Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Public and Its Problems by John Dewey

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The Public and Its Problems. By JOHN DEWEY. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927.—pp. vi, 224.

Aroused by prevailing distrust of democracy that at best leaves the public a 'phantom,' at worst an ass, John Dewey here concerns himself with the nature of the public, the genesis of the state, the means of realizing and maintaining community, and, in general, with the intrinsic value and rôle of shared experience. Since he holds in general that the reference of all intelligence is prospective, political explanations that are retrospective lack something of sagacity. Thus there goes into discard most of the political preoccupation of classical philosophy—a preoccupation that emphasized "alleged, special, original, society-making causal forces, whether instincts, fiats of will, personal, or an immanent, universal practical reason, or an indwelling, metaphysical social essence and nature." Consequences, when recognized, are causes enough,—thus intelligence is causatively enthroned in social philosophy. When the consequences of an act spill over the regulative intentions of private advantage—as they have a way of doing—they challenge general interest. The public arises in answer to this abiding and ubiquitous challenge, government is the body of officials set to guard general interests against the indirect results of private acts, and the state is the public functioning thus through its officials.

But let us make more explicit the genesis of the public and the state. We start with the interaction of man and nature and of man and man. When action becomes social interaction, it acquires the status of a *trans*-action. Natural forces catch up in their swirl the energies released by individual centers and hurl them, willy-nilly, past or through the mark intended, on to unprescribed eventuations. We sometimes, with the poet, "blunder into bliss"; and sometimes we just blunder. All men, in their turn, are innocent bystanders to the actions and interactions of one another. In such a world an animal such as man remains permanently a bystander; but he need not remain permanently innocent. Indeed the loss of innocence marks the second stage in state-formation. Recognizing himself as potentially affected by all the actions that go on around him and differentially assessing his experiences, man sets about effectively to prefer the good, effectively to defer the bad consequences. Common effects beget common concern,

and communities arise to memorialize and make effective the recognition. Insofar as all men (inside whatever limit) are affected through consequences unguarded, often unforseen, by those who initiate them, a general community arises with the recognition of the fact. But it is so far merely a community of understanding. Its metamorphosis into a community of action marks the third stage. The media of its action are other individuals set apart as officials to represent the public in maximizing the good and in minimizing the bad indirect consequences that flow from individuals, whether they be acting in private capacity or as members of groups smaller than the larger community.

So far we have a utilitarian interpretation of social life. It is indeed obvious throughout his present analysis and his general philosophy how much Dewey owes to the utilitarians. But there remains a fourth stage by emphasis of which Dewey supplements utilitarianism where it is weak. And this is the notion that while community arises out of the necessity of controlling for preferred ends the indirect consequences of all activity, it remains to perpetuate itself as an intrinsic good. Worse than all the injurious consequences that effective action prevents would be the absence of the community of action itself; better than all the extraneous benefits that flow from united action is the experience of unity itself. Indeed it is because man naturally experiences this spiritual fruit of common action in seeking direct consequences that he is led to quest through ever larger organizations for control over indirect consequences.

If in the preceding account the ideal and the real are inextricably mixed, it is because they stand thus related in actual social experience. The fact that they are mixed and are further mixable is the logical ground for ethical meliorism. Dewey's social philosophy is a hopeful one, because the process of improvement is always but a further application of the process of initiation. Any state has in it the seeds of a democratic state; for every state rests upon the notion of a common good to be guarded and furthered through some official means. To become democratic a state needs only to increase to all as a limit a recognition of the consequences that constitute the realm of otherwise unsupervised goods and bads and then improve the human administration of this moral economy. No negligible condition, the critic may justly remark.

Cautious as Dewey himself is, there is reason to suspect that humanistic if not lingering idealistic elements in his general philosophy do not permit him to face all the difficulties realistically. Certainly, however, the conditions of a democratic polity as he formulates them

are exacting enough so far as the human element goes: full publicity for all relevant consequences, an experimental attitude in all human concerns, a growing body of available social knowledge, and a recovery by face-to-face groupings of the prestige and efficacy lost to them in this machine age.

But it must be clear upon reflection that these conditions imply much more than the mere will to be free. Man, the unsocial social animal, is recalcitrant enough; nature is worse. Publicity, recognition—all such concepts, as here used, imply prior knowledge. Democracy, as Dewey recognizes, implies science; and the limits of natural science, as he does not seem always to keep in mind in this present discussion, mark the boundaries of democratic aspiration. Democracy may not indeed exploit all the fields that science orders and offers; but it cannot exploit more. Now the world with which natural science deals is a very realistic world: will counts for little, wit for a little. The cosmic weather remains an inexorable item for social philosophy. Only those who make nature pliable by importing into it a larger element of human rationality than the facts warrant can feel that good will offers any adequate ground for democratic optimism. If one discovers in the attic of life that the real and the rational are coextensive or in the basement of life that experience and nature are one (each inter-constitutive or jointly constituted), he lays a ground for larger hope; but it is to be feared also that he discovers a great deal more than any ordinary democrat can ever find by eschewing basements and attics alike and remaining observant on the ground floor of his modest empirical habitat. It is fairly certain that the only way men will ever get anything like all they want, in social organization as elsewhere, is to take a liberal lesson in wanting what they will eventually get. The moral of these remarks with respect to democracy is that fraternity rather than liberty is the cardinal virtue. Insofar as community comes to be its own reward good will promises democratic fruition. This Dewey heavily emphasizes.

But if this disclaimer must be made to what the present reviewer feels to be the metaphysical drift of both Dewey's recent books, let it be said in conclusion that the instrumental logic and the pragmatic ethics remain the bulwark of any democratic hope. Not merely as a plea but as a program this book is magnificent. Forgetting insights and excellencies that alone would be enough to distinguish lesser works, this book has one high and rare virtue: it analyzes and defines and criticizes political philosophy in such a way as to leave disclosed important next steps for practice. If all these indicated steps do not

take us to the very threshold of heaven, let us praise the will of the author and blame the wit of nature. For if the method here outlined and prescribed does not get us to Utopia, where is there another method that will get us even out of our own backyard?

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A Study of Gersonides in his Proper Perspective. By NINA H. ADLERBLUM. New York, Columbia University Press, 1926.

The author justifies a fresh study of Gersonides by the need of an approach to this distinguished thinker from a new point of view. Her work would indeed have had a distinct value aside from this peculiar angle of vision. For she gives evidence of an extensive firsthand acquaintance with medieval Jewish thought, a rare capacity for analyzing and appreciating its typical concepts, and a remarkable independence of judgment. Among Jewish philosophers Gersonides deservedly holds a very high rank. Like Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Crescas, and others, he allowed himself great freedom in meditating on problems of thought that had not before their time been so distinctly and consciously present to the Jewish mind. Like them, he was deeply influenced by what the Middle Ages knew of Aristotle, and especially was his thinking affected by the interpretation of Aristotle by Averroës. Levi ben Gershom, or Gersonides, was born in Bagnols in 1288 and died in Perpignan in 1344. His chief works were written between 1319 and 1329. Consequently he lived in the period of scholasticism. Characteristic of this movement was the attempt to reconcile the essential elements of Aristotelian philosophy with the revelation recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, the Koran, or the Christian Bible, with the authority of tradition and established theological doctrines. The interest of students in the fresh hold of classical antiquity, and particularly of Greek thought, upon the new European nations has naturally been very intense. It may indeed be questioned whether it has yet been powerful enough to lead to a full realization of the vast amount of Hellenism that still survived in Jewry, in the Mohammedan world, and in the Church for centuries before the outblossoming of the Renaissance. But this dominating concern about the precise degree in which the leading Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thinkers were affected by Greek thought may very well have had a tendency to obscure and to crowd into the background other elements in their thinking worthy of consideration.

It is the contention of the author that this has been the case with