
Book Reviews

John Dewey's ethics: Democracy as experience

Gregory Fernando Pappas

Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 2008, 341 pp., \$24.95 (pbk)

ISBN-13: 978-0253219794

Contemporary Political Theory (2010) **9**, 251–253. doi:10.1057/cpt.2009.20

What makes serious scholarship in this area especially daunting is that there is no single authoritative statement of Dewey's ethics. Indeed, the puzzle pieces of Dewey's ethical theory are distributed throughout the 37 volumes of his collected works (*The Collected Works of John Dewey 1882–1953*, Early, Middle and Later Works, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–1987, hereafter CW). Pappas assures his readers that a cohesive account of Dewey's ethics is not a mirage: 'Even though Dewey never wrote a single comprehensive and definitive rendition of his moral thought, he had a coherent and complex view worth reconstructing and reconsidering today' (p. 300). The book is organized into three thematic sections: (i) the metaethics or what Pappas calls 'the methodological commitments that form the basis of Dewey's reconstruction of moral theory' (p. 301), (ii) the metaphysics of Dewey's ethics or those generic traits that pervade morally problematic situations and (iii) the normative ethics, extending to Dewey's democratic ideal and its justification within experience.

Joining Dewey, Pappas criticizes the deep schism in the history of ethical thought (or what he calls elsewhere the 'great divide') between an ethics of being (character) and an ethics of doing (conduct) (p. 132). Nevertheless, virtues and character do have a prominent place in Dewey's ethics. The two virtues that Pappas believes to be integral to Dewey's account of a balanced character are courage and open-mindedness; courage as a resource for inquiring into the challenging conditions of problematic situations; open-mindedness as a flexible perspective in the face of uncertainty; and both as 'complementary virtues' or intelligent habits for engendering personal growth and the enrichment of cooperative experience (p. 189). Yet, Pappas insists that 'it would be a mistake to regard Dewey's ethics as a form of virtue ethics' (p. 144). Dewey did not treat character or the cultivation of virtues as the exclusive concern of moral agents, or as one that could be settled antecedent to all moral contexts. Indeed, virtue, duty and the good are all variables that can potentially



influence moral judgments, depending on the unique conditions of specific situations – a point borne out by Dewey’s 1930 essay ‘Three Independent Factors in Morals’ (CW, Later Works, Vol. 5, pp. 279–288).

In his treatment of Dewey’s democratic ideal, Pappas challenges recent appropriations, especially by deliberative democrats, and objections that the ideal is naïve, utopian or lacking criteria of justification. Rather than offer a panacea for social problems, Dewey’s ideal presents the task before democratic problem solvers. Pappas writes: ‘Dewey insists that democracy as an ideal “poses, rather than solves” (Later Works, Vol. 7, p. 350) problems’ (p. 248). Upon examination of the whole passage from which Pappas excerpts ‘poses, rather than solves,’ one sees that the reference is to a single problem – what Dewey refers to as ‘the great problem’ – not multiple problems. ‘From the ethical point of view, therefore, it is not too much to say that the democratic ideal poses, rather than solves, the great problem: how to harmonize the development of each individual with the maintenance of a social state in which the activities of one will contribute to the good of all the others’ (*Ethics*, 1932 revised edition in CW, Middle Works, Vol. 70, p. 350). In other words, the need for individual growth must be balanced against the need for collective welfare. However, what is missing from Pappas’s treatment are actual situations, whether culled from Dewey’s own social–political activism or from more contemporary sources, illustrating how concerns for the individual and the social can be balanced in actual problematic situations. For instance, when democratic majorities infringe on the rights of minorities, does Dewey’s democratic ideal provide practical guidance? Can Dewey’s notion of the ‘local’ offer a resource to activists wishing to persuade their fellow citizens to ‘think global, buy local’? Though Pappas claims that he ‘makes his [Dewey’s] ideal [of democracy] more amenable to testing’ (p. 308), the paucity of concrete examples makes this reader doubtful that Pappas has sufficiently operationalized the ideal. In contrast, William Caspary interprets Dewey’s ideal as an instrument for mediating conflicts and tests its efficacy by applying it to concrete social–political problems (see Dewey, 2000).

Also, there is an implicit tension in the text between Pappas’s denial that Dewey’s philosophy is foundationalist and the clues of experiential foundations that emerge in his reading of Dewey’s ethics. According to Dewey and most contemporary pragmatists (including the late Richard Rorty), there is no fixed epistemological standard of truth, no Archimedean point from which to evaluate what is real in all situations and no unanalyzed givenness to experience that grounds the legitimacy of every moral claim. Affirming this negative thesis, Pappas states that ‘there is no [absolute] criterion or standard of the good of any kind in Dewey’s ethics’ (p. 58). However, the language Pappas uses to describe non-reflective and aesthetic experience suggests that he might hold the contrary view. In only the last two pages of the book’s



introduction, terminology hinting at experiential foundations (or givens) abounds: ‘one cohesive vision that is grounded on a concern and commitment to experience,’ ‘Dewey’s underlying but very personal faith in experience ... is, for me, the ultimate glue of Dewey’s vision,’ and ‘a pre-reflective, qualitatively felt present situation ... [is] the ultimate source of guidance in moral life’ (pp. 12–13). Apropos of this concern, Colin Koopman has imparted some advice to present-day pragmatists, generally, which could be directed at Pappas, specifically, ‘To avoid this foundationalism ... contemporary pragmatists who are eager to revive the concept of experience must be on guard to not treat experience as a kind of ultimate given-ness against which we might be able to measure our truth claims’ (Colin Koopman, 2007).

Overall, though, Pappas’s book is a significant contribution to the sparse literature on Dewey’s ethics, which is surely to inspire debates among Dewey scholars and provide a valuable introduction to new readers of Dewey’s ethical writings.

References

- Dewey, J. (2000) *Dewey on Democracy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
Koopman, C. (2007) Language as a form of experience: Reconciling classical pragmatism and neopragmatism. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43(4): 694–727, 697.

Shane Ralston
Pennsylvania State University-Hazleton and World Campus,
Hazleton PA, USA

Messy morality, the challenge of politics

C.A.J. Coady
Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2008, 160 pp., £14.99/\$29.95, ISBN: 0199212082

Contemporary Political Theory (2010) 9, 253–256. doi:10.1057/cpt.2009.21

Tony Coady’s book is another in the Oxford Uehiro series in *Practical Ethics* and it expands Uehiro Lectures given by its author in 2005. There is perhaps no



more pressing practical matter than the one this book addresses – namely how to make normative theory work in the all too real and extremely ‘messy’ world. In particular, Coady is concerned to address and rebut the challenge of those cynics about politics who, having appropriated the title of ‘realists’, think that morality is overrated and overused.

Under the description of ‘moralism’, and in his first two chapters, Coady brings together a series of alleged failings of an overreaching morality, some of which he thinks well observed, others less so. In the third chapter, he addresses the proper role of ideals. In the fourth chapter, he asks whether politics has to be amoral and does so through an extended discussion of the influential account of ‘dirty hands’ given by Michael Walzer, a view Coady himself believes to be ‘confusing’. In the final chapter, he gives short shrift to the idea that it might be permissible for politicians systematically and regularly to lie.

Those who take morality, and moral philosophy, seriously must commend Coady for reminding us that these should know, and keep to, their place. Not everything can be seen in moral terms; nor should some moral matters be given an unwarranted importance besides others. In his view, however, morality does have a place in politics. Hence, his dissatisfaction with the ‘dirty hands’ view that politics is necessarily and seriously amoral or the view that politicians must lie. He himself acknowledges that he is mainly dealing with the ‘heavy end of the spectrum’ of ‘immoralities’. It would have been interesting then to hear more about the light end and indeed about whether what politicians must do on a daily basis – such as logroll, compromise, patch together coalitions of diverse views, employ rhetoric and spin – counts as immoral. The world of politics can be and very often is tawdry, vulgar and confused. The clear- and pure-minded ideas of the moral philosopher may be hard to apply in such a world. But, they need to be, and how that application is to be managed is itself a task the moral philosopher needs to take up.

Coady’s list of the forms that moralism can take is nicely constructed. I would add another and qualify an existing one. His choice of Dicken’s admirably drawn character, Saul Pecksniff, is a good one. But, Pecksniff is more than just morally smug or arrogant; he is a hypocrite quick to see virtues in his own character which has none, and not to see them in others deserving of approbation. His moralism wreaks havoc in the lives of those he falsely judges, and yet he is not – as are others of Dickens’ characters, likes Bill Sykes or James Carker – an evil person. The moralist can be immoral yet strangely pitiable.

Coady identifies as one form of moralism, ‘absolutism’, which he defines as an inflexibility or rigorism in the application of moral categories. This, he thinks, leads to an unbalanced concentration on some moral value and indeed to a demonisation of those on the other side of the moral fence. There is



a slightly distinct failing, that of unbendingness or of a rigid sense of rectitude that can be principled and pluralist, need not be unbalanced in its judgment of moral matters and need not demonise those who disagree, but which is nevertheless politically dangerous if directly translated into action. It is not quite the fanaticism against which Isaiah Berlin cautioned in his lifelong suspicion of those who pursue 'big ideas'. Nevertheless, a failure to make moral compromises is, it seems to me, worthy of the description 'moralism'. Indeed, one of the biggest problems facing the liberal moral and political philosopher is to understand how a citizen may combine an unwavering sense of the rightness of his own views with an acknowledgement that he must live together with those who have an equally clear view that their contrary moral outlook is right.

Coady's principal focus is what is done by political actors but he has in mind, and criticises, those who are the major actors – governments and their leaders. Equally, his worries are about, as he says, 'those political performances that tend to wreak the most havoc' in our world, namely political violence and war. Against the background of the continuing ill effects of the invasion of Iraq, his concerns are understandable. But, we are all, or should be political actors, and that of course includes moral philosophers. Tony Coady has a distinguished history not just as a philosopher, but as public intellectual in his own Australia, having spoken out in public forums on many matters of controversy. It would be interesting to hear more about how those who cannot wreak the most havoc can and should act in the 'messy' political realm with both philosophical and moral integrity.

There is a final point to be made about ideals. Coady's discussion of their role and in particular of the criticism that they are unrealisable is intelligent and nuanced. He is surely right to insist that they can play a valuable function in directing us to make a better world. But, it would have been good to see him address the view, recently articulated by Amartya Sen, that politically ideal ('transcendental') states of affairs, however cogently described, are of no help whatsoever in making comparative judgements of those suboptimal states we must choose between. For Sen, it would indeed be wonderful if we could create an ideally just society, but we are unlikely to be able to do so; we must, however, combat injustice and to do that we must set to one side the ideal which gives us no guidance in how to conduct this fight.

Those who know Tony Coady's writing will find its customary qualities on display – pellucid prose, philosophical intelligence, wit, and a fierce and impatient disdain for those who abuse the privileges of power or the requirements of rational argument. More and more is now being written about the demands of normative philosophy in a non-ideal world. Coady is unsympathetic to the Rawlsian distinction between ideal and non-ideal theories. But, this elegant essay is a worthy addition to the literature on the latter.

Reference

Amartya Sen, (2006) What do we want from a theory of justice. *The Journal of Philosophy* CIII (5): 215–38.

David Archard
Department of Philosophy, University of Lancaster,
Lancaster, UK

The philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, conversion, resistance

Penelope Deutscher

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2008, cloth, 199pp.,
£45, \$81, ISBN: 978-0521885201

Contemporary Political Theory (2010) 9, 256–258. doi:10.1057/cpt.2009.22

In this important addition to the Cambridge *Ideas in Context* series, edited by Quentin Skinner and James Tully, Penelope Deutscher does indeed place the work of Simone de Beauvoir within its intellectual context. She provides an original and erudite treatment of Beauvoir's engagement with, and transformative 'conversions' of, the ideas of a wide range of her contemporaries (French and otherwise) as well as many prior thinkers. She also offers a reading of the many creative, and often incompatible, conversions that key concepts within Beauvoir's own body of work undergo, both within and among her texts.

Through reading Beauvoir as a thinker whose concepts not only shift but also often productively undermine, or 'autoresist,' themselves, Deutscher also speaks to contemporary debates about how, more generally, to make sense of incoherence and instability within a thinker's work. Rather than attempting to fix the most precise meaning of a concept, or to search for greater coherence in a body of work, Deutscher advocates mining fluid, unstable, or even contradictory, aspects. For these need not express intellectual failings on the part of a thinker (be it Beauvoir or another). Rather they are expressive of what Deutscher calls 'the multivalent ambiguity' of life, and they assist us in grasping 'our state of existing in various divided modes that cannot be reconciled' (p. 7).

For example, Beauvoir is often accused of logical inconsistency in *The Second Sex* since she asserts, on the one hand, that to be human is always to be free and, on the other, that women are not free. Instead, Deutscher argues,



Beauvoir shows ‘that the subjugation of women is itself a paradox.’ For women, qua human beings, may be defined ‘in terms of an irrecusable freedom,’ and so ‘if they are nonetheless constrained, if there has been a diminishing of the very freedom of consciousness that, by a definition accepted by Beauvoir, is not diminishable, the paradox would belong to women’s situation rather than to a deficiency in [Beauvoir’s] understanding of freedom’ (p. 9). Deutscher’s affirmation of the value of Beauvoir’s paradoxes and instabilities brings a tacit poststructuralist sensibility to her readings. Yet, one cannot say that this *is* a poststructuralist reading. For Deutscher’s approach implies – provocatively perhaps – that there is, after all, very little rupture between the humanistic ‘existentialism’ of a thinker such as Beauvoir and the thought of ‘antihumanist’ French thinkers who, in the next generations, struggled so desperately to distance themselves from it.

For most Anglophone theorists, Beauvoir is above all the theorist of gender oppression. Her opus magnum, *The Second Sex*, (French, 1949) was hailed in the 1970s as the Bible of ‘second wave’ feminism in Britain and the United States, and many of the key debates in feminist theory have since been fought out on the site of Beauvoir interpretation. But, gender was not Beauvoir’s only concern and Deutscher’s methodological reflections bear on her reading of Beauvoir as much wider theorist of oppression. In this account, ‘alterity’ becomes a key concept, that is, the making ‘other’ or the ‘objectification’ of subordinate or marginal social groups. The core chapters of Deutscher’s book move kaleidoscopically among texts in which Beauvoir addresses forms of alterity that encompass race, age and (more occasionally) class, as well as gender.

In addition to her fine exegesis of *The Second Sex*, Deutscher explores in depth two works that have received much less scholarly attention: *America Day by Day* (French 1947) and *The Coming of Age* (French, 1970; Deutscher uses the US edition, but the British one is entitled *Old Age*). In the first, an account of her travels in the United States in 1947, Beauvoir reflects on the racism she discovered in the Deep South. She seeks to understand it by converting and combining arguably incompatible sociological insights from Gunnar Mydal’s *American Dilemma* (1944) with elements of Marxism and with existential arguments adapted from Sartre’s analysis of racism as a form of bad faith. In the later work, *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir explores the lived experience of the aged as a form of alterity and marginalisation. This experience is, she argues, usually exacerbated by the condition of poverty that modern capitalism inflicts on those who have become unproductive.

In all cases, ‘the problem’ of alterity is foremost the problem of the oppressor group – of the bad faith of those who derive material and existential benefits from others by denying recognition to their freedom and subjectivity. But how oppressor and oppressed relate, how the oppressed variously assume their oppressed identities, how individuals become the bearers of multiple and often



conflictual subject and object statuses, and what paths there may – or may not – be towards relations of greater reciprocity, are open questions. Deutscher argues that – although there are passages that point in other directions – in the 1940s, Beauvoir misguidedly treated the alterities of race and gender as distinct, largely occluding the specificities of black women’s alterity in *America Day by Day*. It is only later, in *The Coming of Age*, that Beauvoir developed resources – resources that Deutscher suggests could now be productively used to rework the earlier analyses of race and gender – that enable one to grasp the self as a multiplicity of often conflictual and unstable characteristics.

The last part of Deutscher’s book, with its primary focus on *The Coming of Age*, is perhaps the richest. Here, Deutscher draws out a new conception of reciprocity that lies less in acknowledging the freedom we share with others than in our shared vulnerability. It is not only that old age comes to (almost) all of us. For the phenomenon of aging invites us more broadly to reconceptualize the subject and to consider other possible forms of reciprocity. We are all aging continuously and ‘since age inhabits every subject’ it invites us to focus on what we share in terms of ‘exposure, vulnerability, fragility, transformation, embodied time’ (p. 179). Herein lies not only an ethics but also a politics and a political economy. For, to ground reciprocity in the recognition of our shared vulnerability, we must cease to value individuals for their ‘productivity,’ or for their freedom or their autonomy. As its minimum precondition, as Beauvoir insists, this new kind of reciprocity will require a radical reconstruction of social and economic institutions.

Sonia Kruks
Politics Department, Oberlin College,
Oberlin OH, USA

Deliberative freedom: Deliberative democracy as critical theory

Christian F. Rostbøll

State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2008, 312 pp., hardcover, \$80.00, ISBN 13: 978-0791474594

Contemporary Political Theory (2010) 9, 258–261. doi:10.1057/cpt.2009.24

Christian F. Rostbøll’s book *Deliberative Freedom: Deliberative Democracy as Critical Theory* is unique for several reasons. First, it is the first book that deals



fully with the complex relationships between multiple dimensions of freedom and democracy. Second, Rostbøll provides a new deliberative democracy description that is different from the political liberalism of Rawls and the critical theory of Habermas. Third, this book tries to build a new theory of freedom and democracy that aims to elucidate the different dimensions of freedom that deliberative democracy embraces.

Political Science professor Christian F. Rostbøll of the University of Copenhagen begins with the questions that have not been addressed in the literature of deliberative democracy, such as ‘What is it about democracy that makes citizens free?’ ‘Which conception of freedom does democracy promote?’ ‘Which model of democracy makes citizens most free?’ Rostbøll has an eagle eye for the right questions. From Pettit’s republicanism to Elster and Sunstein’s theories on endogenous preference formation, this book surveys, criticizes and goes beyond the broad literature on democracy and freedom.

Rostbøll builds his argument by differentiating deliberative democracy from the tradition of self-interest liberalism and republican freedoms. In Chapter 1, he argues that although negative freedom models of democracy have various problems, the mechanisms of aggregation and the idea of negative freedom play a role in deliberative democracy. According to traditional deliberative democrats, aggregative democracy and negative freedom aim to protect private interests and preferences. He criticizes the deliberative democrats because of their rejection of what comes out of the negative freedom and aggregative freedom. He continues the same criticism in Chapter 2, in which he presents Philip Pettit’s notion of ‘freedom as non-domination’ as a specific example of republican freedom and shows its relation to deliberative democracy. Similar to Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 Rostbøll criticizes not only the presented theory of freedom – republican conception of freedom – but also the deliberative democracy literature. His main criticism of both liberal and republican traditions is that they lack the important dimension of freedom, which is ‘internal autonomy’.

In Chapter 3, Rostbøll presents the vital notion of deliberative democracy, the issue of autonomous preference formation. His main argument is that both Elster and Sunstein’s theories on endogenous preference formation do not incorporate all dimensions of freedom. Rostbøll appraises these two theories from the lenses of critical theory. The most important insight is that deliberative democracy is different than a paternalist democracy that assumes that people do not know what is good for themselves. Deliberative democracy, therefore, rejects the notion of paternalism and instead supports extensive public deliberation as a means of dealing with non-autonomous preferences. Rostbøll continues his search for a theory of deliberative freedom by explaining Rawlsian and Habermasian conceptions of deliberative democracy in Chapters 4 and 5. Rawls’ view of freedom, which is beholden to liberal



tradition of toleration and accommodation, is accepted as unfortunate and uncritical. Although Rostbøll and Habermas share the same commitments, Rostbøll's theory differs from Habermas' 'by being based on a theory of freedom rather than on a theory of argumentation' (p. 135). On the one hand, Rawlsian deliberative democracy focuses only on negative freedom and overlooks the importance of emancipation. On the other hand, Habermasian deliberative democracy sees internal autonomy as part of public autonomy.

Rostbøll attempts to explain the negative dimension of freedom in Chapter 6. In this chapter, the characteristics of deliberative freedom come into sharper focus. Rostbøll argues that procedural independence 'takes it seriously that even to enjoy opportunities not only for acting freely but also for forming preferences freely some positive state action may be necessary, and that without such encouragement and facilitation of the creation of a democratic ethos, negative freedom will not necessarily reinforce democracy or the full exercise of deliberative freedom' (p. 173). He continues this claim in Chapter 7. Although it would violate freedom to legally enforce participation, law could be used to 'encourage' public deliberation participation. However, Rostbøll's most important nuance in the obligation of participation is that it must be moral. He claims that the key principle of the deliberative democratic view of freedom is *mutual interdependence*, and that it is required in gaining the necessary insights – knowledge about the interest, needs, and opinions of others and ourselves, knowledge about what can be justified to others and what we want together, and knowledge about causal relationships (pp. 183–184) – to live in freedom (p. 207). In short, deliberative freedom, *procedural epistemic conception of freedom*, is concerned with each individual's ability to judge political decisions.

Deliberative Freedom: Deliberative Democracy as Critical Theory is an ambitious book that provides a comprehensive explanation of what deliberative democracy should look like, and how the multiple dimensions of freedom should be included in deliberative democracy. Yet, the main limitation of this work is that it does not explain how deliberative freedom works in practice. Although the author briefly mentions some organized forms of deliberation, namely 21st Century Town Meetings and Citizens Juries, the reader is left needing to know how these public deliberations will gain legislative influence. Another limitation of this book is that it does not really examine what happens if citizens do not want to be involved in public deliberation. Rostbøll argues that 'moral obligations do not depend on whether we like to fulfil them or not' (p. 207). Yet this does not explain what happens if people are happy with the lack of deliberative processes. In any event, Rostbøll successfully explains why there is a need for a theory of deliberative freedom and the major shortcomings of deliberative democracy literature.



I believe this book represents a strong beginning to understanding deliberative democracy from a different perspective. Although the focus of *Deliberative Freedom: Deliberative Democracy as Critical Theory* is to demonstrate the importance of all citizens having the chance to participate in public deliberation, I still left needing to know more about how this process of public deliberation becomes a fundamental element of democracy in modern societies. Anyone looking for a well-argued view of what the need for deliberative democracy is will find this book well worth reading. Still, it is worth noting that Rostbøll's often intense theoretical discussions make this book useful only for graduate seminars.

Aysegul Keskin
Kent State University
Kent, OH, U.S.A