8 Dewey's moral philosophy

In his 1930 foreword to *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey wrote: "In the eighteenth century, the word Morals was used in English literature with a meaning of broad sweep. It included all the subjects of distinctly humane import, all of the social disciplines as far as they are intimately connected with the life of man and as they bear upon the interests of humanity ... Were it not for one consideration [this] volume might be said to be an essay in continuing the tradition of David Hume."[1] Dewey's contemporaries saw Hume as a skeptic whose moral inquiries were meant to explain away rather than explain our knowledge of moral values and principles. To Dewey, Hume's intent was instead to provide a new and improved grounding for moral knowledge and principles, by demonstrating that moral phenomena are natural phenomena, susceptible to methods of inquiry commensurate with those of the natural sciences. This for Dewey was the "inexpungable element of truth in his teachings."[2]

Dewey, like Hume, was an ethical naturalist who believed that moral phenomena are natural phenomena. But unlike Hume and his twentieth-century successors, such as the emotivists Charles L. Stevenson and A. J. Ayer,[3] Dewey was not a non-cognitivist. He did not accept the view that moral claims such as "Her character is exemplary" or "His conduct was vicious" are pseudo-propositions that express speakers' subjective attitudes or tastes rather than verifiable assertions about their own or others' conduct or character. Consequently, he also rejected the view that values, unlike facts, are neither responsive to reason nor empirically verifiable.

In contrast, Dewey holds that value judgments, moral and non-moral, make assertions about things, acts, and persons that can be true or false in a pragmatic sense. But unlike many cognitivist

naturalists, Dewey does not take his naturalism to entail moral realism: the position that there are specifically "moral" facts, properties, or relations to which moral propositions and principles refer. A value judgment, Dewey holds, is a practical judgment: a judgment about the practical adequacy of a course of action to perform a specific function. As such, it is empirically confirmable. Moral judgments are simply a special case of practical judgments, distinguished by their focus on one aspect of what he calls the "double-relation" or "binary" character[4] of making and acting upon practical judgments. When a practical problem is resolvable in different ways, some of which involve actions liable to react back upon the agent's character, strengthening some dispositions to act while weakening others, recognition of these potential reactive effects problematizes the agent's situation in a new way. The agent must also consider the functional implications of these, in light of his or her situation now more broadly considered. Moral practical judgments are thus higher-order, reflective practical judgments that take account of the effects upon ourselves of accepting or rejecting narrower judgments about how to act in particular cases.

Cognitivist theories sacrifice one attractive feature of many noncognitivisms – the latter's simple, straightforward "internalist" account of our motivation to act upon moral judgments. For emotivists or Humean subjectivists, the "conclusions" of practical deliberations are really reflectively formed subjective attitudes. This explains why people are motivated to act upon their "conclusions" either about particular cases ("That act is despicable") or types of cases ("Such acts are despicable"). Motivation to action is internal to (or constitutive of) one's "conclusion." For cognitivists, however, conclusions of moral reasoning are propositions about what is or is not the case. But this can seem to leave our motivation to act upon them unexplained.

There is, however, a counterintuitive consequence to the internalist approach. It seems to entail that any moral conclusion sincerely arrived at will automatically be motivational even if ultimately defeated (e.g. by uncontrollable impulses). Yet sincere individuals sometimes arrive at conclusions about what to do and yet feel no motivation to act accordingly.[5] Contemporary internalists try to explain this phenomenon away either by treating such events as products of abnormal psychological states (such as

depression) or of imaginative but counterfactual reasoning, where the reasoner arrives at moral conclusions from the perspective of individuals or groups whose attitudes she does not share.[6] But are such situations really as abnormal or deviant from ordinary moral judgment as these defenses require us to suppose? Dewey notes how often we sincerely "hoist the banner of the ideal, and then march in the direction that concrete conditions suggest and reward."[7] Dissociation of judgment and attitude in problematic situations is arguably the rule, not the exception. So something is surely wrong with non-cognitivist explanations.

The root problem, Dewey holds, is reliance upon what Wilfrid Sellars would later call "the myth of the given,"[8] the uncritical assumption that certain kinds of experience, e.g. sensation, are basic forms of cognition: a kind of directly "given" knowledge of ourselves or the things around us. Sellars argued that sensation cannot play this role, because sensation is not itself cognitive. It is a physiological event that only takes on cognitive import when interpreted in light of a conceptual scheme. Dewey offers a similar critique in his attacks upon the "spectator theory of knowledge"[9] – the theory that our knowledge of the world is built upon a foundation of primitive sensory cognitions. Like Sellars, Dewey held that sensations are non-cognitive physiological events, like breathing or digesting, that take on cognitive significance for us only when we interpret them as signs of events or processes in which we are interested. But Dewey goes beyond Sellars in attacking another form of the myth of the given – the myth that our passions in some sense "give" us values.

Dewey writes: "Contemporary discussion of value and valuation suffers from confusion of the two radically different attitudes – that of direct, active, non-cognitive experience of goods and bads and that of valuation, the latter being simply a mode of judgment like any other form of judgment."[10] In other words, they confuse causal stimuli *to* action with reasons *for* action. The implications should be sufficient to make us reject this: (1) that strictly speaking we cannot disagree about values, because evaluative talk merely expresses tastes or desires that cannot be true or false; (2) since values cannot be true or false, they cannot be subject to rational critique; and (3) since our tastes and desires are immediately given, we cannot sincerely be in doubt about what we value. But each of these, Dewey argues, is patently false. We do disagree about both tastes and values;

judgments about tastes and values are subjected to critical scrutiny; and genuine doubt about our own tastes and desires is commonplace.

If we are to continue the tradition of Hume's naturalism, Dewey believed, we cannot ignore these phenomena of our moral experience. Since Hume's and other non-cognitivist forms cannot account for our moral psychology, values, and moral deliberation, ethical naturalism must be reconstructed accordingly. This task Dewey undertakes in texts such as "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," *Human Nature and Conduct*, the 1932 *Ethics*, and *Theory of Valuation*. In what follows, I shall discuss Dewey's pragmatic naturalistic treatments of our moral psychology, the nature of value, practical deliberation, and finally their implications for normative theorizing.

NATURALISTIC MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Human beings are first and foremost organic beings whose makeup includes a variety of natural organic processes, including sensations and what have traditionally been called "passions." Broadly speaking, non-cognitivism identifies valuing with the latter. Dewey rejects this, arguing that although passions are among the conditions necessary for values, passions are not forms of valuing and thus do not "give" us values. In "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," he writes, "the present paper takes its stand with the position stated by Hume in the following words:

> A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence; and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. When I am angry I am actually possest with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five feet high.[11]

To better capture the dynamic character of the processes in question, Dewey drops the traditional term "passion" in favor of "*impulse*."

We each begin life as bundles of organic impulses that prompt movement in and about our environments. In young children, these "affective-motor" capacities cause various kinds of behavior (crying, suckling, urination, writhing) but not actions because none of these behaviors are intentional. A child must first associate its impulsive behaviors with their consequences before it can act intentionally. It has to learn that crying is followed by attention from adults, suckling

by relaxation, writhing by a change of position, and so forth, before it becomes possible for it to cry, suckle, or writhe with the object of obtaining these results. Only then does it begin to form *desires* that these specific events should occur or to act to realize them.

Desires to do, get, or avoid, unlike impulses, are at least minimally cognitive states. They involve beliefs about the world and intentions regarding it. Which desires a child will form and what the objects of those desires will be depends upon an interplay between impulse and environment. The human mind is not pre-equipped with latent desires waiting to be triggered by contact with their predetermined objects. Anything can be an object of desire provided the context is right. But in the absence of obstacles to action, we neither form nor act upon desires. Thus desires cannot be the motivational basis for all human action. They are instead just one kind of conduit through which impulsive drives are released.

What we desire is determined by the challenges and resources provided by our environments, most especially by our *social environment*. An infant indiscriminately reaches for anything that attracts its attention. However, infants must rely on others to remove obstacles to their impulsive activity. Thus their desires are shaped from the first by the customs and attitudes of their surrounding culture. They learn to desire and demand socially approved objects and disregard or retreat from those which are socially disapproved. As they come to recognize that some of these objects are of significance in many different sorts of situations, they gradually develop stable enduring *interests* in those objects.

For a young child, a situation is problematic if it thwarts immediate impulses. For adults, situations become problematic when they thwart either impulses or *habits*. Habits are acquired dispositions to act that we develop as we become adept at recognizing and consistently resolving recurring types of problems: "formed in process of exercising biological aptitudes [habits] are the sole agents of observation, recollection, foresight, and judgment."[12] They are not, as we wish our "bad" habits were, contingent, accident features of ourselves or our behavior. They are indispensable mechanisms without which we could not perceive, think, recall, speak, or act in consistent, effective, or coordinated ways.[13] An important advantage of habits is that they allow us to focus our attention on other, less routine matters. A disadvantage is that they can elude our attention even when

they are counterproductive. Habits, like desires and interests, are conduits through which impulsive energies are channeled, but these conduits often function beneath the level of conscious attention.

Taken together, Dewey's analysis presents us with a considerably more complex account of the sources of our motivations to act than did contemporary non-cognitivist internalisms. For Dewey, desire is not the only or the most important source of motivations to action. On the contrary, for Dewey, postulating some sort of desire to account for every action would violate the principle of Ockham's razor. Desires are unnecessary explanatory entities whenever our acts can be explained by reference to our settled habits and the presence or absence of their particular initiating conditions. Habits, unlike desires, are *not* subjective "attitudes," pro or con. They are acquired psychological mechanisms through which certain beliefs about our situations come to be directly motivating. Say it is my habitual practice to put my daughter to bed at 8pm and that I come to believe that it is now 8pm. This belief not only supplies a reason for putting her to bed (it is her bedtime), but is also directly motivating *independent* of my desiring or having any other pro-attitude towards putting her to bed simply because it is a trigger for a habitual practice.

In a problematic situation, however, either we lack acquired dispositions and habitual practices adequate to manage a situation, or the situation is one where those we do have come into conflict. We are forced to inquire about what must be done, to ask ourselves what has gone wrong and what remedy to apply. Sometimes we discover the problem rests upon a mistaken belief. The situation that seemed so unusual is on closer examination actually familiar and readily resolvable. Or the situation in which we are simultaneously disposed to respond in incompatible ways, on closer examination lacks features we thought were present and so also the inducement to conflicting responses. We see how to resolve our dilemmas, and are, by the same token, motivated to act accordingly.

But we are not always so fortunate. On closer examination, novel situations do not always resolve into familiar patterns, nor do conflicts dissolve. In genuinely novel situations, we have to discover what solutions we might desire and then consider how desirable each might be. First, we search for possible objects of desire by an *imaginative rehearsal* of the courses of action open to us. If two or

more of these are immediately attractive, we then shift to a functional assessment of their respective adequacy to the problem before us, asking which is, functionally speaking, more *desirable* as means of resolving the crisis. In cases of conflicting dispositions or habitual practices, we can move more directly to comparative assessment, asking which ways of responding are more desirable given the problem before us. In either case, the practical judgment we arrive at (e.g. "act x will resolve the problem thus and so") is descriptive and so empirically verifiable. Yet there is no mystery about why we are motivated to act upon it. The motivations that necessitated deliberation in the first place explain our motivation to act upon the solutions our deliberations identify.

VALUES AND VALUATION, ENDS AND MEANS

For Dewey, all practical judgment is functional or instrumental. But this should not be taken to mean that practical judgments are only concerned with instrumental "values." "Value" and "valuation," Dewey holds, ambiguously refer to two different ways of responding to a thing, act, or person: "prizing" or "esteeming" versus "appraising" or "estimating." The first category includes immediate, uncritical subjective attitudes, the second, critical instrumental judgments. These categories stand in no particular relation to one another. A thing may be prized yet considered dysfunctional in a given situation or despised yet functionally exemplary. Which kinds of "values" we weigh in a particular case is a matter of the perspective we take upon it. Nothing about things themselves determines which perspective(s) we must take.

This explains why Dewey denies that traditional distinctions between values as *inherent* or *intrinsic*, on the one hand, and *instrumental* or *extrinsic*, on the other, reflect real differences in the things, acts, or persons to which they are attributed. On his view, if something T is prized in situation S, for qualities inherent to it, then within S, T is inherently valued even if it is also desired as a means to altering S. "There is nothing in the nature of prizing or desiring to prevent their being directed to things which are means, and there is nothing in the nature of means to militate against their being desired and prized."[14] And if in S, we opt to isolate the immediate value assigned to some T from instrumental consideration,

then within S, T may be said to be "unconditionally" or "intrinsically" valuable (although strictly speaking humans never prize anything unconditionally, if by that we mean independent of *any* conditions whatsoever).

Because the value status of any thing, event, or person is dependent on the perspective taken, that status will shift from one category to another as changes in our interests, selves, or situations lead us to change our perspectives. I can, for example, value pleasure for its immediate, inherent qualities and at the same time value it as a means or instrument for improving my bad mood or distracting me from some painful or alarming prospect. I can value pleasure unconditionally within the limits of some particular situation, for example, when choosing an entree at a restaurant, or conditionally, if I exclude entrees made with farmed salmon from consideration, because I disapprove of salmon farming on environmental grounds.

For Dewey, distinctions between "means" and "ends" are also perspective-dependent. When we value a thing as a "means," we appraise it from a perspective in which functional considerations take priority. When we adopt something as "end," our perspective is one within which, for the moment at least, functionality is not a priority. This opens the way to explaining how ends as well as means can be instrumentally evaluated. For Dewey, means *define* ends and ends means. Potential ends of action – "ends" we might adopt "in view" of a particular set of circumstances – are defined pragmatically in terms of the operations required to achieve them. But the relation of means and ends goes much deeper than this. For it is as means that we appraise ends in view when we must choose between them. In a sense, Dewey writes, ends in view are not really "ends or termini of action at all. They are terminals of deliberation, and so turning points *in* activity."[15] For example, a mariner who sees a storm ahead decides to sail for a port. Given his interest in staying afloat and continuing his voyage, getting to the port becomes his end in view and the object of his desire. But neither the port nor the security it represents for him is desired purely for its own sake. Each is also desired as a means of resolving the obstacle to continuing the voyage. And that end, the voyage, is itself a means to further ends. We operate, Dewey says, "in a temporal continuum of activities in which each successive stage is equally end and means."[16]

The mariner with a choice of ports can meaningfully deliberate about his ends because they are also means. Perhaps one port offers maximum safety from the storm but will greatly delay the voyage, resulting in financial penalties. A second port offers less safety but a shorter delay. A third possibility is to return to his home port, which would also impose financial penalties but allow the crew to have shore leave with their families. He will appraise each potential end in view accordingly, in order to decide how *desirable* each is overall. Time allowing, he might also consider what his rankings reveal about his character and whether that character is really to his taste, all things considered, or stands in need of reform – a reform that would be helped or hindered by some of the options before him. As ends are also means, not only our ends, but also our tastes and desires for them can be objects of practical judgment. "Instead of there being no disputing about tastes," Dewey argues, "they are the one thing worth disputing about."[17]

PRACTICAL DELIBERATION

What does all this mean for practical deliberation, especially moral deliberation? (1) If ends and means are reciprocally determined, with ends forming an endless continuum, is our selection of ends in view in any given case necessarily arbitrary? (2) Whose desires and interests should be considered in our deliberations: ours or those of others also? (3) Are some sorts of activities right and some character traits virtuous independent of our tastes, desires, or habits? Or are the concepts of right and virtue directly reducible to the concept of goods or ends? (4) What role will moral principles play in our practical deliberations?

Ends and means in practical deliberation

As to the first question, Dewey holds that our starting point cannot be purely arbitrary, since "apart from a condition of tension between a person and environing conditions there is, as we have seen, no occasion for evocation of desire for something else; there is nothing to induce the formation of an end, much less the formation of one end rather than any other out of the indefinite number of ends theoretically possible."[18] Situations that present no obstacles provide no

occasion for deliberation. We desire and deliberate about our desires only when the activities that constitute our current situation are disrupted. "Here," says, Dewey, "is the factor which cuts short the process of foreseeing and weighing ends-in-view in their function as means. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof and sufficient also is the *good* of that which does away with the existing evil."[19]

One might object that this makes moral practical reasoning such a stop-gap, piecemeal affair that its conclusions must inevitably be incoherent and even self-defeating. But this objection will not arise if we bear in mind that (1) most of what we do is directed by habit, and that (2) "present situation" does not refer to a specific instant in time. First, our habits, intellectual, aesthetic, social, and moral, account for the consistency of our tastes, perspective, character, and practices. The conservatism of habits and habitual practices effectively blocks erratic variations in our deliberations from case to case. Second, when Dewey refers to our "present" situation or problem, he does not mean "a sharp narrow knife-blade in time."[20] Individuals' present situations are composed of all the activities in which they are concurrently engaged. Thus the "present situation" in which I am composing this essay also includes all the other projects with which I am attempting to harmonize this one: getting myself to a noon meeting, checking in with a sick child by phone, remembering to get my dog to the vet tomorrow, having lectures prepared for next week, deciding which party to support in the upcoming Canadian elections, and so forth. Whether and how significantly problematic my situation may become depends upon how many of the activities composing it would be affected by a particular disruption: the fewer and the less significant, the less problematic it will be. A telephone call coming just as I am leaving for my meeting may cause so little disruption that it barely registers as a problem at all. But the reverse will be true if the call informs me that my sick child must be taken to a clinic immediately, disrupting numerous other projects. Because many of the projects composing any "present" situation will be long-term ones (managing a career, parenting, etc.), our deliberations must take this into account. Only if we systematically failed to investigate the impact of particular disruptions upon all the projects that constitute the particular present situations we are in, would we habitually arrive at piecemeal or self-defeating judgments.

Individual versus social ends

The second question Dewey would trace to two faulty assumptions about human nature: that humans are inherently egoistic beings and that the situations within which individuals act are individualized in such a way that others' involvement in them is somehow accidental or contingent.

Humans are not inherently egoistic, Dewey insists. We do not naturally care exclusively for our own well-being. "Deliberate unscrupulous pursuit of self-interest is as much conditioned upon social opportunities, training, and assistance as is ... action prompted by a beaming benevolence."[21] Our natural impulsive tendencies are neither egoistic nor altruistic – until or unless circumstances focus their energies into self-regarding or other-regarding patterns of habits, interests, or desires. The single most important factor in these circumstances is our social environment. The social tastes and practices of our society shape the development of our own desires, habits, and dispositions, directing them to socially approved objects with the result that most of what we will immediately enjoy or find intrinsically satisfying will be objects and practices others share and endorse. And among those socially approved objects are other persons and their interests. "This social saturation is," Dewey points out, "a matter of fact, not of what should be."[22] And it does not end with childhood. We know our children are helpless to discover or pursue ends without social support but forget that the same is true of ourselves – that no adult human being can pursue any sustained project without the involvement and support of others. To the extent that others are directly involved in any given project our good *is* their good and vice versa. When others are not directly involved, it is still the case that any threats to their interests our activities pose, threats that might turn them into antagonists, are also threats to our own good and vice versa.

This is why we do not normally experience our situations as limited to or involving only ourselves or our personal interests. Every situation is inherently social, composed of projects all more or less shared with others. Thus in every case of deliberation, we do take some account of others' welfare and interests, because, being human, we cannot do otherwise. But we can and often do fail to take into account all those whose interests our choices actually affect. No

one can succeed in their activities unless these are shared and supported by others, but people can and often do limit the set of individuals with whom they are prepared to cooperate to relatively small exclusive groups (family members, friends, tribes, etc.), treating only their welfare as salient and ignoring outsiders. And, of course, people can and do regularly deceive themselves about the extent to which their activities and successes are actually shared with others and so foolishly ignore the interests of others on whom they actually depend. Either course is apt to antagonize those whose interests were disregarded and so prove self-defeating, both because those most antagonized will offer direct opposition, but more importantly because their cooperation was not enlisted. The fewer stakeholders in a project, the less the capacity available to pursue it effectively and to make it a source of personal satisfaction to all the stakeholders concerned.[23]

The relation of good, right, and virtue

Because Dewey views practical judgments as judgments about the adequacy of adopting particular ends as means for overcoming problems, he is often suspected of taking a simplistic, reductivist view of the relation of the concepts of right action and of virtue to the concept of good. Dewey's early pragmatic treatments of moral philosophy suggest that he once thought virtue reducible to good. But by the 1930s, he had concluded that good, right, and virtue were "three independent factors in morals"[24] no one of which was conceptually reducible to the others.

Starting with the concepts of good and right, Dewey declares that they "have different origins, they flow from independent springs, so that neither of the two can derive from the other."[25] We attribute goodness to features of situations that are either uncritically desired or prized or that have been judged desirable after critical reflection on our interests, habits, and projects. "Right" by contrast, is a kind of value attributed to *claims* individuals and groups make against one another in virtue of cooperative practices they share. Being inherently social, we are disposed to live together and cooperate in shared projects. Many of these shared projects, especially those most important to the survival and success of a group, such as rearing children, obtaining food or shelter, and ensuring security, are, for efficiency's

sake, developed into sets of routine "practices," "roles," or "offices" defined by rules specifying the purpose of these practices, what conduct is integral to them, who may engage in or benefit from them, and so forth. The rules that define practices take on normative or regulative force whenever anyone chooses to engage in them. They determine what counts as successful performance of a practice, how participants must treat one another, what practice-based benefits they are entitled to receive if they enact the practice successfully or must forfeit if they fail.

Ultimately a decision to endorse and/or engage in practice can be warranted instrumentally if it creates or sustains a state of affairs that is desirable overall. But once we are committed to a practice, what it is right or wrong for us to do or claim is not determined by our tastes or desires but by the rules of the practice. These are, in Kantian terms, hypothetical imperatives. Their authority is not wholly unconditional (since one can always refuse assent to a practice) but is not conditioned on agreement with our likes or dislikes. While we may participate because the practice contributes to our welfare (either in its own right or instrumentally) this does not mean that judgments of right are conceptually reducible to judgments of good.[26]

Virtue is "a third independent variable in morals."[27] We admire certain character traits and deplore others. Praise and blame directed to character traits arise both from considerations of their consequences for our ends and of their implications for one another's abilities to fulfill the roles and practices we undertake. But beyond these considerations is what Hume calls the "immediate agreeableness" of some character traits to our tastes and sensibilities. Those we find immediately agreeable we consider excellences or virtues even when they conflict with efficient pursuit of the good or the recognition of justified claims. Those we find immediately repugnant we deplore as defects or vices even when they increase efficient pursuit of the good or the fulfillment of duties. Thus the category of the virtuous and vicious is in large part constituted by sentiments "so spontaneous, so natural, and as we say 'instinctive' that they do not depend either upon considerations of objects that will when attained satisfy desire nor upon making certain demands upon others."[28]

The tastes and sentiments in question are really no less socially saturated or "natural" than are our desires and social practices. Thus we can and should question our tastes and sentiments, asking

ourselves whether they have been critically formed and whether it is desirable for us to be the sort of people who have them. Still, admiration is neither a kind of desire nor a way of recognizing a claim. It is a distinct form of responsiveness to persons, characters, and actions.

So moral practical deliberation is irreducibly *pluralistic*. "What is good from the standpoint of desire is wrong from the standpoint of social demands; what is bad from the first standpoint may be heartily approved [as virtuous] by public opinion."[29] It is often objected that pluralistic theories of value are undesirable theoretically because they cannot provide unequivocal guidance for action when values come into conflict. Dewey rejects this as an unrealistic demand, arising from a desire for certainty where none is to be had. "Moral problems exist because we have to adapt to one another as best we can certain elements coming from each source."[30] There cannot be real moral problems unless moral values really can come into conflict – something reductivist accounts refuse to allow in the name of theoretical simplicity. Is it any surprise that the principles they generate so often seem mere counsels of perfection, inapplicable to the flesh and blood problems of real human beings? To Dewey, such approaches purchase theoretical simplicity at too high a practical cost.

Principles

Consistent with his value pluralism, Dewey holds that there is no one "single commensurable principle" that can be appealed to resolve problematic situations, individual or social. Nor should we expect any of our moral principles to "tell us" what we should do. Since Dewey also holds that practical inquiry is continuous with natural scientific experimental inquiry, the principles it yields will be hypothetical, not categorical, and descriptive rather than normative in form. "The object of moral principles," Dewey writes, "is to supply standpoints and methods which will enable the individual [acting individually or collectively] to make for himself an analysis of the elements of good and evil, in the particular situation" under review.[31] That is, they are generalizations or generalized descriptions of relations between ends and means, practices and duties, dispositions and approbation, that we can use to determine what the obstacles to

individual or collective endeavors are and what may be expected of any proposed solutions.

Every problematic situation is unique, but there are "generic features" of human nature, situations, and outcomes, that lend themselves to generalization. These generalizations are both probabilistic and defeasible: they will fail to predict actual outcomes in a certain percentage of cases and fail to be applicable at all (i.e. "defeated") when problematic situations deviate too far from the samples from which the generalizations were made.[32] Likewise, every practice is unique, but there are generic features of practices we can capture in defeasible generalizations about what constitutes satisfactory performance of a practice, or satisfactory performance by a practice of its role within a set of social practices. And finally there are generic features of the admirable in human character traits that lend themselves to similar sorts of generalizations.

Commonsense morality is a vast repository of such principles to whose use our cultural training has habituated us. Being habituated to them, we can immediately and efficiently employ them at need, but are often so unconscious of them we give them little or no critical scrutiny. Since their role is descriptive and explanatory, they can be checked for their fruitfulness as analytical tools for assisting us in understanding problematic situations and predicting the outcomes of various kinds of responses. Principles failing these tests should be reassessed and revised accordingly. Because the roles, resources, and obstacles we meet with individually and collectively change over time, past assumptions about what should count as paradigmatic instances of any of these need periodic review. Likewise, our notions of justice, equity, and benevolence, of the significance of institutional and personal practices, and the claims they justify, must be continually rethought in light of the ongoing social transformations caused by technological changes in production, communications, medicine, the arts, and education. And to be fully informed, this rethinking needs to be open and public, to take into account the experiences and proposals of everyone affected. Consequently, Dewey holds, the questioning of traditional principles of value is not, as some fear, a sign of moral decay, but just the reverse.

Returning to the issue of "amoralism" – of the inability to experience sincere moral judgments as motivating – we can see why Dewey

saw this as a commonplace phenomenon. While it is true that any *end* we correctly judge desirable is already desired and so directly motivating (to some degree), the same does not hold for judgments of right or virtue. To judge that a claim is justified or right is to judge relative to a practice. That judgment can be directly motivating, independent of any desires we may have, but only if the practice is one which we value and to which we are habituated. If not, the judgment may have no immediate motivational force *even if* we endorse the practice. Though sincere, it will be motivationally inert until or unless we have both endorsed the practice and habituated ourselves to the judgments and acts it involves.

With the virtues, the link between judgment and action is even less direct than with judgments of right. Admiration need not motivate any action at all. I can admire the courage or tenacity of Sir Edmund Hillary or Tensing Norgay, without feeling the least inclination to emulate them. The prospect of popular applause or a realization that I would be better equipped to succeed in my life projects if I emulated them may be required to turn my admiration into a motivation to action. Failing this, I can judge their characters admirable and yet feel no motivation to reform my own.

For Dewey, a more serious source of dissonance between judgment and motivation arises as an effect of the conservatism of habits and social practices. We are habituated to the use of principles and practices of value judgment that our customs and social institutions support. Settled habits, backed by social custom, can come to seem so "natural" that we may forget their origins as generalizations from our predecessors' empirical inquiries into situations whose generic features may no longer be representative of the ones we face. When this happens, the application of these traditional principles and practices to present issues can generate conclusions so unsatisfactory as to render them motivationally inert. Confusion about the source of the motivational gap leads some to blame it on personal or social weakness of will and others to conclude that moral values and requirements are inherently "unrealizable." For Dewey, however, the root cause of these real life cases of "amoralism" is sincere but mistaken interpretation of the nature of moral principles. The solution is to see them as tentative outcomes of ongoing, collective human inquiry into the means and methods available for ameliorating serious obstacles to the satisfactory conduct of personal and social life.

PRAGMATIC NORMATIVE THEORIZING

During Dewey's career, normative ethical theorizing was focused upon identification and justification of either a single moral principle or ranked series of moral principles for determining the morally right, best, or most virtuous solution to any apparent dilemma. Because Dewey's commitment to pluralism put him at odds with the goals of contemporary normative theorists, he did not engage in normative debates nor attempt to develop his own normative theory. But this does not mean that one cannot construct a pragmatic normative theory in keeping with Dewey's meta-ethics and moral psychology if certain caveats are carefully observed.

In contemporary terminology, Deweyan normative theorizing will be a form of pluralistic welfare consequentialism. But Dewey would not define "welfare" exclusively in terms of inner states such as pleasure or pain or the satisfaction of desire. Welfare, from a Deweyan perspective, would mean *faring well* over time in rising to the challenge of adapting ourselves and our ongoing projects to our ever-changing social and physical environments. Thus welfare is not an inner state we experience but is instead a *functional relationship* we maintain between our abilities, resources, and environment, on the one hand, and our interests, ends-in-view, habits, and desires, on the other. Given the facts of human physiology and psychology, certain objective and subjective conditions must be met if this functional relationship is to be maintained over time: (1) we must be able to avoid threats to our lives, our capacities, and to our access to those resources objectively necessary for faring well, including threats to our ability to sustain cooperative communities and the communal practices essential to distinctly human life, and (2) we must find ways of doing so that provide harmonious outlets for our habits and interests, tastes and desires.

From these general facts, we can generate a "thin," cross-cultural account of certain necessary constituents of welfare that may be used to evaluate practical deliberations both individual and collective. To determine what welfare in a specific social environment requires, we will have to go further, taking into account customary or traditional understandings that "thicken" the notions of good, right, and virtue that inform deliberations about personal and social welfare in different cultural contexts. Since real people always do operate within

specific cultural traditions, "thin" accounts will rarely provide sufficient criteria for any real person to determine how to act for the best. But they can provide useful criteria for determining which acts or choices are probably and/or defeasibly unwise or undesirable overall, whatever one's cultural tradition.

Judgments of or about the welfare of actual people always involve "thick" context-dependent concepts of good, right, and virtue that will vary from culture to culture. Moreover, as the necessary conditions of faring well over time differ so categorically from one another that they are neither interchangeable with nor reducible to one another (e.g. autonomy and rationality are not reducible to or interchangeable with sustenance or security), even the necessary constituents of human welfare will be irreducibly plural. The plurality of values has important implications for the conception of rational choice that pragmatic normative theorizing will employ. Specifically, pragmatic normative theorizing will eschew "maximizing" and "optimizing" conceptions in favor of a "*satisficing*" conception.[33] On the maximizing conception, decisions are rational if they maximize desired outcomes. But as we can only maximize for one outcome at a time, maximizing a plurality is impossible. On an optimizing conception, decisions are rational if they optimize a combination of desired outcomes. But we can optimize only if we have all the relevant information necessary for comparison of the future effects of our choices. In moral situations, however, we never possess the information required to optimize outcomes, partly because long-term effects of any act are hard to gauge, but mainly because the long-term binary effects of our choices upon ourselves make neutral, unbiased comparative assessment impossible. Moral choices *change agents* as well as their situations. Different choices result in different perspectives, and thus different experiences and values. To optimize in a moral situation, then, one would have to step out of one's actual perspective and enter into each of one's possible future perspectives, and then somehow compare these and their contents from some neutral, external standpoint. Since this is clearly impossible, it is unreasonable to expect moral choices to optimize values.

On a satisficing conception, however, any decision that yields acceptable results is rationally justifiable. Our strategy is to first establish minimum acceptable threshold levels for the diverse goods, rights, and/or virtues we wish to promote. Then using these

as criteria for evaluation, we review our options until we find one that satisfies them.[34] Any option that satisfies our minimum criteria is one we can reasonably adopt without further review of the alternatives. If time allows, we can continue our review as long as is practical, comparing our options for any additional advantages over and above the minimum necessary to resolve the problem at hand. If time does not allow, we need not view our truncated decision-making as necessarily rationally defective. Any choice is reasonable to the extent that it actually meets the needs of the situation we face. Thus many quite different solutions may all be equally reasonable on a satisficing conception.

Pragmatic normative theorizing will not offer principles specifying what is optimally best, right, or virtuous in a given situation, but rather principles that can help us to better determine where and how to set our minimum thresholds. It will be what Dewey calls an ameliorating normative theory, one that focuses primarily on helping us avoid evidently undesirable, wrong, or unwise choices without attempting to dictate what exactly our choices should be. As many of our commonsense moral principles are generally useful devices for identifying undesirable, wrong, or vicious acts and character traits, these will be used to determine whether and how far particular acts or traits are apt to help or hinder our efforts to reach minimum thresholds for human welfare – but with a critical eye to their practical consequences. Since most human beings on this planet are still unable to achieve and sustain even minimally satisfactory lives, pragmatic welfarism could contribute a great deal to contemporary moral and social debates.

NOTES

1. J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922), *MW* 14:228.
2. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 229.
3. See e.g. C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944) and A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Oxford: Gollancz, 1936). Emotivism was of course only one of several varieties of non-cognitivism current in the first half of the twentieth century. Prior to the appearance of emotivism in the 1930s, Dewey was already criticizing non-cognitivist theories of value in his exchanges with R. B. Perry and D. W. Prall in the *Journal of Philosophy* from 1915 through the 1920s.

4. On the "binary" character of practical judgment generally, see J. Dewey, "The Logic of Judgments of Practice" (1915), *MW* 8:14–82, 17–19. On the form peculiar to moral practical judgments, see J. Dewey and J. H. Tufts, *Ethics*, 2nd edn (1932), *LW* 7:286–287.
5. This is sometimes called the problem of "amoralism." For a classic discussion in relation to internalism, see D. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
6. Counterfactual judgments made in this way are sometimes called, following R. M. Hare, "inverted commas" moral judgments. See R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).
7. J. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), *LW* 4:224.
8. W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
9. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, pp. 18–19, 163, 195.
10. Dewey, "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," p. 26.
11. Dewey, "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," p. 24, and see D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd edn, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 415.
12. He goes on to say, "a mind or conscience or soul in general which performs these operations is a myth." See Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 123.
13. This should not be taken to mean that habits are a kind of mental machinery operating at odds with "free" or "voluntary" action. Unlike machines, we can evaluate and alter these mechanisms and so need not be constrained by them. Indeed, Dewey argues, free voluntary action is simply action directed by settled habits of reflection, foresight, and judgment.
14. J. Dewey, *Theory of Valuation* (1939), *LW* 13:215.
15. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 154.
16. Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, p. 234.
17. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 209, and see J. Dewey, "Valuation and experimental knowledge" (1922), *MW* 13:14.
18. Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, p. 231.
19. Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, p. 232.
20. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 194.
21. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 218.
22. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 218.
23. This fact, for Dewey, weighs heavily in favor of liberal democracy as a basis for social institutions.
24. J. Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals" (1930), *LW* 5:280, and see also Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 2nd edn, pp. 308–309.

25. Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," p. 281.
26. It does mean, however, that practices failing to ensure each contributor receives some kind of benefit may become so undesirable for the excluded parties that they can no longer rationally endorse it – in which case its rules would cease to have any normative force for them.
27. Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," p. 285.
28. Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," p. 286.
29. Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," p. 287.
30. Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," p. 287.
31. Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 2nd edn, p. 280.
32. Thus one might hold that dishonesty is generally wrong or bad, but if one does so based on a sample that does not include cases where lying is necessary to save a life, one may reasonably refuse to consider it applicable in such cases.
33. The term was introduced by an economist, Herbert Simon. See his "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 69 (1955), 99–118. For recent discussions of satisficing versus maximizing or optimizing, see Michael Byron, ed., *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theorists on Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
34. This does not mean there is no role for maximizing or optimizing rationality. We can maximize particular values in certain situations, especially non-moral ones, where it is possible to hold other values temporarily constant and then maximize one value within those limits. We can also optimize in situations, especially non-moral ones, where our sets of options differ in relatively few particulars, if all of the effects can be adequately predicted and none is apt to so alter the perspective of the agent choosing as to make it impossible to review each from a single, constant perspective. In the language of contemporary debate on this topic, we can maximize and optimize "locally" but not "globally."