

HUMAN PERSON ACCORDING TO JOHN DEWEY

Introduction

John Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1859. He was one of the eminent American philosophers, who proved his caliber in the field education, politics and psychology. The writings of Hegel and William James influenced the mind of Dewey. Dewey was a prolific writer. *Human Nature and Conduct* is an important work Dewey in which he presents his notions on human person.

Dewey was a thorough-going empirical naturalist. He was opposed to the use of rationalistic, metaphysical and other non-empirical approaches for arriving at an understanding of the nature of human person.

1. Human Nature - A Product of Man's Interaction with his Environment

Man lives in constant interaction with his environments – physical and cultural. He owes his individuality and personality and all his characteristic qualities to this interaction. Human nature emerges from the interplay between the individual and the environmental forces surrounding him.¹ For Dewey, human nature is not something originally fixed, immutable or eternal but a mode of reaction in and through the surrounding culture.² According to Dewey, “human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not in that environment as coins are in the box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil.”³ He views life as a continual interactive adjustment between the individual and his environment. Behavior arises when a condition of equilibrium between the individual and his environment has been upset, causing tension in the

¹ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 17.

² Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 295.

³ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 296.

individual, who seeks to restore the equilibrium by acting upon the environment. In this process, the individual is changed by his behavior and the environment is also changed by his behavior.⁴

2. Dynamic Nature of Human Nature

Human person is inherently dynamic and inherently unique and as such he retains his individuality even if the social and cultural factors influencing his growth and development are virtually the same. Growth is not something done to him; but it is something he does.⁵ The original constituents of human nature, that is, the original impulses with which the child is born, possess the capacity for active self-propulsion, for reaching out towards objects and experiences which may bring the organism greater life, or rather which may serve as instruments for the achievement of his purposes. Life, according to Dewey, is an active process of adaptation.⁶ The more complex, the more highly developed life is, the more definite is the fact of selection and the remolding of environment. The savage man lives a passive existence and resigns himself to his environment; the civilized man is for ever attempting to improve nature. Through the machines and through other methods he remolds nature and makes life more comfortable and more secure for himself. The civilized man thus does not resign himself to the inevitable. Wherever he is, he remolds the forces of nature and brings them under his control. Man is thus neither passive nor reactive but interactive. His nature results from his sizing up with his physical and social environments. The reality is, thus, person-environment centered. It consists of what one makes of what comes to one-that is, what one gains from experience.

⁴ Pestalozzi and Froebel shares the same view of human person in their writings.

⁵ This view of Dewey is an explicit attack on John Locke who believes that the human being is merely passive in receiving the stimuli from external environment.

⁶ Pestalozzi and Froebel share the similar point that human person is positively and energetically dynamic.

3. The Changeable and the Unchangeable in Human Nature

According to Dewey, the theory that human nature is unchangeable is the most depressing and pessimistic of all the possible doctrines. For according to it, persons are what they are at birth and nothing can be done. If human nature is unchangeable, then there is no such thing as education and all the efforts to educate are doomed to failure. For the very meaning of education is the modification of native human nature in the formation of those new ways of thinking, of feeling, of desiring and of believing that are foreign to raw human nature.

Dewey does not overlook the fact that there are certain aspects of human nature which are unchangeable. The innate needs of men for food and drink, for companionship, for bringing one's own powers to bear upon surrounding conditions, the need for co-operation, and the need for aesthetic expressions are some of the tendencies so integral to human nature.

4. Human Perfectibility

Dewey thought on human person leaves no scope for a fixed notion of human perfectibility. Making the notion of a fixed human paradigm is not only impossible but also virtually meaningless, according to him due the dynamic nature of the human person.

5. Scientific Psychology

Dewey's approach to the study of human nature is characterized by a scientific spirit. He presents the human person from the background of evolution and stresses on the unity of human nature. He believes qualities unique to human beings can only be developed through experiences in social settings.

Dewey argues that the function of value judgments is to guide human conduct. He uses the term "conduct" in the broadest sense, to include not only overt bodily

motion, but also observation, reflection, imagination, judgment, and affective responses to what we observe and think. “Conduct” is a broader category than “action” in contemporary philosophy of action, because it includes unconscious and unreflective activity, such as that produced by instinct and reflex. There are three broad levels of conduct: impulse, habit, and reflective action. These differ according to how far they are guided by ideas of what one is doing.

5.1 Impulse

Humans begin life endowed only with impulses as motor sources of activity. Impulses include what we would call today drives, appetites, instincts, and unconditioned reflexes. They are “affective-motor responses”: primitive tendencies of movement toward some things (eyes toward human faces, hand to grasping whatever is within reach), away from others (spitting out bitter food, averting eyes from too bright light, brushing off pesky flies), and even activity with no particular orientation toward external objects (stretching, rolling over, crying, bouncing up and down, fidgeting). Impulsive activity is not purposive. It involves no idea of an end to be achieved by the activity. When a newborn infant sucks on its mother's nipple, it obtains food and thereby satisfies its hunger. But the newborn has no idea that this will be a consequence of its sucking, and does not suck with the end in view of obtaining food.⁷

Dewey's choice of impulse as the original motor source of conduct contrasts with conventional desire-based psychology in two important ways. First, it takes activity rather than rest as the default state of human beings. Desires are defined by the states of affairs they aim to achieve. On this model, action needs to be inspired by an idea of some external deficit in the world. Once the deficit is repaired, the desire is fulfilled, and the organism returns to a state of rest. Dewey observed that this model does not fit what we know about children. They are constantly in motion even when they achieve no particular purpose in moving. They don't need any end in view or

⁷ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 65-69.

perception of external lack to move them.⁸ Second, impulse psychology stresses the plasticity of the sources of conduct. Desires are fixed by their ends. Impulses can be directed and shaped toward various ends. Children's primitive impulses to move their bodies energetically can be directed, through education, toward the development of socially valued skills and interpersonally coordinated activity.⁹

Desires or ends in view arise from the child's experiences of the consequences of its impulsive activity. A newborn infant cries when it is hungry, at first with no end in view. It observes that crying results in a feeding, which relieves its hunger. It gets the idea that by crying, it can get relief. When crying is prompted by this idea, the child sees it as a means to a further end, and acts for the first time on a desire (that is, with an end in view). What desires the child ends up having are critically shaped by others' responses to its original impulsive activity, by the results that others permit crying to achieve. Parents who respond indiscriminately to their children's crying end up with spoiled children whose desires expand and proliferate without consideration for the interests of others. Parents who respond selectively shape not only their children's use of means (crying) but also their ends, which are modulated in response to the resistance and claims of others. This plasticity of ends as well as means is possible because the original motor source of the child's activity is impulse, not desire. Impulses demand some outlet for their expression, but what ends they eventually seek depends on the environment, especially on others' responses to the child.

5.2 Habit

Habits are socially shaped dispositions to particular forms of activity or modes of response to the environment. They channel impulses in specified directions, toward certain outcomes, by entrenching particular uses of means, prescribing certain conduct in particular circumstances. While individuals may have idiosyncratic habits, the most important habits are customs, shared habits of a group that are passed on to

⁸ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 118-9.

⁹ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 69-75.

children through socialization. Customs originate in purposive activity. Every society must devise means for the satisfaction of basic human needs for food, shelter, clothing, and affiliation, for coping with interpersonal conflict within the group and treatment of outsiders, for dealing with critical events such as birth, coming of age, and death. Yet customs need not have been consciously invented to serve these needs. Language consists in a body of habits and norms, but few languages were explicitly invented to serve needs for communication. Customary ways of satisfying needs shape the direction of impulse in the socialized individual. A young child just starting on solid food may be open to eating nearly anything. But every society limits what it counts as edible. Certain foods become freighted with social meaning — as suitable for celebrating birthdays, good for serving to guests, reserved for sacrifice to the gods, or fit only for animals. The child's hunger becomes refined into a taste for certain foods on particular occasions. She may recoil in disgust or horror from certain edibles deemed taboo or unclean. There may have been a rationale for the original selection of foods. Perhaps some food was deemed taboo when its consumption was followed by a natural disaster, and people concluded that the gods were angry at them for consuming it. But the habit of avoiding it may persist long after its original rationale is forgotten.¹⁰

While habits incorporate purposes and socially meaningful ideas, they operate beneath the actor's consciousness. Once people have learned how to achieve some purpose and entrenched that mode of conduct in a habit or skill, they no longer need to tend to what they are doing in achieving it. Such tending may even interfere with successful performance. Habits, by receding from awareness, conserve people's reflective resources, make their activity fluid, and enable them to reliably produce certain results (provided the environment remains the same). People's habits thereby embody their characters.¹¹

¹⁰ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 15-21.

¹¹ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 33-43.

The subconscious operation of habits has several implications. Habits may continue long after their original rationale has been forgotten or repudiated. Because they entrench modes of conduct rather than ends in view, when the environment changes, they may produce different results than originally intended. They also elude direct control by conscious willing. The idea that we can control our bad or misfiring habits by sheer willpower is a form of magical thinking, because it imagines that willing an end is sufficient to achieve it. A conscious end — the control of habit — cannot be achieved without grasping the means that can bring it about. Because habits operate behind our backs, we can't maintain a constant awareness of them with the aim of checking their operation at all times. We must resort to indirect means, especially alteration of the environment, to check an unsatisfactory habit. Moreover, we can reliably produce alternative results only by acquiring a new habit. Discovering the means required to change habits requires psychological and sociological inquiry, not just conscientiousness and willpower.¹²

Habits also tend to be self-perpetuating and difficult to modify because people form attachments to them. They experience disruptions of their habits with alarm, displeasure, offense, even outrage. Prevailing ideologies represent current customs as right and inviolable. These facts pose obstacles to deliberate social change. Dewey placed his hopes for change in the education of youth, whose impulses have not yet been channeled into rigid habits. How could adults with already entrenched habits impart less rigid habits to the next generation? Dewey answered: by instituting forms of education that instill habits of independent thought, critical inquiry, observation, experimentation, foresight, and imagination, including sympathy with others.¹³ Such education can make habits themselves more flexible and responsive to changes in the context and consequences of conduct. It enables habits to incorporate intelligence.

¹² Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 21-32.

¹³ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 127-8.

5.3 Intelligent Conduct

The need to reflect intelligently on what one is doing arises when the ordinary operation of habit or impulse is blocked. Customary means may be lacking; changed circumstances may make habits misfire, producing unintended and disturbing consequences; the social interaction of groups of people with different customs may produce practical conflicts that require mutual adjustment. When habit is blocked, people are forced to stop their activity and reflect on the problems posed by their situation. They must deliberate. The aim of deliberation is to find a satisfactory means to resumption of activity by solving the problem posed by one's situation. Deliberation involves an investigation of the causes of disrupted activity so as to consciously articulate the problematic features of one's situation, and an imaginative rehearsal of alternative means to solving it, anticipating the consequences of executing each one, including one's attitudes to those consequences. It is a thought experiment designed to arrive at a practical judgment, action upon which is anticipated to resolve one's predicament. Deliberation is more intelligent, the more articulate the definition of one's problem in light of more observant uptake of its relevant features, the more imaginative one is in coming up with feasible solutions, the more comprehensive and accurate one's view of the consequences of implementing them, and the more responsive is one's decision to its anticipated consequences, relative to the consequences of alternatives. Action on the practical judgments that proceed from deliberation is self-aware. As the individual gets more practice in intelligent conduct, the dispositions that make it up become habits.¹⁴

6. Social Ethics

Consistently with his contextualism, Dewey stressed the social circumstances in which different moral theories arose. His *Ethics* begins, not with a review of rival moral theories, but with a survey of anthropology and a brief history of the moral

¹⁴ Dewey, *How We Think*, 196-210.

problems and practices of the ancient Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. By locating moral theories in their social contexts, Dewey exposed their limitations. Theories that make sense in certain contexts may not make sense in others. For example, Dewey argued that the failure of ancient Greek teleological theories to grasp the independence of the right from the good arose from the fact that the good for individual citizens of Greek city-states was inextricably wrapped up with participation in civic life and promotion of the good of the city-state as a whole.¹⁵

Dewey also stressed the ways abstract philosophical doctrines are socially embodied, frequently so as to rationalize and reinforce stultifying and unjust social arrangements. For example, the sharp dichotomy between purely instrumental and intrinsic goods both reflects and reinforces an organization of work life that reduces it to drudgery. Since work is of merely instrumental value, so the thinking goes, there is no point in trying to make it interesting to those who do it. The dichotomy also rationalizes oppressive class divisions. Insofar as the good life is conceived in terms of devotion to or enjoyment of purely intrinsic, non-instrumental goods (such as intellectual contemplation and the appreciation of beauty), it is a life that can be led only by a leisured class, whose members do not have to spend their time earning a living. This class depends upon a working class whose function is to provide them with the leisure they need to pursue the good life. Dewey's critique of traditional ways of distinguishing means from ends is thus simultaneously a critique of class hierarchy.¹⁶

Dewey argued that the primary problems for ethics in the modern world concerned the ways society ought to be organized, rather than personal decisions of the individual. Thus, in contrast with his voluminous political commentaries, Dewey published very little on personal "applied ethics." The rapid social changes that were taking place in his lifetime required new institutions, as traditional customs and laws

¹⁵ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 28-33.

¹⁶ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 185-88.

proved themselves unable to cope with such issues as mass immigration, class conflict, the Great Depression, the demands of women for greater independence, and the threats to democracy posed by fascism and communism. As a progressive liberal, Dewey advocated numerous social reforms such as promoting the education, employment, and enfranchisement of women, social insurance, the progressive income tax, and laws protecting the rights of workers to organize labor unions. However, he stressed the importance of improving methods of moral inquiry over advocating particular moral conclusions, given that the latter are always subject to revision in light of new evidence.

Thus, the main focus of Dewey's social ethics concerns the institutional arrangements that influence the capacity of people to conduct moral inquiry intelligently. Two social domains are critical for promoting this capacity: schools, and civil society. Both needed to be reconstructed so as to promote experimental intelligence and wider sympathies. Dewey wrote numerous works on education, and established the famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago to implement and test his educational theories. He was also a leading advocate of the comprehensive high school, as opposed to separate vocational and college preparatory schools. This was to promote the social integration of different economic classes, a prerequisite to enlarging their mutual understanding and sympathies. Civil society, too, needed to be reconstructed along more democratic lines. This involved not just expanding the franchise, but improving the means of communication among citizens and between citizens and experts, so that public opinion could be better informed by the experiences and problems of citizens from different walks of life, and by scientific discoveries. Dewey regarded democracy as the social embodiment of experimental intelligence informed by sympathy and respect for the other members of society.¹⁷ Unlike dictatorial and oligarchic societies, democratic ones institutionalize feedback mechanisms (free speech) for informing officeholders of the consequences for all of the policies they

¹⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 72-77.

adopt, and for sanctioning them (periodic elections) if they do not respond accordingly.

Dewey's moral epistemology thus leads naturally to his political philosophy. The reconstruction of moral theory is accomplished by replacing fixed moral rules and ends with an experimental method that treats norms for valuing as hypotheses to be tested in practice, in light of their widest consequences for everyone. To implement this method requires institutions that facilitate three things: (1) habits of critical, experimental inquiry; (2) widespread communication of the consequences of instituting norms, and (3) extensive sympathy, so that the consequences of norms for everyone are treated seriously in appraising them and imagining and adopting alternatives. The main institutions needed to facilitate these things are progressive schools and a democratic civil society. Experimentalism in ethics leads to a democratic political philosophy.

Conclusion

Dewey's approach to the study of human nature is consistent with the standpoint of scientific psychology. Man according to him is the product of the process of evolution. His nature has changeable and unchangeable elements. Dewey's approach to the study of human nature is characterized by scientific spirit. He rejects the dualistic view, faculty view and the tabula rasa view on human nature. Deweyan presentation on the human nature is in a way was one of his most cherished dreams. In *Freedom and Culture* he shares with the readers of the dream he has. The dream to have theory of human nature and he succeeds in that attempt with the publication of *Human Nature and Conduct*.

However, when we think in line with the Eastern thinkers who were also influenced by the evolutionary thinking, people like Sri Aurobindo, we do not see in Dewey man's ascent to the divine. This is most likely due to the pragmatist ideology to which he holds on. It is worth recalling the comment of Jacques Maritain in this

regard: contemplation and self-perfection, in which human life aspires to flower forth, escape the purview of the pragmatic mind.¹⁸

¹⁸ Maritain, *Education at the Cross Roads*, 12.

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