Introduction

In his foreword to the 1930 Modern Library edition of *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey wrote: "In the eighteenth century, the word Morals was used in English literature with a meaning of broad sweep. It included all the subjects of distinctly humane import, all of the social disciplines as far as they are intimately connected with the life of man and as they bear upon the interests of humanity. . . . Were it not for one consideration, [this] volume might be said to be an essay in continuing the tradition of David Hume."[1] To Anglo-American moral philosophers trained during or after the Second World War, these remarks summed up precisely what was wrong with Dewey's ethics. Dewey had never learned to abandon the eighteenth-century empiricist belief that ethical theory could be raised to the status of a natural science. Like Hume, Dewey believed that ethics was a practical science of community organization, specifically of the engineering of cooperation under conditions of moderate scarcity and limited generosity, for enhancing human flourishing. And like Hume again, Dewey believed that solutions to the problems of promoting social cooperation were to be found in the study of human nature. Dewey refused to follow the 'linguistic turn' taken by twentieth-century English-language philosophy. And he refused to accept the view that, as a young R. M. Hare put it, moral philosophy was nothing but "the logical study of the language of morals."[2] Contemporary ethical philosophy's retreat from the study of human nature and social life into the analysis and formalization of common-sense moral ideas or intuitions was only beginning in 1922, when the first edition of *Human Nature and Conduct* appeared. But already Dewey was almost bitter in his condemnation of the trend, arguing: "The neglect of sciences that deal specifically with facts of the natural and social environment leads to a side-tracking of moral forces into an unreal privacy of an unreal self. . . . It is impossible to say how much of the unnecessary slavery of the world is due to the conception that moral issues can be

1. John Dewey, foreword to the Modern Library edition, *Human Nature and Conduct*, *MW* 14:228.

2. R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1952] 1964), p. i.

settled within conscience or human sentiment apart from consistent study of facts and application of specific knowledge in industry, law and politics."[3]

Dewey imagined that his one significant divergence from Hume's approach to morality was the rejection of Hume's atomistic individualism in favor of a more Hegelian understanding of the relation of individuals to their societies. His analytically trained critics thought otherwise. If Dewey was proposing to construct a natural science of ethics, then he must be violating Hume's dictum that you cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is.' Normative conclusions about conduct and character cannot be derived from purely descriptive premises. Psychology, sociology, and the other social sciences upon which Dewey proposed to base ethical inquiry yield purely descriptive conclusions. Thus not only was Dewey's conception of moral philosophy hopelessly outdated; it rested upon a fallacy.

Dewey would have begged to differ. His naturalistic ethics was not committed to the possibility of deriving evaluative conclusions from purely descriptive premises. Dewey never held that this was possible, nor did he consider it necessary. All that is necessary, according to Dewey, is to reject the simplistic characterization of scientific inquiry as 'purely descriptive.' It is not true that scientific investigation neither constructs nor yields evaluative statements. Scientific investigation is something people do, an activity governed by its own rules of procedure. It is a project of constructing descriptions, predictions, and explanations in accordance with those rules: rules governing what shall count as evidence for the correctness of a prediction, how disputes about descriptions should be resolved, which explanations should be adopted and acted upon, and so forth. Thus scientists can, on the basis of those rules, not only derive descriptions of the components of some complex phenomenon from their data; they can also derive prescriptions about what they ought to believe about the phenomenon and about how they ought to behave with regard to it in future.

A natural science of ethics will necessarily adopt analogous methodological (i.e., normative) principles. Thus it will be the case that from their investigations of what people naturally want, approve, disapprove, think right or wrong or obligatory, ethical theorists can formulate general descriptions and predictions regarding these phenomena. Moreover, as we shall see, they can also generate prescriptions about what

3. *Human Nature and Conduct, MW* 14:10.

they ought to believe regarding the phenomena of wanting, approving, disapproving, and being obliged, and about how they ought to conduct themselves with regard to these phenomena in future.

Such a theory of ethics could in fact tell us what we ought to believe about our own and others' conduct and what sorts of reasons for action we ought to consider compelling—provided, of course, that we first accepted its procedural rules. Lacking such a commitment to the practice of rational, scientific inquiry into morals, we would have no obligation to accept its conclusions as justified. Additionally, the adequacy of our conclusions would be conditional upon the correctness of the information about human nature, desire, and dispositions with which we have to work. What at one moment may be a rationally acceptable and scientifically warranted conclusion may in the next moment prove just the reverse. Moral truth, like scientific truth, would be a matter of degree.

Dewey's moral philosophy, in particular his thesis that the methods of the natural sciences could fruitfully be applied to ethics, generated widespread interest (if not agreement) in the English-speaking philosophical community. The success of his moral, logical, and epistemological theories in the first decades of this century established Dewey as preeminent among living American philosophers. He enjoyed a national reputation and prestige almost unimaginable to American philosophers today. But by the time of his death in 1952, his philosophy had gone into an eclipse.

Dewey's loss of popularity and influence in Anglo-American thought stemmed from several sources. One was his failure to adopt the language and techniques of the newly developed mathematical logic pioneered by Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and A. N. Whitehead. In comparison with the newer logic, Dewey's own language and techniques soon came to seem hopelessly imprecise. A second was his refusal, noted above, to follow contemporary philosophy's linguistic turn. While younger Anglo-American philosophers were looking to the nature and function of linguistic systems to explicate the nature of meaning, Dewey persisted in looking to the behavior that gives rise to meaning and the functions of that behavior in sustaining an agent in a social environment. A third was a combined effect of the first and second: Dewey's work became increasingly incomprehensible to students of the newer logic, epistemology, and theory of language. As a result, his reasons for believing that the impossibility of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is' does not mean that a natural science of conduct is impossible or that the notion of ethical experimentation is incoherent likewise became increasingly incomprehensible.

After the Second World War, Dewey's work began to look isolated from the mainstream of twentieth-century philosophy and, eventually, irrelevant to its development. In histories of twentieth-century philosophy written after his death, Dewey's instrumentalism, and the related theories of his fellow pragmatists William James and Charles S. Peirce, began to be relegated to footnotes or treated as a survival of fundamentally nineteenth-century doctrines.[4]

Very recently, the status of Dewey's philosophy has begun to change. Much of the credit must be given to Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in which Rorty persuasively argued that Dewey's major works anticipated important criticisms now widely advanced against the analytic tradition in contemporary philosophy to which the work of Frege, Russell, and the Vienna Circle had given rise.[5] Independent of Rorty's efforts, a simultaneous revival of interest in pragmatic theories of truth has developed in the areas of philosophy of science and epistemology. Together these sources have worked to produce a reevaluation of Dewey's role in twentieth-century philosophy, evidenced by the thin but steady stream of articles, papers, and monographs on Dewey's epistemology and metaphysics which has since appeared.

To date, Dewey's moral philosophy has not experienced the same revival of interest. This is doubly regrettable. First, neglect of Dewey's work in this area hampers our understanding of the development of his instrumentalist epistemology and naturalistic metaphysics. Important transitions in his thinking in these areas were often preceded and colored by shifts in his ethics. Second, recent interest in naturalizing ethics has encouraged a reexamination of past theories as possible sources for future inquiry. If Dewey's ethics continues to be neglected, the opportunity to exploit what is arguably the most original, systematic naturalistic moral theory produced in this century will be missed.

Critical scrutiny of Dewey's ethics has unfortunately been hindered by the (at times) very considerable difficulty of understanding what

4. This has particularly been true of histories by English philosophers. Some ignore pragmatist ethics entirely. See, e.g., G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967); W. D. Hudson, *A Century of Moral Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980). Others treat it as merely of historical importance to the work of other American philosophers. See, e.g., Mary Warnock, *Ethics since 1900*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1978). Some American histories have imitated the British examples. See, e.g., George C. Kerner, *The Revolution in Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

5. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

Dewey is trying to say. First, Dewey's prose is notoriously poor.[6] Second, Dewey and the modern reader are often 'divided by a common language.' Dewey began his career in 1884 as an absolute idealist who by his own account "drifted away from Hegelianism in the next fifteen years: the term 'drifting' [expressing] the slow, and for a long time, imperceptible character of the movement."[7] In those fifteen years, Dewey published his first two books on moral philosophy and helped found the famous Chicago school of functionalist psychology out of which important elements of his instrumentalism emerged. These texts are written in a style now unfamiliar, using a technical vocabulary so obsolete as to be at times unrecognizable as such.[8] But they cannot safely be ignored. These publications are crucial to our understanding of Dewey's mature moral philosophy, for it was in this period that Dewey developed the conceptions of scientific and moral judgment on which his later naturalist ethical theory was based.

Of all the impediments to understanding Dewey's transition from absolute idealism to pragmatism, possibly the greatest is the common failure to recognize the accomplishment Dewey's mature conception of scientific inquiry actually was. Although it has been noted that Dewey's interest in science played an important role in the development of his philosophy generally, and during his fifteen-year 'drift' specifically, it has too often been assumed that this role was merely destructive, that Dewey's faith in natural science gradually dissolved his belief in absolute idealism. What has not always been grasped is that the conceptions

6. Reading Dewey is always a strenuous affair—as one reader has put it, like "swimming through oatmeal" (Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987], p. xii). More famous is Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's remark in reference to *Experience and Nature*: "So methought God would have spoken had he been inarticulate but keenly desirous to tell you how it was" (Mark DeWolf Howe, ed., *Holmes-Pollock Letters: The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Sir Frederick Pollock, 1874–1932* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941], 2:287, quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991], p. 341).

7. John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," *LW* 5:154.

8. To give just one example: it is not uncommon to find Dewey in the 1880s and early 1890s arguing the importance of making ethics, psychology, and/or philosophy 'experimental,' encouraging some to believe that he was already advocating the use of scientific procedures of experimentation in this period. Among absolute idealists, however, the term 'experimental' was often used as a metaphysically neutral synonym for 'empirical' (William James's avoidance of the label 'empiricist' in favor of 'pragmatist' and 'radical empiricist' arose from the same need to avoid empiricism's 'materialist' linkages). Consequently, it is more likely that Dewey was suggesting that philosophers of mind and morals pay close attention to human *experience* in these early texts than advocating what we now call 'experimentation.'

of 'science' and 'scientific method' often attributed to Dewey in the 1880s and the early 1890s are anachronisms: the products of his struggles to reform absolute idealism rather than their causes. To the young John Dewey, as we shall see, neo-Hegelian philosophy *was* science. The special physical sciences, for all their impressive technological offshoots, were to him simply defective realizations of the systematic understanding of the world which was Science. Because the understanding that his neo-Hegelian philosophy sought to achieve was the complete realization of the system of relations which organizes the universe and its constituents, and because, by contrast, the special sciences generated only fragmentary information about the universe, Dewey concluded that philosophy was not only a science—it was the ultimate science.

Such a conception of science was hardly likely to have undermined Dewey's faith in idealism. In fact, it did not. His allegiance to idealism was eroded by the contradictions Dewey could not resolve between its absolutist metaphysics and its functionalist accounts of logic, mind, and morality. William James's persuasive demonstration in *The Principles of Psychology* that functionalist accounts of mind, knowledge, and morals could be defended without appeal to an idealist metaphysics, bolstered by the influence of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, seems gradually to have convinced Dewey that he did not need idealism to save him from mechanistic materialism.[9] He was thus freed to reconsider his conceptions of science, philosophy, facts, and values.

After reworking these conceptions to his own satisfaction, Dewey not infrequently operated as if they were transparent to his audience. In order to make sense of his pragmatic writings, one must frequently go back to the publications of his 'transitional' period for explanations. This is especially true of his post-idealist moral philosophy. It is thus essential that Dewey's early work be read if his subsequent attempts to construct and defend a pragmatic 'science' of ethics are to be understood or fairly evaluated. A final determination of whether Dewey's ethical theory is of philosophical as well as historic interest cannot be made until it can once more be comprehended.

My own opinion is that Dewey's moral philosophy is of philosophical interest and that his work is a source that proponents of naturalistic ethics would do well to investigate. Indeed, it may even prove that his work is of greatest value for what now seems its most hopelessly out-

9. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

dated feature: his attempts to elevate ethics to the status of a natural science. That Dewey should have been interested in making ethics scientific is readily understandable given the historical context of his career. He entered the profession at a time when the academic discipline of philosophy was under threat, its claim to the mental and moral sciences disputed by the emerging human and social sciences of psychology, physiology, anthropology, and sociology. Philosophers concerned to defend their discipline were obliged to find ways of reconciling science and philosophy, either by demonstrating the existence of a subject matter for philosophy beyond the ken of physical science or by demonstrating the scientific legitimacy of philosophical theorizing.

Today, philosophers are not similarly called upon to justify their inclusion in institutions of higher learning. A knowledge of philosophical classics has come to be accepted as one of the hallmarks of a well-rounded education. Unfortunately, like other such hallmarks—classical languages, for example—philosophy is commonly thought to serve little or no other purpose. The relevance to contemporary life of philosophical theorizing is widely regarded as questionable at best. Of course, the study of philosophy is credited with sharpening the critical skills that must be brought to bear on our moral and social problems, but the same can be said of any number of other disciplines. Besides acquaintance with its peculiar literature, it is unclear whether philosophy has a unique contribution to make to contemporary life and culture that could be called upon to justify its continuance.

Richard Rorty sees this outcome of philosophy's struggle to maintain its position in the modern university as desirable and credits Dewey in part with its accomplishment. He writes:

> Dewey thought that if he could break down this notion, if scientific inquiry could be seen as adapting and coping rather than copying [reality], the continuity between science, morals, and art would become apparent. . . .
>
> Finally we might move . . . to the realization that philosophers' criticisms of culture are not more "scientific," more "fundamental," or more "deep" than those of labor leaders, literary critics, retired statesmen, or sculptors. . . . Philosophers could be seen as people who work with the history of philosophy and the contemporary effects of those ideas called 'philosophic' upon the rest of the culture—the remnants of past attempts to describe the "generic traits of existence."[10]

10. Richard Rorty, "Dewey's Metaphysics," in *New Studies in the Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1977), pp. 70–71.

Yet as Rorty himself notes, "Dewey sometimes described philosophy as the criticism of culture, but he was never quite content to think of himself as a kibitzer or a therapist or an intellectual historian."[11] Dewey did indeed hope that the dissolution of sharp distinctions between knowing and doing, between science, art, and morals, would transform the role of the philosopher. But he would have been profoundly disappointed to learn that the effect of his efforts was to support contemporary Anglo-American philosophy's retreat from the world into intellectual history and cultural kibitzing. To Dewey, questions about the design of the institutions and practices of public and private life, systems of distributing benefits and burdens, codes of criminal justice, and the like are as 'objective' as are questions about the design of buildings and bridges, their internal distributions of stresses and supports, the interactions of their materials and the surrounding environment. We recognize that to make decisions about the design and construction of buildings and bridges without first scientifically examining sites, materials, and the relative merits of given structures for the purposes intended is liable to lead to disaster. Dewey wanted people to recognize that the same is true of the decisions we make about the design and construction of social institutions. If disasters are to be avoided, Dewey thought, some group must serve as brinksmen, operating at the margin between social scientists and the communities they serve, as, for example, research engineers do between materials scientists and the communities they serve. This role he thought philosophers uniquely qualified to play.

Philosophy, as Dewey wanted it practiced, would be a more interdisciplinary affair than it now is. Moral philosophers, for instance, would probably have to be acquainted with at least the rudiments of sociology, demography, economics, and psychology, to be the effective participants in the formation of social policies that Dewey envisioned. They would require more and deeper knowledge of the world than they have recently been expected to possess. It is hard to see how this could be a bad thing. But even if we reject Dewey's solution to the question of what role moral philosophers should try to play in an era shaped by experimental science and the technological revolutions that have followed in its wake, the question remains. I believe Dewey's work offers us valuable material for the construction of our own responses.

I am not in a position to prove my belief that Dewey's ethical theory is

11. Ibid., p. 46.

of philosophic as well as historical interest. The only evidence that can be offered to show that a theory is of philosophical interest is that philosophers do take an interest in and use that theory. My opinion would be better stated as a prediction: could philosophers, especially those interested in naturalizing ethics, readily understand Dewey's moral philosophy, they would find it of philosophic interest. This book is an attempt to bring about a necessary condition for my prediction coming true.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I covers the development of Dewey's moral philosophy from 1884 through 1894, the year in which his last idealist ethical treatise was published. Part II examines Dewey's instrumentalist theory of judgment and the pragmatic ethics he based upon it through the publication of *Human Nature and Conduct* in 1922. Though this work does not represent the end of the evolution of his thinking either about the nature of value or about the social and political implications of his conceptions of human values, Dewey was to remain unwaveringly committed to the essentials of the ethical theory he had worked out by 1922. Thus *Human Nature and Conduct* marks the end of an important phase in the development of his thought.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I examine the sources and nature of Dewey's early conceptions of philosophy, science, and values, relating them to the views of contemporary idealists such as T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and G. S. Morris, on whose texts Dewey drew and with whom his earliest important philosophical disputes were conducted. In Chapters 3 and 4, I discuss Dewey's first two ethics texts (1891, 1894). In each he sought to collapse the popular distinction between natural scientific and philosophic approaches to human life through the application of Hegelian conceptions of both. In the process, Dewey made radical revisions to his idealist metaphysics, theory of mind, and epistemology but did not abandon his belief that consciousness is both universal and the material of the universe. In Chapter 5, I argue that collaboration with experimental psychologists at the University of Chicago in 1894–1903 led to a crucial reformulation of Dewey's conception of science, which undermined his remaining commitments to absolute idealism by making the postulation of a universal consciousness unnecessary for the explanation of human knowledge of the world. By 1902, Dewey had abandoned his earlier idealist notions for instrumentalism and had begun to construct new arguments for reconciling science and ethics. In Chapter 6, I explicate and defend the reconciliation Dewey achieved through the

use of his new instrumentalist moral epistemology in his first, and arguably most important, pragmatic ethical treatise, the 1908 *Ethics* (coauthored with J. H. Tufts). In Chapter 7, I look at Dewey's responses to his contemporaries' worries about his ethical theory. In particular, I examine whether its fundamental principles were, as Dewey claimed, consistent with a liberal, egalitarian social philosophy.