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## Book Reviews

# John Dewey's ethics: Democracy as experience

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What makes serious scholarship in this area especially daunting is that there is no single authoritative statement of Dewey's ethics. Indeed, the puzzle pieces of Dewey's ethical theory are distributed throughout the 37 volumes of his collected works (*The Collected Works of John Dewey 1882–1953*, Early, Middle and Later Works, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–1987, hereafter CW). Pappas assures his readers that a cohesive account of Dewey's ethics is not a mirage: 'Even though Dewey never wrote a single comprehensive and definitive rendition of his moral thought, he had a coherent and complex view worth reconstructing and reconsidering today' (p. 300). The book is organized into three thematic sections: (i) the metaethics or what Pappas calls 'the methodological commitments that form the basis of Dewey's reconstruction of moral theory' (p. 301), (ii) the metaphysics of Dewey's ethics or those generic traits that pervade morally problematic situations and (iii) the normative ethics, extending to Dewey's democratic ideal and its justification within experience.

Joining Dewey, Pappas criticizes the deep schism in the history of ethical thought (or what he calls elsewhere the 'great divide') between an ethics of being (character) and an ethics of doing (conduct) (p. 132). Nevertheless, virtues and character do have a prominent place in Dewey's ethics. The two virtues that Pappas believes to be integral to Dewey's account of a balanced character are courage and open-mindedness; courage as a resource for inquiring into the challenging conditions of problematic situations; open-mindedness as a flexible perspective in the face of uncertainty; and both as 'complementary virtues' or intelligent habits for engendering personal growth and the enrichment of cooperative experience (p. 189). Yet, Pappas insists that 'it would be a mistake to regard Dewey's ethics as a form of virtue ethics' (p. 144). Dewey did not treat character or the cultivation of virtues as the exclusive concern of moral agents, or as one that could be settled antecedent to all moral contexts. Indeed, virtue, duty and the good are all variables that can potentially



influence moral judgments, depending on the unique conditions of specific situations – a point borne out by Dewey's 1930 essay 'Three Independent Factors in Morals' (CW, Later Works, Vol. 5, pp. 279–288).

In his treatment of Dewey's democratic ideal, Pappas challenges recent appropriations, especially by deliberative democrats, and objections that the ideal is naïve, utopian or lacking criteria of justification. Rather than offer a panacea for social problems, Dewey's ideal presents the task before democratic problem solvers. Pappas writes: 'Dewey insists that democracy as an ideal "poses, rather than solves" (Later Works, Vol. 7, p. 350) problems' (p. 248). Upon examination of the whole passage from which Pappas excerpts 'poses, rather than solves,' one sees that the reference is to a single problem – what Dewey refers to as 'the great problem' – not multiple problems. 'From the ethical point of view, therefore, it is not too much to say that the democratic ideal poses, rather than solves, the great problem: how to harmonize the development of each individual with the maintenance of a social state in which the activities of one will contribute to the good of all the others' (*Ethics*, 1932 revised edition in CW, Middle Works, Vol. 70, p. 350). In other words, the need for individual growth must be balanced against the need for collective welfare. However, what is missing from Pappas's treatment are actual situations, whether culled from Dewey's own social-political activism or from more contemporary sources, illustrating how concerns for the individual and the social can be balanced in actual problematic situations. For instance, when democratic majorities infringe on the rights of minorities, does Dewey's democratic ideal provide practical guidance? Can Dewey's notion of the 'local' offer a resource to activists wishing to persuade their fellow citizens to 'think global, buy local'? Though Pappas claims that he 'makes his [Dewey's] ideal [of democracy] more amenable to testing' (p. 308), the paucity of concrete examples makes this reader doubtful that Pappas has sufficiently operationalized the ideal. In contrast, William Caspary interprets Dewey's ideal as an instrument for mediating conflicts and tests its efficacy by applying it to concrete social-political problems (see Dewey, 2000).

Also, there is an implicit tension in the text between Pappas's denial that Dewey's philosophy is foundationalist and the clues of experiential foundations that emerge in his reading of Dewey's ethics. According to Dewey and most contemporary pragmatists (including the late Richard Rorty), there is no fixed epistemological standard of truth, no Archimedean point from which to evaluate what is real in all situations and no unanalyzed givenness to experience that grounds the legitimacy of every moral claim. Affirming this negative thesis, Pappas states that 'there is no [absolute] criterion or standard of the good of any kind in Dewey's ethics' (p. 58). However, the language Pappas uses to describe non-reflective and aesthetic experience suggests that he might hold the contrary view. In only the last two pages of the book's



introduction, terminology hinting at experiential foundations (or givens) abounds: ‘one cohesive vision that is grounded on a concern and commitment to experience,’ ‘Dewey’s underlying but very personal faith in experience ... is, for me, the ultimate glue of Dewey’s vision,’ and ‘a pre-reflective, qualitatively felt present situation ... [is] the ultimate source of guidance in moral life’ (pp. 12–13). Apropos of this concern, Colin Koopman has imparted some advice to present-day pragmatists, generally, which could be directed at Pappas, specifically, ‘To avoid this foundationalism ... contemporary pragmatists who are eager to revive the concept of experience must be on guard to not treat experience as a kind of ultimate given-ness against which we might be able to measure our truth claims’ (Colin Koopman, 2007).

Overall, though, Pappas’s book is a significant contribution to the sparse literature on Dewey’s ethics, which is surely to inspire debates among Dewey scholars and provide a valuable introduction to new readers of Dewey’s ethical writings.

## References

- Dewey, J. (2000) *Dewey on Democracy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.  
Koopman, C. (2007) Language as a form of experience: Reconciling classical pragmatism and neopragmatism. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43(4): 694–727, 697.

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## Messy morality, the challenge of politics

C.A.J. Coady  
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Tony Coady’s book is another in the Oxford Uehiro series in *Practical Ethics* and it expands Uehiro Lectures given by its author in 2005. There is perhaps no