

Dispositions, values and practices in Deweyan pragmatism: communities of experience and associated life

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Abstract

In Dewey's work education most simply expressed is the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional towards nature and towards other human beings. The fullest expression of such dispositions lay, he believed, in the construction of truly democratic societies. The centrality of practice in Dewey's pragmatism meant that dispositions are best described as demands for certain kinds of activity which over time, come to constitute 'self'. That is, they form our affective desires and furnish us with our working capacities. So habits can be thought of as means waiting like tools in a box to be used by conscious resolve. But for Dewey they are active means that project themselves as energetic and dominating ways of acting. However in understanding them, he felt we need to distinguish between materials, tools and means 'proper'. Tools are merely potential means unless they are bodily co-ordinated in a specific operation. Dewey's major point is that habits are rather a matter of practice not an intellectual proposition and they are always in a deep sense concerned with relationship, which is as much a matter of what is 'felt' as it is of intellectual conviction.

In this paper I briefly examine Dewey's understanding of dispositions in relation to the practices of 'associated living'.

Introduction

A Deweyan account of practice is of central to any discussion of dispositions and values as well as to that of community and democracy. As I will attempt to demonstrate further on, for Dewey habits are a matter of practice not intellectual propositions - they are always concerned with relationship not mere belief or pure intellectual conviction. They do however involve an interactive, that is, a negotiated relationship, with meaning. Pragmatism in Dewey's sense did not pander to popular culture and simplified accounts of larger scientific solutions to social problems. But neither was it only concerned with the development and setting in place abstract systems of ideas, which purported to express the complexities of all human behaviour. Rather for Dewey pragmatism needed to encompass both ordinary everyday experience and sciences. (His position on this is, I think all the more interesting today in light of the various contemporary fruitful engagements of Deweyan pragmatism with variants of phenomenology in social analysis). In attempting to draw out the logical implications of the methods of the sciences his aim was to develop a logic of reasonable argumentation and an 'ethics of discussion'. It is worth recalling here that pragmatism was and still is not merely a philosophy for academic or professional philosophers; even in Dewey's time it was a powerful form of public philosophy, which influenced the American social sciences in their formative stages. Moreover it cannot be over-emphasised that Dewey's anti-foundational pragmatism embraces both the interpretative and the empirical, engagement in the world and reflection, the aesthetic and the practical. Above all I argue, his was a philosophy of the body in a sense that at its very core lay a non-reductive understanding of human embodiment, depicting bodies as practico-sensory totalities that are the locus for all action, but which are unavoidably social. It is this fundamental sociality of human embodiment that I regard as crucial to Dewey's understanding of community and therefore to the development of dispositions and values.

Society, Community and the generation of dispositions

Dewey's distinction between the Great Society and the Great Community is essential to understanding his account of human sociality and the functioning of dispositions and values in generating this sociality. In *The Public and Its Problems* he wrote that numerous technical problems which existed in the societies of his day that could be addressed by 'experts'. These included health, housing, transport, urban planning and organization, the regulation and administration of taxation, the education and deployment of teachers, the effective and efficient management of public monies and so forth. But while all of these activities and many others, were portrayed by him as being essential to the Great Society, they were not sufficient for generating the Great Community. Because at the heart of any society are those 'forces' which must be 'resolved' before the specialised processes can begin to operate. What Dewey took these forces to be will doubtless continue to be debated, but in my view, they certainly included what he referred to as sets of mind that were 'without attentive thought'. In other words they were those ways of being, feeling, relating or construing on the part of individuals which over time, and in each person's reaching adulthood, become constitutive of a wider 'social imaginary' characterising a particular social group. Such modes of being, feeling and so on will therefore be clearly related to conceptions of habit, disposition and value.

For Dewey, as for Mead, individuals grow to maturity through interaction with community. This is not just a strong statement of the embodied nature of human beings as a certain kind of animal but also through continuous engagement in collective practices, as pre-eminently meaning-makers. Involvement in embodied action is not merely a matter for the individual but specifically is the development of a manner of being that is characteristic of his/her culture. That in Dewey's view was a 'natural' process meaning that individuals cannot become such without community. Learning to be human involves for him participation in the give and take of communication out of which gradually arises a functioning sense that one is an 'individually distinctive' member of that community who not only understands but appreciates its beliefs, desires and method and who contributes a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values. He emphasises that this process is never finished. Participation in a community is absolutely essential to human life because each one's participation enables an enriched experience for all. For Dewey however *democracy is the very idea of community life itself*, and habit - the mainspring of human action - is formed within the ongoing embodied communicative practice that constitutes the social group.

Habits, customs and dispositions

In Dewey's writing it is habit that provides stability and continuity to our activities; it enable us to act, free from the requirement to think through and in advance plan our actions on each and every occasion. Moreover it is the nature of habits that they persist through time and in the midst of changing social circumstances. Only when the particular circumstances clearly offer resistance to the continuation of a habit or set of habits will they be overridden. Habits once formed, perpetuate themselves by acting unremittingly upon the 'native stock' of activities by intensifying, stimulating, weakening, selecting, concentrating and organising them. As he notes, they create out of the formless void of impulses a world made in their own image. So Dewey held that habits were of such importance because they could not be gotten rid of by means of a simple conscious determination to do so. It is not possible just to be somehow freed from them once and for all. At the time of his writing Dewey felt that there was a lack of recognition of the importance of habit to human life and especially to the particular impacts that specific habits have - most of which we remain unaware. Dewey wrote that rather than our possessing habits they possess us - moving and controlling us. He was of the view convinced that we would remain under their control until we gain some understanding of what habits accomplish and only afterwards may we judge what results they have produced in our lives. Another way of thinking about habits is to see them as ways of using and incorporating the environment. Dewey also refers to them as 'arts' meaning that they involve skills (of sensory and motor

organs), 'cunning' or craft and, at the same time objective materials. In his account they assimilate objective energies and bring about command of the environment. They require order, discipline and manifest technique, having a beginning, middle and an end. Most significantly habit has power over us because it is so intimately a part of ourselves; it has this hold on us because according to Dewey we *are* the habit.

Habits form our affective desires and furnish us with our working capacities. As such they are embodied practice. All habits however are *affections* having what Dewey calls 'projectile power' meaning that they are active means that project themselves, becoming energetic and dominating ways of acting. Habits wait like 'tools in a box' to be used by conscious resolve. But here we must distinguish between materials, tools and means proper: tools are merely *potential means* unless bodily co-ordinated in a specific operation. A certain kind of 'self' is being formed and progressively cemented. But this does not mean that there is something static or 'completed' about the self that is gradually being shaped. On the contrary, because practice has primacy in his philosophy, Dewey is able to show how, through the operation of spontaneity, novelty can occur, which, gathering force, can impress itself upon others involved thus shaping both the original actor as well as those around her. In this manner social change occurs and transformation is effected in the lives of individuals. Moreover it is especially pertinent when either sooner or later, it significantly alters the interaction of social groups. Dewey's complex and comprehensive account of practice allows for an individual's engagement in an action or actions that have little or none of the familiar qualities of an 'intended' activity. On the contrary this is the kind of action that cannot be predicted by them in advance.

In everyday life such action can take place almost incidentally (running one's fingers across a musical keyboard for the first time, or walking past a dance group and joining in are examples) such that the person at the time attached no importance to the action. But later a person tries out a tune or makes a few dance moves to music and 'discover' an affinity with the action. So in my reading of Dewey, an essentially serendipitous moment can give rise to an action which, drawing upon a combination of awareness, and sensibility (basically an openness to the new) creates initially a kind of 'rupture', then proceeding in a new direction from the individual's previously held understanding of what is significant to him/her. The initial event will be followed by stages involving some interest in (or indeed a fascination with) what has been encountered, and later a period of further exploration and the development of a sense that something of significance is now being grasped. Ultimately, after having passed through various stages involving certain kinds of broader 'social recognition' functioning to re-affirm and solidify, followed by further engagement in spontaneous action, the experiencing individual will arrive at a point at which s/he is now able to achieve greater clarity, and can reflect upon the nature of the experiences undergone, gradually understanding how s/he has actually experienced a crisis in older habits leading to the development ultimately of 'new' values. Dewey's discussions of 'impulsions' - deriving from pre-conscious life experiences - and 'adjustment' - profound changes that take place in the self by virtue of a new, multifaceted engagement with our respective environments, captures this sort of transformation in every aspect of life including those of the creation of values.

Central to Dewey's consideration of the nature and functioning of habits were those social habits known as customs, which in his view, constituted the most significant habits of the individual. These he believed were dependent for their origin on prior customs in society. Chief among them were those matters of morality, the content of which was furnished by traditions handed down over time. Thus customs are modes of organising and regulating conduct that most members of the society (probably for most of the time) are comfortable with and as a result are content to uphold. The institutions that are the manifestation of these customs and of morality are the settings for the conduct of our collective social life.

Dewey distinguishes between habit and dispositions by arguing that the former conveys quite explicitly the sense of 'operativeness' or actuality, whereas the latter connotes latency or potential, usually requiring a positive stimulus beyond itself in order to become active. They are in fact subdued, non-patent forms of

habit. Disposition really means pre-disposition Dewey reminds us, that is, the readiness to act overtly in a specific way whenever opportunity to do so arises, the opportunity being that there is an absence of the pressure which would have been present if the matter were merely one of direct dominance by a given habit in a specific situation. As such, dispositions can be and should be cultivated through the practice of habit within formal and informal education. At its most simply expressed education itself is the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and other human beings. The centrality of practice in Deweyan pragmatism means that dispositions may be described as demands for certain kinds of activity that over time come to constitute the self that is, in his terms, they form our 'affective desires' and furnish us with our working capacities. So we can think of habits as means (tools) waiting to be used by conscious resolve. But for Dewey they are something more: they are active means that project themselves, energetic and dominating ways of acting. However, tools are merely potential means unless they are bodily co-ordinated in a specific operation. As I have already noted, Dewey's major point is that habits are rather a matter of *practice* not an *intellectual proposition* and they are always in a deep sense concerned with relationship, not belief or purely cognitive conviction.

How then is Dewey's understanding of habits and dispositions related to the issue of values?

For Dewey, values are not as some traditions hold, something we can know in advance of action. We cannot determine values simply by applying an a priori analysis of the nature of human being and its basic characteristics. While we may frequently refer to the judgements or ethical standards espoused by individuals in making their decisions about a variety of problems, we ultimately make the decision about value by their being carried out *in practice* to their end or completion. I interpret Dewey as arguing that knowledge of values or valuable ends is knowledge of the operations by which those valued ends can be constructed. This is an expression of what I have called Dewey's 'ends-means' conception of values. More often than not he argued, our grasp of what our ends (values) are in a given problematic situation must undergo major alteration when genuine consideration of the practical implications of the means selected is undertaken. Means are not mere instruments to effect specific ends; they define and constitute ends as Jennifer Welchman notes, 'every bit as much as the natural selection of genetic traits defines and constitutes biological evolution'. Moreover, the designation of means and ends varies - sometimes actions or events will be means, while at other times they may be ends. Neither is exclusively one or other, rather they are given specificity by the complex circumstances in which they occur at in a particular time and place. The upshot of all of this is that Dewey saw ends as the outcome of comprehensive and deep processes of investigation which in action would subsequently be confirmed or not, as the case may be. Irrespective of what ends may have been in the past or may be in future, we want them to enhance sociality and to fulfil individual needs and not to lead to the destruction of communities and their members. To that end Dewey did identify certain 'values' that he saw as crucial to the establishment and maintenance of community and enhancement of the sense of self. One cluster of these are the 'intellectual habits' or outlooks generated by the interaction of reflection, desire and action, for example open-mindedness, intellectual honesty and responsibility.

Open-mindedness can be seen most clearly by considering its opposite - close-mindedness, Dewey believed. He identifies close-mindedness as arising from three reasons or some combination of these. The first is prejudice or a stubborn attachment to the first idea encountered on a particular subject and rejection of any subsequent possible revisions. The second is pride, which makes someone refuse an idea or theory that runs counter to a cherished pre-conception. The third is selfishness - a willingness to consider or accept only those ideas that are to one's personal advantage and to reject everything that does not. Open-mindedness Dewey argues is the antithesis of prejudice, pride and selfishness - it means accepting all truth even when one's own ideas and preconceptions must be altered, or even when it means foregoing some personal advantage. At first glance then it would appear that this account of open-mindedness is straightforwardly a matter of knowledge, but upon reflection it becomes clear that it is also a matter of behaviour over time. It is grounded in action, the necessary condition for all knowledge. We know for example that justice involves

moral behaviour but how can we be just without being open-minded? He claims that it is only when one affords others' opinions their proper consideration that one may have the possibility of being just. Generosity too is a moral value, but how, asked Dewey, can one be generous if one is prejudiced? Honesty is as much a disposition as is having a sense of responsibility and both are required for Dewey's goal - that of successful 'associated living'. It seems to me that we encounter here one of the key underpinnings of a Deweyan ethic of participatory democracy.

Deweyan democratic values

It is important to recall Dewey's understanding of theory – whether in relation to science, the social science or politics. He conceived of theories as sets of abstract propositions that are interrelated in systematic fashion. The processes of abstraction works upon concrete phenomena that are always located in specific social political and cultural situations. That said, it must be stated that what makes a theory a theory as such is the always provisional character of the propositions and the relationship between these. On this Deweyan understanding of the *process of theorising*, theories themselves must by definition be open to change in accounting for new phenomena. If they cannot achieve this then they must make way for a theoretical structure that can do so. Theory must raise new questions in its examination and interrogation of phenomena. The responses to these questions furnish the possibility of revision and transformation of categories and their relationships within particular theories. In this sense a theoretical undertaking is an interpretative enterprise akin to the translation of meaning in language. A particular theory enables communication amongst different theoretical actors only if it is 'open' in the sense described; otherwise it is merely the imposition of meaning by some upon others.

Examples of such imposition were characteristic of the various political theories of his day, the various 'isms' of the early decades of the twentieth century. Dewey had made it clear in his more overtly political work (for example in the *Lectures in China, 1919-1920*) that his approach to social change was one of reform or amelioration rather than revolution, and he saw the development of dispositions through education as having an indispensable role in this. When the aim is to influence behaviour, in terms of the school curriculum the study of morality in isolation from other subjects is about the poorest method that can be adopted he believed. Instruction that does not influence conduct does not really result in any improvement in children's moral ideas and ideals. It is obvious therefore that the thing to do is to forego this sort of frontal attack on the problem of moral education, and devote our attention to teaching those subjects which are directly concerned with life, specifically with associated life. Ostensibly there are many things that have a direct relationship to human behaviour, such as the cultivation of desirable habits of concentration, perseverance, accuracy and loyalty. These are matters of knowledge as well moral habits of behaving. But the relationship between these habits and morality depend upon the quality of teaching employed; good methods result in good habits, poor methods produce bad ones. For example we may aim to produce the habit of concentration, by which we mean the cultivation of a sense of responsibility, but if the methods employed are inappropriate we end up with habits of pretence and slovenliness. Good habits can only be cultivated by proper methods that involve all aspects of the individual in embodied engagement with others in associated living.

Dewey believed that democracy is much broader than a special political form, a method of conducting government, or of making laws and carrying out administration by means of popular suffrage and elected officers. While it undoubtedly encompasses all of these elements it is at its heart something deeper and broader. The political and governmental phase of democracy is a means - the best means found so far he believed, of realising ends that lie deep in the wide domain of human relationships and the development of human personality. It is, we often say but perhaps without truly appreciating all that is involved in the

description of a 'way of life' that is both social and individual. In his insistence on this he had in mind all societies, for example China as much as the America of his time.

Rorty has made the observation in *Contingency Irony and Solidarity* that revolutionary achievements in the arts, in the sciences and in moral and political thought typically occur when somebody realizes that two or more of the available vocabularies are interfering with each other. Initiatives are then taken to construct a new vocabulary to replace both. The main point to grasp here is that the new linguistic armoury not only offers a new way of apprehending the world, but also furnishes a new basis for political action. Essentially the new vocabulary transforms the object of the search or quest itself. Revolutionary thinkers are typically unable to make explicit what they wish to do prior to generating a language in which they succeeded in achieving their end. In other words the vocabulary renders possible for the first time a formulation of its own purpose some of the possibilities offered by those participative forms of daily life that constitute the practice of democracy.

Deweyan pragmatism and the development of democratic dispositions

We can derive from Dewey's work an understanding that democratic dispositions are realised in the joining of affective life and that fellow feeling we have for others in our community as we engage in the multiplicity of practices constituting associated life. As Dewey was aware emotion is essential not only to the account we give of how human beings as individuals come to know their world, but also in terms of the ways in which emotion is profoundly implicated in the generation and maintenance of sociality. It seems to me that there is in Dewey's work an understanding that community is built on forms of solidarity and that such forms have an obvious emotional basis. Dewey fully recognised the functioning of emotion in social life, especially that within the construction of social relationships in community. Like some of the major thinkers in sociology Dewey was concerned with the shared emotion and open communal relationship that together form solid social arrangements but which over time change and evolve. Not unlike Weber's in this respect Dewey held that the shared emotional community is a crucial element in understanding how communities function, acknowledging that 'reason' has only a small part to play in the formation and expression of outlook, orientations and the beliefs of groups. Emotion, rather, is the driving force in the social affairs of human beings. This notion that social life in the form of groups with shared interests and outlook is simultaneously underlain and vitalised by emotion is a very important one. We need to better understand that emotions have 'objects'; that is, as human beings we develop emotional attachments and it is the processes involved in such attachment that will be crucial in the growth and deepening of particular emotions. So democratic dispositions are not merely about developing a particular intellectual 'stance' towards matters.

Therefore I suggest that there is a need to better understand what is encompassed through having individuals develop attitudes, orientations and dispositions that will enhance their lives as democratic participants, encouraging their active engagement in communal life. The difficulty of course lies in grasping what these might actually be, and then being able to determine how precisely they might mount a critique of present perspectives on citizenship, and through this develop an awareness of what citizenship might mean in the future. As Dewey was aware knowledge, values and dispositions cannot be separated in the practice of everyday life. In recent public discourse the term values has been presented as something quite distinct and separate from the everyday lives of people. In the more complex debates about democratic values, there has been some acknowledgement that certain attitudes or dispositions, for example the notion of 'moral accommodation', should be engendered in individuals. These include, 'civic integrity' – being consistent in word and deed – and having 'civic magnanimity' – treating opponents as reasonable and morally worthy. The educational philosophers Eamonn Callan and Patricia White suggest that the value they designate

'emotional generosity' be regarded as an important civic disposition that might help to overcome the shallowness and instrumentalism that infuses many contemporary social values.⁷

Following Dewey, I take the view that depth of emotion is achieved only through an individual's growing awareness of her connection to others. People only matter to each other through experiencing the emotional connection of others who are entwined with them in various kinds of project – who are 'implaced' with them as they carry out varieties of practice. From this kind of relation, individuals gain and generate kinds of 'lived knowledge' in contrast to that sort of knowledge which is excessively abstract and removed from actual practice. Humans realise their humanity through other humans, that is, through emotionally motivated and infused, embodied engagement. In the process of experiencing emotions, as embodied selves we are reaffirmed in our spatio-temporal existence. But as Dewey argued convincingly, our emotions are neither in our minds nor merely in our bodies – they are instead always located in the very depths of our actual engagement with the world in all its specificity. The enhancement of emotional depth can only occur if we have sufficient privacy to be ourselves, but at the same time retain an essential connectedness to others, thereby continually engaging in such practice as will carve out our common life. Participation and identity derive from group membership and the performance of mutual obligations, but what is of primary value is the human association that is entailed as a group member. It is the contribution to the community, the sense of being 'held' by the community, that is its own reward. This I think is what Dewey understood deeply when he spoke of the nature of the Great Community. Deweyan pragmatism has I believe an important role to play in helping us better understand in that a community is grounded in shared values and a common appreciation of what is needed if the community is to survive and to flourish.

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