards, or a description of, it. He would have no need and no ability to choose actions or descriptions. He can be called "God" if we think of the advantages of this situation, or a "mere machine" if we think of the disadvantages.⁹

The very idea of an extra faculty belonging to reason called *pure* reason seems to be a version of the idea of an unclouded mirror, the idea that all descriptions of reality can be reduced to one pure description, by which the Reality of the real could be explained. As Rorty notes, however, such a maneuver would reduce the actor to nothing other than a mere machine, incapable of using the method of intelligence and therefore in essence inhuman. What also seems to follow from the exploration so far is that both the idea of a theory of Reality as well as *pure* reason are dependent on, or obsessed with, the idea of reduction of plurality to *One*. So the very difference between what Dewey calls creative action and mechanical action is that creative action is open to plurality and difference while mechanical action relies on an idea of *One*. It may even be claimed that, for Dewey, the very function of creative action is to divide the totalizing idea of a possible existence of an indivisible *One*.

Dewey himself argues that a symptom of classical moral theories is that they all agreed about one thing: "They all assumed the existence of *the end*, the *summum bonum*, the final goal; and of *the separate moral force* that moves to that goal." Such an idea leads, according to Dewey, to disputes about "whether the end is an aggregate of pleasurable state of consciousness, enjoyment of the divine essence, acknowledgment of the law of duty, or conformity to environment." As such, the disputes or debates, more than anything else, have to do with what would be the best path to reach the final goal: "But these controversies implied that there was but *one* end and the *one* means" (*IM*, 73, emphasis added).

The method of intelligence is a way of countering this type of thinking and organizing of societies. It is a critique of mechanical thinking and feudal societies, or more precisely, of all non-democratic tendencies in all types of societies. It is a critique of all types of societies trying to hinder *the method of intelligence to work out its aesthetic moment of freedom, to create something new and unforeseen, in the name of equality and justice*. The method of intelligence, for Dewey, establishes "man" as well as history as fundamentally historical, that is, as radically open for change.

This is also what Dewey picks up from his readings of G.W.F. Hegel, that Hegel's idealism contributed the idea of history as *becoming*: "it lifted the idea of

progress above the fixed origins and fixed ends, and presented the social and moral order, as well as the intellectual, *as a scene of becoming*, and it located reason somewhere within the struggles of life” (*IM*, 72, emphasis added). It was up to Hegel, according to Dewey, to fill the empty reason of Kant with the concrete content of history. Even though such history at the time was understood as a history idealizing the Prussian nation, in effect the idea of placing reason in “the struggles of life” and in being open to what was to come, “the scene of becoming” and its intellectual as well as practical effects also, in Dewey’s reading, lead to a serious questioning of the very idea of One, by introducing change in a radical form of progress.

The problem with the idea of One for Dewey, in whatever forms it appears, is that it reduces life to mechanical actions that hinder change. It is inherently conservative and it legitimizes power according to feudal principals. It leads to, I would say, “Hobbesian” ideas about One organic society, and a celebration of society as *Ochlos*, in which everything there is, *is* already, a hierarchically organized social organ with a ruling head. But it would be a rather dumb head according to Dewey, since such an understanding of a social world reduces action as well as its actors to mechanics, to doing without thinking.

Dewey warns us about conceiving intelligence as transcendental, and filling it with pre-established moral imperatives possessed by “moralists” (celebrating *the end*), because along with such ideas tends to come a severe restriction of freedom, a severe restriction on the very possibility of putting the method of intelligence to use:

As long as moralists plume themselves upon possession of the domain of the categorical imperative with its bare precepts, men of executive habits will always be at their elbows to regulate concrete social conditions through which the form of law gets its actual filling of specific injunctions. When freedom is conceived to be transcendental, the coercive restraint of immediate necessity will lay its harsh hand upon the mass of men (*IM*, 75).

When freedom is conceived of as yet to come, it is by definition not here and now. When freedom is conceived of as transcendental, for Dewey, it is always placed at the end of the tunnel, an indefinite delay of its actuality here and now, and instead of freedom its empty space is filled with (hierarchical) regulations of concrete social conditions by “men of executive habits.” Such men, I will call them “administrators,” make themselves into the guardians of “the God’s eye view,” the executors of mechanical action in conservative society. By being the guardians of the One possible society, such “men” are incapable of intelligent action. Instead they actively reduce creative relations between humans to relations between *mere machines*, to speak with Rorty. As mere machines “men of executive habits” execute the mechanical ordering of society into a feudal state of mind.

INTELLIGENCE FOR MORE THAN ONE

For Dewey, intelligent action requires creativity and human freedom. Mankind in Dewey’s terms is not formed under the weight of a pre-existing social context or culture, which one just has to adopt, but rather creates its destiny by changing its context and future. A pre-requisite for being in charge, for social change, is that there

is a human being capable of intelligent action. Zygmunt Bauman writes in a discussion of culture as praxis:

The idea of creativity, of active assimilation of the universe, of imposing on the chaotic world the ordering structure of human intelligent action — the idea built irremovably into the notion of praxis — is indeed comprehensible only if viewed as an attribute of community, capable of transcending the natural or “naturalized” order and creating new and different orders.¹⁰

For Bauman, as well as for Dewey, then, intelligent action is not an action by one separate individual, acting on the basis of her or his superior intelligence. The cult of the single intelligent genius, at the top of the mental hierarchy, superior as a measure of the g-factor, is a product, as Michel Foucault would say, of the power/knowledge relation rather than anything else:

[I]t is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it, and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.¹¹

For Foucault, the very claim to know something is a result of a process of exclusion of what we do not know. Knowledge is therefore not unmarked by power but an expression of it. That is, constellations of knowledge are also constellations of power. That means, among other things, that we cannot emancipate ourselves with more knowledge alone but only by changing the conditions through which knowledge/power is constructed in the first place. As Jacques Rancière would have it, this is not done primarily by more knowledge but by aesthetics and politics: aesthetics because changing the conditions for knowledge/power includes changing the distribution of the means by which we make things intelligible to each other in the world; politics, because it includes changing the terms on which the division takes place between those who are included in the social whole as naturally speaking the “truth” and those who are included as “excluded,” as unintelligible noise. In short, to speak with Rancière,¹² only in the moment of change of “the distribution of the sensible” (*le partage du sensible*), is emancipation possible.

For Foucault it is the material conditions for thought that are historically significant rather than a “single genius.” A genius, following Foucault, then, has to be understood as an expression of the actual state of power/knowledge in the historical moment of articulation rather than anything else, and as such, mental “intelligence” is not a significant factor at all for what moves the world. The idea of *the* individual genius turning the world around emanates rather from, as Bauman says, “a misplaced nostalgia for a new, more suitable human-ordering-of-the-world, cast into the illusory realm of individualism by the obfuscating impact of an alienated, ossified, immobile society.”¹³

Social intelligence then, as an intelligence that belongs to the community, following both Bauman and Dewey, is dependent on the idea of creativity as the freedom to act, to create societies which not only confirm given orderings but invent new ones. It is not, though, an abstract, spiritual, or “pure” idea of community that is formulated by Bauman — a community that would be above and beyond actual relations between men and women acting together or, what Bauman calls Durkheim’s

“absolutization” of the community — because “communal praxis would hardly be possible were not human beings, as members of the human species, capable of producing creatively potent communities.”¹⁴

Creativity is a condition for praxis in and of the community by human beings acting together through the method of intelligence. As such, human beings, in Bauman’s terms, are in opposition to mechanical actions as far as they are capable of praxis, that is, intelligently changing their conditions for their social existence. Mechanical “immobile society” on the other hand celebrates the single genius, as a position on the top of a hierarchy that fixes the positions possible in any given society. Such a society is, of course, inherently conservative. In addition, it makes only one position possible as carrying (valuable) meaning, or viewed another way, it is the privileged signifier atop the hierarchy that gives the entire structure or system its stability and marks the direction of actual life-processes. It brings actual life-processes in line with the highest potential of the hierarchy, making individual life-processes more or less “valuable” in direct proportion to the distance from “the highest potential.”

So the cult of the genius is as such an expression of a society that orders itself in a certain way. It orders itself into a hierarchically immobile society, a society that embodies the principles of injustice and inequality, and which internalizes inequality into its mental structures by, among other things, using the tool of psychometric intelligence. Schooling in such a society would regard its major task to be to bring individual life-processes in line with the single meaning of the highest potential, but in doing just that such schooling confirms an already established inequality and injustice. Such schooling would not be able to put the method of intelligence into use in order to push for equality and emancipation. Rather, and to speak with Jacques Rancière,¹⁵ it would be a school that stultifies.

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 72.

2. Howard Gardner and Thomas Hatch, “Multiple Intelligences Go To School: Educational Implications of the Theory of Multiple Intelligences,” *Educational Researcher* 18, no. 8 (1989): 4–9.

3. See for example, Lee Cronbach and C.G. Glaser, *Psychological Tests and Personnel Decisions* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1957); and Raymond B. Cartell, *Intelligence: Its Structure, Growth, and Action* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Elsevier, 1987).

4. John Dewey, “Intelligence and Morals,” in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, eds. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), 66–76. This work will be cited as *IM* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. John Dewey, “The Need of Recovery of Philosophy,” in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, eds. Morris and Shapiro, 6–7.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

7. Georg Henrik von Wright, *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* [Science and Reason] (Stockholm: MånpoCKET, 1986), 22–40.

8. Dewey, “The Need of Recovery of Philosophy,” 2.

9. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 376, emphasis added.

10. Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis* (London: SAGE, 1987), 95.
11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1991), 27–28.
12. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2007).
13. Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, 95.
14. Ibid.
15. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.