

Four

Ethics reconstructed

A moral philosophy which should frankly recognize the impossibility of reducing all the elements in moral situations to a single commensurable principle, which should recognize that each human being has to make the best adjustment he can among forces which are genuinely disparate, would throw light upon actual predicaments of conduct and ... would lead men to attend more fully to the concrete elements entering into the situations in which they have to act.

(LW 5:288)

The problem with wallpapering an old house is that the lines vary from room to room, so wallpaper neatly squared by the eye in one room appears crooked from the next. The effect is a bit jarring. The well-tested solution is to square the first strip of wallpaper to the world, not to the room, by following the vertical line of a weighted string called a plumb line. Descartes ran with this image as a metaphor for the leveling effect of pure reason in the Discourse on Method: “As far as all the opinions I had accepted hitherto were concerned, I could not do better than undertake once and for all to be rid of them in order to replace them afterwards either by better ones, or even by the same, once I had adjusted them by the plumb-line of reason.”¹

It is a common presumption that one’s own moral formulation has been adjusted by the singular plumb line of reason, direct intuition, or divine authority. As such one’s peculiar brand of moral rectitude occupies an exclusive logical space. In Descartes’ seventeenth-century understanding, the “plumb-line of reason” squares our individual judgments with the fixed geometry of God’s creation.

But in Dewey's view no plumb line of pure thought or transcendental reason is required as a leveling reference to orient our scientific, moral, or aesthetic inquiries. Nor has such a universal plumb line ever been available.

The problem is not that Descartes selected a tool for his metaphor. His image is ironically a pragmatic one, highlighting that we use improvable intellectual instruments to enlighten judgment. Tools such as plumb lines are forged in response to situational needs, evaluated and refined by how well they meet these needs. In Dewey's view we need all the help we can get to square our judgments with our best ideals and to square our scientific inquiries with our highest standards of open scrutiny. We need to make judgments less specious, exclusive, "arbitrary, capricious, unreasoned" (EN, LW 1:320).

But consider Descartes' metaphor a bit further. On the Cartesian coordinate plane—the one we all graphed pairs of integers with when we were in high school geometry—a plumb line can be described as a segment of fixed length that is part of a straight line extending across space. The Cartesian line has no curves, and any segment of it has only one possible correct measurement. For Einstein, in contrast, a plumb line would be understood to follow the Earth's local gravitational lines through curved spacetime, and observers in relative motion would correctly disagree about a segment's length. In this way physics was transformed into a relational dance in the twentieth century. Meanwhile, absolutistic moral philosophies kept one foot in the seventeenth century. Dewey's is a relational moral philosophy of the twentieth century, a new philosophy for dealing with new facts.

Multidimensional moral experience

The central dogma that unites ethical theories, whatever the differences that divide them, is that they must identify the fundamentally right way to organize moral reflection. On this view we can set aside our emotional lives and our hodgepodge of customary beliefs in favor of rationally ordered rules, priorities, or laws derived from a foundational principle or supreme unifying concept that correctly distills and resolves moral problems.

Moral skeptics agree that this is indeed an essential assumption for doing ethics, and they reject it. Moral skeptics say it has been an exercise in futility to try to discover or erect a closed system of ready-made principles to live by. But they too often blithely accept the central dogma that ethics is a quest (albeit a hopeless one) for such principles. The practical result is that the moral skeptic may fail to shine any light between extremes of haphazard drifting, on the side of relativism, and fixed doctrines, on the side of absolutism.

Dewey constructed an ethical pluralism that rejected the central dogma. In 1930 he presented an essay titled “Three Independent Factors in Morals” (LW 5:279–88) to the French Philosophical Society in Paris. The essay was published in French and did not appear in English translation until resurrected in 1966 by Jo Ann Boydston, editor of the critical edition of Dewey’s works. Dewey scholarship of the last twenty-five years has benefited greatly from this interpretive key. From a more practical standpoint, the essay provides a very general map of ethical theorizing for the student of ethics who encounters a smorgasbord of conflicting yet illuminating theories with little way of organizing them to do practical work. “Three Independent Factors in Morals” offers an organizational scheme or house of theory for the many value orientations encountered when studying ethics, especially when read alongside Dewey’s 1932 revision of the *Ethics*.

To illustrate this smorgasbord of value orientations, consider some stances in contemporary environmental ethics. Here are some highly simplified snapshots of ethical debates regarding hunting, stripped of the nuance and analytical sophistication that actual philosophers bring to their ethical theorizing. The utilitarian inquires: Should relevantly similar interests of all currently existing sentient beings be accorded equal consideration when we are deciding how to act? If so, if we permit a nonbasic preference for hunting to trump an animal’s basic interest in going on living, does this produce the greatest overall good for all morally considerable beings? The deontological rights theorist objects that the utilitarian is blind to the fundamental question: Do some nonhuman animals possess characteristics that make them bearers of rights that we are duty-bound to uphold? If so, actions treating such an animal as a mere instrument for others’ ends fail to conform to the dictates of right

action, no matter how much purported good or fulfilled desire comes of it. The virtue ethicist in turn wonders: What traits of character are cultivated by hunting, and do these contribute to a thriving shared life?

Adding to the questions, the biocentrist asks: Is sport hunting compatible with respecting an animal as a fellow center of life pursuing its own evolved good? The ecocentrist steps in to urge that all of the above miss the forest for the trees by unwisely limiting moral considerability to individuals and relegating species and systems to a secondary and supporting role. Instead, says the ecocentrist, we should take our cue from natural processes and ask: Is culling of some animals ecologically obligatory for the good of the system, regardless of whether anyone prefers to pull the trigger? Moreover, given the sad conditions of industrial animal agriculture, might hunting offer many people a sustainable source of locally harvested, free range animal protein while reconnecting them with natural cycles?

Recall that I am greatly simplifying highly articulated and subtle positions, but these moral philosophies do tend toward a single focus. Dewey's pluralism embraced the fact that when we ask different questions, we see different connections and possibilities, and this is an aid to both moral deliberation and the democratic development of policies. There is a siren lure to the hyperrationalist's search for grand unifying concepts and for metaethical organizing principles that aim to swallow all that is best in competing orientations. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his crew pass the island of the sirens, whose song promises to tell their futures. His men heed Circe's council: They stop their ears with wax and tie Odysseus securely to the ship's mast. The siren song of classical ethical systems promises something even more alluring: a universal plumb line to square our moral reasonings with the social world. Ethics students should not stop their ears, but they should perhaps tie themselves to the mast. No matter how carefully elaborated their moral principle, it will rarely focus their attention on all the relevant situational factors that they ought to note and deal with. Dewey shared the spirit of William James's pluralism: "The word 'and' trails after every sentence. Something always escapes. 'Ever not quite' has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness."²

In opposition to the monistic search for a single principle or unifying concept to explain and direct moral life, Dewey asserted that “there are at least three independent variables in moral action” (LW 5:280). He described the following three general characteristics of moral experience, which are often at odds with each other: demands of communal life (the root of deontological theories of justice and duty, such as Immanuel Kant’s), individual ends (the root of consequentialist theories, such as John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism), and social approbation (the root of virtue theories, such as Aristotle’s). The identification of three primary factors conveniently encompassed the three chief Euro-American ethical theories, and Dewey knowingly exaggerated differences among the three (LW 5:503). Pinning down a precise number of primary factors in moral life is far less significant than Dewey’s argument that moral philosophers have generally abstracted one or another factor of moral experience as central and uppermost, hypostatized it (as discussed in Chapter Two), then treated this factor as the self-sufficient starting point for moral inquiry and the foundational bedrock for all moral justification.

In sum, the concepts of duty, virtue, and the good highlight irreducible factors that operate in any moral situation; that is, the three cannot be boiled down to one. Classic moral philosophies that privilege only one of these concepts did not drop from the heavens. They were forged in part as tools to understand and deal concretely with everyday social situations, consequently they do have practical value for streamlining moral deliberation. This practical value can be liberated by putting these tools to work attending to the complex textures and hues of conflict-ridden moral situations (see 1932 E, LW 7:6). Rigorous reflection on goodness, virtues, and obligations is a means to “the continuous reconstruction of experience” (RP, MW 12:185) that is more inclusive, meaningful, and value-rich. Unfortunately, competing monistic bedrock concepts vie as bottom lines in traditional ethical theory, and so they too often sacrifice nuanced perception and engaged problem-solving in favor of armchair theoretic clarity that may actually render moral problems more opaque.

Morally uncertain situations, Dewey urged, require us to intelligently reconcile inherent conflicts between conflicting factors. Should I have an abortion? Should a soldier shoot upon command?

Should a security analyst blow the whistle on government intrusions into privacy? To see these questions through the lens of only one factor—as at bottom a matter of rights not consequences, of duty not virtue, of what is right not what is good, of what I should do and not who I should become—risks bringing deliberation to a premature close.

Chuang-tzu's fable “The Frog of the Well” gave rise to a Chinese idiom for tunnel vision: “like looking at the sky from the bottom of a well.” If indeed traditional moralists see the sky from the bottom of a well, this does not imply that they perceive their patch of sky less clearly than they should. They are presumably expert in that part. The problem arises when they ignore the rest of the sky on the assumption that their patch is all that warrants moral consideration. It is fair to add that we are all frogs in the well, inescapably limited by our standpoints and contexts. Dewey's pragmatic pluralism in ethics built on his more general theory of operative intelligence to chart a course making the best of our contingency and provincialism.

In Dewey's ethics, there is more than just surface tension between independent moral factors, so conflicts between them are not merely specious. No single principle, standard, law, concept, or ideal rooted in just one factor can operate as a moral bottom line that accommodates whatever is of moral worth in the rest. That is, no single factor of moral life—the right, the good, or the virtuous—is the central and basic source of moral justification to which all morality is reducible. Instead, when we begin our moral deliberations with the troubled situation, we discover that diverse factors are already in tension with each other. Our foremost practical need is for fine-tuned habits of character that enable us to continuously coordinate and integrate these tensions. When a theorist errs in the direction of abridging moral life and editing out the plurality of situational tensions that tug at us, we should not be surprised that a relative few find much use for that theory when facing real, unsettled circumstances.

Especially outside the academy, many of those who are drawn to the cropped moral images prevalent in classic theories savor a sense of moral certitude that can accompany them. Consider the influence on activists of utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, author of the classic *Animal Liberation* (1975).³ Those who take seriously his rigorous arguments on behalf of animals cannot fail to be moved in

some way by them. His own acceptance (in a moderated form) of the central dogma of ethics is no doubt a factor in his ability to radicalize advocates, but it is also his greatest liability. In his engaging and aptly titled *Ethics into Action*, the “preference utilitarian” rationally discerns the ethical thing to do to satisfy the greatest number of already-existing individual preferences, then urges activists to turn up the emotional rhetoric to get it done.⁴ But such certitude can exact a fee: absent ongoing sensitivity and reflection to elicit differences and give them an appreciative hearing, the activist—if he or she is dogmatic—may bluntly ignore what does not fit his or her preestablished trajectory. He or she may not consciously wish to freeze out other people with a stake in the process, or presume them to be dull or irrelevant, but this is too often the actual result. When this occurs, there is a failure to coordinate workable solutions in a way that inclusively develops individual capacities and durably modifies problematic conditions (see RP, MW 12:192–93).

We get a great deal of subjective reinforcement in the moment when our moral deliberations culminate in a resolute plan of action, and this lends a psychological motive to the quest for a theory or belief that will banish our doubts. The aim of ethics is of course to mediate objective difficulties, and no practical ethicist knowingly aims merely to “banish doubt” by resolving an ethical conundrum in the psyche. The aim of ethics is to thoughtfully guide action. Ethicists best achieve this goal when they help us to paddle, with revisable moral convictions, against the swift psychological current that propels people toward subjective moral certainty.

Philosophical ethics at its best can proffer hypotheses that enlarge perceptions and “render men’s minds more sensitive to life about them” (RP, MW 12:91–92). In Dewey’s view it is valuable only insofar as it renders this service. Traditional ethical theories are helps on the moral journey: even a one-dimensional map of a multi-dimensional landscape can help us to be more perceptive of and responsive to the terrain. The search for finality and completeness itself has nevertheless largely been a distraction except as it has, almost by happy coincidence, enlarged perceptions and made us more sensitive to the world about us. Where they have succeeded in doing good work despite the central dogma of ethics, their good work too often becomes the enemy of better work. Abandoning the

quest, as well as the tone, of finality in favor of artfully and experimentally developing projects with distinctive emphases and angles would help rather than hinder the future growth of these traditions.⁵

Dewey's ethical writings

Dewey's writings on ethics of course offer no explicit guidance for many contemporary problems. He is perhaps best understood by a twenty-first-century reader as drafting designs for a house of theory within which we might "do ethics" in a way that is more sensitive to situational facts. The layout of his "house" of theory may appear odd to a reader coming to this chapter in isolation from prior chapters, particularly for a reader who has some background in mainstream Anglo-American ethics. Dewey may appear to be ducking questions that he thinks he has dissolved, and his house may appear wrongly organized. Some (though certainly not all) of the high-traffic areas of analytic ethics (i.e., problems taken to be central, such as the "is/ought" problem) are tucked away in a back closet. Meanwhile, the outbuildings of analytic ethics (i.e., issues taken to be of marginal or supplemental importance, such as the role of imagination in moral deliberation) are found in Dewey's family room.⁶

He approached ethics as the practical art of helping people to live richer, more responsible, and more emotionally engaged lives. He rejected as self-defining and circular the classic hunt for a univocal principle that purports to correctly conceive and resolve ethical quandaries about right and wrong, or to finally solve conflicts over values in advance of the situations in which these conflicts arise. He equally rejected the reactive notion that, absent governance by an overarching rational criterion, we are set adrift with only customary conditioning as rudder or sail. Instead, he refashioned the competing blanket principles of ethical theory so that they could be better used as deliberative tools to help us deal reflectively with distinctive factors of situations. He also advanced a theory of character as inherently social and historical, developed a theory of moral deliberation as fundamentally imaginative, and prescribed a democratic moral ideal informed by aesthetic values. (The last will be developed in Chapter Six.)

Dewey's principal ethical writings included his 1908 and 1932 Ethics textbooks (coauthored with James H. Tufts) as well as *Human Nature and Conduct* and *Theory of Valuation*. These writings together engage all approaches typical of philosophical ethics today: descriptive ethics (neutral descriptions of moral thinking and behavior, which includes moral psychology), metaethics (bird's-eye analysis and critique of the central concepts and projects of ethics), normative ethics (formulation and justification of basic moral values), and applied ethics (application of all-the-above to specific areas of activity). In this jargon, Dewey's most distinctive work in ethical theory consisted of metaethical analyses that relied on a redescription of moral experience.

In his 1932 *Ethics*, Dewey argued that deliberate ethical reflection is born of the need to act with patience and courage amid the inevitable ambiguity and doubt that daily arises when we are "confronted with situations in which different desires promise opposed goods and in which incompatible courses of action seem to be morally justified" (1932 E, LW 7:164). Ethical reflection is needed when the way forward is not well lit or when multiple paths beckon. Ethical theory is simply a more systematic working through of the reflection generated by such moral conflicts.

There is a popular but misguided notion of ethics as the study of good versus evil, or of how to get people to do the right thing when they are tempted otherwise. Take a bank employee tempted to steal or embezzle money. The sort of moral struggle involved here quickens the pulse of the individual involved, but Dewey observed that it does not occasion much ethical reflection unless the temptation involves sincere perplexity about right and wrong. If the employee has already determined to embezzle, the only "reflection" involved may be of the tail-wagging-the-dog sort that will allow the unmediated desire to govern conduct (1932 E, LW 7:164).

The absolute prohibitions, commandments, and catechisms of customary morality cry that their own exclusive fixed mooring is humanity's lone moral hope amid storms of lawlessness, disorder, and chaos. Customary catechisms tend to be long on rules but short on tools to intelligently deal with novel challenges and opportunities. Take a citizen who is habituated to be loyal to country, yet her country is engaged in a war that her religious convictions set her

against. She is not struggling between a clear good, on the one hand, and the temptation to do wrong, on the other hand. There is a conflict, Dewey observed, between two incompatible duties, and she must choose “between competing moral loyalties and convictions” which “get in each other’s way” (1932 E, LW 7:165). Reflection is forced by the situation. Although our everyday moral quandaries are usually less momentous, we are daily torn between incompatible options. Each option may intuitively tug at a desire to uphold this or that conviction about rights, duties, ends, goods, and responsibilities. Incompatible goods and colliding duties are the rule in moral experience, not the exception. Theories of reflective morality, of ethics, are generalized extensions of this ordinary sort of thinking (1932 E, LW 7:165).

Dewey argued in Reconstruction in Philosophy that moral philosophers have fled the insecurity of troubled situations in their quest for a certainty even greater than the fervent opinions held by those conventional parrots of reactive mores whom philosophers rightly distrust. Having unseated the moral monarch of custom, they still contest which monarch of reason shall rule from the old throne. Moral philosophers seeking a single ethical ruler to govern deliberation, or taking the absence of such a ruler to spell the end of ethical theory, missed the democratic revolution.

Most Western ethicists still want three things from a theory: “the right way to reason about moral questions” based on principle-driven moral agency, a clear procedure for resolving moral quandaries, and a single right thing to do.⁷ In the main ethical theorists have answered the call to negotiate moral conflicts with their own sorting devices for determining the right way to deal with them. As mentioned, they have tended to regard conflicting ends, goods, and duties as merely apparent (i.e., resolvable through rational analysis) rather than as intractable. This would be fine if moral problems could be solved by hitting upon a unified, coherent, and compelling arrangement of symbols in the inner space of consciousness. But the locus of moral problems is situational and interactive. Existential situations do not reliably fit our tidy rational classifications.

When we approach the principles and rules of monarchical ethical theories as substitutes for personal decision-making and democratic dialogue, we don blinders. We tend to oversimplify and overlook the situational features and alternatives that most require

our attention. There is always, Dewey observed, some portion of the relational network of any moral situation that legitimately presses for consideration yet is not spotlighted by our inherited moral frameworks. So our certificates of virtuousness, dutifulness, or goodness invariably lack luster upon closer inspection.

Moreover, as discussed in prior chapters, a lesson of physics and ecology is that what we see is always situated within what we do not see. One “moral” of this is that it is a rare instance when our choices can exhaustively respond to all that warrants our attention. As a consequence moral experience is unavoidably tragic, in the classical Greek sense: In any moral situation there are more things to which we ought to respond than we can. There is no escaping this existential thicket, only the pretense of escape into our own intellectual caves. Dewey’s ethics points a way beyond the usual cultural attitudes of resignation, guilt, and shame that we learn to cope with the weighty burden of seemingly inexhaustible “oughts.” We select and ignore, as we must (see Chapters Two and Three). Moralistic sermonizing begins when we forget that we have done so. Thus James’s pragmatic pluralism, as Dewey endorsed it, “accepts unity where it finds it, but it does not attempt to force the vast diversity of events and things into a single rational mold” (LW 2:9).

Facts and values

In Dewey’s view there is no essentially separate realm that marks off “moral” issues from those that are practical or factual. To say “the act ought to be done” differs only verbally from saying “this act will meet the situation” (EW 3:108–9). “You ought not to steal” is not essentially different than “You ought not to plant beans outdoors in the New England winter.” In contrast, G. E. Moore famously asserted in *Principia Ethica* (1903) that any candidate for a “moral fact” would have to involve some “non-natural property.” This bequeathed to the twentieth century the odd notion that statements about natural facts (“is” statements) must be sharply enclosed as inherently distinct from statements about values (“ought” statements).

As Hilary Putnam helpfully explains, what Dewey did instead “was develop a naturalistic picture of the way in which intelligence can be applied to ethical problems, and especially to social

problems. For Dewey, ... ethical problems are simply a subset of our practical problems, in the ancient sense of ‘practical’—problems of how to live—and it can be a fact that a certain course of action or a certain form of life solves, or better resolves, what Dewey called a problematic situation.”⁸ If I “ought” to do something, it is because of what the situation “is.” Whatever I do to meet the situation changes it. Ideally my response will be as sensitive and perceptive as possible to the existing relationships, but any response to the situation will be what Dewey in an early essay playfully called “the ‘is’ of action” (EW 3:105).

Dewey regarded it as a truism that we cannot simply deduce how we ought to behave as an implication of factual descriptions. But this does not mean that the connection between situational facts and our normative judgments is no better than a wild guess. It is a practical inference of an inductive sort. We daily test such inferences as hypotheses that are drawn from the evidence at our disposal, and (if we are thinking well) we judge such inferences to be warranted and well-grounded, or unwarranted and groundless, by the consequences of acting on them (LTI, LW 12:424). Not only can one intelligently infer an “ought” from an “is,” but one cannot responsibly avoid doing so.

In *Theory of Valuation*, Dewey pointed out that people impulsively or habitually prize many things that, upon reflection, cannot be justified as praiseworthy. The prized and praiseworthy, valued and valuable, desired and desirable: Although common speech does not always reflect the logical distinction, the former word in each pair highlights in Dewey’s ethics a habituated felt motive, while the latter is a term of reflective judgment. The distinction parallels that already referenced in Dewey’s 1938 *Logic* between affirmations and assertions.⁹

Reflective value judgments are like maps that we have journeyed with and assessed. They have “existential import” (LTI, LW 12:123), which simply means that we act on these judgments and, for better or worse, we thereby reshape the moral situation. Our considered judgments are most reliable when they develop through the guidance and direction of colloquy with others, and through the use of moral principles and ideals, instead of in detachment and isolation. There are limitations of even the most refined moral understanding, so criticism is always necessary, with no standpoint

immune from ongoing revision. When we plant a crop or take a journey, we know the test is in the reliability of our methods, not in whether we started with the right intellectual abstractions. The same holds for moral life.

Moral imagination

In his redescription of moral inquiry, Dewey laid bare underappreciated deliberative capacities, chief among which is imagination. In a memorable passage from *Anne of Green Gables*, Diana says to Anne: “It’s easy for you because you have an imagination, ... but what would you do if you had been born without one?”¹⁰ Diana places Anne’s imaginative powers on a pedestal to be admired as something most people lack, something godlike that cannot be nurtured by education. Both children share a romantic view of imagination as a “power that enters into the world on the wings of intuition, free of the taint of contingency and history.”¹¹ Imagination in Dewey’s view, in contrast, is a concrete cognitive capacity as ordinary and integral as flexing our muscles (DE, MW 9:245). It is not the special province of poets or daydreamers. It is as ordinary and practical for humans as singing and nest-building is for birds, or gnawing and dam-building for beavers.

His ethical theory can be foreshortened from the standpoint of his theory of imaginative forethought in deliberation. Following the lead of Plato’s low appraisal of imagination in the *Republic* and *Ion*, philosophers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment were suspicious of any central role for imagination in ethics. “Nothing is more dangerous to reason,” Hume wrote in the *Treatise*, “than the flights of the imagination.”¹² Hume was the greatest Enlightenment champion of the role of sympathetic emotions in moral life, but he nonetheless presented imagination as a wayward mental faculty that may oppose intellect and so must be subordinated. On the still-prevalent Enlightenment view, rationality is dispassionate and calculative while our flickering imaginations are the teenagers of the mind. Imagination’s cool and collected parent, reason, has assigned its self-indulgent offspring a limited task—to reproduce mental images—which it might at any moment shirk in a flight of fantasy.

But imagination is not limited to fantastical inventions. Dewey highlighted imagination as it functioned concretely in the life of the artist, the moral decision-maker, the scientist, the student. He approached imagination not as a flighty faculty with a subsidiary role in cognitive life, nor as a gaseous inspirational power descending from on high, but as an essential function of human interaction: our capacity of “realizing what is not present” to the senses (LW 17:242).

Perhaps the term imagination should be jettisoned as hopelessly entangled in Enlightenment mistakes, ironically including the hypostatized misconception that there is such a thing as a discrete “faculty” of imagination. Contemporary cognitive scientists studying the same function define it helpfully as a form of “mental simulation” shaped by our embodied interactions with the social and physical world.¹³ This meshes well with Dewey’s view, but he chose to retain and reconstruct the word to accord with a functional psychology. Imagination encompasses our capacity to form and reproduce visual, auditory, motor, and tactile images (e.g., LW 17:242), but most importantly imagination plays an active and constitutive role in reflection.

Imagination emerges, Dewey asserted, through early childhood play. Very young children begin to understand the world metaphorically by carrying over “one experience into another” (LW 17:262). The toddler who sees a stack of blocks as a tower is no longer limited to the world as immediately presented to his or her senses. “The Omaha house is closed,” our five-year-old informed his visiting grandparents as they were departing back to their Nebraska home. He saw the disappointing situation before him in light of a familiar possibility: One cannot go to a store, restaurant, or school when it is closed, so there is little point in going to a closed house. Eventually, though perhaps less charmingly, through more complex imaginative simulations children come to see the actual conditions and challenges they face in light of what is possible, what is before them in light of what could be.¹⁴ Dewey said in his 1902 lectures on education at Brigham Young University: “Imagination really is the transferring of one experience over into another” (LW 17:264). In this way children, and adults, develop the natural force Dewey called intelligence.

Reason-giving is the gold standard for moral deliberation in university ethics courses. It is an important and ill-developed skill, one that requires imagination. Nonetheless, a focus on reason-giving as the essence of wise deliberation has marginalized the importance of imaginative simulation. Ethicists betray a lingering suspicion of imagination. Imagination, it is thought, “leaps and swerves” while rational intellect at its best advances “by rule-guided steps.”¹⁵ Even some philosophers who highlight its import prescribe that we “clip the wings of imagination” to keep “imaginings on track.”¹⁶ This is in part due to cultural identification of the imaginative simply with what is imaginary, unreal, or fanciful. The imaginative experiences of special interest to Dewey were those that are interactively engaged and rooted in problematic circumstances, not subjective. A subjective fantasy may follow the same neural channels, but imagination in Dewey’s sense is the medium in which we extend perception deep into the place and time in which we live.

Intentional acts are possible only through imagination. For example, planting a seed is an imaginative act, indeed a prophetic one. The gardener sees and values the seed and soil in light of what they promise for a distant harvest. The focus of intentional acts like planting a seed is concretely on the present, yet attention is expanded beyond what is under our nose so that past lessons and future prospects “come home to us and have power to stir us” (ACF, LW 9:30). Imagination “supplements and deepens observation,” Dewey observes, by affording “clear insight into the remote, the absent, the obscure” (HWT, LW 8:251). Through imagination things before us are significant of things absent, as with the natural historian who sees fossils as records of prior events that constituted them (HWT, LW 8:126).

There could be no scientific, aesthetic, or moral thinking without the intervention of imagination. “Only imaginative vision,” Dewey urged, “elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual” (AE, LW 10:348). Imagination needs promising channels, not clipped wings.

More precisely, there are two aspects of imagination in Dewey’s ethics, which operate simultaneously:

1. Empathetic projection. As Mead described it, empathy is taking the attitude of another. Empathy stirs us beyond numbness so we

pause to sort through others' aspirations, interests, and worries as our own. Empathy is distinct from the Golden Rule, which asks you to put yourself in the position of another and discern what you would have done "unto you." Dewey defined empathy as "entering by imagination into the situations of others" (1908 E, MW 5:150; cf. 1932 E, LW 7:268–72). (Dewey and Mead followed the lead of Scottish and English writers in calling such direct valuing sympathy, but their usage fits the term empathy in contemporary ethics.) In sharp opposition to Kant's disparagement of empathy as morally (though not prudentially) unnecessary, even subversive, for Dewey it is through such sensitivity that we avoid cold-blooded callousness and indifference. For Dewey, as for contemporary feminist care ethicists, empathy is a necessary condition for moral deliberation. Without it there would be no "inducement to deliberate or material with which to deliberate" (1932 E, LW 7:269). A multifaceted sympathy is a virtue, at least up to the point that empathetic care threatens to block any action.

2. Creatively tapping a situation's possibilities. Empathy provides the primary felt context of moral reflection, without which we would not bother with the other aspect of imagination: seeing what is before us in light of a wide survey of what is possible in a situation. Surveying and forecasting is the most important phase of moral deliberation (indeed all deliberation), in which we dramatically rehearse alternatives prior to acting on them irrevocably. In novelist Wallace Stegner's words, imagination is our means for shaping definite contours, lines, and forms "out of the fog of consequences" that we call our past and future.¹⁷

As discussed in Chapter Three, for Dewey inquiry is born of troubled situations. We are propelled to act despite being brought up short by perplexing circumstances. Disrupted action evokes deliberation, which Dewey described as an indirect and vicarious mode of action that substitutes for direct action by placing before us "objects which are not directly or sensibly present, so that we may then react directly to these objects, ... precisely as we would to the same objects if they were physically present" (HNC, MW 14:139). Deliberation, Dewey said, is "a kind of dramatic rehearsal" in

imagination. If only one alternative for dealing with a problematic situation were to present itself, we would act on it without hesitation. But when alternatives contend with one another as we forecast the consequences of acting on them, the ensuing suspense sustains deliberation (HWT, LW 8:200).¹⁸

There is an obvious evolutionary benefit of a neural adaptation that enables experimental simulation: “An act overtly tried out is irrevocable, its consequences cannot be blotted out,” Dewey observed. “An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable” (HNC, MW 14:132–33). From plotting your next chess move to struggling over a reproductive choice, dramatic rehearsal is a capacity for crystallizing possibilities for thinking and acting and transforming them into directive hypotheses. Whatever else may or should be involved in moral deliberation, in Dewey’s view it must at least be compatible with these psychological operations, which are fundamentally imaginative.

An incisive critic of narrowly utilitarian calculation (e.g., HNC, MW 14:147–50), Dewey urged that what is most at stake in moral life is engaged imaginatively rather than via calculative rationality, if the latter is understood on the standard view as cold accounting. What is most at stake is “what kind of person one is to become” and what kind of world one wishes to participate in making (HNC, MW 14:150). Next to basic questions of physical nourishment, health, and security, these are the most fundamental human questions. We bet our lives on a conviction that the better answer is found in one direction rather than another. Our choices express who we are and who we will become. “Every choice sustains a double relation to the self. It reveals the existing self and it forms the future self” (1932 E, LW 7:286–87).

Calculative rationality and a value hierarchy may suffice for making a provisional choice in a situation in which there is no fundamental tension between goods, ends, responsibilities, rights, or duties. But dramatic rehearsal is the way we negotiate less tidy moral territory, and moral life is memorably untidy. Understanding the psychology of imaginative deliberation may help us to more effectively map that terrain.

To the extent that utilitarian theories limit our dramatic rehearsals to consequences that are immediate and localized, Dewey opposed them. By the time he wrote his great social and political

works in the wake of the 1929 Wall Street collapse, it was apparent that such narrowness was alarmingly out of step with complex social conditions. He was also keenly aware that it is easier to think atomistically and individualistically about the roots of problems that are in fact systemic and institutional. We are lately realizing what Dewey counseled decades ago, that contemporary moral perception needs supplementation and expansion beyond the speck of self-interest and pleasure-seeking around which many daily consumer concerns orbit. Scientific literacy has become vital to this. But even the most thorough scientific knowledge will overwhelm rather than enhance moral reflection if that knowledge is not framed by imagination in a way that relates one's individual biography to one's encompassing environment and history.

Imagination is essential to the emergence of meaning, a necessary condition for which is to note relationships between things. "To grasp the meaning of a thing, an event, or a situation," Dewey asserted, "is to see it in its relations to other things" (HWT, LW 8:225).¹⁹ Take an everyday ecological irony. Many migratory songbirds I enjoy in summer while drinking a morning cup of coffee are declining in numbers, in part because trees in their winter nesting grounds in Central America have been bulldozed to plant coffee plantations. Awareness of these relationships amplifies the meaning of my cup of coffee as new connections are identified, discriminated, and employed "as means in a further course of inclusive interaction" (EN, LW 1:198). In imagination we hold these connections before attention as we reflect, and this confers relational significance upon otherwise mechanical and superficial experiences. Such imagination permeates a situation "deeply and widely" (ACF, LW 9:13), and it opens the way for critical assessment and redirection of individual and institutional behaviors. Should I drink shade-grown coffee? Donate to wildlife conservation groups? Support habitat protection in trade agreements? Put the concern on the back burner? Ideally, this amplification of meaning operates as a means to intelligent and inclusive foresight of the consequences of alternative choices and policies. No option will be perfect, each will proliferate new questions, and each must be considered in relation to other problems and goals.

As with the coffee example, many remediable moral failures stem from maldevelopment of our capacity to oscillate in our imaginative

rehearsals between things and relevant relations. Economists and ecologists have long emphasized that it is essential to forecast and facilitate outcomes so we can better navigate systems. It is through imagination that relational perceptiveness enters into practical, aesthetic, and scientific deliberations so that we are able to understand focal objects through a fuller scope of connections distant in space and time.

The starting point and principles

In Utilitarianism, Mill echoed the received view that “the morality of an individual action is not a question of direct perception, but of the application of a law to an individual case.”²⁰ For Dewey, in contrast, the term “applied ethics” is potentially misleading: ethics is always practical. What could it mean to apply, to put into action, a theory like Dewey’s that asks you to start with the situation at hand? Dewey’s ethics were Shakespearean in spirit, beginning in *medius res* with the emotion-soaked muck of real circumstances of competing values and diverse goods. That is where we actually find ourselves in our moral lives: the thicket of deliberation about what it is best to do. Dewey rejected as a fantasy the notion of a purified rational perspective from nowhere. There is in his view no universal plumb line, no singular moral compass, no inerrant moral intuition, no God’s-eye view. But neither is ethics arbitrary.

Philosophical analysis can help to identify the often-unexamined principles, organizational patterns, or customary assumptions underlying behaviors and beliefs. Of course these implicit principles are not commonly held in the detached and abstract way of a professional philosopher. These principles are often latent and hard to articulate, not consciously applied and debated. Many contemporary ethicists understandably identify “doing ethics” with an attempt to benefit human conduct through analysis and critique of such underlying principles. Philosophical analysis teases them out to see what trajectory they commit us to when acted upon. The (re)constructed principle can thereby be evaluated by the work it does when used as a tool. As a tool it is never final or complete; it is subject to ongoing refinement. And as a tool it is never the starting point of ethical deliberation; it is something we reach for in the thick of the problem.

This is the heart of Dewey's ethics: The starting point of deliberation is a problematic situation. We reach for our toolbox of principles and ideals not to deduce the right thing to do, but to help us attend more perceptively and responsively to situational factors.²¹

The constructed tools of ethics are not fixed metrics that have been analyzed and justified by an autonomous, detached, dispassionate individual consciousness. Yet much contemporary "applied ethics," despite sophisticated stabs at a defensible moral epistemology, still tends to approach ethical decision-making as though universal metrics are being applied to concrete cases. At its extreme, applied ethical discourse may give the appearance of prefabricated principles in search of problems. When ethicists appear to have the parameters for an answer ready before a question has even arisen, they may not succeed in helping people see their way between absolutism and arbitrariness. Dewey argues that principles can help us to feel and think our way through a conflicted relational web, but the standpoint of being situated or placed should be the primary one in moral deliberation rather than standpoints steeped in the quest for a universal plumb line, such as divine commands, universal laws of reason, timeless moral intuitions, natural laws, or universal maxims.

To see how Dewey's reconstruction of ethics can nevertheless be "applied" to contemporary problems absent any fixed metric, consider a problematic context far removed from his own. Debates over animal use and treatment have become standard fare in philosophical ethics since the 1980s, with special ferocity in the areas of biomedicine and agriculture.²² Perhaps the touchiest area concerns what we choose to eat, with many diets vying for "the best." To illustrate Dewey's moves, take two out-of-the-mainstream diets competing for center stage: an omnivorous diet relying on grass-fed animal husbandry, and a vegan diet seeking to abolish animal agriculture. Each seeks to respond to problems stemming from our industrialized food system, such as chemical runoff, overuse of antibiotics, resource depletion, and animal confinement that suppresses natural behaviors. There is nothing extraordinary about this particular dispute among moral reformers. It is replaceable for purposes of illustration with any other current heated controversy, some more consequential, in which disputants typify the outworn cultural assumptions about ethics that Dewey urged us to get over.

Drawing in part from trailblazing work on “perennial polyculture” by the agriculturalist Wes Jackson, Virginia farmer Joel Salatin advocates an approach to agriculture and eating that requires less tilling (hence less soil depletion) than exclusively vegetable-based agriculture, is well adapted to colder climates, and does not rely on long-distance transportation of conventionally produced grain. From the standpoint of Dewey’s ethics, this or any other promising hypothesis should be evaluated in light of how well it directs behaviors to solve shared problems. But Salatin is no pragmatist in his ethics. He wields the sword of righteousness. For example, he argues that the “right” diet must be based on grass-fed animal husbandry if it is to mimic perennial natural cycles, so it must include meat. From his standpoint vegetarians are hypocrites (if they eat dairy and eggs), and the best that can be said of vegans (those who consume no animal products) is that at least they are not hypocrites. Indeed Salatin, who is a Christian fundamentalist, believes vegans and vegetarians commit a sacrilege against nature (and God) by refusing to enter the cycle of eater and eaten.²³

Despite faddish proliferation of books and blogs proposing the correct, best, or “natural” diet, Dewey’s ethics provides no basis for assuming that such a thing can be determined in advance of the situations that require us to make dietary choices. There are multiple ways to pursue better lives in relation to food, and no diet exhaustively deals with all of the often incompatible exigencies inherent in agriculture and eating. Practical ethicists would generally agree that there can be no such thing as the correct diet. But neither, from Dewey’s standpoint, is there any single right way to reason about dietary choices. Still, dietary choices are not arbitrary. We do not need an absolute dietary compass to perceive that many choices and policies do little to move us toward a more humane, just, healthy, and sustainable food system. Nor do we need such a compass to infer and test ways forward—such as the hypotheses of perennial polyculture and veganism—to judge by their consequences the extent to which these hypotheses are well grounded or groundless.

Salatin makes several popular assumptions about moral life, including the central dogma of ethics. There is, he assumes, a right way to reason about moral matters, a single accurate way to conceive the human-nature relationship, and hence a right (omnivorous) diet.

Ironically, vegan abolitionists share the same assumptions when they argue that “meat is murder” and that all animal agriculture is slavery that violates animal rights. For the abolitionist, an animal’s sentience or subjectivity grants it rights comparable to the human rights Jefferson celebrated in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights, abolitionists claim, trump any interest humans may have in killing, penning, or experimenting on animals, and violating these rights simultaneously degrades the environment of all species and worsens human health. The analogy to human slavery highlights for abolitionists the dismal treatment customarily accorded to those we regard as property, emboldening their activism with absolute moral conviction.

Each disputant starts with the same assumption about ethics: a bedrock, a correct worldview, a single right principle. They simply disagree about which. The fundamental agreement is what charges their polarization. Dewey rejected this culturally dominant starting assumption. He proposed a pragmatic approach to vexing ethical issues as a realistic aim of moral education, even if it is not always a realistic aim for already-polarized situations. A practical result over time is that polarized positions may lose their winner-take-all prescriptive force, thereby liberating their respective insights for accommodation in a broader-based, more intelligent inquiry.

In Dewey's view moral education should aim to help youths be patient with the suspense of moral inquiry, distrustful of tunnel vision, aware of the fallibility and incompleteness of any deliberation, and imaginative in pursuing relational leads. At its most successful, such an education helps moral debates to be more honest, open, and productive. It also makes moral inquiry harder work. But there is need for confidence without puritanical fervor, courage in mediating troubled situations without need or expectation of certainty, and bold ameliorative action without fatalistic resignation or paralyzing guilt.

Dewey reconstructed ethics as a way for us to help each other and the next generations to become more perceptive and more responsible. The question dietary warriors, and the rest of us, should ask is which methods and habits trend in this direction, and which do not. Many do not. Some do. We should be grateful that those which do will be approached through different conceptual frameworks

with their varying dominant emphases, and the resulting tensions will stimulate ongoing inquiry as we grapple with the transitions ahead. There is ample room, for instance, for diets that rely more or less on animal agriculture, and for advocates of the same, just as there are usually more mutually traversable ways forward in any polarized debate than are seen by mono-focused disputants.

In praise of theory

Those who demand certainty rather than guidance from an ethical theory will be disappointed. But the problem may lie more with their expectations than with the theory. On their own, traditional ethical theories are neither enriching nor obfuscating. But critical examination of their holdover assumptions frees them up to be used as aids to imaginative reflection (EN, LW 1:40). Dewey found the baby in the bathwater of classic systems, but he was especially intent on criticizing those who point to the baby as proof that the system was right all along. That is, he argued that the praiseworthy accompaniments of classical ethical theories have no indissoluble connection to the monistic systems that spawned them (see MW 10:5). Classic theories such as Kantianism and utilitarianism contain fertile ideas despite and not because of their attempts at logical exclusion. Thanks to them “the horizon has been widened; ideas of great fecundity struck out; imagination quickened” (MW 10:5). An organizing principle such as Kant’s practical imperative or Mill’s utilitarian maxim provides a way of

looking at and examining a particular question that comes up. It holds before him certain possible aspects of the act; it warns him against taking a short or partial view of the act. It economizes his thinking by supplying him with the main heads by reference to which to consider the bearings of his desires and purposes; it guides him in his thinking by suggesting to him the important considerations for which he should be on the lookout (1932 E, LW 7:280).

It is difficult to imagine a serious reader of Kant or Mill who has never found them helpful for checking a tendency toward selfish

gratification. Classical systems can help to make judgment more intelligent, less biased by what Dewey called “the twisting, exaggerating and slighting tendency of passion and habit” (HNC, MW 14:169). But in Dewey’s view these aids to reflection can be better sustained and expanded when freed of the straitjackets of classic systems. For example, when we respond to the call of moral duty over and against sell-outs to narrow practical expedience, we need not retreat with Kant to a fantasy realm of pure reason to explain our choice. At our best, in Dewey’s view, when we opt out of a convenient and self-serving course we are exercising imaginative moral artistry that takes the longer view of practical consequences, the wider appraisal of pressing communal demands, and the more complete engagement with our best reflective ideals.

Emerson famously wrote that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” He did not say consistency is foolish, only a consistency that fails to meet situations. Returning to dietary choices, consider the case of a vegetarian couple living abroad, invited to dine at the home of new acquaintances. Sitting down with their hosts to a meticulously prepared dinner, they find steaks on their plates. Suppose they eat gratefully. From a neo-Kantian animal rights standpoint, they are sellouts or people of weak will who have just committed a transgression. At the logical extreme of animal rights, eating the steak is the moral equivalent of eating a person to honor a host. The absolutistic tenor and artificial clarity of this judgment is not a peculiarity of animal rights theories. It stems from the fact that the Kantian deontologist limits deliberation to universalized maxims purified of sensitivity to particular relationships and concrete circumstances. Yet these relations and circumstances constitute the ethical situation. It is not that the couple’s usual dietary choices are irrelevant, or that their concerns about animal treatment are negated when they are in the role of guest. The point here is simply that they are in the thicket of ethical life. They cannot simply rest on their usual dietary habits to meet the situation well. Their choice to eat the steaks may indicate fine awareness and rich responsibility for the consequences of their choices, along with an ability to perceptively read and respond to situational particulars. Or perhaps there were other options they missed.

Everyday rules do not have the scope of fundamental principles, laws, or maxims, but they are not essentially different from general principles in the way they function. A rule like “Look both ways before crossing the street” helps children to focus attention and economize reflection, lest they be injured. Such rules are implicit and habitual for most adults, absent conditions that may require greater reliance on externally imposed limits. A Dewey-inspired ethics employs principles, rules, and unifying concepts as directive hypotheses. As discussed, Dewey defended their use as tools even as he decried the idea of a mythic true north for setting moral compasses. Unidimensional tools cannot on their own do multidimensional jobs.

Fundamental moral principles, laws, and maxims are not truths that receive their warrant from some realm of pure thought or spirit beyond history, context, and place. The foundational principles and procedures of modern Western moral philosophies have made many people confident that that they are acting within precise moral limits. Yet we do not mostly suffer from lack of confidence. We do “suffer from lack of ... detached and informed criticism” (LW 17:110). No matter how rigorous the rational demonstrations of our ethical theories may be from the standpoint of the armchair or lectern, confidence does not entail responsibility to the situation at hand.

Rules and protocols are effective when they help rather than hinder responses to particular needs. A friend of mine was recently driving on a busy urban freeway en route to the airport when his car broke down. Worried about missing his flight, he phoned a taxi. “We can’t send a taxi without a street address,” he was duly informed of the company rule. “I’m on the freeway, so I don’t have an address,” he replied. After several minutes of this, a manager eventually grabbed the phone, frustrated after overhearing his employee: “Sorry about that; just tell me where you are.”

Plato was aware long ago that legalistic morality is maladaptive because something invariable cannot keep up with the pace of circumstances. Law, he wrote in the *Statesman*, “is like a self-willed, ignorant man who lets no one do anything but what he has ordered and forbids all subsequent questioning of his orders.”²⁴ When the traditional moralist snubs situational considerations as an inferior locus for motives and justifications, he or she paves the way to becoming what Mark Twain called good “in the worst sense of the word.”

Some principle-based ethicists classify Dewey as a “moral particularist,” the view that moral principles are crutches and that the ideal moral agent is sensitive rather than principled. Instead, Dewey rejected both horns (of course) of what is nowadays known in Anglo-American ethics as the generalist-particularist debate.²⁵ This debate is often illuminating, but it fails to fully appreciate either the profound instrumental value or the myopic limitations of principle-based reasoning. It is true that we may find convenient excuses for self-interested action when, instead of submitting ourselves to the governance of principles, we limit ourselves to surveying the concrete particulars of a situation. But it is equally true that we excuse unresponsive behaviors by reference to universal maxims.

To loosely paraphrase Henry James, it is a foolish consistency that fails to sacrifice a dictum or code when considerations of a finely perceived situation demand it. No codified rule can replace a flexible and discerning imagination. We need the economizing of thought that principles and rules afford. We also need the guarding against partisan bias, the summarizing of prior wisdom, and the intellectual parameters.²⁶ These needs clarify the pragmatic value of armchair thought experiments for scrutinizing and adjusting precepts, so ubiquitous today as to be synonymous with ethical theorizing. But at the same time, it is increasingly recognized that ignoring imagination contracts perception and leaves deliberation coarse and monochromatic.

Edwin A. Burt suggested that “if he had to pick a single word to typify Dewey’s philosophical work, it would be ‘responsibility.’”²⁷ We derive more psychological comfort from being Right than from being responsible. Armchair systematizing that attempts to delineate a latitude and longitude of rectitude, or that approaches ethics as rational justification of an inherited moral system, is useful, but it is not on its own responsible enough. It leaves moral imagination flat and lifeless. It does not skillfully transform troubled situations in light of discovery of integrative paths of mutual growth. A situation at hand may require integrative ways forward that are not currently recognized as alternatives, creative and value-added resolutions that preserve and carry forward the propulsive desires that had previously been in conflict—as with two children being persuaded to play catch with a ball they had been fighting over.²⁸ Ethicists drop

the ball if they offer instead a picture of moral life that is content to leave moral experiences incomplete and underdeveloped, without the depth and breadth required to grasp inherent connections and relationships. Our greatest social need is to awaken dormant imaginative capacities to be more context-responsive. Sadly, imagination neglected is as likely to turn to fleeting self-serving pursuits or to promotion of authoritarian control, regardless of how well-oiled our detached ethical analyses may be.²⁹

The social basis of character

Modern European-descended political philosophy and ethics has assumed in the main that humans are defined in isolation rather than in relation. The model of free-willing, autonomous moral agency has dominated Western ethics. It has been considerably eroded among professional ethicists since Dewey's day, but it too often lingers as a habitual assumption. There is, the classical story ran, an unchanging moral realm of free will that does not depend for its structure on physical or social systems. This mental power of free will is best ruled by transcendental rationality or supernatural authority.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Dewey rejected these dubious notions. Mind and will are functions of the way we inhabit nature as imaginative cultural beings. That is, they are complex functions of the doings and undergoings of encultured, embodied, historically situated organisms, continuous with physical systems. We commit the fallacy of hypostatization whenever we abstract an emergent individual away from social relationships and then assert or assume that the individual is self-sustaining.

Dewey concurred with Mead in observing that individuality emerges through a developmental process, and it is not set over-and-against our association with others. The self does not arise in the absence of others. Ecologists study the way individual organisms arise together and act together, and the human organism is no exception (see PP, LW 2:250). The child's selfhood is formed socially. Although desires, intentions, and choices originate in singular beings, there is no soul-like "seat, agent or vehicle" of selfhood that does the perceiving, imagining, and reasoning for us (HNC, MW 14:124). The self is not like a seed awaiting the right

external conditions to actualize its pre-existing form. Nor is the self a genetically hardwired wind-up device. But neither is selfhood the product of mechanical and thus precisely controllable stimulus-response events. Dewey associated the latter view with what he called the “extremely narrow and dogmatic” tenets of psychologist John Watson’s behaviorism.³⁰

In opposition to social contract theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau, Dewey argued: “There is no sense in asking how individuals come to be associated. They exist and operate in association. If there is any mystery about the matter, it is the mystery that the universe is the kind of universe it is” (PP, LW 2:250). We grow into a social milieu shot through with complex, stable, and often conflicting customs. Such heritable cultural and subcultural patterns set the stage for personal habituation, and they are the principal objects and tools of philosophical criticism. From sublime arts to genocide, our preestablished social circuits set the scene.³¹ They operate as neural paths of least resistance, and through them potential meanings are revealed and in greater proportion concealed.

Dewey used the everyday word habit to capture the propulsive power of latent recurring tendencies. He included private behavioral patterns, what we call good or bad habits, but he also used the word habit in a deliberately imprecise way to sweep in physical posture, evolving customs, symbol systems, conceptual frameworks, myths, metaphors, beliefs, virtues, and prejudices.³² He explained this broad usage in *Human Nature and Conduct*:

We need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity (HNC, MW 14:31).

Habits form our characters, which Dewey defined along Aristotle’s lines as “the interpenetration of habits” (HNC, MW 14:29). Habits operate as active means, projecting themselves for better or worse into actions. They, and not some mythical free will, are the

fundamental instruments of conduct, so much so that when we lack the relevant habits and thus the relevant moral “intuitions” (HNC, MW 14:26), our conduct misses the mark. Without stability in our habitual attitudes, moral experience would be a sequence of disjointed acts and there could be no such thing as developmental potential. George Eliot wrote in this vein about the importance of “good and sufficient ducts of habit without which our nature easily turns to mere ooze and mud, and at any pressure yields nothing but a spurt or a puddle.”³³ In that case, Dewey said, conduct could not be morally significant, as no act could be “judged as an expression of character” (1932 E, LW 7:170).

Our sense of who we are, how we understand situations, how we relate to the social and natural world, and what we see as possible courses of mediation all depend significantly on the stable habits that we inherit, share, and live by. Dewey described the moral import of this: “The community … in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed … is the matrix within which our ideal aspirations are born and bred. It is the source of the values that the moral imagination projects as directive criteria and as shaping purposes” (ACF, LW 9:56).

Habits mostly unconsciously shape our dramatic rehearsals, enabling us to coordinate situational tensions and to envision an indefinite future together. An organization of avenues for thinking and acting would be largely unavailable—again, for better or worse—if habits did not mark them out. Indeed, Dewey concurred with Mead that thinking itself is an “inner conversation” carried on in a locus pervaded by the language(s), traditions, and institutions of a particular human environment.³⁴

In Dewey’s view, the principal social role of philosophy is the interpretation, evaluation, criticism, and redirection of culture. As children we inherit values along with our speech. “It is not an ethical ‘ought’ that conduct should be social,” Dewey urged. “It is social, whether bad or good” (HNC, MW 14:16). Because the customs that possess us precede our choices, many ideas and ideals seem naturally right, beautiful, or true. We did not opt for our presuppositions, and we are mostly unaware of them, so we take them to be inevitable and uncontroversial. This makes it challenging to intelligently evaluate and reconstruct them. Left uneducated, the

human tendency is unfortunately to champion customs in blind conformity or to dismiss them in reactionary defiance.

We cannot entirely bypass the customs and recurring attitudes that structure our dramatic rehearsals and thereby inform conduct and policymaking. They do some of our thinking for us and so must be examined, evaluated, and criticized. To the extent that contemporary research opens up greater knowledge of these organizational circuits and their inner workings, we are supplied an inroad to better understanding, appreciating, and gradually altering the inescapable context of our moral imaginations.

Does this emphasis on morality as social make Dewey a cultural relativist? The anthropologist Franz Boas, who developed cultural relativism as a methodological tool, was among Dewey's Columbia University colleagues. Dewey's principal work predates the occasional conflation among moral philosophers of the terms "cultural relativism" and "moral relativism."³⁵ The former is a methodology in anthropology that aspires to nonethnocentric descriptions of cultural practices, while the latter is a dissenting position in ethics on the issue of whether any set of individual or cultural norms or practices can be substantially justified against any other set of norms. On the issue of moral relativism, as throughout his work, Dewey steered between what he identified as equally untenable extremes. He felt no temptation to justify an ethical theory of ultimately ethnocentric principles that masquerade as universals and so are threatened by anthropological methods.

What anthropological evidence supports, on Dewey's interpretation in "Anthropology and Ethics," is both variability and stability across cultures. There is of course "relativity in the actual content of morals at different times and places." But such relativity "is consistent with a considerable degree of stability and even of uniformity in certain generic ethical relationships and ideals" (LW 3:22). At least two factors account for this stability. First, although popular claims about an unchanging human nature are grossly exaggerated, we share recurrent psychophysical needs such as requirements for food, security, sex, companionship, social recognition, and artistic making. Second, we share basic preconditions for living together, such as some level of peace and internal order (LW 3:22).

As discussed, when habits get out of equilibrium with the flux of environing conditions, moral experience becomes problematic, and

this is the source of deliberation. So as a necessary condition for moral growth and achievement, habits must be open to intelligent reconstruction. We are by definition used to them, but inflexible habits are maladaptive because mechanisms for blind routine cannot keep up with a moving world. To be genuinely responsible and self-disciplined is to be empowered and educated to overhaul prevailing habits in order to manage problems of the insistent present. It is thus a perverse irony that so many try to inculcate responsibility in the young by “molding” them in past designs simply because these hardened habits may once upon a time have helped us to cope (HNC, MW 14:48–49). Of course, regardless of how maladaptive they are, habits do not magically disappear simply because we tell them to. Habit-change demands support from objective conditions. We should be wary of the habitual biases we cultivate, as the embodied mind has no easy reset button.

Dewey’s emphasis on individuality as the locus of desire and choice, along with his championing of democratic inquiry, stands in contrast with collectivistic tendencies in East Asian views. But it is noteworthy that Dewey completed *Human Nature and Conduct* during his second year in China, and there are affinities which were reinforced during those two years.³⁶ Bao Zhiming describes the Confucian model of selfhood: “Ultimately, man is social, hence relational. … Man as an individual abstracted away from the social and political relationships he is born into never enters the picture of Confucius’ ethical world.”³⁷ Our reasoning, in Dewey’s view, does not stand outside of culture. It does not hover above that to which we are accustomed. A dominant assumption in most schools of Western philosophy has been that moral knowledge arises through the exercise of a rationality that transcends customary morality and hence stands on *terra firma*, but what is needed in moral life is not a substitute for customs, but to adopt more “intelligent and significant customs” (HNC, MW 14:58).

Summary

Moral zealots are often fearful of ambiguity and so cling desperately to settled codes as fixed compass points. Philosophical ethics stands in opposition to such zealotry, but it has in the main egged on

winner-take-all value disputes, and as a result it has been lost in an ink cloud of logical one-upmanship. For example, Dewey argued in his 1932 *Ethics* and “Three Independent Factors in Morals” that ethical theorists have abstracted one or another factor of moral experience—such as duty, for Kant—as central, forgotten the rich context from which it was abstracted, then treated this factor as the self-sufficient starting point for moral inquiry. On Dewey’s view that moral situations cannot be reduced to a single primary factor, the role of moral philosophy and practical ethics shifts. Dewey’s ethics aimed not to establish a singular moral bedrock, but to help us become more imaginative and responsible.

Notes

- 1 René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 37.
- 2 William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 145.
- 3 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009).
- 4 Singer, *Ethics into Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). As a caveat, Singer’s book was explicitly written for a popular audience as a guide for activists. His philosophical writings are cautious and probing. See, for example, Dale Jamieson, ed., *Singer and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
- 5 For criticisms (and appreciations) of aspects of Dewey’s pluralism, see Robert B. Talisse, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 6 For an excellent introduction to both Dewey’s value theory and metaphysics, see James Gouinlock, *John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1972). Gouinlock wrote the book as a response to debates in analytic ethics about the “is”/“ought” distinction in the 1960s and 1970s, but the book remains a timely introduction to Dewey’s house of theory despite the demise of the “is”/“ought” debate as “the” purported core problem of ethics.
- 7 For example, R. M. Hare asserts that his Kantian-utilitarian hybrid ethical theory is “the right way to reason about moral questions.” R. M. Hare, “Why I Am Only a Demi-vegetarian,” in *Singer and His Critics*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 247–68.
- 8 Hilary Putnam, “Reflections on Pragmatism,” in *Dewey’s Enduring Impact: Essays on America’s Philosopher*, ed. John R. Shook and Paul Kurtz (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 52.
- 9 On affirmations and assertions, see Chapter Two.
- 10 Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1908), 290.
- 11 Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 87.

- 12 David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, bk. 1, pt. 4, §7, 267. On Hume and sympathy, see Annette C. Baier's classic *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 13 George Lakoff, *The Political Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 2008), 241. Cf. Benjamin K. Bergen, *Louder than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
- 14 Cf. Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 194.
- 15 Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1891), 126.
- 16 Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004), 166.
- 17 Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 444.
- 18 For a more detailed treatment of Dewey's theory of imagination, see my *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), including ch. 5, "Dramatic Rehearsal." Dramatic rehearsal is one phase or function of the deliberative process. But this function is so essential for Dewey that it lends its name to the whole process.
- 19 As Johnson explains Dewey's position: "The meaning of something is its relations, actual or potential, to other qualities, things, events, and experiences." Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 265.
- 20 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002 [1861]), 2.
- 21 For a thorough analysis of Dewey's ethical starting point, see Gregory Fernando Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 20ff.
- 22 For a pragmatist approach to animal ethics, see Erin McKenna and Andrew Light, eds., *Animal Pragmatism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004). More recently, see Erin McKenna, *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
- 23 Joel Salatin, presentation at Green Mountain College, Poultney, Vermont, November 2011. Journalist Michael Pollan advanced Salatin's view in his best-selling book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, while distancing himself from Salatin's libertarian-agrarian-Christian-conservative idiom. See Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).
- 24 294a–c. Plato, *Statesman*, trans. J. B. Skemp (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), 66.
- 25 For a discussion of this debate in the context of Dewey's ethics, see Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics*, 51ff. See David Bakkhurst's careful distinction of pragmatist from particularist ethics in "Pragmatism and Ethical Particularism," in *New Pragmatists*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a criticism of my own Dewey-inspired situational and instrumental theory of the role of principles in moral inquiry, see Mark Coeckelbergh, *Imagination and Principles: An Essay on the Role of Imagination in Moral Reasoning* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

- 26 Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 99.
- 27 Quoted in Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 196.
- 28 The example is Alexander's in *The Human Eros*, 199.
- 29 This does not, however, address the extent to which principles are best emphasized in order to operate most effectively as mediating tools, and indeed this is a matter of current debate.
- 30 1934.01.03 (02088): Dewey to Frank Connor.
- 31 Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1962), 87.
- 32 Dewey's catch-all term habit appears too vague and sweeping from the standpoint of contemporary psychology and cognitive science. He had no theory of how intellectual habits are blended and systematically linked to form complex cognitive models, but his work on habit accords with the contemporary view that complex conceptual networks are indispensable, irreplaceable, and unavoidable. See Chapter Eight.
- 33 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (New York: Random House, 2002 [1876]), 139.
- 34 George Herbert Mead, "The Social Self," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Andrew Reck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 146.
- 35 For example, see James Rachels's widely anthologized "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," in his *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1999), 20–36.
- 36 See 1921.02.23 (07207): Dewey to James H. Tufts. For a book-length investigation, see Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).
- 37 Bao Zhiming, "Language and World View in Ancient China," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 2 (1990): 195–219, at 207. Quoted in Carl Becker, "Language and Logic in Modern Japan," *Communication & Cognition* 24, no. 2 (1991): 169.

Further reading

- Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).
- James Gouinlock, ed., *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, rev. ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994).
- Mark Johnson, *Morality for Humans: Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
- Todd Lekan, *Making Morality: Pragmatist Reconstruction in Ethical Theory* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).
- Erin McKenna, *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
- Gregory Fernando Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).
- Jennifer Welchman, *Dewey's Ethical Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).