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Dewey and the Ancients

John Dewey was arguably the most famous and influential philosopher in America between the First and Second World Wars. In his view, philosophy can be considered the most general form of social criticism, rather than a search for eternal, unchanging truths. Dewey believes that there is a major flaw in the way philosophy has historically been practiced and continues to be practiced; therefore, he wrote *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, a series of lectures in which he attempts to dismantle the hierarchical nature of philosophy, replacing it with both scientific and practical applications of truth and knowledge. Although Dewey's argument is undoubtedly appealing for pragmatists, along with social liberals, its critique of the ancient Greek method of philosophy is unnecessarily severe and excessive: the search for the eternal is an unavoidable, innate desire felt by nearly all people since the start of the human race, and there is not sufficient reasoning to warrant the reconstruction of philosophy how Dewey suggests.

Dewey places much value on the progress accomplished by the scientific revolution, which took place mainly between the 16th and 17th centuries. The scientific revolution and its discoveries displaced many of the theories that were developed by the ancient Greeks and continued by early Christians throughout the medieval period. This includes not only theories on how the physical world worked, but the general purpose and function of philosophy as well. Famous ancient philosophers, such as the "Big Three" of Greek philosophy, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, valued philosophic contemplation over action in order to achieve an understanding of the world around them. They justified their reasoning and desire to seek out eternal truths for the sake of attaining knowledge itself: as Aristotle's opening line of his *Metaphysics* says, "All men by nature desire to know." Dewey argues that modern science, technology, and social equity changed philosophy as the world knew it-- and for the better. Although at the time in which he

was writing there was some pushback against the scientific revolution (it brought about nuclear weapons and missiles, after all), Dewey nonetheless believes that the scientific method should be applied more broadly to a variety of fields, including philosophy.

Dewey acknowledges that a conflict exists between tradition and knowledge and spends a decent amount of time in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* discussing this topic. Humanity has, since its inception, been tasked with practically dealing with various harsh environments, both as individuals and as groups. Therefore, it would seem to make sense that there would be a natural inclination to do as Dewey believes and to obtain all understanding of the world through practical means and actions; however, humans are instead inherently and historically symbolic creatures. Their animism, or regard of nature as sacred, has resulted in countless impactful religions, mythologies, and cultures all around the globe. In the evolution of human societies, the inner structure of each group or society also changes (comprising what we view as history), and within these changes lies a conflict between the practical skills and the cultural symbols one may inherit. Practical knowledge is that which is required to live in your respective environment successfully, whereas cultural symbols can constitute religious doctrines or myths. As societies improve and become more efficient, Dewey argues that tensions rise between the practical and the cultural. Historically, philosophers have been on the side of tradition, favoring the cultural myths of evolving societies in their quests to discover eternal forms. Metaphysics becomes the substitute for custom, and a cycle of innovation in conflict with inherited traditions is perpetuated throughout society.

Systematic experimentation, according to Dewey, should be valued above hereditary customs to understand the world. In stating this, he rejects customary philosophical beliefs, breaking his own limiting cycle of practicality and culture. He argues that empirical evidence and hypotheses based on experience better suit the evolution and progress of societies and of the

world. Additionally, as a more radical and progressive social democrat, Dewey had a distaste for the concept of the “heroic past,” in which the modern notion of progress was not viewed as something beneficial or even good. The scientific revolution glorified progress and science, solidifying that that is what humanity should be working towards in order to make the world a better place to live in (after all, it is a relatively recent phenomenon that we will have more knowledge, advances in technology, and large-scale progress tomorrow than we did yesterday). On the other hand, philosophy tries to justify inherited values rather than progress, and philosophers in his day remain entrenched in this outdated mode of thinking:

“Unfortunately men... are still so dominated by the older conception of an aloof and self-sufficing reason and knowledge... But in truth, historic intellectualism, the spectator view of knowledge, is a purely compensatory doctrine which men of an intellectual turn have built up to console themselves for the actual and social impotency of the calling of thought to which they are devoted.” (Dewey, p. 67)

In his opinion, philosophy’s goal should be to aid in social reconstruction and utilize modern science to liberate us from the traditional conservative approach. It should not be saved only for egotistical, wealthy elites in society to use for their soul-searching and self-centered quest for “truth.” However, is philosophy actually catered to only the upper strata of society? Given the fact that all people are capable of searching for eternal truths in their own ways, it seems that the answer would be no. Dewey is all too hasty to reach this conclusion, sacrificing the merits of ancient Greek traditional philosophy in the process.

Dewey references the ancient Greeks in a multitude of instances throughout *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and his other writings. It is clear that he is extremely critical of

ancient Greek thinkers and the philosophical traditions that can be dated back to the era of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey discusses the aforementioned “Spectator Theory of Knowledge.” What this does is accuse most of the Western tradition of perpetuating the notion that the person who understands something the best is the person who does not participate in its practice: essentially, to have objective knowledge of something, one should not be involved with it. However, this idea is directly in violation of pragmatism, which says that truth, knowledge, logic, and science are all found within the interactions of an organism and its environment. Additionally, instead of adhering to the dualistic view of the Greeks, Dewey sees all interactions as processes. Therefore, change within and throughout a society is not only inevitable, but necessary, and subsequently nothing can be labeled as permanent or eternal: “Fixed forms and ends, let us recall, mark fixed limits to change.” (Dewey, p. 41) Since his philosophy seems to be so vehemently opposed to the ancient Greek philosophy, Dewey arguably misses out on some of the deeper subtleties of Greek philosophy, presenting himself as more separate from tradition than he actually may be.

Dewey has striking similarities to Plato, who was also an arguably restless critic of past traditions-- both political and philosophical. To begin with, he insisted to his mentor, Socrates, that writing was valuable to the philosopher. Socrates did not agree with this sentiment and only valued discussion and dialogue; however, Plato, the author of the *Republic* and many other dialogues and treatises, chose to write down conversations and discussions to be analyzed and further debated by posterity. Plato also was, like Dewey, an advocate for social reconstruction and the reform of society, and was known for his “unflinching spirit of dedication to the problems of men.” (Anton, p. 487) The *Republic* serves a similar purpose to Dewey’s book, but on a different level: Plato discusses the reconstruction of a city, which Socrates calls “Kallipolis,” meant to exemplify the proper definition of justice. Although it is a contentious work filled with extreme

ideas such as the “noble lie,” forced breeding, and mass extermination of a polis to make room for the inhabitants of Kallipolis, the *Republic* also remains one of the most influential works of the Western canon, even today. Dewey’s obsession with dualism and hierarchy may be found as themes running throughout the *Republic*, especially brought forth in Plato’s conception of the soul and the analogy of the divided line.

Plato’s tripartite soul is an internal hierarchy of reason, desire, and spiritedness (*thumos*). Essentially, he uses this notion of the soul to justify the social structure of Kallipolis. Furthermore, Plato’s analogy of the divided line also represents the four separate sections of the psyche, corresponding to increasing levels of reality and truth. Dewey is also quite preoccupied with hierarchy in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*: he believes that social hierarchy should be done away with (which is why he is opposed to religion, since he argues that it is used to support and justify social hierarchy). He favors community, equality, and freedom over tradition and authority. I think that both Plato and Dewey acknowledged the intrinsic significance of various levels in human society, but in different ways: Plato thought they were essential, while Dewey sought to do away with them altogether. However, both are similar in that their ideas are impractical. Just because there seems to be a certain order of the soul does not essentially mean that a functioning city can be modeled after that, and it is impossible for all social stratification to be obliterated. It is intriguing how these philosophers fall on two sides of the same coin, interpreting society in the same way but with different results.

Dewey possessed a fervid dislike for Aristotle, who was known for being a moral philosopher concerned with eternal truths. He writes, “In spite of [the universe’s] dramatic rendering (as in Dante), of the dialectical elaborations of Aristotle and St. Thomas, in spite of the fact that it held men’s minds captive until the last three hundred years, and that its overthrow involved a religious upheaval, it is already dim, faded, and remote.” (Dewey, p. 32)

Fundamentally, what Dewey is contending is that Aristotle's view of the larger aspects of the universe hold no weight in modern society: they are irrelevant and outdated, along with the significance of religion. However, Dewey is completely wrong on this front. Although Aristotle did not have access to modern science like Dewey, he made observations and analyses of the world that are in fact still hugely important and integrated into society today.

In Book Three of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses virtue as voluntary or involuntary action. He says that whether a person is forced to do something or not has a significant implication on the action itself: "For example, if a tyrant should order someone to do something shameful while the tyrant has control over his parents and offspring, and if he should do it, they would be saved, but if not, they would be killed-- whether this thing is involuntary or voluntary admits of dispute." (Aristotle, 1110a5-9) Dewey would most likely think that Aristotle's argument has no merit, as it does not have any backing by practical scientific experience. However, Aristotle's question is still extremely salient and relevant, not just in real life, but in works of fiction: in fact, this example has been utilized countless times as a common trope in modern books and films. Additionally, when discussing reciprocity in relation to justice, Aristotle writes, "But it must not escape our notice that what is being sought is also the just unqualifiedly, that is, the just in the political sense... The just exists for those for whom there is also law pertaining to them, and law exists among those for whom there is injustice." (1134a25-26) This pertains to the modern debate of whether it is possible or practical to have an international justice system. It seems unlikely that Dewey could argue that Aristotle's lack of a scientific background nullified his theory apropos to the modern justice system. Furthermore, his explanation of the significance of money still holds today:

"Hence all that is exchanged must somehow be capable of being compared. For this purpose money has arisen and become in a way

a middle term... All things, therefore, must be measured by some one thing, as we said earlier. The thing is, in truth, need, which holds all things together.” (1133a19-26)

It is evidently possible to do proper philosophy without the prerequisite of a scientific revolution, for Aristotle cracked the code of supply and demand over 2000 years ago. Are modern-day economics truly necessary for understanding that just prices are determined by demand or “need?” It seems as if Dewey would attempt somehow to say yes, but it seems quite obvious that that is not the case at all.

Throughout human history, there has always been a mismatch between our technology and our wisdom. Even after the scientific revolution, all of mankind’s questions could not possibly be answered... and that has arguably remained unchanged, even with the great innovative leaps that have taken place since Dewey’s death in 1952. Although he desired a reconstruction of the way we practice philosophy and view the world, Dewey fell short in convincing his audience that the traditional philosophical approach was outdated and worthless. After the Second World War, Analytic and Continental philosophy quickly came onto the global stage, and philosophers such as Martin Heidegger sought to answer questions about what “the human being” truly is and how to differentiate between what is and what is not. Human existential inclinations are impossible to vanquish, and, even if Dewey had the chance to implement his reconstruction, his new mode of scientific philosophy imbued with pragmatism would be destined to fail. It would make more sense to allow for his philosophical beliefs to coexist alongside traditional philosophy, rather than attempting to devalue all past intellectual traditions. Finally, Dewey’s exceedingly selective approach to handling Greek traditions also contributed to his flawed arguments in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, highlighting that he only sought to make his criticisms from the standpoint of a person in a modern industrial society,

which is an unfair process. Although Dewey undoubtedly made historic contributions to the realm of philosophy during his near century-long lifespan, his critique of ancient Greek intellectualism ultimately and woefully failed to succeed.

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