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Ethical Theory and Social Change: The Evolution of John Dewey's Ethics, 190

Abraham Edel

New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers

213 pp.

The heart of this book is an intensive examination of the changes in Dewey's

ethical theory between the 1908 and 1932 editions of Ethics^ by Dewey and

Tufts. Though others have touched on this topic, Edel's discussion is

considerably more systematic and probing than anything in the literature, to this

reviewer's knowledge. In addition, Edel surveys many of Dewey's intervening

works, often from archival sources, to show by what stages and under what

influences the changes developed. Edel's archival detective work is one of the

many charms of this book. Edel promises also to link the evolution of Dewey's

thought to the dramatic changes in society in the U.S. and the world, and to

Dewey's own life experiences in the quarter century between the two editions.

General observations are made about the decline in belief in progress in the face

of the World War and the Great Depression. Edel shows specific cross-cultural

impacts from Dewey's extended stay in China. Particular influences from other

scholars and scholarly fields are also mentioned. But this enterprise is not carried

through systematically. The great merit of this book lies in its comparative

philosophical analysis of the two editions of Ethics^ and of the body of work in

between.

Edel's initial focus is on Dewey's shift from asserting the primacy of the

Good, to recognizing three independent roots of morality in the Good, the

Right, and Virtue. To fully understand this particular change, however, Edel

examines gradual but cumulative alterations in Dewey's conception of the

relationship of individual and society. In turn, this leads to exploring transitions

in Dewey's conception of the role of history, the meaning of custom and of

habit, and the place of reason or intelligence in ethical deliberation and choice.

Dewey was always a critic of atomistic individualism and its accompanying idea of

a conflict between individual and society. He always understood the individual as

a social being. Thus Edel finds that the movement in Dewey's theory from 08 to

32 is a significant transition, but not a drastic paradigm shift.1 Let us look at

these topics in more detail.

Edel writes that in 08 Dewey assents to the linear theory of societal

development, from social to individual ethics, widely believed at the time and

presented by his partner, Tufts, in Part I of the Ethics. Ethical development is

presumed to move from an unreflective customary morality, which is social, to a

reflective morality, which comes into being through critical and creative thought,

by the individual person facing an ethical dilemma. In addition, the Good is seen

to be the primary ethical category, and the Good is understood in terms of

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individual self-realization. Furthermore, duty is understood as an indiv

obligation to his more inclusive or ideal self, not as an obligation to oth

these three ways, "the focus was on the self ... the self-focus held the

structure, as it were, in harness" (p. 66). 2 In 08 Dewey adds that the sel

social self, and thus a link is built to the idea of morality as obligation t

common good (pp. 25-26). But in 32 the emphasis on the social, Edel as

uis no longer treated as a reaching out of the individual, through his becom

moral, to incorporate the social" (p. 121).

Edel finds that in 32, "Dewey has emancipated himself from the individu

focus that channeled all moral theory through the concept of the self (p

This change reflects developments in several broad strands of Dewey's thoug

In his ongoing interest in the philosophy of law, Dewey begins to look a

concept of the Right as something rooted in the life of groups. Dewey gradu

comes to see the Right, therefore, as separate from the good, and of

significance. The primacy of Good is given up. At this time, Roscoe Poun

reversed the then conventional wisdom of a progressive evolution in law's ba

from relationship to contract. Influenced by Pound, Dewey reconceptualizes

link between individual and society in terms of relationships - relation

among people in groups. "The concept of the social is being dissolved int

multiplicity of groupings ... 'rather than being made up of collections

individual persons'" (p. 139). In this way Dewey arrives at a new more co

meaning for the idea of a social self.

Furthermore, Edel turns to The Public and its Problems^ a political th

work, where Dewey develops ideas about participation. The individual

democratic society not only shares in the benefits of society, but actively t

part in making the society what it is. Participation itself becomes a Good. B

the interrelation of individuality and society is so crucial to Dewey's et

theory, Edel devotes attention to Individualism Old and New, also gen

viewed as a work of political theory. In that book Dewey "calls on us to '

"society" and think of law, industry, religion, medicine, politics, art, educat

philosophy - and think of them in the plural'" (p. 143).

Dewey's understanding of the Right is also affected by the theme

relationship. Both the motivation and the content of obligation are now seen

this context.2 Finally, the focus on society brings Dewey's renewed attentio

the disposition of people to praise and blame one another's ethical condu

character. Thus he recognizes a third "root" of morality - approbation

Virtue - independent of and on an equal footing with the Good and the Righ

Under the influence of the cultural anthropology of Boas and others, De

gives up the idea of linear social evolution. The idea that morality evolves fr

the social (customary) to the individual (reflective) drops away. This also lead

a more pluralistic conception of the Good, which supplants the focus on

realization. In this context, Dewey also realizes that there can be post-reflec

well as prereflective habits and customs. Thus the customary/social elem

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morality need not be considered a more primitive stage of moral developm

societies. This transition is already being driven in 08 by the triple role pl

habit in Dewey's theory. Habitual dispositions are the product of

socialization into the customs of one's society, and the stable adop

decisions first made through reflection. What is more, intelligent delib

can, itself, become a habitual reaction to the occurrence of ethical dil

Thus the simple opposition of habit and intelligence is unsupportable, a

begins to cast doubt on the simple opposition of custom and intelligen

customs not be adopted, or reaffirmed, upon intelligent reflection? D

pushed to this conclusion when he travels in China in the years 1919 t

and develops a deep respect for some of the traditional Chinese ways (p. 16

The new theory has three distinct and equal roots of morality, the Goo

Right, and Virtue. The first is based in desire and interest, the second is b

relationships in social groups and the functional requirements o

relationships, and the third is based on the disposition of people to app

disapprove of one another's conduct and character. "Each has its own i

rationality, its own sanctions, and to some extent its own key or lea

conceptions" (p. 9). This leaves the question of whether one unified th

ethics is possible. Edel quotes Dewey: "it is a moral problem - o

conduct - to adapt the concepts of right and virtue to that of the good en

9). For present purposes let us consider only the relationship between the R

and the Good. Edel's conclusion amounts to a two way street; each cate

influenced by the other (though Edel mentions the two sides ofthat adjust

in different sections of his book).

On the one hand, the content of the Right is shown to derive from

common good, social welfare (p. 11). The notion of duty, of obli

responsibilities, has its own separate root in requirements intrin

relationships, but this does not determine what specific conduct is obli

The content of those duties is to be ascertained by critical reflection

reflection will concern the survival and flourishing of the group and the w

being and development of its members, which are questions of the Good. O

other hand, the effect of the Right and duty is, quoting Dewey, "'to l

individual to broaden his conception of the Good; they operate to indu

individual to feel that nothing is good for himself which is not also g

others'" (p. 83).

The shift from an individual ethics of self-realization in 08, to a plural

ethics that is social through and through, has a crucial consequence for the

in which ethical dilemmas are finally resolved. In 08, when com

deliberation leaves a person with incompatible ends, Dewey offers the crite

that one should chose the alternative that more fully realizes the self (p. 1

32, Dewey stresses a plurality of goods not hierarchically organized.

reference to character and through a standard for character upon the real

a whole self has been removed from the account of the good" (p. 68)

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concludes that, "The cultivation of interests is seen as the human end. This

pluralistic and not forced into a single framework" (p. 68; see also p. 69). Dewey

in 32, however, would no more make the cultivation of interests the end in view

in resolving an ethical dilemma, than he would make self-realization the end-in-

view. Thus Edel leaves obscure the mechanism of ethical decision. Perhaps this is

because Dewey works out his harmonization and self-transformation model

ethical decision in Human Nature and Conduct, and only makes glanci

references to it in 32 .4

In his exploration of Dewey's account of the Good, Edel also attempts to

clarify the decades long debate between Dewey and other philosophers over valu

theory. Edel believes that much of that controversy could have been averted

Dewey had not burdened this particular debate with extraneous issues - a

challenge to the entire prevailing approach to logic, and the introduction of his

eccentric concept of judgments of practice as forces that "take part in action an

[in] fashioning the outcome" (p. 74). This seems to be too easy an answer. Th

confusion lay not only in what Dewey claimed constituted something as valuable

and the logical form of such claims, but also in Dewey's failure to answer critic

like Perry about how one was to choose among conflicting values (p. 75). In

writings specifically on value theory Dewey never answered that criticism. The

answer, again, lies in the harmonization and self-transformation model in t

ethical writings, but this was not brought over into the value-theor

contributions.

Edel's writing is lucid and persuasive, but the organization of the book may

cause difficulties for the reader. Some parts of the book are organiz

chronologically, and others thematically, so some issues are treated several time

on widely separated pages. The reader who overcomes this minor obstacle will b

richly rewarded. Edel, a distinguished senior scholar, has made a fresh an

stimulating contribution to our understanding of Dewey's ethics, and thus

understanding his views on politics, education, law, and social psychology as wel

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NOTES

1. Edel's practice of referring to the two editions of Ethics, as "08" and

"32" will be Mowed here.

2. All page references are to Edel. Passages from Dewey are those quoted

by Edel and are referenced by where they appear in Edel's book.

3. On relationships and the Right in Dewey's thought, see W. Caspary,

Dewey on Democracy, Cornell University Press, 2000, pp. 156-157.

4. On the harmonization and self-transformation model, see W. Caspary,

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"One and the Same Method: John Dewey's Thesis of Unity of Method in Eth

Science," Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, summer, 2003, Vol. XXXIX, N