Dewey and the Arrogance of Reason
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John Dewey has received so much criticism for his incremental approach to social change that we sometimes neglect the truly radical character of his vision of democracy and democratic education. Just as socialists promised the emergence of a new socialist human, Dewey often speaks as though democratic education is a process of discovering and creating the new democratic individual. He says, for instance, that “the unsolved problem of democracy is the construction of an education which will develop that kind of individuality which is intelligently alive to the common life and sensitively loyal to its common maintenance.”¹ Even though this individual emerges from institutions that do not yet exist and embodies traits we cannot fully foresee, Dewey believes the democratic individual will experience the most complete realization of human potential.

The individual Dewey seeks bears only a passing resemblance to real live humans inhabiting our society. The citizen of Dewey’s “Great Community” is willing to engage in a social and individual process of “continuous inquiry.” She will overlook the interests of her class, race, or person in the name of the common good; indeed, she cooperatively problem solves with those who hold opposing views on the issue under study; she considers the hypotheses and analyses of other citizens just as plausible as the ones she offers; she considers all worldviews and theories merely the source of hypotheses that may be confirmed or disconfirmed through a dispassionate consideration of consequences; she makes decisions without adherence to an absolute standard of morality; and she makes frequent use of the knowledge offered by media and researchers who have focused their work on ideas needed in the ongoing process of social experimentation.² The disparity between this democratic citizen and our meager selves is evident if we recall the acrimonious debates and sometimes violent encounters that accompanied our nation’s failed efforts to integrate public schools.

It is perhaps this disjunction between ideal and reality that leads Dewey to refer repeatedly to democracy as a faith, “a faith,” he says, “in the potentialities of human nature.”³ For Dewey was all too aware of the disparity between his vision of human possibility and the social realities of his society. In times of despair, he even toyed with the possibility that “the faith may demonstrate its own falsity” — if, for instance, commercial success came to be heralded as the highest democratic achievement.⁴ Nonetheless, Dewey believed we could make good on this faith, and set before us the challenge of realizing a better society in its name.

While I am among those who have found Dewey’s vision of democracy profoundly ennobling, I fear that his emphasis on human potential leads to an irreverent and sometimes hostile attitude towards the actual characteristics of humans in our society. This arrogance appears most starkly when Dewey portrays a particular group’s commitment to religion or traditional authority largely as an
obstacle to progress. The same arrogance appears in Dewey’s attitude towards the child’s nature. In contrast to Rousseau who exhorted us to “observe nature and follow the path it maps out for you,” Dewey views the child’s character merely as the starting point for teaching. Indeed, Dewey portrays the child’s character as a standing reserve to be utilized, or as he says in Democracy and Education, as “the foundation and ultimate resources for education,” and “the conditions of educational efficiency.” Dismissing Rousseau’s reverence for the child’s nature as a bit of outmoded theology, Dewey simultaneously abandoned Rousseau’s humility, the belief that the child’s character embodies wisdom the teacher would do best to study, appreciate, and follow. Dewey instead adopted the arrogant belief that a vision of continuous inquiry in a democratic society provided the best educational guidance; the individual’s character could be adjusted in keeping with the vision of a democratic society.

In this paper, I would like to suggest that Dewey’s instrumental approach to humans is rooted in an aggressively irreverent conception of human nature, positing a highly malleable self that can be continually remade in tune with the dictates of rationality. With the spontaneously acquired traits of individuals deemed truly valuable only insofar as they pass the tests of the method of inquiry, a good many human characteristics are considered expendable. To apply these concerns to education, many student characteristics which a good educator should encourage and develop in her students are robbed of the respect that might accrue if experimen-
tal reason were not the only method of measure. And politically, many characteris-
tics of individuals which may run counter to the economic, political, or technical logic of dominant institutions may be devalued and an assimilatory policy adopted.

LOOKING PAST EXISTING HUMANS: DEMOCRATIC ASSIMILATION

In speaking of Dewey’s arrogance, I do not mean to suggest that his manner is aggressive or presumptuous. Rather, it is to say that as a cultural representative, Dewey takes the ideals of his group and the democratic tradition to be desirable for all humans, without showing sufficient respect for the many people within and outside his tradition who do not betray those qualities. Relying upon a democratic vision of human potential, Dewey’s philosophical attitude adopts an implicitly assimilational view of those people whose characteristics do not match a democratic conception of potential.

In a recent essay, John Stuhr argues that democracy, in Dewey’s work, must be viewed as a “way of life.” “Existing ways of life,” says Stuhr, “are not actually democratic.” Development of democratic ways of living would “demand different personal conduct and far-reaching cultural reconstruction — deep changes in habits of thought and action, patterns of association and interaction.” Dewey feels confident recommending such a radical reconstruction, because he assumes that “democratic freedom is the cause of the fullest possible realization of human potentialities.” In defending the ultimate value of democratic principles, Dewey asks, can we do better than acknowledge our “belief that democratic social arrange-
ments promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely acceptable and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of life?”

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 1997
Basic to a democratic way of life is the scientific method. Dewey hoped citizens might employ the method of inquiry to cooperatively solve problems — guiding society by the force of reason, rather than the force of technological development or private interest. However, Dewey envisioned this process of joint decision making to be far more than an efficient means of reaching good decisions. He says, “actively to participate in the making of knowledge is the highest prerogative of man and the only warrant of his freedom.” Cooperative inquiry, serves in Dewey’s work, as the route to the highest human attainment.

This belief in the supremacy of a democratic way of life forms the backdrop which allows Dewey to disrespectfully group competing forms of life under catch-all terms, such as, “authoritarian” and “customary.” Such labels, which might be used to characterize Southern Baptists, Traditional Navajo, and Hmung immigrants alike, are best understood as a deficit terms, denoting only the ways in which cultural traditions deviate from the democratic model; to charge a group with authoritarianism requires that we know very little of the actual beliefs that guide life among the people in question. We are thus able to dismiss entire traditions without considering the ways in which the worldviews in question may build communities, guide moral and courageous behavior, or create an egalitarian distribution of wealth.

Dewey refers to authoritarian cultures and practices in ways that leave no doubt about his negative judgment. He considers the movement beyond an customary ethic a clear sign of progress; he criticizes authoritarianism present in contemporary perspectives; and he is sharply critical of authoritarian child-rearing practices and authoritarian pedagogies. It was, for instance, the authoritarian character of the Polish population in Philadelphia that caused Dewey sufficient alarm to warrant a study of the community.

Viewing authoritarian characteristics as an obstacle to a democratic society and the free development of all individuals, Dewey offered social and educational recommendations for assimilating as many people as possible to a democratic ethic. Dewey warns that undesirable patterns of “desire, belief, and purpose” have “a force comparable to the momentum of physical objects once they are set in motion.” Professing his faith in the “indefinite plasticity of human nature,” Dewey argues that we should pursue democratic social change by finding out “what forces already at work can be reinforced so that they move toward the desired change and how the conditions that oppose change can be gradually weakened.” “Such questions,” remarks Dewey, can be considered on the basis of fact and reason.

Thus Dewey’s vision of assimilation is incremental and noncoercive. He hopes that social and educational institutions will slowly support those characteristics of people that fit with a democratic way of life. He hopes that nondemocratic cultural traditions will be weeded out. “The future of democracy,” he says, “is allied with the spread of the scientific attitude.”

THE INQUIRING SELF “MADE TO ORDER”

While Dewey’s overwhelming faith in democracy establishes the central ethical justification for an assimilationist agenda, Dewey’s conception of the
inquiring self is a crucial aspect of that justification. Dewey’s conception of the inquiring self serves to implicitly devalue those aspects of the individual which are spontaneously acquired as the result of personal experience or cultural tradition. Dewey’s ideal individual scrutinizes her personality traits, testing them for their consequences, before deciding on their desirability. In cases where a character trait is found to lead to unfortunate consequences, Dewey’s individual finds personal or social means of remaking herself.

Dewey’s inquiring self is a philosophical descendent of what Charles Taylor calls the “punctual self.” From Descartes, this doctrine takes an ego that deliberates upon the world from a disengaged vantage point. From Locke, the doctrine takes the view that our already-acquired habits and beliefs are the results of irrational associations and syntheses of associations, since they are the nondeliberate result of passion, custom, and education. Thus, in Locke’s conception of the punctual self, disengaged reason is granted the sole authority to determine the moral worth of an action, and individuals are exhorted to scrutinize their arbitrarily accumulated habits and beliefs to remake themselves in accordance with the light of reason.

Taylor isolates two aspects of Locke’s doctrine that are of particular concern in discussing Dewey’s concept of the self. The first is the metaphysical duality of mind and body, and the second is the moral-epistemological duality which results from the metaphysical one: mind is considered the source of rational and moral acts, while acts betraying only the influence of custom are considered unjustified.

Locke — following Descartes — portrays the ego as “extensionless,” and he separates the ego, or the ability to combine sensations, from the content of human thought gained via perception. The ego is the locus of rational thought, and actions which do not result from the deliberative processes of the ego are the unplanned results of the history of associations that compose an individual’s experience. Thus, Locke implicitly identifies the ego as a self-conscious agent, while the experiences and actions that occur without deliberation are portrayed as objects for the ego to work upon. In other words, Locke objectifies human properties, leading us to view them instrumentally in terms of their contribution to an rationally envisioned self.

Consequently the metaphysical duality of mind and body is also a moral and epistemological duality between the rational and the customary. Beliefs and actions which have been deliberated upon may be considered rational, but ones which have not been reflected upon cannot. Unreflected associations are likely to be the result of tradition, where — for example — women are tied to nurturing labor regardless of whether this practice has been rationally justified. Thus, beliefs and acts which have not been scrutinized are denied any normative power, or respect; they remain unjustified.

Now, of course, it is clear that Dewey rejected the metaphysical duality of mind and body everpresent in Locke’s work, denigrating it as one component of a “spectator conception of knowing.” Mind, for Dewey, is to be understood as one aspect of our observable attempts to maintain equilibrium with our environment. Intelligence, in this portrait, is not merely a matter of deliberation, but also a matter of activity. Moreover, perception is not portrayed as a mechanical or passive
Intelligence interpenetrates experience; our habitual patterns of action and thought organize incoming experiences. The intelligence of perception is powerfully suggested in Dewey’s view that, in a problematic situation, the problem is initially felt — not consciously understood, not linguistically categorized — and this feeling, a qualitative sense of the whole situation, should guide the process of inquiry. As feelings become codified into linguistically formed ideas, they continue to carry with them the meaning gained in perception. Thus, perception is intelligent and thought is imbued with feeling. So, in a powerful way, Dewey overcame the Cartesian dualism Taylor criticizes: thought is engaged, not disengaged, and perception is not a mechanical but a rational process.

Despite Dewey’s success in avoiding Locke’s metaphysical dualism between mind and body, he nonetheless reconstructs Locke’s moral-epistemological dualism between the rational and customary. Like Locke, Dewey expects our habits to form in a way that is not necessarily rational. And like Locke, Dewey consequently grants the patterns of unreflected habits no moral authority. And lastly, like Locke, Dewey instrumentalizes habits — viewing them in terms of their contribution or detraction from aims reached through a process of rational thought — the scientific method. Thus, despite his many divergences from Locke, Dewey’s division between the procedural knowledge captured in consciousness and the varieties of propulsions represented in our many habits is a reconstructed version of Locke’s division between a rational ego and chains of association gained via custom.

Dewey’s bifurcation between the rational methods of scientific problem solving and the socially constructed realm of habits operates to validate scientific judgments and invalidate habitual judgments. Even though Dewey commonly says that our habits shape the way we perceive and think, he nonetheless portrays scientific problem solving as an empirical endeavor that lifts the individual above prejudice. Reflective morality, for instance, is said to rise above the dogmatism which forces adherence to a particular code of ethics. “A genuinely reflective morals” assumes an individual who is bound by no particular code of ethics, but can “look upon all the codes as possible data,” considering “the conditions under which they arose,” “the methods which consciously or unconsciously determined their formation and acceptance,” and “their applicability in present conditions.” Reflective morality will “neither insist dogmatically upon some of them, nor idly throw them all away.” The reflective individual is apparently able to make decisions that are not predecided by tradition, prejudice, or interests; she can treat competing perspectives merely as possible hypotheses and consider the likely consequences of their implementation. Reflection thus appears as a powerful ability rising above the grip of society.

In contrast, our habits are the sociological result of our participation in the social and historical institutions of our time. The physical world leads us to create particular patterns of activity in our daily efforts to meet basic needs. The social world enjoins us to develop particular habitual relations with those around us. Since our social circumstance plays such a fundamental role in creating our habitual character, it is a mistake to think individuals are simply in control of their habits. Individuals may play a role in developing their habitual characteristics, but the
institutions we have developed and the others we interact with also play a basic causal role in creating our habitual selves. Consequently, our habits reflect a sociological logic which need not be rational.

Thus, Dewey portrays a self whose reason emerges largely through the work of conscious problem solving and whose habits are a sociological creation that must be brought into line with scientific deliberation. This bifurcation reinstates one of the most worrisome characteristics of Locke’s punctual self: the portrait of a self capable of rational reordering. In Taylor’s view, the punctual self became an influential perspective and has continued to hold sway partly because it serves the requirements of modern institutions. The “ideal of an individual agent who is able to remake himself by methodical and disciplined action” places the onus upon persons to refashion themselves in keeping with the requirements of business, government, and the military. According to Taylor, “what this calls for is the ability to take an instrumental stance to one’s given properties, desires, inclinations, tendencies, habits of thought and feeling, so that they can be worked on, doing away with some and strengthening others, until one meets the desired specifications.”

Now Dewey’s portrait of this process of reordering is a bit more complex than Locke’s vision. Many of our habits are initially in tune with our rationally determined goals. Where, for instance, habits develop to make automatic acts and thoughts which were previously guided consciously, habits develop in conformity with our rationally envisioned goals. Such habits increase the efficiency and intelligence of our acts by allowing our conscious attention to focus upon problems for which we have no habitual response. Habits operating in tune with reason remain dynamic and facilitate our development.

Bad habits, in contrast, are “severed from reason.” They grow rigid and blind, continuing their operation independently of our conscious intention. Individuals may have a conscious commitment to change a habit without being able to successfully halt the offensive behavior, because the habit is supported through our interactions with others and the environment.

So habits can be intelligent and they can be blind on Dewey’s view. Whether habits are deemed intelligent or blind, rational or irrational, moral or immoral — is determined deliberately, through the processes of the method of inquiry. There is no such thing as an immediate apprehension of a habit’s desirability; we must decide upon a habit’s value by calculating its consequences relative to the possible consequences that might accrue if we substituted our habit for some other set of thoughts or actions. Controlling habits is as much a social enterprise as an individual one; “control of individual actions is effected by the whole situation in which individuals are involved.” And both Dewey’s pedagogy and politics are intended to create selves who have a second-nature commitment to solve problems cooperatively. Dewey’s hope is to develop a form of social control that, at once, provides for individual development and social organization, and the link that allows both aims is the scientific method. However, Dewey does not face the difficulties that arise if we ask whether the scientific method is in tune with the cultural backgrounds of all students. His assumptions of a highly malleable self that can be continuously remade lead him to believe that all students—even students reared in
values powerfully opposed to the values implicit in the method of inquiry — will be served by cooperative problem solving.

DECENTERING REASON AND REGAINING EDUCATIONAL HUMILITY

Dewey’s reluctance to accept aspects of the self as given, as characteristics the teacher should adapt to, betrays a basic arrogance in his philosophical method. Positing an organism bent upon controlling his environment and himself, Dewey’s pragmatism develops epistemological standards that likewise emphasize control. Adopting an instrumental conception, he focuses on how the self may be reordered, and his methods give us only impoverished means of valuing those ways of life that are not sanctioned by the method of inquiry and Dewey’s vision of democracy.

While Dewey was justified in dismissing the theological aspects of Rousseau’s conception of the child’s nature, I think we would do well to recapture some of Rousseau’s humility. In advising that we “observe nature and follow the path it maps out for you,” Rousseau suggested the child’s character may betray a wisdom that is not easily grasped in the conscious deliberations composing the scientific method. He leads us to adopt an appreciative and humble view, focusing our attention on understanding and following the child’s direction.

A secular version of Rousseau’s humility might be found in the ontological perspectives of the early Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger considered the aggressive attitude which portrays individual capacities as standing reserves a fundamental aspect of arrogant humanism. His own work shows a humble stance, a perspective that posits human being as a powerful mystery to be inquired about in an appreciative and sympathetic manner. The ontological method of the early Heidegger is guided by a central question that preempts the irreverence of Dewey’s instrumentalism. By asking what is “always already there,” Heidegger suggests that we consider — within specific situations — those aspects of humans which must be adapted to. Heidegger viewed the ontological method as a continual process of questioning, so the aim is not to reach foundational answers to the question of what is always already there. Rather, it is the process of ontological inquiry and the respect it embodies that is most crucial.

Following in the path cleared by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty has provided a portrait of human being that sharply questions our ability to consciously grasp human characteristics, let alone come to a deliberate understanding of which elements of human character ought to be kept and which jettisoned. He created the concept of the “body subject” to capture the distinctive power and innovation that occurs in nonconscious acts. Unlike Dewey’s habits, which depend for their intelligence upon a connection with conscious attention, Merleau-Ponty considers the body-subject far more intelligent than our attempts to describe the body would suggest. For Merleau-Ponty, our accounts of nonconscious acts are a pale imitation of the body’s powers because our conscious abilities are quite limited and partial in comparison to our nonconscious abilities.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty turns our attention toward the acts of the body-subject with an awe reflecting the belief that we will only capture a small part of the picture, that our theories will underrate our abilities and face the basic limitations of any
effort to codify experience. Our conscious understanding will flounder in an effort
to represent the intelligence of a teacher’s immediate reaction to students in a
classroom, a lecturer’s ability to create words with rhythm and power, or an artist’s
ability to find the exact spot on a canvas for her brush stroke.\(^4^2\) Our accounts of habits
will employ mechanistic metaphors which reduce profoundly innovative acts to
routine behavioral loops. And our plans to create the best type of selves will be blind
to many of the factors which lead students to be as they are.

Adopting the appreciative stance of ontological methods does not force us to
give up on educational aims, but it does lead to aims that are closely geared to
specific students. Aims, on this view, should be developed within a particular
context with a eye to what is in tune with the cultural and historical characteristics
a specific group of students bring to the classroom. Educators need to sympatheti-
cally inquire into the actual historical possibilities of each group of students and
develop visions of possibility that are organic outgrowths of those students’ lives.

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   Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 57 (emphasis added).
2. This is a composite portrait of the Deweyan citizen taken from the following sources: John Dewey
5. For example, see John Dewey, “The American Intellectual Frontier,” in Boydston, *The Middle Works
   1899-1924*, vol. 13, 301, 303.
8. In Asante’s view, this sort of arrogance is characteristic of Western thought. Molefi Asante, *The
   350.
   Boydston, *The Middle Works 1899-1924*, vol. 11, 260 and Walter Feinberg, *Reason and Rhetoric*
   291-93.
20. Ibid., 166.
23. For example, in *Logic*, he states, “In ordinary language, a problem must be felt before it can be stated. If the unique quality of the situation is had immediately, then there is something that regulates the selection and the weighing of observed facts and their conceptual ordering” (John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938), 70-71.
24. “If a thinker had to work out the meaning of each idea discursively, he would be lost in a labyrinth that had no end and no center. Whenever an idea loses its immediate felt quality, it ceases to be an idea and becomes, like an algebraic symbol, a mere stimulus to execute an operation without the need of thinking” (*Art as Experience*, 120).
27. Ibid., 22.
30. Ibid., 54.
40. Now *Being and Time* is an attempt to reach universalizable claims about human being, and it is this sort of humanism that Heidegger disowns in the “Letter on Humanism,” Krell, *Basic Writings*. I believe the formalistic claims about human being provided in *Being and Time* can serve as a general guide in the local hermeneutic process of considering specific students’ basic characteristics. Thus, the universalizable claims can be rewritten as a consideration of particular students warrants.