Part One: Moral Theory and Experience
Experience as Method

It is commonly claimed that Dewey, like other theorists in the twentieth century, sought an empirical grounding for ethics. This is true, but it is not illuminating unless Dewey's own brand of empiricism and his views about experience as method are made clear.

Although Dewey published the second edition of his *Ethics* in 1932, there is not in this text an explicit recognition or explanation of how the philosophical empiricism that he was committed to and that received its final articulation in the first chapters of *Experience and Nature* bears upon his philosophical inquiries and conclusions about morality. Dewey’s criticism of traditional ethical theory presupposed a methodology, and it was informed by the systematic mistakes that he detected in other areas of philosophy.

We must first ask what one could mean by the claim that an ethical theory or inquiry, such as Dewey's, is "empirical." A survey of the literature on this issue suggest the following possible tenets:

1) It is an ethics that adopts the same subject matter, concepts, results, and judgments of the natural sciences (i.e., a science of morality);
2) It is an ethics that has as its starting point social psychology and evolutionary naturalism (i.e., based on scientific truths or standpoint);
3) It is an ethics that is like science in certain methodological respects (i.e., modeled upon science);
4) It is an ethics that is informed by the natural sciences; and

5) It is an ethics that, like other empirical inquiries in philosophy, relies on experience as method. It takes moral experience as its starting point.

Many of the misdirected criticisms of Dewey’s ethics have assumed that he held tenet (1). Dewey’s defenders rightly point out that this is a caricature of his view. One cannot take Dewey’s remarks about a “science of ethics” at face value. Dewey cannot be identified with a “naturalistic” reduction of moral judgments to scientific statements or with any scientistic approach to morality. I suspect that many of the scientistic interpretations of Dewey on ethics originate from confusing Dewey’s suggestions in his writings that we must apply the methods of science to the problems of morality with applying the methods of science to ethical theory. These are entirely different things and Dewey did not hold the second one.

Tenet (2) is a more recent common interpretation. Dewey had a tendency to describe everyday experience by using biological and psychological terms. This did the job of getting away from the modern view of the self as a subject or spectator of an antecedent reality, but it can mislead readers to think that Dewey is just a philosophy that adopts a scientific outlook upon things or that starts with some theoretical truths given by the sciences. The pragmatists were influenced by Darwin and evolutionary naturalism. They saw these and other developments in the sciences (at the turn of the century) as providing an indirect validation of their philosophical views. However, this is different than claiming that pragmatism, in particular, their view of moral experience, is based on or presupposes the truth of Darwinism or any evolutionary type theory.
There is also no doubt that Dewey had a social psychology that influenced his ethics but its conclusions were not the starting point of his ethics. Psychology is a type of inquiry that, however useful and important, it is limited by the purposes, methods, selectivity, particular to the sciences. Dewey spent many years reading and criticizing current psychological theories because he found them based on problematic dualisms. This was of consequence since current educational practices were based on these psychologies. For Dewey’s criticisms to be effective he had to engage in psychology but he became clear on the differences between philosophy and psychology as inquiries.

Instead of the narrow view assumed by tenets (1) and (2), commentators and defenders of Dewey's ethics point out that it is tenets (3) and (4) that convey better the sense in which for Dewey ethics can be empirical. Tenet (4) postulates an ethics that is constantly nurtured and informed by the results of scientific inquiries. In this conception, the moral philosopher is a more interdisciplinary creature than she typically is. Compared to tenet (4), tenet (3) seems to be making a stronger claim about the relation between science and ethics. An empirical ethics is one that adopts the general method of inquiry of the sciences. For example, Dewey did not see why the conclusions of moral philosophy could not have the same hypothetical character as those of the sciences. Recent scholarship on Dewey has insisted that to appreciate that this was Dewey's view we must first understand what Dewey meant by "science" or the "scientific method." Jennifer Welchman, for example, claims that if one studies carefully Dewey's conception of the nature of science, one finds that he thought that "every scientist acts in accordance with procedural rules" that can be experimentally confirmed. This indicates at least one respect in which for Dewey ethics can be like science. "Commitment to such rules,
Dewey holds, is the essence of science. It is in this respect that he believes ethical theory ought to become scientific.\textsuperscript{5} If ethics is to advance it should "construct procedures for inquiries analogous to those used in the physical sciences."\textsuperscript{6} For James Campbell it was more the "scientific attitude" and the communal ("public") aspect of science that attracted Dewey to the notion of "ethics as a moral science."\textsuperscript{7}

I do not wish to question tenets (3) and (4) as Deweyan theses, or the above claims by Dewey scholars. However, I think there are limitations to this way of proceeding to understand both Dewey and the notion of an empirical ethics. Although the association of empiricism with science is not totally unwarranted, I question the fruitfulness of tenet (3) in regard to understanding fully the radical nature of Dewey's reconstruction in moral philosophy. Deweyan scholarship should not assume that we must demonstrate the respects in which ethics can be like science on the assumption that, otherwise, our claims to an empirical ethics will be bogus. This is especially so if ethics is philosophy and Dewey had a well developed view of what it means for any area of philosophy to be empirical. It is this view of an empirical philosophy that is appealed to by tenet (5). This view, although compatible with tenet (3), is not reducible to it. Dewey had some very substantive things to say about what it means for an area of philosophy to be empirical that are independent of how he conceived the relation between philosophy and science.\textsuperscript{8}

Dewey used science as an analogy or as a paradigm. He advocated in ethics a method analogous to scientific inquiry. At the time, the analogy with science was important for Dewey because it served the function of emphasizing "the continuity of ethical with other forms of experience" (MW 8:35). Unfortunately, analogies have their...
limits and can outlive their usefulness. In fact, a more recent trend is to argue that art or aesthetic experience is a better analogy for understanding Dewey’s ethics. This is the approach of Steven Fesmire in *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*. This book is a welcome corrective against the scientistic views of Dewey’s ethics. Fesmire, may have, however, in the process of emphasizing what has been wrongly ignored by scientistic views of Dewey’s ethics, overstated the case on behalf of an aesthetic reading of Dewey’s ethics. An adequate understanding of Dewey’s overall philosophy would indicate that these qualifications (aesthetic and scientistic) are not mutually exclusive. We do not have to choose between an aesthetic view of Dewey’s ethics and a scientific one. Dewey used science and art as metaphors by which to understand moral experience without committing himself to a reduction of morality to art or science. Secondary sources that stress either of these metaphoric tools often fail to make this clear.

Instead of deciding which analogy is better (science or art) I want to move beyond them (in some sense "before" them) to focus on Dewey's commitments to an empirical philosophical method and how this yields the kind of ethics it did. It was his commitment to a different starting point in philosophical inquiry that led him to provide one of the most devastating and systematic critiques of modern moral theory, and a radically new account of moral experience.

1. Experience as the Starting Point

Dewey's early insistence in making ethics "scientific" is part of his more general and life long aim to base philosophy in lived experience or take experience as the starting point. Early on he characterized the empiricist's way of philosophizing in terms of a
postulate, i.e., the "postulate of immediate empiricism." This is the hypothesis that "things--anything, everything, in the ordinary or non-technical use of the term "thing"--are what they are experienced as" (MW 3:158). A genuine empiricism in philosophy entails that, no matter how abstract and remote our philosophical speculations might turn out, we need to start from and terminate in directly experienced subject matter. Hence, for Dewey experience is a "starting point and terminal point, as setting problems and as testing proposed solutions" (LW 1: 14, my emphasis). This “turn” towards everyday lived experienced as the ground where we must start from and return to is the more important philosophical inheritance we received from Dewey.

This method would not be so important to Dewey if most philosophizing had been done from this empirical postulate and attitude. For the most part, however, the starting point in philosophy has been theoretical abstractions (or as Dewey says, "reflective products") and not "primary experience," i.e., everyday experience as it is found, present and given. Even modern empiricism has not been radical (or empirical) enough to distinguish a theory about experience from experience as it is experienced. In general, “experience” in modern philosophy was understood as the content of consciousness, i.e. of a knowing subject that is a spectator to an antecedent world or objects. But this is a theoretical picture of things that we may employ when we adopt a theoretical point of view and not how we experience our everyday life from a pre-theoretical and engaged point of view. Modern philosophers tend to start their inquiries with the feature of events qua known and not as they are experienced in their robust and raw character. We cannot ignore the crudities of life just because they are crude.
Modern moral philosophy was no exception. Dewey's moral philosophy is revolutionary because it tried to avoid all the mistaken theoretical starting points and begin with moral experience as it is lived. However, before considering what this means, we must first address some possible misunderstandings and questions about the sort of empirical method proposed.

Does not the above "postulate" assume the very naive philosophical view that there are "givens" independent of theories that we can appeal to as a "neutral court of appeal"? Alasdair McIntyre has recently claimed "we need to avoid the error of supposing that there are facts of the moral life completely independent of and apart from theory-laden characterization of those facts." If all facts of experience are theory-laden (and the "given" is a myth), then it seems that Dewey's empiricism, in particular his appeal to a "primary experience" (i.e., to things as they are "present" and "given" in our everyday practical life) is at best problematic.

But Dewey recognizes that there are no "hard" or "neutral" givens. A central tenet of his philosophy is that "selective emphasis, with accompanying omission and rejection, is the heart-beat of mental life" (LW 1:31). We can distinguish two possible ways in which selectivity (or interpretation) are part of experiencing: pre-theoretically and theoretically, but for Dewey neither one makes the effort to be empirical futile.

Experience can be "theory-laden." By this is meant that either a theory we hold determines what counts as a "fact" or our selection of "facts" from the total situation is determined by our interest in confirming, disconfirming a theory we already hold. It is our recognition of this kind of selectivity that allow us to question the naive idea that empirical theories are mere transcripts of independent and brute matters of fact.
Although Dewey recognizes this kind of selectivity, he hardly thinks it follows that all experience is theory-laden and that, therefore, any appeal to "primary experience" is problematic. Contemporary philosophers who think otherwise must hold an extended sense of what counts as a "theory" or the view that everyone in their lives looks at the world through a theory (i.e., we are all "walking theories"). To begin philosophy in the midstream of our lives is not even to begin within a body of beliefs, as is sometimes assumed by epistemologists. Theories and beliefs are in our lives.

"Primary experience" is, however, not "pure" experience in the sense of something that we could get to if we were just to divest ourselves of our conceptual and cultural "baggage." There is pre-theoretical selectivity because as social and cultural organisms we always confront a situation with a character (set of habits, emotions, beliefs) that to a certain extent determines the content of what is non-reflectively "given" and present in our lives. We grow up in a certain society with a language and in the process we acquire conceptual and perceptual habits that may determine what we directly experience. Nevertheless, we do experience things in their gross qualitative "givenness" in a situation. It is to this lived experience that we have to be faithful regardless of how conditioned this "given" might be conditioned by one's character and one's historical cultural context. The extent of this conditioning is an open question and not critical to the use of the method.

The empirical method, hence, provides a basis for continuous criticism and evaluation of theories. A philosopher proceeds empirically when her theoretical selectivity is guided by what is pretheoretically "given." If we can appeal to our description of what is directly-experientially lived, then we can appeal to something
outside of our theories. To be clear, for Dewey, that which is “immediately” or “directly” experienced is not just perception by the senses, as is presupposed by some modern theories of knowledge. Instead, what we immediately experience in the midstream of our everyday engagements are things, others, anticipations, relations, novelty, location, flow, qualities, etc.

For Dewey, the pretheoretical (i.e., "primary experience") is the more "primitive" level because it encompasses the theoretical and because it is where things are present in their brute and direct qualitative "givenness" and "thereness." It is this level that we need to start with and come back to in an experientially guided inquiry.

There is a sense, then, in which there are "moral facts" independent of theory. For there is no reason to think that everything that is experienced as moral in our everyday lives is determined by a theory. This is not to deny that it is difficult to be empirical in philosophy. There is, for example, the problem of designating the experiential subject matter to be studied without using or assuming a theory. This is difficult because a philosopher who studies a subject matter comes to it with pre-conceived theoretical assumptions and with certain theoretical demands and interests. Yet the fact that many or most philosophers "become trapped" into their theories does not mean that they must, and it is not sufficient to demonstrate that the philosophical effort to be truthful to experience is futile.

Dewey's form of empiricism is not the kind that many would like. One cannot object that while the method offers a way of evaluating and testing theoretical hypothesis it cannot guarantee that they will correspond to the "nature of things"; or in the case of moral theory to a "moral reality" outside of experience. For this assumes a mysterious
ontological gap between experience and reality that is ruled out by Dewey's "postulate."
On the other hand, the complaint might be that while it gives us the hope of an extra-
theoretical check for our theories it does not provide us with "freedom" from our
historical circumstances. The extent to which our "primary experience" is conditioned by
our culture or place in history is a source of anxiety to those who would like to have the
assurance that what they experience is "unspoiled" by one's circumstances. Dewey did
not experience this anxiety because he did not even understand what this last sense of
"freedom" could mean. However, his view should be distinguished from other extreme
views.

Dewey's denial of "pure" experience does not mean that he held the theory that
our starting point is always inside a language, a culture, or a socio-economic system. He
would be skeptical of any theory that claimed that our primary experience is determined
(or conditioned) by one single cohesive factor such as one's historical period, culture,
race, class, or biological make up. These are all reductionistic theories that overlook the
complexity and heterogeneity of factors and interactions that are the conditions for
human experience. In other words, they are non-empirical theories in the sense already
explained. We do not experience ourselves as inside (or as "trapped" in) our subjectivity,
language or anything else. The notion, for example, that one’s culture or social class
solely determines moral experience is only a theory and not what we experience when we
have moral experiences.

Dewey's appeal to primary experience is not a disguised appeal to the status quo.
On the contrary, the purpose is to encourage criticism. Philosophy as criticism relies on
subjecting the more refined reflective products of our inquiry to the test of primary
experience. However, philosophy can also subject what, at any time, is taken as primary experience to criticism. This is done either by arguing that it is not really primary or by unveiling factors (e.g., historical-cultural beliefs) that condition our experience in an unwanted way. We start where we are, in the midst of our pre-reflective immediate qualitative experiences. These experiences change and are transformed by inquiry but we must return to them as our guide. If we have prejudices or stereotypes that distort our immediate experience, then hopefully we will find out through inquiry, the criticism of others, and further experiences. There is no privilege-theoretical-objective (“God’s eye view”) standpoint for us to take.

In other words, experience as method relies on what is experienced, but what is experienced not only changes but can be modified and improved by the same method. Nevertheless, effective criticism and modification of what we experience needs to begin with what we do in fact experience in the ordinary practical situations of life. What cannot be subjected to criticism is all of our primary experience. Reflective criticism always takes place in the non-cognitive context of a situation that cannot be transcended.

Neither is the appeal to experience a disguised form of foundationalism. Experience as method is not experience as a foundation. Since Descartes, the latter has been understood as a fixed and particular subject matter that we can (as subjects or spectators) gaze at and provide the unshakable grounds of our philosophies. Yet for Dewey, this is a theoretical conception of experience. Experience cannot be a foundation because we are in experience as agents in situations. As Douglas Browning explains,

Day after day we find ourselves within and an integral part of those ever-changing and always unique situations that constitute our lives and mark
out their shifting horizons. Each of us is bound within this situational stream, a stream which is never at rest, always in transit. We cannot stop it or freeze it even for a second; we cannot view it from without or find some external point of leverage from which we might alter the direction of its flow. We are not mere subjects for whom our situations are objects to be observed; we are agents in our situations, in our arenas of action, and part of what transpires there is our own doing. Now, this stream of situations in our lives is precisely that to which Dewey refers by the term 'experience' 12.

Hence, in a certain sense, experience is always our starting point (and for that matter middle and end point) for we cannot get away from it. The choice is not between starting in or outside of experience but between ways of proceeding within it. The difference between being empirical or not in inquiry is ultimately the choice between affirming or denying the character of things as they are presented in our practical everyday lives. To be an empiricist is to live by the naive and crude sort of realism that affirms that what is real is whatever is denotatively found. It is to go by how things present themselves and not by how we want them to be. It is "accepting what is found in good faith and without discount" (LW 1:372), and to settle issues by "finding and pointing to the things in the concrete contexts in which they present themselves" (LW 1:377).

Dewey’s empirical method has significant implications about the resources and limits of philosophical inquiry and criticism. Argumentation and logical rigor continue to be important, but there is also the requirement of adequacy to experience. This last
requirement introduces in philosophy a way to evaluate philosophical hypotheses that can be a strength and a liability of pragmatism, when in dialogue with other philosophers. Dewey rejects commonplace assumptions in ethics because they are not based in his everyday primary experience, and he doubts that they are a part of the primary experience of those other ethical theories. This is a “good reason” for Dewey to reject entire views, even when they are impeccably well argued and meet all possible objections. However, this is a liability because it opens the pragmatist to the charge of seeming to be “shallow,” “dismissive,” and begging questions in the confrontation with alternative views.

How can anyone as a philosopher be certain that one is beginning with things as they are experienced and not with reflective products or theoretical presuppositions? The only reply to this is simply that there is no certainty. Dewey provided no infallible method by which one can guarantee success in the empirical method he proposes. All one can do is to try to be alert about purposes that might distort or mislead, such as too much zeal for a theory we hold. Other philosophers might keep us on the alert. This is why the empiricist method requires that one's results be tested by the results and lived experience of others. One could provide ones results to be tested by others with a lead to where to have the confirming experiences. Guiding others to have certain experiences is not providing a reason or an argument but it opens our hypothesis to be subjected to the criticism of others.

Dewey also suggested that it would help if we keep the term 'experience' in philosophy as a reminder of our method. This will remind one to run a never-ending check of one's philosophy with what one experiences from day to day and with the results
of other philosophers. Even more helpful is the suggestion that we learn from the experience of other philosophers. To study other philosophers' mistakes might prevent one from making those same mistakes and avoid "misbeginnings," i.e., non-empirical ones. In this respect Dewey was very helpful. He occasionally tried to summarize the general and systematic kinds of mistakes of non-empirical philosophers. It will be helpful to consider them before continuing to disclose the proper starting point for ethical theory.

2. The Philosophical Fallacy

Dewey thought that the general failure to be empirical in philosophy amounted to a failure to acknowledge primary experience as the non-cognitive context of philosophical inquiry. Philosophers often denied the practical experiential context of their own investigations and took the products of their inquiries to replace experience as it is lived. Philosophers have not only failed to have their own inquiries be guided by and returned to context but they have also defended notions of thinking as devoid of all context. Hence, Dewey concludes that "the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to neglect of context" (LW 6:5). This general failure was so common in philosophy that he calls it "the philosophical fallacy" (LW 1:51).

The "philosophical fallacy" became Dewey's main tool of criticism in different areas of philosophy. He discovered many different ways in which philosophers have made the same fundamental mistake. However, he never clearly sets forth in a systematic way the various formulations and versions of the fallacy. I will try to sort out four different versions of this fallacy and how they generated the truncated view of experience inherited by non-empirical ethics.
The Analytic Fallacy

Analysis consists in a process where we discriminate some particulars or elements within a context. Of course, what hangs those particulars together, i.e., what gives them their connection and continuity, is the context itself. Philosophers commit the analytic fallacy when the results of an analysis are interpreted as complete in themselves apart from any context. "It is found whenever the distinctions or elements that are discriminated are treated as if they were final and self-sufficient" (LW 6:7).

Though Dewey refers to this fallacy as one of "analysis," it is not to be limited in its application to a specific phase of inquiry. The key to this fallacy is that the rich and concrete context from which distinctions are abstracted is forgotten and the results of inquiry are given a certain status that they do not and should not have. The conclusions of inquiry are not only treated as final and self-sufficient, but sometimes they are even elevated, ontologized, or, as Dewey said, given "antecedent existence."³

Philosophers, as result of their analyses, have "dissected" the world in many ways: mind and body, reason and passions, subject and object. There is nothing wrong about these "dissections" per se. The problem is that sometimes they neglect or they forget the concrete non-cognitive integral contexts from which things were dissected. They then invent the philosophical problems that center on how to get together or reconcile features that are actually experienced as part of an unified and integral whole. This is the fallacy responsible for the atomistic, dualistic, and subjective view of experience. Instead of starting with the "integrated unity" and "unanalyzed totality" found in a situation, modern philosophy begins with ontological gaps (dualisms).
Functional distinctions for the purpose of regulating primary experience are taken as the starting point of philosophical inquiry (i.e., as primary).

One common way for philosophers to ignore context and "elevate" the conclusions of their inquiries is to give them unlimited application. Let's examine this as a separate fallacy.

The Fallacy of Unlimited Universalization

When philosophers ignore the fact that conclusions arise out of limiting conditions set by the contextual situation of particular inquiries, they tend to absolutize them or universalize them. Philosophers are prone to this fallacy because they are the ones who are usually trying to formulate theories about "truth," "good," "reality," or the "absolute" at large. In many instances of this fallacy one "converts abstraction from specific context into abstraction from all contexts whatsoever" (LW 6:16). Philosophers tend to absolutize or universalize their conclusions because they ignore the fact that philosophical inquiry always occurs in a temporal and spatial background that is not subject as a whole at any time to reflection.

The Fallacy of Selective Emphasis

The fallacy of selective interest occurs when the philosopher forgets or overlooks selectivity and the purposes of selection that are part of the context of a particular inquiry. The most common consequence and sign of this is that nonempirical philosophies deny reality to what is "left out" (not selected) from their inquiries. Hence, they have equated what is real with what has value in some specific contexts and for some particular purpose. This is to confuse good traits with "fixed traits of real being."
Because philosophers have cherished simplicity, certainty, and permanence they have converted these traits into features of what is real. Meanwhile, uncertainty, change, ambiguities have been taken as phenomenal, subjective, or as lacking reality. However, according to Dewey's empiricism, all that happens is equally real though perhaps not of equal worth. If one is empirical one recognizes that primary experience has precarious elements as well as stable ones.

**Intellectualism**

Intellectualism might be accounted for as a combination of the aforementioned fallacies. But it is so pervasive in the history of non-empirical philosophy that it deserves to be considered as a separate fallacy. Philosophers have always favored cognitive objects. The problem arises when the philosopher as a consequence of her cognitive bias excludes what is non-cognitive or precognitive as important or even as part of the "real" world. The consequence of intellectualism in philosophy has been a certain narrow view of experience, namely, that "all experience is a mode of knowing." The concept of experience that is at the heart of traditional epistemology assumes something like an intellectualist postulate: that things really are what they are known to be. Therefore, we have to get to knowledge in order to reveal reality and whatever is ultimately real has to have the characteristics of an object of knowledge.

If "things are what they are experienced as," then there are many other ways in which we experience things than as objects of knowledge. In fact, there is a qualitative appreciation of our surroundings that precedes, underlies, and cannot be reduced to knowledge. All our intellectual activities are always within the more general context of
the world as encountered, lived, enjoyed, and suffered by human beings. In primary experience "things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things had before they are things cognized" (LW 1:27-28). The qualitative character of experience is not something subjective but a trait of existence. "The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is preeminently a qualitative world" (LW 5:243).

Intellectualism is so predominant in moral theory that it operates in subtle ways in accounts and debates about moral realism, moral problems, moral relationships, and moral deliberation. For Dewey even if the outcome of moral deliberation might be called moral knowledge it arises out of a context of moral non-cognitive experienced subject matter. Moreover, as I will later consider, even the process of moral deliberation itself is not purely cognitive. I will even claim that for Dewey the most important instrumentalities of moral life are not the usual cognitive powers associated with moral knowledge. This is not to deny the importance of knowledge. Knowledge is one mode of experiencing that can make a significant difference in primary moral experience. However, a pragmatist is ready to argue against a reductionism of moral life to the cognitive.

Dewey knew that his philosophical views would not be understood by philosophers that are “wedded to the idea that there is no experienced material outside the field of discourse” (LW 14:33). He became, for instance, frustrated with Bertrand Russell for “not been able to follow the distinction I make between the immediately had material of non-cognitively experienced situations and the material of cognition--a
distinction without which my view cannot be understood” (LW 14:32-33). Against the common tendency by philosophers to assume the ubiquity of theory and knowledge in experience, Dewey insisted that, “the universe of experience surrounds and regulates the universe of discourse.” (LW 12:74) Today this intellectualist tendency continues by those that assume that everything in our everyday experience is language-funded. This totalizing picture of language “all the way down” is assumed even by Neo-pragmatists. I will argue that this linguistic bias is a costly one in ethical theory.

In sum, Dewey’s reconstruction in ethics consisted in a diagnosis of how the above fallacies were endemic to a non-empirical approach to morality. They became his tools of criticism. The consequences of the philosophical fallacy are philosophical theories that, though simple, coherent, and cohesive, are far from being adequate to the complexity and richness of everyday experience. This is probably truer in morality than in any other area of philosophy. In ethical theory the temptation is to provide a self-serving characterization of moral life, one that gives theory the apparent power to resolve moral problems. This is done by reducing our moral experience to one or a few categories or elements. “Whatever may be the differences which separate moral theories, all postulate one single principle as an explanation of moral life” (LW 5:280). This continues today to be the basis for distinguishing among ethical theories. Dale Jamieson explains.

Different theories take different categories as primary. For example, utilitarianism takes the goodness of outcomes as primary, and from this derives accounts of the rightness of actions and the virtuousness of agents.
Deontology, on the other hand, takes the rightness of actions as primary and either derives from this accounts of other categories that it takes to be morally relevant, or supplements it with accounts of other categories.\textsuperscript{14}

The debates between theories have decided to ignore that in concrete moral experience neither the good nor the right are reducible to each other. Ethical theory has neglected the non-cognitive, pluralistic, and incommensurable aspects of moral life because they are of no use in constructing a theoretically coherent system that can presumably provide solutions to moral problems. The results are reductionism and simplification. These might be considered virtues in academic circles but they are usually vices when it comes to making decisions in our moral lives. The most elegant, coherent, simple, and philosophically puzzle-solving theory might just be the most futile for assisting anyone in any way in his or her moral lives. Dewey observed that "one cause for the inefficacy of moral philosophies has been that in their zeal for a unitary view they have oversimplified the moral life" (LW: 5:288). Moral theory will continue to be inept in throwing light upon the actual predicaments of moral conduct as long as it continues to ignore "the elements of uncertainty and of conflict in any situation which can properly be called moral" (LW 5:279).

Dewey was critical of the highly formalistic and abstract character of Hegelian and Kantian ethical theories.\textsuperscript{15} Their reductionism and oversimplification is driven by the desire to come up with a moral theory as a rational system, i.e., a self-contained system of ideas. Jim Gouinlock has recently shown how even John Rawls is part of the tradition of constructing an ethical theory that is concerned with internal consistency and coherence at the expense of arriving at a prejudicial oversimplification of our moral life. Gouinlock
says, “Rawls is the most famous and influential exemplar of this reductive and prejudicial mode of thought. The many tributes paid to him are testimony to the weakness of philosophers for seemingly self-sufficient system of ideas.”

The empirically inclined ethicist would like her theory to be in accord with concrete moral experience. However, this intention does not by itself guarantee success. Dewey praised Utilitarianism for its empirical spirit, for its insistence "upon getting way from vague generalities, and down to the specific and concrete" (MW 12:183). Yet it never questioned the idea of a fixed end and it assumed a view of moral deliberation that conforms to no one's experience. It is almost as if they thought they were being empirical simply because they were suspicious of "Reason" and appealed to quantifiable moral subject matter (units of pleasure and pain). There are in ethics shared misconceptions about signs of concreteness and of an empirical methodology in ethics. That contemporary ethics is more linguistic, historical, or scientific is no guarantee that it is empirical.

I have, so far, considered what it means for Dewey to proceed empirically in philosophy. Consider, however, what does the method described entail for the sort of philosophical inquiry that takes morality as its subject matter. What does it mean to begin with moral experience? How should an empirical account of moral life proceed?

The first task is designation.

3. Designating the Subject Matter: Moral Situations as the Starting Point

In Experience and Nature Dewey names the empirical way of doing philosophy the “denotative method.” What Dewey means by “denotation” is just the phase of an empirical inquiry where we are concerned to designate (as free from theoretical
presuppositions as possible) the experiential ("had") subject matter for which we can provide different and even competing descriptions and theories. Thus, our empirical inquiry about morality, must begin by a rough and tentative designation of moral experience from within the broader context of our everyday life and activities. Once we designate the subject matter, we then engage in the inquiry itself, possibly even constructing theories and developing concepts. That, of course, is not the end of inquiry. We must then take the results of that inquiry “as a path pointing and leading back to something in primary experience” (LW1:17). This looping back is essential and it never ends as long as there are new experiences that may require a revision of our theories.

Notice how different this is from an ethical theory that starts with a definition of morality or aims at arrive at one that clearly demarcates the moral domain from the non-moral one. Definitions can be useful but in philosophy they have come to carry the expectation of arriving at an essence or some definitive criteria. The attempt to pre-theoretically designate the subject matter, i.e. to “point” in a certain direction, may be better assisted by some general even if vague or crude description of moral experience.

But this task is not easy. One must be careful to designate the subject matter in such a way as not to beg the question in favor of one’s ethical theory or theoretical preconceptions. A philosopher must make an honest effort to designate what is moral based on what is experienced as such. If we are truthful to experience as it is concretely experienced, moral experiences are had and they are experiences just as distinctive as friendly conversations or the enjoyment of music.

To individuals in their everyday pretheoretical interaction, many "things" are experienced as having a predominant moral cast, quality, or character. We need to start
by pointing out and describing the experiences that we have in such situations instead of starting with theoretical definitions of morality. In ethics it is also important not to confuse this empirical task with designating what is correct moral conduct. To be able to designate and describe moral experience all that is required is that one have the minimal sensitivity to experience the difference between, for example, moral and aesthetic qualities and not that one has knowledge of what is right and wrong. Hence, Dewey’s descriptions of moral experience are totally meaningless to individuals that, for whatever the reason, are totally devoid of moral sensitivity. Notice how this entails a methodological commitment to take seriously how things are presented “within” moral life and not from an “external” theoretical standpoint. I will say more on this later.

Can we be certain that everyone engaged in this sort of philosophical inquiry will be pointing to the same experiences? No, but this is not a good reason to portray moral experience as subjective or to prefer some other method. How much agreement there will be among philosophers in the tasks of designation and description is an open and empirical issue.

In locating moral experience (as a distinctive mode of experience) one is faced with the difficulty that the term “experience” has been associated in philosophy with consciousness or subjective phenomena. For Dewey, however, experience is that which for a person is his practical life, i.e., “the life he has led and undergone in a world of persons and things” (LW 1:369). As inclusive as this is, we experience the world always in the context of a situation. What is truly "given" at any time in experience is the context of a unique situation. In fact, to say that we are in experience or that “individuals live in a world means, in the concrete, that they live in a series of situations” (LW 13:25).
Although the notion of a situation is crucial to locate moral experience it is not sufficient to distinguish moral experience from other modes of experience. Is there a way to distinguish moral experience from the rest of experience without committing oneself to its separation from other modes of experience? Although for Dewey there is no area of our experience that is exclusively or essentially moral, he designated those situations that we experience as predominantly moral as those that have the pervasive quality of demanding of the agent that she discover what she morally ought to do among conflicting moral forces or demands. As philosophers we might "step back" (into another reflective situation) from the unique situations that are experienced as having a moral component and design theories about our moral life. Those unique moral situations, however, remain the primitive contexts of moral experience, i.e., of our moral practices and activities. This is the experiential subject matter to be studied, described, and appealed to in order to test our theoretical accounts. The basis for distinguishing morality from other dimensions or modes of experience is the subject matter, problems, and pervasive quality of certain situations. There is no criterion that is antecedent to the sheer having of these experiences.

Moral problems are, of course, not all there is to moral life. Most situations are fairly well settled. That is, we plod along in our daily lives, trusting our habits (rightly so, for the most part) to get us through. Occasionally, though, we find ourselves in a problematic situation. Among our problematic situations, some will be morally problematic. In general, and this is Dewey’s hypothesis in “Three Independent Factors in Morals,” they are morally problematic because we are troubled either about what is the "good,” “the dutiful,” or “the virtuous” thing to do. Often, however, the problem is that
each of these moral demands point in irreconcilable directions. If we find through inquiry the "right" thing to do, it is that which reconstructs a situation from being morally problematic to being determinate or solved.

In Part II, I will return to consider in much greater detail Dewey’s view of moral life but from this initial description it is already clear how different is Dewey’s starting point from that of most ethical theories. Moral theories have been classified according to whether they take good (teleological-consequentionalist), virtue (virtue ethics), or duty (deontological theories) as their central category or source of moral justification. However, for Dewey to abstract one factor or feature of situations which are experienced as morally problematic, and then made that factor supreme or exclusive to morality is to commit the philosophical fallacy. To be empirical requires that we come to terms with the fact that good, virtue, and duty are all irreducible features without a common denominator or a set hierarchy among them. Quite simply, living morally is a more messy and complicated affair than moral theorists are willing to recognize.

The problem with most traditional theories is that they start their philosophical inquiries with either theoretical assumptions or with a theoretical standpoint instead of how moral life is experienced as engaged agents, i.e., in the midst of living.

4. Ethical Theory and the Theoretical Starting Point

Underneath the debates among opposing schools in modern philosophy is a common starting point that resulted in a certain view of experience, which in turn led to artificial and irresolvable problems. Dewey calls it the “spectator view” and more recently, Douglas Browning has called it the “theoretical point of view.” Here is how Browning describes it,
taking the theoretical point of view is something you and I often do. As agents, i.e., as engaged, interactive participants within an immediately experienced arena of practical, daily affairs, we frequently find it helpful to assume the role, take on the guise, of a disengaged and disinterested observer who is no longer caught up in the rough and tumble of that arena, but withdrawn from it and merely observes it or some area of interest within it from an objectifying distance.\(^\text{17}\)

The theoretical standpoint is sometimes difficult to detect, since it is not a matter of assuming certain theoretical propositions but of adopting implicitly a certain outlook from which we proceed to construct our moral theories. R.M. Hare is, however, very explicit about adopting the theoretical standpoint as his starting point. He says,

> Let us imagine a society that has as yet done no moral philosophy… And then let us suppose that someone does start such an inquiry. What sort of theory is he likely to come up with? The facts about moral thinking which will most obviously confront him are facts about intuitive moral thinking.

> He will observe that people do react in consistent ways, in their verbal and other behaviour, to certain actions in certain situations.\(^\text{18}\)

Notice how Hare is inviting us to take a theoretical-detached-external standpoint upon morality as the subject matter of philosophical investigation. For Hare the philosopher must start by noticing that there are people in the world that use moral terms and that they are used in a certain ways. The philosopher must start from the same standpoint of the sciences, e.g., of the anthropologist or sociologist. The situations in which the philosopher has had moral experiences or the use of moral language are
relevant but a description of them as they are experienced seems irrelevant or distracting from the broader theoretical standpoint we need to take. Why should we favor the detached theoretical standpoint? This is important because “observing” and studying how people use moral terms from this standpoint “looks” different than when we are in the midst of “living” these sort of situations. When I am in a morally problematic situation moral terms are employed but there is a lot more going on than the use of moral language. In fact, awareness of my moral language as language is usually the last thing in my mind, unless it is somehow relevant to the moral problems that I am experiencing. For the most part, I find myself confronted initially not with moral terms or even questions, but in the midst of what I immediately experience as a moral problem or a situation where I am having the immediate experience that something, however vague, is morally wrong.

If from the participant-involved standpoint an action in a particular situation strikes us as immediately right or wrong (i.e., as having some moral character), from a detached-theoretical one a philosopher just sees human beings having an experience that require some theoretical explanation. Some philosophers have called the engaged-standpoint “internal” or “subjective” and the theoretical one “objective.” This not only begs the question but poses a dualism. For Dewey and Jose Ortega Y Gasset, the primacy of the engaged standpoint is based on the fact that any inquiry and its theoretical point of view is experienced as embedded in the more everyday, practical point of view. Here is how Doug Browning explains why the practical is primary for Dewey,

Theorizing and indeed linguisticizing are, for him, critically important phases in inquiry. But, of course, he also insists that the starting point for
inquiry, its motivating context throughout its course, and its consummation are found in the lived experience of being in a situation in which I, as agent, participate and interact. It is a consequent of this that the theoretical point of view is parasitical upon the more everyday, practical point of view; it derives its focus, its motivation, and its very significance from that down-home, flesh-and-bones course of daily affairs that Dewey had the temerity to label "experience". 19

In what ways the theoretical standpoint has been favored in ethics? What are some of the most common versions of this starting point and what are its consequences? In modern philosophy the theoretical standpoint is what led philosophers to start with dualisms. Dewey appreciated how in ethics the modern dualisms between the mind/body, inner/outer, subject/object, and so on had their counterpart in the assumed dichotomies between self/act, doer/deed, character/conduct, fact/value. The counterpart to the Cartesian starting point in ethics is to begin with the isolated subject who has a purely cognitive apprehension of moral truths. These modern dichotomies have in turn generated a number of false dilemmas and debates to be considered later in this book, such as subjectivism vs. objectivism, egoism vs. altruism, and an ethics of character or virtue vs. an ethics of act (duty and rules). Dualistic starting points do not do justice to the integral character of our concrete moral experience as it is experienced. In a pragmatist ethics the distinctions that can be made within moral life are features of an irreducible whole (of the ongoing-unanalyzed unity of a situation) distinguished by reflection and not existential dichotomies.
For those philosophers that favor the particular theoretical standpoint of science, their starting point in ethics is a natural world with natural properties but without values. From this standpoint the only “moral” facts she is confronted with is that humans are animals that claim to have moral and aesthetic experiences. These facts must be explained in ways that square with our scientific starting point and the goals of scientific inquiry. Dewey would have no problem with any of this so long as it is recognized for what it is, an inquiry restricted by the method and goals of science. The problem comes when the philosopher goes a step further and privileges the results of such inquiries in such a way as to denigrate or deny the reality of the moral experiences we do have while being engaged in the midst of moral life. This is precisely what scientistic philosophers do when, for instance, they conclude that moral behavior is nothing but actions that are guided by the evolutionary goal of spreading ones genes, i.e., this is the “real” reason why we behave morally.

In his well-known paper, ‘The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories’, Michael Stoker argues that modern ethical theories recommend a kind of disharmony between reasons and motives. Their theoretical reasons why right acts are right (e.g. because they maximize utility or are in accord with a universal duty) are at odds with the actual motives of moral agents when they do what is right. For some of these theories it is best if things are kept this way. It is sometimes desirable for an agent to be motivated by thoughts that do not have anything much to do with the truth about why her acts are the rights ones to perform. Stoker finds this disturbing, but he fails to provide an adequate or full diagnosis of what is the root of the problem. The problem is methodological. The gap between reasons and motives discovered by Stocker is a
consequence of the more fundamental gap in these theories between the theoretical standpoint and the practical-engaged one. Modern ethical theorist have assumed that we must determine what makes right act right by “stepping” outside how things appear from the motivating situational context in which we do what is right. It is only because they have favored the detached theoretical standpoint that their descriptions of moral life are at odds with how we experience moral life. For Dewey, the consequences of this starting point are more severe than just “schizophrenia”.

What is most problematic about the theoretical starting point in ethical theory is that it has ended up “rendering the things in ordinary experience more opaque than they were before, …depriving them of having in ‘reality’ even the significance they had previously seemed to have (LW 1:18). J.L. Mackie has, for example, claimed that although most people (in their primary moral experience) make moral judgments claiming to be pointing to something objective they are in error. From a theoretical standpoint the objectivity of moral qualities we experience seems false or queer. For R.H. Hare, those who are not able to rise above the everyday habitual engagement (what he calls the “intuitive level”) may never be able to ascertain the naiveness of their realism about colors and all moral qualities. Hare thinks we are fortunate animals because in spite of our limitations (we cannot be “the ideal observer-prescribers”) we can acquire the ability to take the sort of reflective distance of the theoretical standpoint at the “critical level.” We are fortunate because at this level we can realize that our immediate partiality or moral concern for friends is actually nothing more than a habitual but useful emotional disposition that “pays off” from a rational consequentialist standpoint. For Hare, it is a good thing that people have the immediate experience (or should I say “appearance”?) of
feeling an special obligation to particular others but it is only when they take the “critical” standpoint that they can become aware of the “real” reasons why they should care or take their experienced obligations seriously. For instance, here is what Hare says about the experienced moral bond (partiality) in the mother-child relation, “If we ascend to the critical level and ask why it ought to be, the answer is fairly obvious. If mothers had the propensity to care equally for all the people in the world, it is unlikely that children would be as well provided for even as they are.” So, we are all lucky that mothers are duped into feeling they have a special obligation to their children because they are their children! From this to the view that all of our moral experiences are nothing but a useful fiction to propagate our genes is only a small step. Whether it is Platonism, cultural relativism, or scientism, they often adopt a theoretical standpoint that explains away the reality of our immediate moral experiences.

The abstraction of a thinking-rational subject in a value-less world is a common theoretical starting point implicit in a variety of ethical theories. It is in those that assume that our moral principles or our desires are the source of moral experiences, and therefore, morality is a human projection upon nature. It is in views that assume that ethical theory must provide rational reasons that would convince an imaginary skeptic to be moral or take morality seriously. This is as if to be rational (defined usually as procuring ones self interest or following the rules of logic) is primary, anything else (especially moral value) is questionable and must be derived from this imaginary standpoint. For Dewey, this is not to start with moral experience as it is had. We start in a morally value laden world. Morality is no more in need of justification or legitimacy than the existence of the external world. Morality is just as basic, natural, and given as
rationality (in any of its possible meanings). There is no more need to show that morality is rational than a need to show that rationality is moral.

Another common theoretical starting point in ethical theory is to locate morality in moral norms that are prior to or subsist across situations. Moral theory, according to this view must start with the fact that agents and communities inherit general moral principles and standards. They are the reason why we experience moral demands and they determine right from wrong in a particular situation. Moral problems are in effect a matter of deciding what follows from a general criterion of right and wrong or it is the conflict between different standards or criteria. Moral disagreement among individuals is a disagreement about moral norms. The task of ethical theory is to bring to the fore (to our conscious attention) the norms at work in our actions and judgments. It must validate (i.e., seek a rational basis) for the moral standards that ordinary moral agents take for granted. This is the theoretical view of moral experience that is taken for granted in debates between different forms of objectivism and relativism.

The relativist holds that moral judgments are justified only relative to standards accepted by a person or the social group to which she belongs. Objectivists take the relativists as presenting a challenge. Morality is not just a matter of our upbringing, group, or desires; there must be some basic criterion of right and wrong. There are a variety of objectivist views in ethics according to what is proposed as the criterion. Here are some options. What is right is determined by:

a) what any rational person has good reasons to accept or what would be agreed upon by hypothetical contractors under ideal conditions;

b) what is self evident according to one’s moral sense;
c) what can be expected to produce more good consequences than bad ones;

d) what is deducible from the commands of divine authority, a categorical imperative, the concept of the rational agent, or human nature (human flourishing).

These are all objective standards insofar as they presuppose an “objective” standpoint, that is, a standpoint outside of the historically contingent standards of any particular individual, society, or culture. They are proposed as the rational basis to evaluate or criticize these relative standards. Relativism, of course, denies the existence of such a “God’s eye view” of things. Instead, we find ourselves in moral life with inherited historically contingent moral standards and no outside perspective by which we can subject them to criticism.

From Dewey’s standpoint this debate goes on without questioning the notion that moral norms are the locus and source of morality, and their application is what accounts for moral problems, deliberation, and judgment. This is, at best, a theoretical explanation about moral life and it leaves out (an instance of the analytic fallacy) the concrete context where standards are found. It is only when standards are examined, imagined, and discussed by a philosopher in abstracto, i.e., apart from their role in a unique morally problematic situation, that they seem to be in need of some philosophical justification. This is an instance of how philosophers are concerned with problems that they have themselves created by starting with a theoretical view of our relation to general norms. Later on I will even argue that moral judgments are not derivable by applying a criterion
of right conduct. Almost to the contrary, if there are general moral standards they receive their normative force from particular judgments in situations.

Because of the “linguistic turn” of philosophy in the twentieth century the theoretical starting point turn linguistic. It is common in ethical theory to take discrete moral terms, predicates, judgments, and propositions as the starting point of philosophical investigation. To start with moral language seems more concrete and empirical than to begin with “metaphysics,” understood as the postulation of the existence of some mysterious and supersensible moral values. This starting point commits the philosopher to try to derive or explain the rest of our moral experience from trying to “expose the logic of moral concepts” \(^{27}\) or the meaning of moral words. Ethical theories are tested by trying to see if it squares “with the facts of linguistic behaviour” or by predictions about “what the ordinary man would treat as self-contradictory.” \(^{28}\)

Moral theories that begin with an analysis of moral terms or the moral properties of particular actions end up with the same sort of problems as the modern view of experience as a composite of atomistic simples. Recall that this view is faced with the problem of accounting for relations. Indeed, our moral lives seem like a disconnected series of atomistically isolated acts and two propositions in moral reasoning seem disconnected when the results of ethical analysis are taken as self-sufficient. In Part II, I will claim that these and other problems do not arise when one takes the lived context of our moral problems and deliberations seriously. To abstract moral terms and moral judgments from their concrete contexts in order to set their meaning apart from these contexts or to begin with the assumption that there are some propositions that are inherently moral is to commit the philosophical fallacy. \(^{29}\) Even if successful, an analysis
of our ordinary moral language is simply not sufficient to account for the richness and complexity of our moral experience.

The legalistic character of modern ethics goes hand in hand with its linguistic bias. This bias colors or determines their descriptions of every aspect of moral life. Moral problems are nothing but the conflict between principles or rules that can be stated and revised (or re-written). Moral judgments are treated as statements or propositions that are the result of the process of moral deliberation that has the same linear character of reading words in a text. In other words, it is assumed that we ought to reach justified moral judgments by following the same logical order of reading.

The linguistic starting point in ethics is usually accompanied by the same intellectualist starting point of traditional epistemology. It is assumed that to start with moral experience is to start with moral language in the form of propositions about right and wrong (i.e., the beliefs of common morality). W.D. Ross says,

> My starting point [is] the existence of what is commonly called the moral consciousness; and by this I mean the existence of a large body of beliefs and convictions to the effect that there are certain kinds of acts that ought to be done.  

Ethics must therefore start with epistemology. Moral disagreement is the conflict between beliefs and moral judgments are propositions that stand “somewhere” in between a subject and the world. Hence, the key philosophical problems of ethics are: how do we know that moral claims and judgments are true of false? Are they capable of being derived from our knowledge of facts about the world or are they just mere exclamations or commands? Dewey questions the theoretical starting point that
usually gives legitimacy to these questions. As we will later consider in more detail, moral judgments are not propositions. They are experienced as acts or assertions that emerge in the context of (and as the result of) a particular qualitative inquiry. The question of their warrant and evaluation cannot be discussed independently of a situation.

The linguistic outlook or bias is so taken for granted in philosophy that even a Neo-pragmatist like Hilary Putnam, who criticizes traditional ethics (from presumably a Deweyan perspective), is still caught up in it. He asserts, for instance, that the alternative to the traditional metaphysical sources of objectivity in ethics need to be replaced by “the objectivity of discourse.”32 His “Deweyan” criticism of traditional ethics amounts to the charge that they have a narrow and monistic “vocabulary.”33 Putnam is in favor of a more pluralistic ethics but falls for the same reduction of moral experience to moral language that is endemic to the tradition.

From Dewey’s standpoint, the problem with the linguistic starting point, or starting with moral beliefs in ethics, is what it leaves out. If all there is, is moral discourse, what ultimately guides our particular moral deliberations that is not more discourse or some absolute external standard? The failure to recognize the non-cognitive situational context of moral discourse has had grave consequences in understanding what is the ultimate source of guidance for Dewey in moral life. Even Deweyans are prone to leave this out in presenting Dewey’s view. Dewey, however, is clear on this. Leaving out the non-cognitive situational context is to leave out “that which is the controlling factor in my entire view, namely the function of a problematic situation in regulating as well as evoking inquiry” (LW 14:44). I will say more on this later.
I have been assuming that empiricism in ethics entails contextualism, but not every contextualism is thereby concrete and empirical. Moral philosophers like Alasdair McIntyre have suggested that the relevant contexts for the understanding of moral terms are the “moral vocabularies” of large social and historical structures and practices. But an inquiry about moral life that begins and comes back to shared and cohesive “moral languages” or a “network of shared moral laws” does not seem committed to an experiential starting point. For even if these refined theoretical products explain why people experience what they do experience, they are not what moral agents experience in the primitive situations where they have moral experiences. Cultural, historical, and sociological explanations of morality are perhaps better theories than universalist-platonic ones, but this does not change their status as theories.

For Dewey, radical empiricism in ethics entailed a radical contextualism in the sense that each situation constitutes a unique present context and while it is lived (as a process) it is all there is to moral life. Accounts of our moral life that ignore this, and begin with the assumption of absolutes across time and history, are adopting a “God's-eye point of view” that neglects the situational context of both our investigation and of morality. There is no standing outside where we are.

There is no other issue more important to ethical theory than this issue of the starting point. For where a philosopher begins conditions her understanding of moral notions and her view of moral experience. For Dewey moral experience includes virtues, rules, obligations, ends and all other notions that have been taken as exclusively moral by different theories. This inclusiveness is a result of taking a particular type of context as
primary, i.e., from finding all of them as elements of situations that are experienced as morally casted to some degree or another.

Dewey complained about "how much of distraction and dissipation in life, and how much of its hard and narrow rigidity is the outcome of man's failure to realize that each situation has its own unique end and that the whole personality should be concerned with it?" (MW 12:176). Dewey hoped that attention to moral experience as it is experienced would lead in ethics to a shift toward situations as the "center of gravity" of moral endeavor. He insisted that it is essential that moral philosophy quit seeking ends or standards that are over and above unique and particular morally problematic situations. The resolution of each present morally problematic situation is the end of morality. The tendency to absolutize or universalize in ethics by providing theories of "the good" is a failure to see that any meaningful quest for "the good" is tied to a particular inquiry within the unique context of a morally problematic situation. He said, "while there is no single end, there also are not as many as there are specific situations that require amelioration" (MW 12:174-175). In other words, each concrete morally problematic situation has its own immanent end and meaning, and it is not a mere means to even contingent (historically situated) overarching ends.

In sum, any adequate unfolding or examination of Dewey's ethical vision needs to begin and take as central the notion of a "situation." The situation has to be understood as a consequence of Dewey's commitment to a philosophical empiricism. Moral experience is experienced as something that is neither subjective nor merely intersubjective. We begin where we are, in a situation as participators and not inside a culture, conceptual scheme, or our society’s norms. To be in a morally problematic
situation is experienced as to be interacting in the same ordinary objective world of people and things. Moral situations became the most inclusive category or concept in Dewey's ethics. His description of categories and elements that are part of moral experience (such as character, conduct, principles, relationships, and habits) are features or traits of lived situations, and not antecedent to them. Ideals are part of the means available in the process of ameliorating a situation. Virtues are habits operative in and integral to situations and not means to abstract notions of human flourishing. Even Dewey's philosophical speculations about how to live (the subject of Part III) were nothing more than proposals about how to engage in present situations.

Does the "radical" character of Dewey's contextualism preclude the possibility of theorizing about moral life? If philosophical inquiry is itself embedded in situations as unique, complex, and changing prereflective contexts, then can moral theory perform the functions it has traditionally performed? What is left of moral theory after all of the above methodological mistakes are avoided? It is the acknowledgment of context and the abandonment of a “God’s eye view” that have led contemporary skeptics to consider futile the ambitions of traditional ethical theory. However, I want to claim that Dewey's skepticism about moral theory is based upon a situation ethics and on an alternative conception of the proper function of moral theory. Let’s consider that next.

Notes to Chapter One


3. It is therefore perfectly understandable why in *Human Nature and Conduct* (MW 12), a book that Dewey explicitly regarded as an introduction to social psychology, there is no reference to moral qualities and instead to “impulses” and “instincts”. From a scientific point of view there is no use to talk about moral qualities.


8. From the point of view of the actual historical development of Dewey's philosophy there might be support for understanding his ethics through his views on science. This is what Jennifer Welchman has accomplished in *Dewey's Ethical Thought*. But even if Dewey came to adopt an empirical view of ethics after or because he reexamined his own views about the nature of science, this does not mean that his views on science are the key to his ethics. My intention here is not to discredit but to supplement Welchman's work. We are in fact concerned about different things. She is concerned with Dewey's efforts to bring science and ethics closer together ("reconcile"),
but this can be distinguished from his effort to show how to proceed in an empirical philosophical inquiry about morality. I am in this book concerned with the later and not with the former.


10. Alasdair McIntyre, "Moral Dilemmas" Philosophical Phenomenological Research 50 (Fall 1990), 371.

11. See (LW 1:40).


13. This is the fallacy of taking what is eventual as given, the "conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence" (LW 1:34).


15. See (MW 5:313).


21. Stocker’s argument is often taken to provide a reason to abandon consequentialism and deontology in favor of virtue ethics. But, as I will later argue, virtue ethics is equally vulnerable to the same problems as long as the theoretical standpoint is taken as primary.


24. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 137.


27. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 81.


29. It is an instance of the analytic fallacy and a short step towards the fallacy of unlimited universalization. Hence, what begins as an analysis of ordinary language ends up as a theory of the good or of the meaning of "morally good" by all speakers of the language.

31. These two questions are the key issues in the meta-ethical debates between cognitivists, emotivists, naturalists, and intuitionists. For a good overview of these views see Charles Pigden, “Naturalism” in A Companion to Ethics, 421-431.

32. Putnam, Ethics without Ontology, 72, my emphasis.

33. Putnam, Ethics without Ontology, 106.

34. These are general concepts used for example by Alasdair Mcintyre in A Short History of Ethics (New York: Macmillan, 1966).