Dewey
A Beginner's Guide

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Morality: character, conduct, and moral experience

Introduction: moral experience and critique of traditional ethics

For many in the Western tradition, the primary ethical question has been 'Why be moral? Why should one do something that is not in one's interest?'[1] The question is based on the belief that morality is not something anyone *wants* to embrace – one must be persuaded it is *in one's interest* to be moral, and that morality, at its core, is a constraint on what one would *really* like to do. The assumption behind the central importance of this question – and the reaction mentioned above to it – is that morality is something imposed by an external source, be it a transcendental authority (God, Nature, Reason, etc.) or supra-individual custom (society, religion, cultural traditions, etc.). Moral *experience*, as understood by this framework, is something radically distinct from everyday experiences of domestic and industrial relations; moreover, there is implied a special moral *realm* which, while not as obviously extra-mundane as the realm called 'spiritual', is nevertheless seen as deserving the specialized study of moral theorists.

For Dewey, morality is not like this. Looking at everyday life, one sees how moral concerns permeate much of experience and require nearly constant deliberation and choice of action, whether issues are minute or momentous. To take 'Why be

moral?' as the *central* question of ethics struck Dewey as absurd, and he responds with an alternative that critiques traditional assumptions and reconstructs ethics in a way that emphasizes the integral connections between human beings, nature, and society. No man is an island, the poet says; for Dewey this means more than 'no man is self-sufficient'. It means that each person's identity exists only in virtue of social interaction. Just as one is a 'fullback' in soccer only through existing relations to other positions (and the rules), humans are moral individuals in-and-through their interactions with groups. Economists speak of 'interest satisfaction' as if human conduct could be understood by aggregating the preferences of numerous atomic individuals. But no 'interest' is never meaningful in such strict isolation; interests (needs, desires) are meaningful only as understood within the social and historical contexts that help form them.

These examples help introduce a central Deweyan point: any moral theory that assumes a model of experience that views inter-action as *accidental* – as something happening to already-formed individuals – is superficial. For Dewey, experience is the complex interplay and transaction of one-as-participant-and-product of the world; it is inadequate for moral theories to depict moral agents as inert atoms, pushed around by the gravity of custom; nor is it appropriate to vest in each agent a moral universe unto herself. Traditional theoretical choices (objective realism *or* subjective idealism) falsify and obscure moral experience's complexity. In part tradition errs by assuming an inadequate model of human nature and conduct; in part, it errs by seeking a moral theory aspiring to the rigor of Newtonian physics. But such approaches are too abstract, spectatorial, and fixated on certainty to be of use to real people with problems. As Gregory Pappas put it,

> Dewey's concern with ethics arose out of his perception that individuals and institutions had not been able to find viable alternatives to the moral absolutism offered by custom and

authority, on the one side, and the subjectivistic views supported by moral philosophers on the other. He thought that such ethical theories, as well as the economic and political institutions that depend upon and perpetuate them, have tended to encourage habits and attitudes that impoverish moral life.

(Pappas in Hickman 1998, 101–2)

Dewey offers both a redescription of moral experience and a reconstruction of ethical theory based on this new understanding of our living moral realities. 'If moral theory is *in* and *for* our moral life', Pappas writes of Dewey, 'then one cannot determine what an adequate ethical theory will be without considering what kind of moral theory works better within our actual moral lives' (Pappas in Hickman 1998, 104). Dewey demonstrates that, contrary to traditional assumptions, philosophy should not attempt to reconcile the diametrical opposition between interest and morality assumed by 'Why be moral?' Instead, philosophy should critique past theories' mistaken descriptions (of moral experience, ends) and prescriptions (about how to live) to equip individuals and communities with more constructive methods for addressing problems.

To understand Dewey's ethics, begin with the dramatic statement: 'moral life is tragic'. If moral theory begins from the practical starting point of everyday life, what is found? First and foremost that living consistently involves us in situations both precarious and stable. Prosperity is suddenly shattered by adversity and a struggle to adjust ensues. Stability may be more or less recovered, but even this lasts a relatively short while. For those living in hope of constant harmony, the above picture is, at best, a compromise, and at worst, tragic (blamable perhaps on our expulsion from the Garden of Eden). Moreover, traditional ethics typically rejects this practical starting point altogether. Rather than accept, as a basis for theorizing, the genuinely precarious and conflictual nature of human life, political and ethical theories

have sought certainty instead. This pursuit of certainty has required the invention of a separate realm for ethical concepts. 'Moral philosophers', Pappas writes,

> have consistently sought to prove that there exist, independently of the 'phenomenal' changes that occur in the world, special moral precepts that are universal, fixed, certain, and unchanging. But in Dewey's view, change, conflict, contingency, uncertainty, and struggle are at the very heart of moral experience.
>
> (Pappas in Hickman 1998, 107)

The first key, then, to understanding Dewey's ethics is 'moral experience'. Moral experience, as defined in Dewey's and Tufts' 1908 book *Ethics*, 'is . . . that kind of conduct in which there are ends so discrepant, so incompatible, as to require selection of one and rejection of the other' (MW5:194). In contrast to cases where one knows, automatically, what to do, for Dewey 'only *deliberate* action, conduct into which *reflective* choice enters, is *distinctively moral*, for only then does there enter the question of *better* and *worse*' (MW14:193, emphasis mine). The gravity of the choice, it is worth noting, does *not* help discriminate 'moral' from 'non-moral'. A momentous decision (for example, to kill another person), given the right circumstances, may raise *no* moral issues while a more trivial decision (to privilege an older child over their siblings) may be rife with moral implications. In other words, the custom of identifying 'moral' choices with 'weighty' ones must be surrendered. For Dewey, the difference between a moral and non-moral experience derives from the agent's need to perceive and select from incompatible alternatives.

Dewey's approach will strike many as counterintuitive. After all, it requires that one reject the deeply ingrained notion that experiences concerning weighty issues (like life and death) are always 'moral'. It also requires that we stop identifying the moral

with choices affecting motives, consequences, or aspects of character. Such elements may need to be considered, but what characterizes morality, *per se*, is the existence of a *situation* saturated by conflicting elements which *demands* that engaged agents determine *reflectively* what to value and what ends to pursue.

> It is *incompatibility of ends* which necessitates consideration of the true worth of a given end; and *such consideration* it is which *brings the experience into the moral sphere*. Conduct as moral may thus be defined as activity called forth and directed by ideas of value or worth, where the values concerned are so mutually incompatible as to require consideration and selection before an overt action is entered upon.
>
> (MW5:194, emphasis mine)

A moral situation obtains when one is unable to choose between ends. There may be several causes for the indecision. Perhaps the values of the various ends have, until now, been equal in the agent's view; or perhaps the present juxtaposition of options is so unusual that the agent has never considered them as competitors. Then again, the agent may see that one of the choices entails profound changes in their future character and they are ambivalent about taking that path. Regardless of what best explains any particular case, the difficulties inherent in moral situations help draw attention to another central feature of moral experience: the role of habit.

When a choice stops one cold, at least a pause in physical action is necessary. Like other creatures in a problematic situation, some way forward is needed to cope with the problem, but no immediate solutions present themselves. There is a dearth of habits. Habits are not simple 'hardwired' instructions but sets of functions that embody previously chosen ends; habits are largely responsible for the continuity of conduct. 'Habit' covers not

only rudimentary behavioral phenomena such as walking, but many complex skills involved in mating, food–gathering, conversation, and play. Some reach far back into the history of our species and are so automatic we call them 'instinct', while others trace back only into the history of one's nation, family, or individual development.

Most of the time, habits quickly tell us what to do: sniff the mushroom, nod politely, duck the flying object. In such cases, pragmatically, there is no question about which end to pursue and habits smoothly carry us forward. What makes an experience especially 'moral' is that *habits necessary to resolve the problem are missing* (or undeveloped), yet one is aware that a choice for the better *must* be made. In Dewey's view, traditional emphases on 'reason' over 'habit' (a 'mind/body' prejudice, essentially) overlook what is truly crucial to ethical theorizing, namely recognition that what demands discrimination is 'not between reason and habit but between routine, unintelligent habit, and intelligent habit or art' (MW14:55). Rather than addressing problems with the general question, 'What action should one take?', ethics should instead ask 'What *habit* is appropriate for addressing problems of this type, how can it be developed, and how can it be incorporated as a stable feature of conduct?'

Being ethical requires that one knows what to do, and how to keep doing it. Accomplishing this first requires that one criticize approaches that rely upon singular and certain ('magic bullet') answers to moral dilemmas. Regular reliance on such answers rigidifies habit, and makes it less adaptable and successful. (Accepting Dewey's description of moral experience can help resist such reliances.) Being ethical also requires that one understand what moral inquiry is and then engage in it. Such inquiry has both scientific and artistic qualities. Like science, moral inquiry must be broadly empirical, experimental, and hypothetical; like the arts, it must use techniques that are

imaginative and dramatic so that deliberation can assist with the widest possible range of morally problematic cases.

One of Dewey's most compact criticisms of traditional ethics is 'Three Independent Factors in Morals' (1930). Consider again the primordial question for much of the ethical tradition: Why be moral? If this is the *central* challenge for ethics, then the answer (if found) should provide an answer that can 'clarify' the conflictual nature of moral problems in a way that is absolute, objective, and certain. A number of ethical systems have been developed to eliminate this uncertainty. One influential approach makes character (or virtue) central; morality, then, is a system of praise and blame organized around the development of a healthy character living a meaningful life. Aristotle is the most famous Western proponent of virtue theory. A second approach makes consequences (or desire) paramount; an action's moral worth is estimated by relating it to the amount of pleasure created for the maximum number of persons. John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham are the most famous proponents of this utilitarian approach. A third approach takes rights (or duty) as central to morality; since a moral agent is a rational being, the morality of any choice is determined not by looking at consequences or character, but by evaluating whether the choice itself was an exclusively rational expression of the agent. Immanuel Kant is the most famous proponent of this deontological ethics.[2]

While these theories diverge at many places, and stand in sharp opposition to one another on fundamental points, Dewey believes that they share several devastating flaws. First, all dismiss the reality of the *uncertainty* that is a part of any moral situation. To them, conflict is mere appearance awaiting philosophy to bring reality (and goodness) as a solution:

> Whatever may be the differences which separate moral theories, all postulate one single principle as an explanation of moral life.

> Under such conditions, it is not possible to have either uncer-
> tainty or conflict: morally speaking, the conflict is only specious
> and apparent. Conflict is, in effect, between good and evil,
> justice and injustice, duty and caprice, virtue and vice, and is
> not an inherent part of the good, the obligatory, the virtuous.
>
> (LW5:280)

According to the tradition, moral uncertainty about, say, whether
to prolong someone's life on a respirator is no different than, say,
the perceptual uncertainty of a stick submerged in water. Is the
stick straight or bent? If the stick is part of a world independent
of thoughts about it, the stick can only be straight *or* bent – it *is*
only one of them, regardless of how much perceptual ambiguity
the perceiver *feels*. The same holds, traditionalists reason, about
morally ambiguous cases. There must be some *moral way the world
is* – some single, determinate reality that is independent of moral
agents. Though *we* are morally ambivalent about active euthana-
sia, we can at least be sure *it* is right or wrong.

Why do philosophers think of reality this way? Dewey argues
that the main impetus to *presume* a reality that transcends ordinary
experience derives from an age-old 'quest for certainty'. That
quest spawned centuries of attempts to demystify reality with
grandiose theories covering *all* cases one could encounter. Moral
philosophy has taken up this quest insofar as it has sought a single
cause or overarching explanatory principle for conduct. Such an
ambition is irresponsible in at least two important ways.

First, it is *intellectually irresponsible* to search for such theories
once experience provides sufficient evidence to conclude that
more than one factor is likely to be at work in moral experience.
This prejudice (to produce a single explanation) tends to set
theoretical camps against one another. Since all share the
presumption that there should be only *one* explanatory principle
('right duty' *or* 'good consequences' *or* 'virtuous character', etc.),
cooperation among philosophers is mooted at the very start

of concrete moral inquiry. This shared prejudice (against a practical and fallible approach) prevents philosophers from developing multicausal (and empirically sensitive) explanations, which may be the *only* form a solution can take. For these reasons, Dewey writes, we must reject traditional ethical theories 'which identify morals with the purification of motives, edifying character, pursuing remote and elusive perfection, obeying supernatural command, [or] acknowledging the author-ity of duty' (MW14:194).

Second, monocausal explanations are *irresponsible in practice* because they are typically unable to address morally complex issues (such as war or economic justice) and so they waste precious opportunities to alleviate human misery. One reason for these theories' impotence is their predilection to assume that *their* principles are decisive – even before a single, concrete case of moral inquiry is before them. As a result, excessive attention is paid to one idea or factor ('duty', 'consequences', etc.) of a complex situation while the remaining situational details are neglected. The result is a lack of serious, empirical scrutiny and the disconnection of ethics from everyday life. Of the attention paid to such ideas, Dewey writes,

> Such notions have a dual bad effect. First they get in the way of observation of conditions and consequences. They divert thought into side issues. Secondly, while they confer a morbid exaggerated quality upon things which are viewed under the aspect of morality, they release the larger part of the acts of life from serious, that is moral, survey. Anxious solicitude for the few acts which are deemed moral is accompanied by edicts of exemption and baths of immunity for most acts. A moral moratorium prevails for everyday affairs.
>
> (MW14:194)

Given the magnitude of humanity's problems, we can neither afford to 'divert thought into side issues' nor enact 'a moral

moratorium . . . for everyday affairs'. In fact, the practical cost of irresponsible and ineffective moral theories is, itself, moral. By wasting time and energy on overambitious or myopic ethical fantasies, philosophers ignore practical problems and deprive actual people of the aid or relief they deserve.

The larger point of this discussion about monocausal explanations is about inquiry. Moral progress, for Dewey, really comes down to *process* – the degree to which we habitually inquire in nuanced and scrupulous ways:

> [M]oral progress and the sharpening of character depend on the ability to make delicate distinctions, to perceive aspects of good and of evil not previously noticed, to take into account the fact that doubt and the need for choice impinge at every turn. Moral decline is on a par with the loss of that ability to make delicate distinctions, with the blunting and hardening of the capacity of discrimination.
>
> (LW5:280)

This little paragraph nicely encapsulates pragmatism's existentialist and instrumentalist dimensions. To exist as a moral being is to be aware that *choice is an ever-present obligation*; in order to fulfill this obligation in a way that propels us toward growth (or authenticity), we must hone the ability to *devise distinctions that make a difference* to future practice. Both objectives, in turn, imply that the reconstruction of ethical theory must turn away from traditional theory and toward the resources of contemporary science.

Reconstructing ethics

So far we have seen that, for Dewey, the reconstruction of ethical theorizing begins with a practical, radically empirical, starting

point. Taking this approach is an acknowledgment that the concrete necessities of situated moral experiences are *more* relevant *to theory* than most of the abstract principles inherited from past systems. It helps reveal major blind spots of traditional theories, including (1) their denigration of the inherently uncertain character of moral problems; (2) their disregard of the complexities of moral experience; and (3) their exaggerated confidence that philosophy could address living moral issues with overarching and monocausal explanations. With these fundamentals out of the way, Dewey's positive proposals for ethical theory can now be discussed.

What should ethical theory be and do? According to Dewey, ethical theory must be 'more than a remote exercise in conceptual analysis' or 'a mere mode of preaching and exhortation'. It is not theory's job to 'provide a ready-made solution to large moral perplexities'. Rather, theory should 'enlighten and guide choice and action by revealing alternatives . . . [including] what is entailed when we choose one alternative rather than another'. While theory does not make personal and reflective choices for us, it serves as 'an instrument for rendering deliberation more effective and hence choice more intelligent' (foregoing quotations from LW7:316).[3] Moral theories are, then, similar to all other theories – they are functions within a larger problem-solving act, moral inquiry.

Moral problems are addressed, then, by moral inquiry, which includes the functional phases mentioned above, deliberation and choice. Like other types of inquiry, moral inquiry exhibits regular patterns, and some can be made explicit. 'There are three predominant stages in Dewey's model of moral inquiry. First, the agent finds herself in a morally problematic situation. Second, the agent engages in a process of moral deliberation. Finally, she arrives at a judgment that results in a choice' (Pappas in Hickman 1998, 108). This account, so far, seems to express a commonsense schema of a problem; there is awareness of moral

tension, the consequences at stake, and one's duty to safeguard important principles and values.

Deweyan moral inquiry becomes interesting when parallels with scientific inquiry are highlighted. As in science, moral inquiry is *predominantly hypothetical and prospective*. While respecting the capacity of past experiences to *inform* present choices, the *worship* of past experience is avoided; precedent can never be treated as a template for action. Previously chosen values are not talismans but clues that must be worked into an ongoing decision process. For example, when I choose from a restaurant menu I often recall my previous meal at that restaurant. Memory assists my decision *not* because it forces a repetition of past choices, but because it provides *data* (about what is valuable) that can be factored in. This example is obviously non-moral, but it helps reinforce Dewey's point that the general hypothetical approach (commonly found in everyday life, science, and technological innovation) is *also* appropriate to moral inquiry.

Because moral inquiry is hypothetical, it is disposed to treat every problematic situation (and resulting solution) as unique. And while a hypothetical stance does not demand that morality be reinvented for every case – sometimes old rules survive intact because of their virtuosic usefulness – it does release moral inquirers from blind obeisance to old formulas, laws, and classifications that no longer relate to present conditions.

> *A moral law*, like a law in physics, is not something to swear by and stick to at all hazards; it *is a formula of the way to respond when specified conditions present themselves*. Its soundness and pertinence are tested by what happens when it is acted upon. Its claim or authority rests finally upon the imperativeness of *the situation* that has to be dealt with, *not* upon its own *intrinsic nature* – as any tool achieves dignity in the measure of needs served by it.
>
> (LW4:222, emphasis mine)

All past moral solutions – laws, rules, prescriptions – are provisional, and their survival depends upon how they perform in future inquiries addressing new problems. A rule considered 'authoritative' ('Refrain at all costs from harming innocent persons') has *acquired* this authority because it has proved so adequate in mediating experience that, on reflection, we have singled it out for praise and incorporated it as a habit.

Ethics makes progress, then, by emphasizing the hypothetical approach of moral inquiry. As we have seen, this approach insists that moral rules and laws possess, at best, a provisional status, not an absolute one. The hypothetical approach also encourages a greater tolerance toward *persons* with diverse points of view – those with whom we already disagree and those with new, seemingly radical, ideas. Writing in 1949 about interfaith understanding, Dewey says

> Genuine toleration does not mean merely putting up with what we dislike, nor does it mean indifference . . . It includes active sympathy with the struggles and trials of those of other faiths than ours and a desire to cooperate with them in the give-and-take process of search for more light . . . There may be, there will be differences on many points. But we may learn to make these differences a means of learning, understanding that mere identity means cessation of power of growth.
>
> (LW15:183)

Dewey's writings on education (see chapter 5) are particularly eloquent on the pedagogical steps needed to create tolerance (which he enlarges to the pedagogical ambition of a 'total attitude'). What is noteworthy here is that Dewey's hypothesis-based tolerance is valuable not only because it exhorts compassion, but because tolerant conduct enables cooperation that, over time, yields more satisfactory intellectual and ethical results.

Dewey believes that ethics can do more than borrow from scientific method, and become scientific itself. Why would this be necessary? First, Dewey observes that the complexity and stakes of contemporary moral choices are becoming increasingly complex and momentous. Average people, facing such choices, should be able to appropriate and use the same powerful logical tools which have helped science and industry master the physical forces of nature. Second, Dewey notes that the scientific approach has the enviable advantage of keeping the burden of proof on any critic whose proposals brought only provisional justification. This scientific habit would help not only by preventing rash ethical judgments (with little or no evidence) but would also incorporate into moral judgment the disposition to revise conclusions when new conditions complicate previously accepted solutions.

Understood as a science, then, ethics 'is concerned with collecting, describing, explaining and classifying the facts of experience in which judgments of right and wrong are actually embodied or to which they apply' (MW3:41). Considering that morality's compass is so broad, moral theory has to do more than borrow from the physical sciences' *methods* of inquiry; it needs to utilize the *content* of scientific discoveries, too. In other words, since moral inquiry focuses on moral *situations* (rather than the rules, duties, or calculative procedures or moral agents) the range and quantity of empirical data necessary to construct a rich characterization of such situations is far greater than ever before. Examples of relevant scientific research might begin with 'biology, physiology, hygiene and medicine, psychology and psychiatry, as well as statistics, sociology, economics, and politics' (LW7:179).

Thus, the enterprise Dewey calls 'a genuinely reflective morals' would be an inquiry with a range of data extraordinarily broad when compared with traditional ethics. And while it would draw from the content of many scientific disciplines

(psychology, biology, etc.) it would *also* incorporate the lessons of social custom, jurisprudence, and biographical texts.[4] Finally, genuinely reflective moral theory would continue to reread philosophy's great moral systems, not because some new system can be pieced together out of them – or because they can be reconciled – but because the wealth of this variety of thoughtful moral positions (with, of course, objections, counterexamples, and implications) may cast light on present problems. By studying philosophers such as Plato, Hume, and Kant (to name just three) we are rewarded by their ability to 'reveal the complexity of moral situations . . . [so as] to bring to light some phase of [our] moral life demanding reflective attention, and which, save for it, might have remained hidden' (LW7:180).

We have been talking about Dewey's theory of moral inquiry in some fairly abstract ways – the structure of moral inquiry, its basic methodology, and the various intellectual resources useful for its reconstruction. Before leaving the topic of moral inquiry, let us revisit the perspective of someone stuck in a moral jam, for part of Dewey's explanation (of how pragmatist moral inquiry can assist people in jams) is an expansive account of deliberation, including a phase called 'dramatic rehearsal'.

Moral inquiry, recall, is a reflective response – intervening with analysis and imaginative deliberation – when action is frustrated. Deliberation in ethics has traditionally meant a mechanical calculation of future pains or pleasures, advantages and disadvantages. Dewey expands the meaning of deliberation; it includes traditional forecasting, but also much more. Deliberation may also proceed by dialogue, visualization, imagining of motor responses, and imagining how others might react to a deed done. Some deliberation uses 'dramatic rehearsal' to illuminate the emotional color and weight of various possibilities.

> Deliberation is a process of active, suppressed, rehearsal; of imaginative dramatic performance of various deeds carrying to their appropriate issues the various tendencies which we feel stirring within us . . . We give way, in our mind, to some impulse; we try, in our mind, some plan. Following its career through various steps, we find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow; and as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad. Deliberation is dramatic and active, not mathematical and impersonal.
>
> (MW5:292, 293)

Obviously, one benefit to such rehearsal is that no great commitment in physical action is made; various hypotheses about what is best to do can be tested imaginatively without provoking irrevocable consequences. Just as important, though, as the avoidance of consequences is the way dramatic rehearsal serves to make us more self-conscious of what we already think is valuable. This happens because by trying out various courses of action in imagination, we not only map out logical possibilities, we also evoke and make explicit *our* reaction; we test how we would feel if we did an action – what sort of person we would become. And while deliberation connotes a solitary act, much deliberation is actually social, 'not only in the sense that we must take consequences for others into consideration but also in the sense that conversation with others provides the means for reflection' (Fesmire 2003, 82).

Dewey's expanded notion of deliberation (as dramatic rehearsal) finds connections with his writing on education. As early as 1893 Dewey was advising high-school ethics teachers to focus students' earliest training on picturing the details of proposed moral dilemmas rather than focusing on 'the' solution to them. His argument was that the training of flexible and creative student imaginations would be of much greater use in

actual moral quandaries than the memorization of rules or principles. The argument still seems a powerful one.

By this point in our discussion, some readers are likely to be harboring an impatient question: 'Yes, yes, morality involves inquiry, and inquiry involves deliberation. That's easy to accept. But isn't morality about the nature of the *values and goals* a person should strive for? Shouldn't theory tell us whether values are discovered or constructed, and even which specific values are *good*?' As we start to consider Dewey's theory of moral value, consider that philosophical moral theory was born, in part, from peoples' need to think and act outside rigid moral codes and values (or ends) sustained by *custom*. As situations developed that could not be addressed by these customary guides, a crisis arose for moral agents and society. On one hand, unreflectively obedi-ent conduct no longer worked; on the other hand, the instinct to hew to past practice was so intense that acting outside customary morality seemed akin to either moral rebellion or anarchy. In short, when custom fails, the way is obscure. What ends should be pursued? What is good, after all? One result of such crises is a renewed appeal to 'traditional' or 'eternal' moral truths; another result is sensualism – shallow, reactive choices for what gratifies immediately. Neither strategy has been particularly effective in creating the adjustments required.

In lieu of these approaches, Dewey promotes the capacity of pragmatic moral inquiry to sort out the nature of a problem and its possible solutions. Inquiry also has the ability to reconsider and reconstruct even the moral values and ends at stake, questioning the purposes people use to direct their conduct, and why such purposes are good (LW7:184). Moral inquiry not only discovers morality, it *makes* it.

Since moral values are not absolute, they must occasionally be constructed or modified. Of course, in any particular moral situation one may *find* that things already possess value. In such cases one has an immediate experience of something 'good', say,

or 'bad'. If I witness a bystander being assaulted – without warning, by a stranger, for no apparent reason – I typically do *not* need to construct any values regarding harm to innocents. The facts before me are plain, and I perceive the 'wrongness' of the event as immediately as I perceive the 'blueness' of the victim's coat. But the fact that I can quickly interpret this event's morality does *not* mean there was not some *previous* occasion where others had to work out what was happening and decide what value should attach to it. I am simply the beneficiary of their inquiry, and I don't need to reconstruct the value at stake before me because the object or person I'm judging as valuable already possesses 'a certain *force* within a situation temporally developing toward a determinate result' (MW8:29). What is important, from the standpoint of Deweyan ethics, is that we do not read too much into the immediacy with which values are sometimes appreciated; the *experience* of a good or value should not be confused with an *endorsement* of it.[5] Dewey writes, 'To say that something is enjoyed is to make a statement about a fact, something already in existence; it is not to judge the value of that fact . . . But to call an object a value is to assert that it satisfies or fulfills certain conditions' (LW4:207–8).

The difference between immediate experience and reflective endorsement as set out by Dewey is the difference between '*valuing*' (or 'prizing') something and '*evaluating*' (or 'appraising') it. *Valuing* is immediate – value is felt as present in experience. *Evaluating* (also called 'valuation' by Dewey) is mediate or reflective – value is indeterminate and inquiry must endeavor to clarify the situation. Anyone who diets knows that these two are easily distinguished since 'the fact that something is desired only raises the question of its desirability; it does not settle it' (LW4:208). I love carbohydrates – and I *value* this cream donut before me. But this fact about the situation does not settle whether I should eat the donut, given other considerations, such as my health. My course of action requires *evaluation*, and that requires inquiry.

Dewey's distinction between values felt (prized) and values considered (appraised) replaces the is/ought (descriptive/normative) distinction, which was traditionally used to demarcate moral from non-moral questions. For Dewey, 'is' and 'ought' differ not categorically but by the degree to which someone regards 'some desires and interests as shortsighted, "blind," and others, in contrast, as enlightened, farsighted' (LW13:214). There is no immediate intuition of is and ought, no instant sizing up of the 'objective values' to be safeguarded in a situation. Is and ought, shortsighted and farsighted, can be distinguished only by intelligently considering how a desire or interest affect further consequences. They are the eventual products of operations of inquiry. 'In short', Dewey writes, 'a truly moral (or right) act is one which is intelligent in an emphatic and peculiar sense; it is a reasonable act. It is not merely one which is thought of, and thought of as good, at the moment of action, but one which will continue to be thought of as "good" in the most alert and persistent reflection' (MW5:278–9).

Much effort in moral theory has been spent searching out what is really and unqualifiedly good or valuable. Traditional theory harbors a major divide between those who believe that 'the ends can sometimes justify the means' and those who maintain that some means are strictly immoral, no matter how good the final end. One influential school, so-called teleological ethics, refuses to judge absolutely that a particular act (means) is right or wrong. One cannot judge means in isolation from whether they might, in fact, contribute to ends (consequences) good enough to justify them. One may tell a white lie (a means or instrumental good) to one's grandmother about her awful cooking to preserve a warm and loving relationship (an end or intrinsic good). An opposing school, so-called deontological ethics, argues that right and wrong can and should be determined *without* reference to possible consequences. What the

teleologist is willing to call a 'mere' means (or instrumental good) may on its face conflict with what the deontologist believes is our rational duty (e.g., not to lie). Morality, for deontologists, requires that conduct conform to principle, not consequences, and so good acts cannot violate our duty to principle. Sorry grandma.

Dewey believes that this conflict (between teleological and deontological ethics) does not exhaust the possible ways moral experience can be framed. We can avoid the dilemma by avoiding the fundamental assumption made by both schools – that moral judgments must be made on a basis that is monocausal. Deweyan ethics refuses to base all moral judgments upon *either* 'consequences' or 'duty' (means or ends, good or right) and instead considers them as multiple, contributing factors in moral experience (along with virtue or character).[6] In complex situations, such factors are often interrelated and interdependent. And in living moral practice, there is no categorical difference between a means and an end. 'Means and ends are two names for the same reality', Dewey writes. 'The terms denote not a division in reality but a distinction in judgment . . . "End" is a name for a series of acts taken collectively – like the term army. "Means" is a name for the same series taken distributively – like this soldier, that officer.' (LW14:28.)

The distinctions made between means and ends are functional ones. If I seek to accomplish some end (playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*), that end functions by organizing and directing the means-process; once I choose my means (learning to read music for example), those means become, temporarily, ends as well. They are ends-in-view. This way of treating means as temporary ends is actually quite pragmatic: 'Until one takes intermediate acts seriously enough to treat them as ends', Dewey writes, 'one wastes one's time in any effort at change of habits' (LW14:28). In short, *what counts as a 'means' and an 'end'* (or 'cause' and 'effect') *depends on where one draws the boundaries of the*

situation. Nothing can be called, absolutely, a 'means' or 'end' because, Dewey writes, 'the distinction between ends and means is temporal and relational' (LW13:229).

Dewey's point about means and ends is perhaps best illustrated in his philosophy of education; in contrast to traditional views, he believes that children are not 'incomplete' adults (mere means), empty vessels that need to be filled as efficiently as possible. Pedagogy must start with the understanding that the child has a point of view, too (is an end). While any lesson surely functions as a means (say, of learning the alphabet) it is also what-the-child-does: an end-in-view. The pedagogic burden shifts, then, toward answering empirical questions such as, what makes *this* particular means–ends significant (not trivial), humanizing (not alienating)? The difference will depend, in part, upon whether the lesson *and* the child are seen as ends, and not mere means.

By rejecting the notion – in education, morality, and everywhere else – of absolute ends-in-themselves, Dewey insists that theorists take a practical starting point. For ethics, this means surrendering the idea that key ethical concepts (value, good, right, virtue, etc.) have *any* anchor in a fixed and final reality, transcendent of human experience. To judge some act or event good or bad does not attribute to it the metaphysical character of 'goodness' or 'badness'. It makes a practical judgment about *doing* something, sooner or later. Because moral judgments do not pretend to be metaphysical reports, we are relieved of deciding whether moral values are 'really' in an agent's mind, a Platonic Form, or in an 'objective' and material world. For the practical ethicists, inquiries shift away from such metaphysical inquiries toward empirical ones concerning how to discover, make, and sustain value for struggling creatures in a changing world.

Adaptation never happens wholesale; each problem inhabits a situation that is uniquely new. And confronting the new

requires choosing what to do, what to value or disvalue. As we tackle these challenges – experimentally and hypothetically – it is of little use to inquire into whether things or events 'really' have value, or whether value 'really' can be created. Some things will be experienced as valuable, non-reflectively; they will present themselves as 'obviously valued'. But such valuings will always be situated in a context, and contexts change. No matter how stable the context, no matter how forceful, universal, and enduring a value, it is still illegitimate to infer that this value is, therefore, eternal and unqualified – and thus immune to reconsideration (inquiry) at some future moment. Experience and inquiry are ongoing processes, and if one assumes a pragmatic and hypothetical stance, absolute values simply have no place.

Though his philosophy rejects absolute perspectives, values, and criteria in morality, Dewey did not shrink from holding moral views and values. Some moral stands were philosophical, and some were political; at times, they exposed Dewey to serious personal and professional risks. Dewey's moral theory cannot be equated to a set of prescriptive commandments or timeless values, therefore some claim that it represents one more token of moral relativism, even nihilism. But Dewey can reply that if critics require a moral criterion which is central to his ethics, he will point to *growth*. Whether one is judging the worth of an action or the direction of a person's character, the measure for that judgment must be taken *not* by looking to static outcomes, results, or final goals but to the *process* – whether there is growth. In morals, Dewey writes,

> The *end* is . . . the active process of transforming the existent situation. Not perfection as a final goal, but *the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living*. Honesty, industry, temperance, justice, like health, wealth and learning, are not goods to be possessed as they would be if they expressed

fixed ends to be attained. They are directions of change in the
quality of experience. Growth itself is the only moral 'end'.

<div align="right">(MW12:181, emphasis mine)</div>

Critics such as John Patrick Diggins and Kenneth Burke have
questioned the standard by which these processes (of *perfecting,
maturing, refining)* are to be judged. Is it possible to believe that
a separate standard exists for every individual?[7] Dewey thought
that radically individualistic standards did not exist – that there
was something *like* a human nature to measure whether a change
should be considered 'growth'. Dewey's view, however, retains
an important qualification: while we can identify central, recur-
ring features of 'human nature' we do so *without* insisting that
these features are *unalterable*. As an empiricist and a naturalist,
Dewey can admit that scientific evidence shows that some
human characteristics have barely changed since 'man became
man' and are unlikely to change 'as long as man is on the earth'
(LW13:286). Regardless of which exact traits comprise the most
adequate portrait of human nature (a question which must itself
be nested in a specific inquiry), the point is that their justifica-
tion is empirical not speculative. Their purpose in ethics is
pragmatic: to provide moral inquirers with a criterion for moral
judgment:

> No individual or group will be judged by whether they come
> up to or fall short of some fixed result, but by the direction in
> which they are moving. The bad man is the man who no
> matter how good he has been is beginning to deteriorate, to
> grow less good. The good man is the man who no matter how
> morally unworthy he has been is moving to become better.

<div align="right">(MW12:180–1)</div>

Dewey's ethics must issue judgments, of course, if it is to help
make life better. Since these judgments are fallible, they must be

accepted with caution, and so must any standard of human nature on which they are based. Dewey's belief was that a cautious and fallible approach would enable moral inquiry to move ahead far less arrogantly than those based upon absolute systems. 'Such a [process-based] conception', Dewey writes, 'makes one severe in judging himself and humane in judging others. It excludes that arrogance which always accompanies judgment based on degree of approximation to fixed ends' (MW12:180–1).

Is Dewey a relativist – does he believe that moral principles and values can have no stability beyond that awarded to them by a person or group, no matter how arbitrary or capricious? Is he a subjectivist – does he hold that all moral positions come to no more than reports about that which the speaker approves or disapproves, or about the speaker's feelings? Critics such as C.I. Lewis and George Santayana took Dewey's rejection of absolute ethical standpoints as evidence for such judgments. Dewey's starting point in moral theory – the radically empirical approach emphasizing the experienced character of moral situations – lead both men to conclude that by placing narrow, self-interested experience above the more abstract and disinterested pursuit of moral ideas, Dewey neglects doing a serious inquiry into morality *at all*.[8]

One fast rejoinder to the force behind such criticisms is that even the most carefully crafted absolutist moral system can be ignored by actual people. Kant's answer, for example, to the question 'Why be moral?' may be rationally convincing and yet practically impotent.

If, following Dewey's advice, one renounces theoretical starting points in ethics and looks instead toward everyday experience, one can find all the authority that a moral theory could want – or need – for answering the question 'Why be moral?'

> [I]n an empirical sense the answer is simple. The authority is
> that of life. Why employ language, cultivate literature, acquire

and develop science, sustain industry, and submit to the refine-
ments of art? To ask these questions is equivalent to asking:
Why live? And the only answer is that if one is going to live
one must live a life of which these things form the substance.
The only question having sense which can be asked is how we
are going to use and be used by these things, not whether we
are going to use them.

(MW14:57)

Dewey's point, which we are now rehearsing, is that the activ-
ity of moral theorizing emerges from the actual affairs of life.
Done this way, ethics does not presume to explain what lies
behind or *before* your life. 'The choice', Dewey says, 'is not
between a moral authority outside custom and one within it. It
is between adopting more or less intelligent and significant
customs' (MW14:58).

Further responses to charges that Dewey's pragmatism is
relativistic or subjectivistic can be answered by taking a second
look at the assumptions on which they are based. Individual
relativism rests on the assumption that the self is essentially
atomistic, while social or cultural relativism rests on the atomism
of communities. As chapter 4 will explain, Dewey believes there
is good evidence that neither the individual self nor the social
group are atomistic in the ways assumed. But even if they were,
Dewey could still point out that the conception of experience
informing his ethics is not one which assumes that experience
must always align with our fancies. Like physical forces that drag
us to the ground, moral experience confronts us; in its face we
are not little gods, but creatures struggling with a world not
entirely of our own making nor under our absolute control.
Therefore, doing ethics from a practical starting point means, in
part, nipping in the bud those epistemological fantasies that give
rise to 'the problem of relativism' or 'the problem of subjec-
tivism'. Doing ethics requires that one observe the phenomenon

of growth in one's own life so one might use their observations to help shape the development of moral criteria.

The moral self

To conclude this chapter, we take up Dewey's conception of the self in morality – the self that inquires, deliberates, chooses, acts, and ultimately grows or deteriorates. As the chapter on experience explained, the self is ineliminably social in many ways. While many needs and desires arise within the individual organism, their satisfaction (and eventual sophistication into novel forms) takes place by virtue of a social medium: we utilize socially mediated concepts to understand ourselves and communicate; we evaluate our actions against a social tableaux. Relationships literally make me 'who I am'. They are not merely 'added on' to my identity.[9] 'Who one is', in other words, depends on the kinds of activities and relationships which are *ongoing*, and the mode of this whole process is largely social. These facts about moral life help guide Dewey's reconstruction of moral theory because they form a new idea of what theory can assume a moral agent is: a *feeling* agent as well as a *rational* one; a socially constituted being as well as an individual center of consciousness and biography. Let us look at several of the most important ways in which Dewey develops and deploys a reconstructed notion of the self in moral theory.

The development of a self takes place within culture. The 'socialization' process is, then, *not* the subjugation of an individual's 'natural' or 'true' self to 'external' or 'unnatural' forces. Rather, it is a necessary part of how the social self is built. This cumulative process involves many activities, but permeating most of them is language, which is one of our earliest ways of forming relationships. Beyond language, membership in any

number of activities contributes to and constitutes who we are as individuals:

> Cooperation, in all kinds of enterprises, interchange of services and goods, participation in social arts, associations for various purposes, institutions of blood, family, government, and religion, all add enormously to the individual's power. On the other hand, as he enters into these relations and becomes a 'member' of all these bodies he inevitably undergoes a transform-ation in his interests. Psychologically the process is one of building up a 'social' self. Imitation and suggestion, sympathy and affection, common purpose and common interest, are the aids in building such a self.
>
> (MW5: 16)

The notion of 'building up' a self seems strange to many; selfhood is supposed to be the basic property or underlying structure of an individual. Sure, one thinks, the self may undergo social and biographical happenstances but it is not *fundamentally* constructed by them! However, this 'property' model of the self is wrong. As Jennifer Welchman puts it, for Dewey

> personality or selfhood is not a property of human beings, like their natural endowments. It is instead a complex set of functions that these natural endowments may be used to perform. One *becomes* a person as one learns to perform the functions constitutive of personality, in accordance with the social rules for their performance.
>
> (Welchman 1995, 165)

Over time, we become so acclimated to our cultural environ-ment that we stop noticing the degree to which actions, reactions, and conceptual frameworks originate from social causes. This, however, does not make them less integral to

personality. 'Apart from the social medium', Dewey writes, 'the individual would never "know himself"; he would never become acquainted with his own needs and capacities' (MW5:388).

The construction-by-social-function of the self may also be framed in terms of habit. Impulses may be biologically first, but they are given a social shape by habit. And while some habits are formed primarily in accord with an individual's private experience, most derive from the social world. Such social habits, also called 'customs', are enacted in concert with others and enable individuals to interpret their experience as individuals. Those particular organizations of habits that prove themselves to be relatively stable, successful, and enduring become nominalized as 'my self'. 'Habits constitute the self', Dewey writes, and 'character is the interpenetration of habits' (MW14:29).

Appreciating how important social environments are for the actual formation of the self should make it clear why the stakes of a moral dilemma go so far beyond utilitarian consequences or rational duty. By choosing what to do, I choose who to become; this is choice's 'double relation' to the self. Every deliberate choice, Dewey writes, 'reveals the existing self and it forms the future self. That which is chosen is that which is found congenial to the desires and habits of the self as it already exists' (LW7:287). A range of alternative selves is presented in our deliberation as possibilities, as we dramatically give 'all sides of character a chance to play their part in the final choice' (LW7:287). (One can easily see the ancient Greek chorus as a theatrical device to make this common psychological function explicit in art.)

So, while it may sound overly existential and melodramatic to say 'all choices are life-determining', this is an accurate representation of Dewey's view. The choice of what to do is ultimately the choice to be the 'sort of person who chose and did that action', whether the action is momentous or not. To give his theory a bit more color, imagine the following:

> You are riding alone in an elevator toward the bottom floor of a building. Just as you approach the third floor, you hear a commotion outside the elevator. Shouts of 'Stop them!' and 'Get that money back!' ring out; as the elevators doors quickly open, six bank robbers rush in, and the doors close again. For whatever reason, your presence is not noticed. At the bottom, the elevator doors open to a dark and empty parking garage; the leader quickly disburses packets of money to his gang, and they all flee the garage. Stunned, you find yourself suddenly alone with a forgotten packet of cash worth $150,000. Nearby, your car sits waiting for you. Stunned by it all, you stand wondering, 'What should I do?'

This scene illustrates a number of foregoing points about Dewey's ethics. There is the paralysis of choice and action that characterizes moral experience and prompts moral inquiry. The inquirer must deliberate about what ought to be done, and this will likely involve playing out, mentally, multiple possible sequences. I have made the example dramatic to illustrate how choice can significantly remake the substance of one's identity. But, as Dewey points out, choices change us in this way whether they are momentous or not.

A common and fundamental moral question is 'What is a good character?' Because the people and their environments are so diverse and changeable, Dewey's ethics cannot offer a single template or portrait of 'the good character' to imitate. But, guided by the criterion of growth, it can describe what makes character strong or weak. Character, recall, is 'the interpenetration of habits'. To understand a person's character, we can investigate how well their habits are working to unify elements of the various situations life is dealing them (MW14:29). In people with 'strong characters', habits support and embody one another; they are *integrated*. In contrast, Dewey writes, 'a weak, unstable, vacillating character is one in which different habits

alternate with one another rather than embody one another. The strength, solidity of a habit is not its own possession but is due to reinforcement by the force of other habits, which it absorbs into itself' (MW14:30).

The ideal type of character, then, has an integrated set of *functional virtues*: coherent dispositions that are both enduring yet adaptable to changes in the environment and to one's evolving identity (Welchman 1995, 162). If it becomes incumbent upon us to *judge* someone's character, Dewey's account obliges us to look at their acts not in light of *what they are* but rather *which direction their character is moving*.

> [S]ome acts tend to narrow the self, to introduce friction into it, to weaken its power, and in various ways to disintegrate it, while other acts tend to expand, invigorate, harmonize, and in general organize the self. The angry act, for example . . . is bad, because it brings division, friction, weakness into the self; [the expansive, invigorating act is] 'good', because it unifies the self and gives power.
>
> (EW4:244)

The arms dealer makes the world a more violent place in part by selling guns, and in part by becoming the kind of person willing to profit by the perpetuation of violence and war. His actions have bad consequences, but his character, too, can be denounced. Judged by his tendencies, he is marked by a deteri-orating character, one whose actions and habits are increasingly in conflict with one another, or one whose conduct diminishes flexible interaction with others.

Ultimately, then, moral judgments apply not only to an action's consequences, but to character as well. Character leads to consequences, but those consequences also shape character in the process. Moral theories which disregard the transactional relationship of character and consequences, and

focus on one or the other, operate half-blindly and with inferior efficacy.

Conclusion

Dewey's moral theory follows a similar approach to his others, combining sharp critiques of outmoded views with constructive proposals that should replace them. In part, he criticizes ethical systems (made up of fixed rules, absolute values, natural virtue, and utilitarian consequences) because these systems are driven by the overarching imperative of certainty (comprehensiveness, ultimacy, monocausality). This imperative, Dewey believes, actually renders theory less effective at resolving moral inquiry, and so in the end these moral systems fail – morally.

Because ethical systems are also driven by assumptions about human beings, Dewey criticizes a variety of these assumptions. He proposes, instead, that human individuals should *not* be considered as fundamentally separate, either from nature or other persons; a person subsists and flourishes in virtue of environment, natural and social. 'Conduct', Dewey writes, 'is always shared; this is the difference between it and a physiological process. It is not an ethical "ought" that conduct *should* be social. It *is* social, whether bad or good' (MW14:16).

Once one accepts that human sociality and interaction are neither accidental nor ad hoc, it becomes necessary to link questions about individual ethics to those concerning the best social structures for human flourishing. Such structures include political, educational, aesthetic, and religious institutions. As we will see, Dewey investigates the ethical impact of them all.

Chapter 3

1. Regarding the terms 'ethics' and 'morality', I will be using these terms interchangeably, taking my cue from Dewey's *Ethics* (written in collaboration with James Tufts). See MW3:40.

2. According to Kant, because human nature is only free to the degree that it is rationally autonomous, our moral choices must not be determined by desires or indeed by any emotion; morality of choice rests on a rational being's respect for the moral law (which itself is rational), and nothing else.

3. In her fine book, Jennifer Welchman writes that Dewey thought ethical philosophy 'must become the theoretical wing of a practical science largely conducted by professional experimental scientists . . . As the theoretical wing of the social sciences, philosophy has a twofold vocation: critical [analyze and critique human objectives] and constructive . . . [acting to] assist in the design of new institutions and practices by which new ideas and powers can be put to humanly fruitful use' (Welchman 1995, 192–3). Dewey disallows rule by philosopher kings; rather, 'The determination of what should be done is the fundamental project of society at large. Philosophy's contribution is the development of procedures and principles of assistance in the collective social construction and evaluation of ideals (ends) of human flourishing and the materials and means of their construction' (Welchman 1995, 192).

4. See LW7:179.

5. 'That men love and hold things dear, that they cherish and care for some things, and neglect and condemn other things, is an undoubted fact. To call these things values is just to repeat that they are loved and cherished; it is not to give a reason for their being loved and cherished . . . But to consider whether it is good and how good it is, is to ask how it, as if acted upon, will operate in promoting a course of action' (MW8:27, 29).

6. This same observation applies to traditional tensions between 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' (or 'final') goods.

7. For criticisms of Dewey's use of growth as a criterion in moral theorizing, see Burke 1973 and Diggins 1994.

8. See Clarence Irving Lewis, review of *The Quest for Certainty*. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1930) and George Santayana, 'Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 25 (1925).
9. This fact is made painfully evident when one experiences the sudden death of a loved one. I am not 'who I was' before the loss; I am disoriented, at a loss. A hole has been ripped in the fabric of my identity.

Chapter 4

1. See, for example, *The Public and its Problems* (1927), *Individualism, Old and New* (1930), and *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935).
2. For example, we enforce property rights with the authority of law; laws are legitimated by their process of creation (by fairly elected representatives of the public).
3. Rice-Oxley 2004.
4. I follow Jaggar (1983) here.
5. This sense of 'liberal' should not to be confused with the more local, political descriptor attached to wings of specific political parties, such as the liberal wing of the Democratic party in America. While such liberals can certainly trace their roots back to many principles of the classical liberal tradition, their positions also reflect fundamental divergences.
6. John Rawls's theory of the liberal welfare state is widely acknow-ledged to have done the most systematic and influential work in this area.
7. In 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy', Rorty writes, 'Those who share Dewey's pragmatism will say that although [liberal democracy] may need philosophical articulation, it does not need philosophical backup. On this view, the philosopher of liberal democracy may wish to develop a theory of the human self that comports with the institutions he or she admires. But such a philosopher is not thereby justifying these institutions by reference to more fundamental premises, but the reverse: he or she is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit' (Rorty 1991, 178).