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JOHN DEWEY'S ETHICS
DEMOCRACY AS EXPERIENCE

Gregory Fernando Pappas

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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, some have recently argued 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, and it is a welcome corrective to the scientific views of Dewey’s ethics. In the process of emphasizing what has been wrongly ignored by scientific views of Dewey’s ethics, however, Fesmire may have overstated the case on behalf of an aesthetic reading of Dewey’s ethics. For one does not need to choose between an aesthetic and scientific view of Dewey’s ethics, nor indeed for his overall philosophy. 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. This is not a widely appreciated point.

Instead of deciding whether the science or art analogy is better, 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.

Experience as the Starting Point

Dewey’s early insistence in making ethics scientific is part of his more general and lifelong aim to base philosophy in lived experience or to take experience as the starting point. Early on he characterized the empiricist’s way of philosophizing in terms of a postulate, that is, 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 and end with directly experienced subject matter. For Dewey, then, experience is a “starting point and terminal point, as setting problems and as testing proposed solutions” (LW 1:14, my emphasis). This turn toward everyday lived experience is the most important philosophical inheritance we have 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”), rather than primary experience, that is, 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 has been understood as the content of consciousness, that is, of a knowing subject who is a spectator to an antecedent world or object. But this is a picture that we may employ when we adopt a theoretical point of view; it is not, however, 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.

Dewey’s moral philosophy is revolutionary because he tries to avoid all the mistaken theoretical starting points and begins 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 Dewey proposed.

Does not the above postulate assume the very naïve philosophical view that there are givens independent of theories that we can appeal to as a neutral court of appeal? Alasdair MacIntyre has recently claimed that “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.”10 If all facts of experience are theory-laden (and the given is a myth), then it seems that Dewey’s empiricism, particularly his appeal to a primary experience—that is, 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) is part of experiencing: pre-theoretically and theoretically—but for Dewey neither one renders futile the effort to be empirical.

Experience can be theory-laden. This means that either a theory we hold determines what counts as a fact or our selection of facts from the total field of experience is determined by our interest in confirming or disconfirming a theory we already hold. A recognition of this kind of selectivity lets us question the naïve 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 experi-
ence is problematic. Contemporary philosophers who think otherwise must hold an extended sense of what counts as a theory or believe that in the course of everyday life we all look at the world through a theory. 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 not, however, pure experience in the sense of something that we could access if we were able 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. We grow up in a certain society with a certain 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. We must be faithful to this lived experience regardless of how 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 pre-theoretically given. If we can appeal to our description of what is directly experienced, then we can appeal to something outside of our theories. To be clear, that which is immediately or directly experienced is not, for Dewey, just sense perception, as is presupposed by some modern theories of knowledge. Instead, we immediately experience things, others, anticipations, relations, novelty, location, flow, qualities, and so on in the midstream of our everyday engagements. For Dewey, the pre-theoretical (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. We need to begin and end experientially guided inquiries on this level.

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 empirically minded 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 a difficult task because one often comes to a subject matter with pre-conceived theoretical assumptions and with certain theoretical demands and interests. Yet the fact that many or most philosophers become trapped in their theories does not mean that this is inevitable, 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 although 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 objection 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 an extra-theoretical check on 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 their circumstances. Dewey did not experience this anxiety because he did not even understand what this last sense of freedom could mean.

However, 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 socioeconomic 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 makeup. These are all reductionist and, as such, non-empirical theories that overlook the complexity and heterogeneity of factors and interactions that are the conditions for human experience. 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 itself a theory, rather than 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. But philosophy can also subject to criticism what, at any time, is taken as primary experience. 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 and 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 we should find this out through inquiry, the criticism of others, and further experiences. There is no privileged theoretical or objective standpoint—the God's-eye view—for us to take.

In other words, experience as method relies on what is experienced; and 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 our ordinary practical situations. What we cannot do, however, is simultaneously subject all our primary experience to criticism. 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 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'.

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 adopting an empirical method of inquiry or not is ultimately the choice between affirming or denying the character of things as they are presented to us in our everyday lives. To be an empiricist is to live by the naïve 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, a requirement that introduces a way of evaluating philosophical hypotheses that can be both a strength and liability of pragmatism. 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 other ethical theorists. This is a good reason for Dewey to reject entire views, even when they are impeccably well argued and meet all possible objections. This, however, is a liability because it opens the pragmatist to the charge of seeming to be shallow, dismissive, and begging questions in her confrontation with alternative views.

How can anyone be certain that one is beginning with things as they are experienced and not with reflective products or theoretical presuppositions? There is no certainty here and Dewey provides no infallible method by which one can guarantee success in the empirical method he proposes. All one can do is be alert to purposes that might distort or mislead, such as holding on to a theory too zealously. Others might also keep us on alert. This is why the empiricist method requires that one's results be tested by the results and lived experience of others. One can guide others to circumstances that would let them test one's own results, but suggesting that others have certain experiences is not the same as providing a reason or an argument in their defense. It does, however, open our hypothesis to the criticism of others.

Dewey also suggests 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 both with one's day-to-day experiences 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 false starts of a particular, that is, non-empirical, kind. Dewey very helpfully summarizes the general and systematic kinds of mistakes made by non-empirical philosophers, and it will be helpful to consider them before continuing to disclose the proper starting point for ethical theory.
Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. (LW 14:229)

The Reasonableness of an Ideal

Dewey never denied the affinities of pragmatism with the democratic spirit or way of life. On the contrary, he openly asserts that “upon one thing we take our stand. We frankly accept the democratic tradition in its moral and human import” (LW 8:76). Dewey reconstructed and justified one of the most distinctive and radical visions of democracy of the 20th century.

If the only way philosophy can provide justification for our democratic aspirations is in the form of a knowledge foundation or from some historical objective standpoint, then Dewey failed as a defender of democracy. Such failure is assumed by Richard Rorty, who believes that a pragmatist must abandon, once and for all, the notion that she can provide a philosophical justification for democracy or any other particular way of life. “There is no ahistorical standpoint from which to endorse the habits of modern democracies he wishes to praise,” Rorty claims, and there is no “demonstration of the ‘objective’ superiority of our way of life over all other alternatives.”

Unwillingness to accept Rorty’s resolution has recently sparked an interest in reformulating Dewey’s intellectual warrant for democracy. The problem with these attempts is that they often seem more eager to answer Rorty than to understand Dewey’s philosophy on its own terms. It is not surprising, then, that in many of these reformulations Dewey ends up begging the question or offering an embarrassingly circular justification. According to David Fott, for example, Dewey runs into the difficulty of justifying science or the assumed historical relativism without going in circles. He finds in Dewey “an odd defense of democracy,” for there is no “clear final point for his defense of democracy.” Fott is puzzled about the validity of Dewey’s metaphysical and normative claims because he makes a common mistake among scholars: he wants to believe that at the heart of Dewey’s philosophy there is some truth, proposition, or theoretical thesis from which we can derive, explain, and examine the rest of his thought. And, of course, once one has presumably identified that first thesis for Dewey, one is faced with a dogma or finds oneself unable to defend him against the charge of begging the question. Meanwhile, Dewey’s remarks about doing philosophy by starting with experience and making the entire enterprise hypothetical are either ignored or reduced to the ludicrous claim that philosophy must bow to science or to its truths. Dewey did not presuppose what he set out to prove simply because he did not set out to prove anything, at least in the traditional sense of searching for premises by which anyone may be able to deductively derive a conclusion. This is a view of justification sharply at odds with Dewey’s philosophy.

Even more sympathetic scholars, like Matthew Festenstein, are disappointed by the incomplete character of Dewey’s justification of democracy. According to him, Dewey may have an adequate answer to the skeptical threat against democracy, but it is not clear that Dewey has a response to the relativist challenge that confronts neopragmatists today. Festenstein is right only if it is assumed that any reasonable justification must answer the challenges of an imaginary radical skeptic or relativist. But this requirement for justification, like those which require an appeal to certain first axioms or an ahistorical objective standpoint, presumes a starting point of philosophical investigation that is not Dewey’s.

Philosophical inquiry is invariably and inevitably enmeshed in a par-
particular context and background (i.e., experience) so that any justification or criticism of democracy has to arise out of this context. Dewey does not think philosophy seeks knowledge of timeless truths, but neither does he think it "a mere arbitrary expression of wish or feeling or a vague aspiration after something nobody knows what" (MW 11:46). Philosophy is the kind of inquiry that will "use current knowledge to drive home the reasonableness of its conception of life" (MW 11:46). Therefore, providing a justification of democracy cannot mean anything more than establishing the "reasonableness" of some course of life which has been adopted from custom or instinct" (MW 11:46, my emphasis) as a response to concrete problematic situations and with whatever resources we have available at the time in lived experience.

Indeed, a basic premise of this work has been that Dewey's philosophy is an effort to establish the reasonableness of a certain vision about how to live. It is addressed to people in a particular place and time in history where democracy is already a live option, rather than to an imaginary skeptic or relativist. Dewey used philosophy to make his hope reasonable, which is different than seeking a foundation or a rationalization for a way of life. Philosophy "shows men that they are not fools for doing what they already want to do." Pragmatism involves the preference and the choice of a way of life but this choice does not have to be based, as Rorty suggests, solely on a desire for solidarity, mere imitation, or obedience to tradition. We do not need to become ahistorical beings to make an intelligent choice; we need to constantly examine our inherited ideals in the light of present conditions and be sincere about our preferences in the sense of stating "as clearly as possible what is chosen and why it is chosen" (IW 8:78).

This contextualist view of philosophical justification is not subject to the charge of circularity because Dewey's philosophy is not a postmodern, relativist philosophy that starts with the theory that we are in a culture, language, or any cohesive cognitive framework. On such views justification is always circular since judgments about better and worse forms of life are just propositional assumptions of the same form of life or "language game" we are trying to validate. From Dewey's standpoint there is not much that is "post" about this sort of postmodernism. To start with the theory that there is no way to escape our ethnocentric beliefs and language is not much different than starting with the Cartesian assumption that we starttrapped within our subjectivity. Douglas Browning has said this best:

I take the so-called "linguistic turn" in recent philosophy and the linguistic and cultural relativism which has lately been spawned by certain so-called "Post-Modernists" to be in fact the last and dying gasp of

Modernity, Modernism, or whatever one wishes to call the subjective turn in 19th century philosophy. Deeper than foundationalism and representationalism is the Modern avowal of the irremediable enslavement of the individual to his own manner of thinking, his own ideas, wherever those ideas originated. The notion that the world which one takes himself to live in is somehow constructed intersubjectively through the medium of one's own native language or culture is only a variation upon the Cartesian theme. I cannot help but believe that Dewey's revolution was much more radical, much more thoroughgoing, simply because it rests upon a more vital shift or turn than that.

"To be empirical we must begin, not with theory, but where we are, with what is pre-theoretically given in the midst of our lives. We do not find ourselves in our minds, languages, beliefs, conceptual schemes, cultures, or theories. On the contrary, these are all things that are found within the crude and situational non-cognitive experience as it is lived. To make any of them prior to all experience is to commit what Dewey calls the philosophical fallacy."

"In light of Dewey's more radical turn and his philosophy of experience, what would constitute adequate philosophical support for democracy as an ideal? What were Dewey's grounds for his faith in democracy? These are issues that cannot be discussed in isolation from Dewey's ethics and his basic assumptions about the nature of ideals, faith, and how they emerge in the context of lived experience. Recall that ideals are experienced as part of the resources (instrumentalities) operative in situations, as ends-in-view, not as final ends with antecedent existence. Because of their nature and role in experience their reasonableness can be determined in terms of (1) their adequacy to what is actually experienced, (2) their functionality, and (3) their congeniality and consistency with one's other central commitments and hopes. Let's clarify each of these grounds and how they apply to democracy."

The Empirical Grounds of Democracy

Ideals must be empirically grounded, that is, they must be adequate to experience as it is experienced. There are at least two senses in which democracy as an ideal can meet this requirement: (1) it is supported by and emerges out of actual values experienced, and (2) it is supported by how moral life in its most generic traits is experienced. These claims are based upon a certain view of how ideals or any normative standards emerge and function in experience.

It is because we experience meaningful and worthwhile experiences in
a precarious and changing world that we form and rely on ideals. If all experiences were of equal worth or if there were not a need to try to secure and reproduce the best of our experiences, then ideals would not have a function. "Because of this mixture of the regular and that which cuts across stability, a good object once experienced acquires ideal quality and attracts demand and effort to itself" (LW 1:57). Ideals are experienced as imaginative projections of possibilities based on goods actually experienced. Democracy is not only based on but goes beyond the goods of associated life in the sense that it is an appreciation of its richest possibilities. These possibilities are not subjective or fictitious. In Dewey's ethics discovery and imagination, inquiry into actual conditions, and the exploration of possibilities are mutually dependent phases of inquiry about betterment. He explains this process:

There are values, goods, actually realized upon a natural basis—the goods of human association, of art and knowledge. The idealizing imagination seizes upon the most precious things found in climacteric moments of experience and projects them. We need no external criterion and guarantee of their goodness. They are had, they exist as good, and out of them we frame our ideal ends. (LW 9:33)

Although Dewey was critical of the traditional normative ambitions of philosophy, he thought that an empirical philosophy is not limited to description; it can imaginatively propose general and hypothetical methods of participating in situations. Nevertheless, ideal proposed methods of farming, surgery, thinking, and living together are adequate to the degree that they have been informed and constructed of an updated and comprehensive survey of actual satisfactory experiences. For instance, the pattern of inquiry presented by Dewey in his 1938 Logic is descriptive insofar as it is the general structure shared by different surveyed modes of thinking. Nevertheless, it is selected as exemplary for any future inquiry. It serves a normative function insofar as it provides a generic description of how we ought to think. An expert's ideal farming methods are not drawn out of the blue; rather, they come from experiencing good and bad farming. Experience provides the means to discriminate between better and worse ideals. Dewey makes the same point with respect to his inquiry into inquiry:

We know that some methods of inquiry are better than others in just the same way in which we know that some methods of surgery, farming, road-making, navigating or what-not are better than others. It does not follow in any of these cases that the "better" methods are ideally perfect, or that they are regulative or "normative" because of conformity to some absolute form. They are the methods which experience up to the present time shows to be the best methods available for achieving certain results, while abstraction of these methods does supply a (relative) norm or standard for further undertakings. (LW 12:108)

A philosophy of democracy is an imaginative effort to articulate in a coherent fashion the most salient traits of the most worthwhile experiences and possibilities of human interaction for the purpose of ameliorative criticism. Democracy rests on experiencing and discriminating better and worse forms of interactions in our daily life. It is precisely because meaningful and enriching relationships are hard to come by that we need to set them up as ideal and inquire into their conditions. "The problem is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement" (MW 9:88–89).

Dewey insisted that this ideal must remain open to modification and improvement as new forms of communication in different contexts are experienced. Since ideals are based upon experienced goods, they can be subject to criticism and improvement based on their adequacy to these goods. For example, an ideal may assume certain goods that are no longer experienced as such or it may fail to include some important ones. In fact, our task today in reevaluating Dewey's ideal should be to ask ourselves: Are the features of democratic interactions that Dewey thought were important still experienced as positive and essential features of the best in human relationships? For instance, is it still the case that openness, tolerance, and sympathy are integral to our most enriching and meaningful communicative experiences? Things that were worth aspiring to yesterday may not be worth aspiring to today. Someone could well maintain that openness and tolerance are no longer good in most situations or that, if they are good, we should not make them part of an inclusive end-in-view. It is hard to see how one could argue for such a position, especially today when "closedness" and intolerance are so common and insidious; but as a contextualist, I must accept that someday, somewhere, openness and tolerance may well not be worth our efforts. The reasonableness of Dewey's ideal from the point of view of values experienced could also be questioned on the grounds of what he failed to include or emphasize. I have raised this criticism of Dewey in regard to trust and loyalty. A similar case could also be made in regard to responsibility, humility, curiosity, discernment, love of learning, forgiveness, and compassion. These are virtues that are usually present in the sort of interaction that Dewey envisioned as
ideal, but they are underemphasized or not explicitly considered by him in his ethics.

What may seem peculiar and perhaps objectionable about this account of how ideals can emerge in philosophical inquiry is the assumption that experiencing better and worse in particular situations does not itself presuppose an antecedent ideal standard or criterion that must be made explicit. More to the point, can a philosophical defender of democracy determine what interactions are experienced as better (or valuable) without begging the question in favor of democracy? I will consider this important objection at a later point.

The Metaphysical Support for Democracy

Metaphysical support for democracy counts as empirical support when metaphysics is understood as an empirical inquiry into the most generic traits of experience as it is experienced. For Dewey, a view of democracy "not grounded in a comprehensive philosophy seems .... only a projection of arbitrary preference" (LW 14:150). Our general view of reality must support our democratic hopes and efforts. His criticisms of traditional metaphysics and ethics were efforts to demolish a view of things that makes our faith in democracy seem unreasonable. Philosophers have for the most part, whether aware of it or not, failed to deliver philosophies that can provide intellectual warrant for democracy. Philosophers have assumed views of reality and of moral life that are not congenial to and supportive of democratic values and aspirations. Foremost among them is what Dewey called the "metaphysics of feudalism," that is, a hierarchical and fixed view of reality. This is clear in ethical theory, where the presupposed view of morality usually has a top-down structure and spirit. For instance, ethical theorists assume that among the concepts of good, duty, and virtue one of them must be primordial (i.e., that there is a set hierarchy). There is also the authoritarian belief that there is a single rule- or law-governed right thing to do in any moral situation, and that otherwise there would be anarchy. The top-down aspect of traditional ethical theory is even more evident in the shared assumption (in spite of remarkable differences) that individual acts and situations fall under some prior abstract or universal moral truth or code, or that one's regard for a particular individual must fall under some wider or higher concern (e.g., justice). This stands in sharp contrast with Dewey's radical bottom-up democratic ethical theory. As I have already argued, Dewey turned traditional ethics on its head. Each situation is both the means and end of morality. Moral reasoning and justification are not manners of working downward from rules to their application; instead, it is "working upward from concrete moral experience and decision making toward guiding moral hypothes." Even someone like Jürgen Habermas, who shares a similar communicative ideal, seems to be caught in the traditional quest for a top-down ethics in which the validation of general rules that apply to what is particular and unique is primary.

If the top-down assumptions about morality and nature were only the fancy of philosophers, then Dewey's ethics is at best therapy for philosophers. But these assumptions are still part of the dominant model of morality in Western culture and, therefore, many have adopted them as their ground map (metaphysics) that provides their basic orientation in the world. Therefore, for Dewey, criticism of ethical theories that help perpetuate this erroneous view of morality is necessary, for such ethical theories undermine the spirit and hopes that Dewey considered essential to democracy. This situation is worsened by the fact that those philosophers who have explicitly tried to provide philosophical support for democracy have ended up assuming an oxymorous and dangerous type of metaphysical individualism: the notion of the isolated individual with inherent rights who is naturally self-interested. As Dewey said, when democracy "has tried to achieve a philosophy it has clothed itself in an atomistic individualism, as full of defect and inconsistencies in theory as it was charged with obnoxious consequences when an attempt was made to act upon it" (MW 11:52).

It is because Dewey conceived democracy as an aspiration about how we should relate to nature (reality) that metaphysics is an important part of its justification. If, contrary to Dewey, there is in nature a set hierarchy of beings or values, and its open-ended character is an illusion, then democracy seems to recommend that we live in a way that is orthogonal to nature's dictates. But if nature is a process where new problems, risks, and the unexpected seem unavoidable, then a community and character that goes forth to meet new demands, that welcomes untried situations, and that is capable of constant readjustment is in better shape than a fixed, static one. It is because the world has certain generic traits that democracy is a reasonable way to interact in it. Dewey thought that his ethics supported democratic hopes and aspirations better than most ethical theories because it portrayed moral reality itself as open, contingent, individual, social, and irreducibly pluralistic.

In fact, Dewey's views about democracy cannot be separated from his plea that we accept a certain metaphysics, that is, that we do not turn away from or ignore the complexity, pluralism, and uncertainty of reality. Democracy is another name for a way of life that "accepts life and experi-
Pluralism of beliefs, religions, cultures, and social groups is increasingly an unquestionable trait of present experience. In a world where interaction is becoming unavoidable and even necessary, isolation and segregation are no longer ways to successfully cope with pluralism. We can respond to pluralism by trying to remove it, either by force, indoctrination, or by constructing a philosophical theory that explains the unfortunate pluralism as mere appearance or a result of human limitations. These responses assume that a pluralism of beliefs is merely an early stage on the way to later convergence or, perhaps, a fall from grace. For pragmatists, on the other hand, the plurality of views that are deeply believed is a positive characteristic of the human condition, rather than something to lament. For pluralism is not only the irreducible character of reality but a source of possible enrichment. Participation, communication, and sharing in a pluralistic environment can make life rich and varied in meanings. "To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life." (LW 14:228).

Dewey believes that the ideals of liberty, equality, and freedom are more meaningful or congenial to the pragmatist conception of experience than to traditional metaphysics. Our liberty is more meaningful if we are participants (instead of spectators) in a universe that is a genuine field of experimentation, novelty, and constantly in the making.

A philosophy animated, be it unconsciously or consciously, by the strivings of men to achieve democracy will construe liberty as meaning a universe in which there is real uncertainty and contingency, a world which is not all in, and never will be, a world which in some respect is incomplete and in the making, and which in these respects may be made this way or that according as men judge, prize, love and labor. (MW 11:50)

Pragmatism is a philosophy that supports the democratic ideal of equality because it rejects "the metaphysics of feudalism" (MW 11:51) that supports authoritarian ideals, while also recognizing that uniqueness and individuality are traits of experience. In a world where every existence is qualitatively unique and develops in the context of unique social circumstances, our democratic aspirations to respect the individuality of the other seems most reasonable. Dewey supports the ideal of equality by "a metaphysical mathematics of the incommensurable in which each speaks for itself and demands consideration on its own behalf" (MW 11:53). A metaphysics of democracy based on the notion of everyone having the same rights cannot elicit the same democratic respect for one another that comes from recognizing that there is something irreplaceable about each one of us in every new moment in the flow of experience.

However, individuality is not something that develops or that can be appreciated independently of association and interaction. Hence, an individualism that is not atomistic is the metaphysical basis for fraternity as an ideal of democracy.

To say that what is specific and unique can be exhibited and become forceful or actual only in relationship with other like beings is merely, I take it, to give a metaphysical version to the fact that democracy is concerned not with freaks or geniuses or heroes or divine leaders but with associated individuals in which each by intercourse with others, somehow makes the life of each more distinctive. (MW 11:53)

To be sure, democracy is not something separated from nature (the subject matter of metaphysics). It is not some sort of method or way of talking to each other by which humans can, in isolation from a valueless and chaotic world, establish some sort of order. Democracy lacks metaphysical grounding if one begins with the theory that all of our wishes, ideals, and values are nothing more than our own cultural and arbitrary (self-serving) projections imposed upon a valueless world. This dualistic picture of things is not the starting point of Dewey's ethics. For him, democracy points to values and possibilities that are experienced and have arisen in our transaction with the world. These values and possibilities are as much a part of the objective everyday world as they are ours. Democratic interaction is something we do in discourse with other humans, but we are part of nature and the context that guides the discourse is the qualitative world that we inhabit. Therefore, the ordered richness achieved by democracy is of nature and because of it.

The Functionality of Democracy

To evaluate and justify ideals requires much more than investigating their relation to how life in its actual values and generic features is experienced. For what makes them ideals is that they are in some sense beyond how things are and have been. And they are not things destined to be facts or to be fully realized. As Giovanni Sartori has said, "ideals always smack of hubris, they are always excessive. This is, as it should be, since ideals are designed to overcome resistances." An ideal that is fully realizable ceases
to function as an ideal. This explains why Dewey can say that democracy 
"is not a fact and never will be" (LW 2:328).

Ideals are experienced as ends-in-view that interact with the world and have a practical function. We could thus ask about any ideal: Is it constructive or is it counterproductive and self-defeating? Does it provide orientation, inspiration, and carry us through tough times? Does it guide action or make our individual struggles more meaningful? Does it positively provoke our imaginations in the sense of eliciting possibilities that may not be appreciated or explored otherwise? These are all important questions that would have to be considered in a full evaluation of democracy as an ideal. For now I would like to focus on one important aspect of a useful ideal according to Dewey’s ethics.

A constructive ideal must assist in transforming, guiding, and inspiring but it must itself be open to improvement in light of present experience. This requires that an ideal be “sufficiently definite to be usable and sufficiently flexible to lead to its own reinterpretation as experience progresses” (LW 7:344). Dewey was aware that both excess generality and specificity in the formulation of an ideal tend to be counterproductive. He was, on the one hand, concerned that the ideal of a democratic way of life not remain an idle tool by becoming a vague abstraction. We must do better than regurgitate the political slogans associated with democracy. The ideal “must not remain vague and general. It must be translated into the concrete details of what it means in every walk of life” (LW 11:237). On the other hand, he was keenly aware that too much specificity can work against the effectiveness of an ideal. As we saw earlier, Dewey thought that ethical theory can betray its practical function if it abandons its generic character and pretends to provide specific instructions. In order to serve as an effective instrument of criticism without undermining context-sensitive reflection, democracy as an ideal must be “stated in such a way that it will apply to changed conditions of the present and the future” (LW 7:343).

This last point is relevant to evaluating an objection to Dewey that has been reconsidered by Robert Westbrooks and Michael Eldridge. They find it problematic that, as Eldridge puts it, Dewey did not specify “in the concrete the political means to effect the democratic ends.”12 He failed to flesh out the details of his democratic vision. But how much more thickness could be added to his ideal before it becomes counterproductive? I am suggesting that the generality and vagueness of Dewey’s views about democracy are strengths, not weaknesses of his position. Dewey was a committed contextualist and the lack of a more detailed vision is what allows us today to develop the specifics as they pertain to our present experience without abandoning Dewey’s vision. Had he, for example,

given us specific instructions about how freedom is secured in a democracy, they could have prevented us from engaging in a fresh context-sensitive inquiry into this matter today. Critics wanted to know “what to think” but Dewey instead would tell them “how to think,”13 because the latter was more fruitful.

The lack of specific instructions in Dewey’s philosophy regarding the democratic task does not mean a total lack of guidance as to what can be done to democratize experience. Let’s reassess the issue of functionality in light of Dewey’s ethics. Criticism and inquiry into conditions on behalf of a more democratic experience are legitimate theoretical tasks. If democracy has to do with the quality of our most immediate associations, then widespread institutional, political, or legal reforms must be tested by how they affect the quality of these relationships. If democracy is about having certain experiences, then instead of investigating rules of justice or the proper conception of human rights, philosophers and political theorists must inquire into which character traits and environmental conditions are necessary for having those experiences.

Dewey was particularly concerned with which type of education and classroom environment would provide the conditions for the development of characters that have an emotional readiness to assimilate the experience of others (e.g., openness, sympathy), and are active, flexible, critical, sensitive, and willing to cooperate in the common good. It is especially important that in a democracy each generation of children be equipped to “formulate its own beliefs and practices in light of new experiences and discoveries” (LW 11:554). Philosophy cannot set the particular conditions and means that are needed for democracy for all times and places, but it can be concerned with useful generalities such as how to inquire into them. The importance of context-sensitive reflection cannot be underestimated. In order to seek solutions in terms of concrete problems as they arise we must “surrender our faith in system and in some wholesale belief” (LW 5:19–20).

Dewey was also critical of ways to inquire into conditions and means that are not consistent with the idea of force individuals to be free in the name of democracy is a form of intellectual hypocrisy which leads to antidemocratic results. “The fundamental principle of democracy is that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be attained only by means that accord with those ends” (LW 11:298). The aristocratic means of such democratic elitists as Walter Lippmann was also against the spirit and realization of democracy.14 A democratic community cannot be created or handed down from above by a democratic elite that has a blueprint of the good life. It must rather emerge from within its voluntary associations.
The stress on immanence is consistent with the notion of a moral life that is ameliorated by its own means. In “The Ethics of Democracy” (EW 1:227–49) Dewey stresses that what really distinguishes democracy from any aristocratic ideal is the means by which all that is worth striving for is brought about. What is most objectionable about a society ruled by the few wise and good (assuming that power will not corrupt them) is that their decisions (no matter how wise) lead to benefits that are external to others in the sense that do not come from within individuals (the rest of society) working out for themselves problematic situations. Hence, it violates an important condition for ideal activity, for having the most meaningful experiences.

The defenders of aristocracy are quick to point out that the outcomes they propose are good, but for Dewey, as we have seen in his ethics, the quality of the process is more important than how good or beneficial the outcome happens to be. “Humanity cannot be content with a good which is procured from without, however high and otherwise complete that good” (EW 1:243). A society where good outcomes are given is not to be preferred to one in which these goods are the result of participation (working). It is good when others solve problems for us but it is more meaningful and enriching—it has an aesthetic quality—when we have put some of our own work or effort into the process. When we work things out for ourselves we learn, and the results of our task achieve consummatory value. Dewey offers no argument to defend this. He is just offering a hypothesis and an invitation to try it out to see whether it is a more meaningful experience. To be engaged in an activity where there is a balanced relation between means and ends, between play and work is the ideal.

It follows that the best way to help others is indirectly, by creating the conditions for them to help themselves as well as deepen and widen their relationships. This idea is easily misunderstood. But Dewey endorses it because positive freedom happens to be a condition for the enhancement of present activity (living), not because individuals are self-sufficient, must be left alone, and liberty is an absolute good.

To foster conditions that widen the horizon of others and give them command of their own powers, so that they can find their own happiness in their own fashion, is the way of “social” action. Otherwise the prayer of a freeman would be to be left alone, and to be delivered, above all, from “reformers” and “kind” people. (MW 14:203)

This is a call for a lot of work in a society that takes democracy seriously. Leaving the individuals to themselves to whatever they want does not foster the positive freedom needed for democratic interaction. It takes great effort and communal resources to foster individuals and communities capable of working out the problems they experience for themselves.

Although we cannot export or impose democracy, we can provide or prepare the soil in which the flower of democracy may gradually emerge. There are some interesting implications and complications of this important insight. First, there is the question of who is the “we” that fosters the conditions for the emergence of democracy. Can it ever be someone from outside the community in question? Furthermore, at what point can the control over indirect conditions ruin the spontaneous emergence of what is wanted? This is especially troublesome when one aims to restore or revitalize the sort of relationships and genuine communities for which Dewey hoped. They cannot be engineered or created the way one constructs a bridge or fixes a pipe. Since community is usually associated with stability in experience it is easy to overlook the importance of contingency, novelty, and spontaneity in the creation, sustenance, and quality of a community. This becomes clear in examining the recent attempt to build gated communities. The gates, rules, and homogeneity of these communities provide the comfort of a controlled, secured, predictable, and safe environment but at the cost of sterility, boredom, and the unaesthetic. The retreat into gated communities is a flight from chance. The price for security is an environment with no surprises, where an unplanned and enriching conversation with a person unlike oneself is ruled out. Dewey, of course, would be opposed to this sort of community, but it is not clear how a more intelligent and flexible Deweyan effort to create community is not vulnerable to the same sort of problem. A Deweyan project to indirectly control the conditions for the emergence of a community may run into the problem of determining when its intervention is spoiling the needed chance and spontaneity for a community to emerge. This being said; it does not mean that the way of intelligence is to leave things alone. I can think of no solution to this difficulty except to hope that, equipped with the habits of intelligence, we will be able to determine in a particular case when we have reached that critical point where even indirect control is too much. The emergence of a genuine community is in some ways a more delicate matter than that of a flower. But just as with the flower, even if we do what is in our power we must come to terms with the fact that it many never blossom. This is all Deweyan in spirit.

Perhaps a more promising way of inquiring about conditions in the name of democracy can take the negative form of answering the question: What feature of present conditions is an obstacle to having more
of the kinds of experiences associated with democracy? Just as with a flower we may decide to focus our attention on weeds. This is one way in which the ideal may serve as a tool of criticism. For example, what undermines meaningful and effective democratic public deliberation? What specific environmental conditions (economic, sociological, and political) are responsible for nurturing habits that work against the habits and spirit of democracy? What has contributed to the snobbery and aristocratic habits that continue to predominate in our society? To what extent have the habits of classifying, quantification, labeling, and ranking contributed to our numbness toward the individuality of others in our everyday experience? What in our society encourages the habit of dismissing or demonizing others instead of genuinely listening to them? What encourages dogmatism or the habit of thinking of simplistic good/evil, us/them dichotomies?

One difficulty with inquiry into the obstacles to democracy is that dualism often gets in the way. One must be careful, for example, not to assume that there are certain institutions or means that are somehow by nature intrinsically opposed to the values of democracy. The material/spiritual dualism is sometimes behind the assumption that industry and business (i.e., our economic relations) are intrinsically non-democratic or outside the realm of human values. This often has the unintended consequence of making them immune from the sort of democratic reconstruction for which Dewey hoped. “To stop with mere emotional rejection and moral condemnation of industry and trade as materialistic is to leave them in this inhuman region where they operate as the instruments of those who employ them for private ends. Exclusion of this sort is an accomplice of the forces that keep things in the saddle” (LW 5:17).

There is no realm of human experience that is immune from democratization or criticism from the point of view of democracy. If some corporations and governments are a threat to democracy we must find ways to transform them from within their everyday operations and interactions. One could argue that this is a more radical and subversive approach to the threats to democracy than merely adopting an ideological view that understands such threats as inherently evil powers that can only be subject to external control.

Technology, science, and commerce are responsible for the mobility, organization, and impersonalism that have eroded the quality of the local ties needed for a healthy democracy. But Dewey insisted that there is nothing in the nature of things that rules out that the same forces that have undermined democracy can be used to reverse their effect. “We can assert with confidence that there is nothing intrinsic in the forces which have affected uniform standardization, mobility and remote invisible relationships that is fatally obstructive to the return movement of their consequences into the local homes of mankind” (LW 2:369). There is no going back to some mythical better past. Dewey’s solution was to try to turn these same forces in favor of procuring a free, diverse, but stable communal life. This is what it means to reconstruct from within our present resources and possibilities. He is, for instance, explicit about the important role that mobility and organization can play in maintaining the sort of balance that is needed. “Mobility may in the end supply the means by which the spoils of remote and indirect interaction and interdependence flow back into local life, keeping it flexible, preventing the stagnancy which has attended stability in the past, and furnishing it with the elements of a variegated and many-hued experience. Organization may cease to be taken as an end in itself. Then it will no longer be mechanical and external, hampering the free play of artistic gifts . . . ” (LW 2:370).

The functionality of Dewey’s philosophy of democracy could be questioned on the grounds that it is just too utopian. In other words, it is too demanding or idealistic to be taken seriously or to play any positive function. The idealistic or optimistic character of Dewey’s vision in light of present conditions should be obvious. His vision was of a society in which the strength and depth of local relations (family, neighborhood, and friendships) are not a threat but supportive of the organizations and institutions we delegate to administer the indirect consequences for all social groups. He even dreamed of finding ways to extend some of the democratic qualities of the most intimate and direct relations to the wider circle of an organized society. Is there something objectionable in holding such utopian dreams and hopes?

The Utopia Objection

There are different versions of this utopia objection that must be considered.15 On one level, it seems to be based on a misunderstanding of what an ideal is. A failure to achieve or even envision full realizability should not count against an ideal. What would be the use of an ideal if it was not utopian and beyond complete realization? But perhaps the objection is that the ideal is too idealistic, that is, too good to be taken seriously. The charge of excessive goodness can take two forms. It may be that the content of the ideal is so good and perfect that it becomes undesirable, thereby losing its intrinsic imaginative appeal as something worth aspiring to. This was the same reaction and concern expressed by James after he visited the Chautauqua community and saw “a gathering of wonderfully cooperative,
peaceful, benign, socially conscious" persons. James's account of his reaction is worth quoting here at length:

And yet what was my own astonishment, on emerging into the dark and wicked world again, to catch myself quite unexpectedly and involuntarily saying: "Ouf! What a relief! Now for something primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as an Armenian massacre, to set the balance straight again. This order is too tame, this culture too second-rate, this goodness too uninspiring... this city simmering in the tepid lakeside sun; this atrocious harmlessness of all things—I cannot abide with them. Let me take my chances again in the big outside worldly wilderness with all its sins and sufferings..."  

Is my description of Dewey's ideal too good in this sense and therefore susceptible to the same sort of charge? Only if one ignores what I have said about the nature of ideals. The ideal described is not something intended to be fully realizable or supposed to describe a comprehensive state of affairs. Therefore, there is much that is missing in the description that is not presented simply because it is taken for granted that it will be part of any community. Dewey never assumes that the precarious, the uncertain, and all the things that make our lives less than absolutely perfect—that is, those things that are missing in the Chautauqua community—would have to be eliminated. On the contrary, he counted on them, and I have made that a key to my description. I have shown that conflict, tension, and risk are an integral part of his ideal. "Balance" is understood by Dewey as a creative but precarious tension, and not as a stable state of peace and harmony that we can rest on. A community that is too tame needs a dose of danger. Fragility, contingency, struggle, and conflict are integral to a meaningful life.

There is, however, another interpretation of the utopia objection that any Deweyan should confront. What if the excessive goodness of an ideal affects its practical effectiveness under present conditions? Although all ideals are excesses, this does not mean that they can be safely maximized beyond measure without losing their effectiveness. An excessively idealistic view of democracy can work against the democracy it is supposed to generate. This is a danger today. The gap between our actual way of life and Dewey's ideal is so pronounced that becoming aware of the latter may only lead to cynicism, nihilism, and passive resignation. The point is that sometimes when ideals become too high or idealistic relative to the present context they are nothing but obstacles to present amelioration. Pessimism is usually the result of having unreasonably high standards and expectations about the potentialities of life and others. It is not a matter of humility to aim or dream lower when constructing ideals, but a matter of making the ideal instrumentally effective.

This last objection raises a legitimate concern. Dewey would want his ideal to be a good means and it may be the case that Deweyans today must make the content of the democratic ideal more modest in order to increase its instrumental potency. The objection, however, is only a practical warning and does not give us a philosophical basis to evaluate the reasonableness of Dewey's ideal independently of any particular use and context. Indeed, it is difficult to assess the instrumental potency of an ideal in the abstract, independently of a particular context and of how an ideal is actually used. The threat of cynicism and passivity, for example, may be more a consequence of the bad use of the ideal than of anything related to its content. An ideal may seem reasonable in all other respects, but because it is taken as an absolute standard, it ceases to function as a possibility which provokes our imaginations and makes us nonconformist (and uncomfortable) about the present state of affairs. Those who think of democracy as a blueprint and ignore the fact that the meaning of democracy changes with time and place may be considered traitors of the ideal because they confuse the spirit with the letter of democracy. We have already seen that Dewey makes this same point regarding the use of rules in morality. Even the best moral principles can be harmful if one is not sensitive to context. Hence, even if we were to agree that Dewey's ideal has the appropriate amount of substance, detail, and appeal, it could still remain counterproductive because of the way it is employed in situations. This underscores the emphasis on the "how" of his ethics, that is, being equipped with the right habits needed to find out what democracy requires in particular situations.

The Naïveté Objection

The counterpart to the utopia objection is the charge that Dewey was naïve which affected the reasonableness of his democratic vision. This could mean that he was naïve (1) about the problems or obstacles of democracy, (2) about how bad (severe) these problems really are, or (3) about the means needed for ameliorating them. These are, of course, related. Naïveté about the means is usually a result of underestimating the problems. The most common charge against Dewey has been that his ideal seems impotent and naïve because he underestimated the extent to which conflict, power (as force and coercion), tragic irreconciliabilities, instinct, and irrationalities undermine any effort to democratize experience. This claim is serious since it in effect accuses Dewey of failing to meet the
requirement of adequacy to experience. In his zealously for democracy he may have downplayed or ignored undesirable and anti-democratic forces that are intrinsic features of the human condition.

Is this charge fair? It depends on the nature of the accusation. It would not do to claim that he hoped for what is impossible, or that he expected too much out of human relationships, social institutions, and human beings because he had the wrong (and naïve) view of the nature of these things (e.g., because humans are by nature intrinsically evil or selfish). There is, for Dewey, no fixed nature of anything, certainly not of human beings. The extent to which forces plague or create limitations to what can be done in human relationships is an empirical issue because it is based on present conditions. The problem with non-empirical ways of deciding what is or is not possible (e.g., what we can expect of humans) is that it settles the issue in advance.

If, however, the charge is that Dewey did not take into account the evil and complexity that we experience today but which was not part of his situation, then this either makes no sense or it is an unreasonable expectation. But we can inquire into whether he was oblivious or blind to the ways that the anti-democratic forces operated during his time. Eldridge, for example, defends Dewey on these grounds by providing evidence that in Dewey’s active involvement of the problems of his time he did not “ignore class interests” or the use of power politics. There is in fact plenty of textual support to show that Dewey recognized the subtle and hidden forces that controlled public discussion. He even warned future generations about how the growing forces of propaganda (control by the few) and the consumerist appetite for sensationalism are bound to prevent the possibility of democratic public discourse. It is not clear to me how much more we can expect of Dewey.

The more interesting and important issue is whether our problems today are sufficiently different, and things so much worse, that Dewey’s ideas and ideal seem out of touch, naïve, and inapplicable. To properly answer this question I would have to provide an empirical assessment of present conditions, something that is beyond the scope of this book. I can predict, however, that we would indeed find aspects of Dewey’s view that seem naïve when compared to today’s complex social conditions. For instance, given what science is today, it may be hard to have the same sort of confidence that Dewey had in its instrumentality for moral life or in his confidence in science as the best example of communal inquiry. Given the unprecedented power of global corporations today it seems that much more is needed for positive freedom and the self-governing capacity of the public than what Dewey suggested. New technologies have made possible new ways to reduce political discourse to a sport-like spectacle where the public remains entertained but dormant. More could be said, but I fail to see how this sort of criticism constitutes a refutation of Dewey’s views or a reason to dismiss their relevance. For he expected context to change, and therefore he expected that followers of his vision would reconstruct his ideas in light of present conditions, so that they do not become irrelevant, naïve, and out of touch.

The most flawed version of the naïve charge comes from misconceptions about what Dewey hoped for and how he conceived moral life. John Patrick Diggins, for example, faults Dewey for not recognizing that democracy is full of tensions and contradictions. He claims that unlike Dewey, “Lincoln saw democracy as tragic.” Diggins makes the common mistake of inferring from the fact that since Dewey argued against dualisms he must have presupposed the possibility of an easygoing harmony. He says, “since Dewey denies dualism, he sees little distinction between the community and the individual. He is also unwilling to see that liberty, equality, and fraternity are value preferences and, as such, are incompatible with one another.” It should be clear by now that Dewey never underestimated the tensions integral to the ideal of democracy, or the difficulties and even tragic character of the decisions one must make in living by this ideal. Even if, as Richard Bernstein has recently pointed out, Dewey may have at times “relied too much on metaphors of harmony and organic unity,” they must not be understood as the quest for a state without tension and conflict.

Dewey’s view of moral life provides the rich and complex context of background in which we must understand his hopes for democracy. In his ethics one finds a view of moral problems, conflicts, and deliberation that should discredit most charges of naïveté. As obvious as this may be, there have been reputable Dewey scholars who have claimed that there is a lack of tragic sensibility in Dewey ethics. Hilary Putnam, for example, finds Dewey’s moral philosophy less satisfactory than his social philosophy because he failed to take into account the tensions and irreconcilability between human goods. James Kloppenberg thinks that because of Dewey’s failure on this score we should turn to James’s ethics as the basis of a democratic vision. James’s sensitivity to the “tragic betrayal of some ethical ideal in every choice between irreconcilable conceptions of the good makes his variety of pragmatist political thinking perhaps better suited to our time.”

I would admit that Dewey, in comparison to James, often overzealously encouraged us to create instrumentalities of prediction and control. But this is just a difference of degrees, emphasis, and character. Dewey
recognizes that in the paradigmatic problems of moral life there is genuine uncertainty and conflict as to the morally correct thing to do. Dewey's starting point is not a world where values are compatible and where most problems can be solved by some intellectual method. On the contrary, moral life is usually so complex and conflicting that it is no wonder we tend to flee by seeking the false security of rules or some foundation outside of lived experience. We should instead try to work with the raw resources, and trust that with perseverance and sensitivity we may find some guidance within experience. This makes Dewey faith extraordinary but not naïve.

In sum, tragic sensibility is not what is missing in Dewey's ethics. His faith in the instrumentalities of experience was tempered by an honest realization that moral life was strenuous and tragic, and that "when all is said and done, the fundamentally hazardous character of the world is not seriously modified, much less eliminated" (LW 1:45).

The charge of naïveté presents at best a danger for the democratic task. The risk of downplaying actual limitations in dealing with problems is that we may fail to rely on them in inquiry. The danger of wishful thinking is that we may stop consulting the "grain of experience," and this has consequences. Democracy is in jeopardy if people decide to ignore the actual obstacles and limitations present at any time in human relations. This is why for Dewey "choosing and acting with conscious regard to the grain of circumstance" (LW 3:105) must become habit.

But the risk in emphasizing limitations is also serious. If we convince ourselves that improving our relationships in a more democratic direction is impossible, then we have automatically precluded one of its first conditions: our faith. Because of this and because we cannot know in advance what our actual limitations will be, it seems wise to be hopeful but alert, to have faith but be critical. Naïveté today is avoided by allowing criticism to reach down to even those concealed forces that control what may seem like free public discourse. The difficulty, however, is how to do this without becoming cynical and losing faith in all dialogue and resorting to non-democratic means. The alternative to cynicism and a primitive naïveté is the balance between faith and criticism that Dewey describes as a "cultivated naïveté of eye, ear, and thought, one that can be acquired only through the discipline of severe thought" (LW 1:40).

Dewey's meliorism tries to avoid both pessimism and optimism. There is a false sense of comfort or security in these opposing views, and assent to either of them shows a failure to confront the open-ended character of life and an intellectual arrogance in claiming to know things in advance. Learning from defeat, frustration, and failure does not presuppose that there will always be a lesson or that the lessons are already there in some sense. Rather, it presupposes that we may learn while acknowledging that "control or power is never complete; luck or fortune, the propitious support of circumstances not foreseeable is always involved" (LW 3:105).

A different charge of naïveté can be raised against Dewey. He was not naïve about our limitations but rather about the dangers of the drive to control and ameliorate present conditions. Even if Dewey was sensitive to the tragic, his meliorism is an intellectual justification for the drive to improve that can go against certain more passive but important attitudes toward people and events. Dewey's faith in the instrumentalities of experience should have been tempered by recognition of what positive value there is to accepting things as they come. There is in life a time to ameliorate our contingent circumstances, but there is also a time to accept them, not in a grudgingly or stoical way, but in a loving way.

This is an issue that has come up in regard to technology in its seemingly endless capacity to improve our lives. In a recent article, Michael Sandel argues that what is troubling about designer children, bionic athletes, and genetic engineering is that this kind of meliorism represents "a kind of hyperagency—a Prometheus aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires. The problem is not the drift to mechanism but the drive to mastery. And what the drive to mastery misses and may even destroy is an appreciation of the gifted character of human powers and achievements." The ethics of enhancement raises "questions about the moral status of nature, and about the proper stance of human beings toward the given world."77

If we can become better human beings and communities by genetic engineering, should we? Is that what Dewey's melioristic ethics implies? Is there in Dewey an acknowledgment of the attitude Sandel thinks is threatened by the new developments in technology?

Dewey has been called an instrumentalist but he was aware of the dangers of too much mastery or excessive doing.28 I have argued that for him activity with aesthetic quality (as a balanced relation between doing and undergoing) is the paradigmatic form of activity. Beholding, savoring, accepting, and celebrating the given world does not have to be incompatible with molding, transforming, and perfecting it, even if there is a tension and risks corresponding to doing each of these things in isolation or to the extreme. The difficult balance between a transforming love and an accepting love, between molding our children and accepting their individuality, is true of all democratic relationships. The parents to be admired are not those who are willing to improve their children by whatever means and to whatever the extent. Dewey addressed these issues with
The sort of ethics of enhancement that Sandel criticizes is a very different view than Dewey's ethics even if they both emphasize amelioration. Remember how I distinguished Dewey's view from the notion of improvement as approximation to a final end or standard of perfection. Dewey is not interested in perfection as either an ideal or a standard. This is in no way a license to be lazy, sloppy, or unconcerned about improvement. Meliorism in Dewey is a context-relative notion (i.e., to particular problematic situations that call for improvement). He does not endorse amelioration for the sake of amelioration. The amelioration that is encouraged by his ethics is one that is grounded on problems experienced—in this sense, terms such as ‘ameliorating’ and ‘re-constructing’ are better than ‘perfecting’ or ‘enhancing.’ The moral agent is not someone who ameliorates as part of a general quest for perfection or even amelioration. Dewey reverses this Platonic quest. Notions of perfection are not antecedent to problematic situations; they are, at best, instruments for present amelioration whenever the context calls for amelioration. This is an important difference. The demand for improvement is not something created or projected by humans in a world that is otherwise neutral or indifferent, that is, valueless. This is a very suspicious starting point. Although Dewey would not deny the importance of having characters with the readiness to improve (as a habit or disposition), his starting point is a world that demands improvement in its problematic phases.

Men have constructed a strange dream-world when they have supposed that without a fixed ideal of a remote good to inspire them, they have no inducement to get relief from present troubles, no desires for liberation from what oppresses and for clearing-up what confuses present action... Suffice unto the day is the evil thereof. Sufficient it is to stimulate us to remedial action. (MW 14:195)

In sum, there is in Dewey's ethics some basis to warn us about the dangers of technological enhancement as a general practice. It can erode an attitude toward the world that is part of the sort of balanced engagement that I have articulated in this book. The road toward perfectionism is the road to the sort of stability and harmony that is non-aesthetic. The contingency of our talents, fortunes, as well as of our bad circumstances are for Dewey the grounds of democratic solidarity. I said earlier that the ultimate glue in Dewey's view is a faith in experience or nature, one that is felt as the notion that "everything that's here is here, and you can just lie back on it." There is an active and a more passive side to this faith. You can lie back on experience by trusting its potentialities that may be released with
our intervention, but it is also important to lie back in the sense of accepting the grain of experience and affirming what it brings even if it is not in line with our wishes.

Of course, this does not answer the difficult questions. At what point does our capacity for mastery with the developments of new enhancement technology lead to the sort of unbalanced control where we have removed too much contingency, novelty, surprise, gifts, and uniqueness from our everyday lives? Dewey does not say, and given his contextualism, he would be skeptical of any philosophical attempt to fix this line a priori. Furthermore, slippery-slope-type arguments would not convince Dewey to set absolute limits to enhancement technologies; rather, he would likely eschew line drawing and assume the risks of such technologies in the name of trying to maintain a context-sensitive balance. Nevertheless, the danger is there and if it is true that today we are on the verge of too much mastery, then Deweyans today should be more resistant or watchful about the effects of technology in this regard than Dewey was.

Democracy and the Limits of Pluralism

Another way to raise the naïveté charge against Dewey would be to question the means by which conflict, force, and disagreement are to be handled. The idea that we can sit down as equals, admit everyone to the table, and have a rational discussion would seem to ignore the fact that there are people who are not willing to put their special interests aside, and that sometimes we may have to resort to force and coercion. Pragmatism, hence, would appear to be dangerously naïve because it seems too tolerant, open, generous, and inclusive. Dewey prescribes that we have a discussion with even those who may not deserve to be talked to and who may be a danger to a democratic society. How is Dewey’s pragmatism any different from the “let many flowers bloom” variety that is sometimes defended?

This is, of course, a caricature of Dewey’s view. He was aware of the limitations of inquiry. Moreover, there is nothing in Dewey that rules out the use of force or of recognizing that there are limits to pluralism and tolerance. It is true that nowhere does he lay out rules for exclusion (i.e., as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for excluding some views from communal inquiry), but it does not follow that there is no conceivable basis to exclude certain viewpoints in particular situations. This is the same sort of assumption that is behind the idea that if in ethical theory we cannot provide a theoretical basis to rule out someone as evil as Hitler, then there is no actual basis to do so in concrete situations and all is permitted.

Dewey did encourage us to avoid violence to settle conflicts of interest and opinion in a pluralistic society. The enemies of democracies are the enemies of inquiry and public discussion. These are not only censorship and suppression but the covert and indirect use of force. “Mankind still prefers upon the whole to rely upon force, not now exercised directly and physically as it was once, but upon covert and indirect force, rather than upon intelligence to discover and cling to what is right” (LW 7:231). But for Dewey the proper way to stand by the principles of openness and tolerance is also to stand by contextualism. The most that can be said about these principles prior to a situation is that there are good reasons to try them and to avoid the use of force, violence, and exclusion. We cannot have a priori or absolutely rule out force, violence, and exclusion. But does it follow that these stand as equally warranted ways of confronting situations? Even if in a democracy we must do our best to try to consider each case on its own merits, the burden of proof is on those who do not wish to try democratic means in a specific situation. To favor democratic principles also means that in cases of doubt we should err on the side of being too tolerant than not tolerant enough.

The objection considered does, however, raise a legitimate practical concern. There are risks (or liabilities) for standing by the principles of tolerance, freedom of action, and dialogue in a democracy, but there is no reason to believe that Dewey was not aware of this. He counted on the sort of intelligent contextualism that would hopefully allow us to recognize, as we engage in particular situations, when we have reached the limits of tolerance and when it is time to use force or exclude someone. I am aware that this answer is not satisfactory for many who expect some sort of fixed criteria or rules as an adequate answer; anything less seems too lax and unstable. But from the point of view of Dewey’s ethics, the habits required to be an intelligent contextualist are more stable and reliable tools to rely on (in these critical situations) than any cognitive criteria. The openness of contextualism is no comfort for those who want the security of knowing answers in advance. But from Dewey’s perspective this is naïve. It is wanting or counting on what the universe cannot provide. Both absolutism and a relativism that permits anything provide a false sense of comfort.

Pessimistic views about human nature would find Dewey’s views naïve because, according to them, violent warfare and the use of force seem inevitable. But for Dewey claims about inevitability are non-empirical and non-intelligent.

Wherever the inevitable reigns intelligence cannot be used. Commitment to inevitability is always the fruit of dogmatism; intelligence does not pretend to know save as a result of experimentation, the opposite of
preconceived dogma. Moreover, acceptance in advance of the inevitability of violence tends to produce the use of violence in cases where peaceful methods might otherwise avail. (LW 11:55)

We must not assume defeatism in advance of actual trial. Dewey gave us many reasons why democracy seems worth trying but ultimately theoretical reasons are impotent if we do not in our own experience feel the need to ameliorate the quality of present experience. “The reasons for making the trial are not abstract or recondite. They are found in the confusion, uncertainty and conflict that mark the modern world” (LW 11:64).

Democracy and the Quality of Experience

The most important functional evaluation of an ideal is one that takes into account the particular problem from which it has arisen. After all, an ideal has a context and it is born from a particular dissatisfaction with how things are. As George Herbert Mead said, “a conception of a different world comes to us always as the result of some specific problem which involves readjustment of the world as it is.” Given what I have taken to be the problematic context that grounds Dewey’s hopes or aspirations, the following questions are important in reevaluating democracy as an ideal: does trying to live by his view of democracy (and using it as a tool of criticism) have the power or potential to transform (improve) the quality of our interactions and present experience by its own means? Can it guide, inspire, and inform our individual struggles on this issue? That Dewey thought of democracy as the best hypothetical response to living a more qualitatively enriching social life is supported by his most straightforward and explicit remarks regarding the justification of democracy. In Experience and Education he said,

is it not the reason for our preference that we believe that mutual consultation and convictions reached through persuasion, make possible a better quality of experience than can otherwise be provided on any wide scale? ... I do not see how we can justify our preference for democracy and humanity on any other ground. (LW 13:18)

To be sure, the ideal of democracy is not a mere instrumentality to some future state of affairs where the quality of our interactions (and life) is enhanced and fulfillment is achieved. As previously noted, the aim of Dewey’s ethics is a better life relative to where we are, rather than to some predetermined conception of the good life. The rewards and test of having democracy as an ideal are in the very striving and piecemeal achievement

in particular situations and in light of particular problems encountered. These problems are so varied and unique that all that can be said about them is that they demand a qualitative improvement in how we interact with each other. The interaction in an oppressive working environment, the mechanical and superficial character of most dialogues, the inability of many to understand and consider in deliberations the suffering of the other, a felt lack of control over the forces that guide my conduct, the inability to learn from others and embrace the irreducible pluralism of experience, the unjust oppression of a minority, the drudgery of working with others, the capricious and arbitrary nature of our decisions, and so on are the problems of democracy. The ideal must be tested and reevaluated in light of these sorts of problems that according to Dewey characterize our contemporary social existence. There would be no point or value to democracy as an ideal in a world where we are confronted with situations in no need of qualitative improvement.

The move to justify democracy by the quality of lived present experience is consistent with a philosophy that makes experience its starting point. That which initiates inquiry and tests the validity of its results is life. This is Dewey’s alternative to justifying democracy by appealing to natural rights, self-interest, or rationality. However, it is open to challenges from more traditional philosophers. How does one judge what counts as better quality? How do we determine if living by the democratic ideal tends to improve the quality of our interactions and present experience? Are we justified in believing that the democratization of our experience leads to improvement of its quality? If so, by what standards? By what criteria are we even entitled to reach any judgment that there is better and worst in interaction? If the criteria presuppose features of democratic interaction then are we not begging the question? Even Deweyan sympathizers like Sydney Hook and Robert Westbrook have found the challenge about criteria legitimate.

After quoting Dewey’s claim that a democratic community is superior to other forms of association because it is “full and free,” Hook raises the problem that this sort of justification of democracy will not work. “Actually this derivation of the validity of democratic society is circular, and some may even claim it is question-begging because the very choice of criteria presupposes an ideal family.” Hook regrets that Dewey did not devote “more pages to the problem of justification.” Westbrook raises the criteria challenge in a different context. “If one is willing to go this far with Dewey, a nagging question remains; that is, what criteria do we use to evaluate the success of our ends in view?”

This criteria challenge is in fact one that could also be raised against
that knowledge (in the form of rules or criteria) is prior to experience; this is an instance of the intellectual fallacy.

The empirical attitude that certain interactions are better because they are experienced as such is not an appeal to intuition or to the view that it is good simply because one says so. Recall that Dewey's method is one of trusting immediate experience without closing the door to further inquiry. The need for criticism and communal inquiry about value is recurrent in a changing world where we are aware of the possible narrowness and limitations of our own experiences. What may be experienced initially as good may not be experienced that way upon further dialogue, reflection, judgment, and experience. About our most direct personal experiences, Dewey admits that they can be restricted, one-sided, and perverted but the "remedy, however, is not divorce of thought from the intimacies of the direct contacts and intercourses of life, but a supplementation of limitations and a correction of biases through acquaintance with the experience of others" (LW 6:21).

Dewey denied that there is a single universal standard or criterion of value, but he did not think that it follows that there is no basis for criticism or reasonableness, nor that one must abandon the need to provide reasons or support for our judgments. Reasons and arguments are important for reasonableness; they are arrived at in the process of critically reexamining judgments and commitments, and they play a role in further inquiry. But their mere formulation is no substitute for personal judgment based on experience. The variety of reasons presented in favor of democracy may lead others, who hold similar commitments, to test certain hypotheses and to reach similar judgments about the value and promise of democracy. You can guide but not reason someone into having the experiences that can validate democracy. And even in the best of circumstances, there is "no assurance that any one will so act as to have the experience. The horse led to water is not forced to drink." (LW 14:31). According to Dewey's denotative method, the empirical philosopher must provide arguments, but she should also guide others (through descriptions and other means) to have the experiences that may confirm their hypotheses.

Dewey's critics and sympathizers, however, continue to presuppose that Dewey's politics is grounded in Dewey's ethics because in the latter one finds the ultimate criterion of all value judgments. They presuppose that for Dewey self-realization, human fulfillment, or growth are the goods ultimately served by democracy. It is hard to deny that Dewey was to some extent concerned with all of these goods, but to assume that any of them is the underlying and final telos is to fail to do justice to the radically pluralistic and contextualist view of Dewey's mature ethical thought and
philosophy. There is no overriding aim to all of our moral struggles that can be used as the theoretical standard to judge all activity. The ideal of democracy is an end-in-view and, as such, it is a means. I have suggested different ways in which Dewey would want us to evaluate it as a means. But doesn't this make him a consequentialist regarding democracy and therefore bind him to some sort of criteria? Dewey does think that democracy as an ideal is a means and that it produces good results. But one can make good consequences key to evaluating action or an ideal without assuming the sort of standard assumed by consequentialists. Furthermore, Dewey found it objectionable when consequences and results are understood in terms of a future end that is remote and external to the present situation. A consequentialist might argue that democracy leads or contributes to, for example, human flourishing, the just and happy society, or the survival of our species beyond and apart from democracy itself. This assumes a dualism between means and ends, and it disregards the present as the locus of moral reconstruction.

Dewey wanted to shift the focus of democracy to the present striving or democratization of experience instead of toward future results. Democracy as an ideal is a means to present reconstruction of specific problems in a situation. Democracy is not a journey to some predefined end point, nor is it the end of the journey itself. The spirit of democracy is in the present process of adjusting democratic means and ends. Living by and with the ideal and dealing with the problems and challenges it entails for us now is to endorse democracy as a way of life. When the emphasis is put on the striving to be democratic, every unique contextual battle for the sake of democracy is its own reason for being, as well as a unique opportunity for celebration if won (i.e., a source of immediate enjoyment). There is no grandiose and ultimate war for the sake of which the piecemeal present battles are fought. We do (and should) carry forward the wisdom from previous battles, but there is no end in sight in the sense of a final consummation or cumulative goal that serves as the standard for all the battles. Trying to transform everyday activity to make it richer and fuller relative to concrete present problems and possibilities is what we do in democracy as a way of life. The experience of pursuing and achieving democratic ends is a means but it is valued for its own sake as the experience which it is.

Dewey was more concerned with the spirit of democracy—that is, with how one is engaged in democratic reconstruction—than with trying to make fixed and final normative pronouncements about democratic rules or conduct. In the ideal democratic engagement there is a balance between work and play; moreover, present activity is not taken as mere means, but neither are goals or ideals taken as mere ends. Mastery over means of execution and enthusiasm for wider aims and ideals should supplement each other. In other words, the democrat needs to adopt the "genuine interest" in an ideal typical of the artist. The ideal democrat experiences each effort on behalf of democracy in the same way that the sculptor experiences each stroke of the chisel.

Each molding of the clay...is at the time the whole end in process of realization. Whatever interest or value attaches to the end attaches to each of these steps. He is as much absorbed in one as in the other...A genuine interest in the ideal indicates of necessity an equal interest in all the conditions of its expression. (EW 5128)

In sum, a consequentialist justification of Dewey's ideal of democracy is inconsistent with Dewey's philosophy, for it is central to the ideal that there should be a balanced relation between means and ends, and a concern for the quality of present processes. Insofar as the consequentialist justification of democracy would make the present striving for democracy a mere means, it is sharply at odds with the ideal of democracy as conceived by Dewey. The notion, for example, that democracy produces aesthetic satisfaction or that it is a prerequisite for epistemic goals seems to make democracy a mere means to a future and separate goal.

The justificatory requirements for democracy cannot be the same as those for theory. The reasonableness of an ideal way of life is to be tested in lived experience by trying to live by it. Consistency with one's beliefs and with the nature of experience is important, but this is ultimately nothing more than an intellectual warrant to try to live in a certain way. In other words, there are limitations to a philosophical investigation about better or worse ways of participating in experience. The most important one is that we can test our hypotheses only by living them. Participation can only be tested by participating. There is, then, no theoretical justification of democracy that can replace the support provided in favor of democracy by living and embodying democratic habits in our everyday interaction. That, for example, openness and tolerance usually make for a better dialogue can only be tested by adopting them in our daily interactions with others. To argue that in the end all theoretical arguments in favor of democracy pale in comparison to our attempts to try it for ourselves could not be more consistent with the very spirit of democracy.

In the last analysis, ideals are experiments. We know that the world is tolerant and fairly hospitable to our experiments. But perhaps the world does not lend itself equally to all our ideals. Of course, there are limitations to this appeal to experimentation. We cannot divest ourselves of our habits
as we do with our clothes, but just because we cannot stand outside our ways of life to make side-by-side comparisons does not mean that we can never know whether we are improving or whether changes are needed in our lives. About growth or progress Dewey says, "...if it cannot be told by qualities belonging to the moment of transition it can never be judged" (MW 14:195).

Dewey turns the fact that we cannot stand outside of our situatedness into a positive resource, rather than a reason to abandon all objectivity. If we were to appreciate the guiding force of reflection based on a unique and pervasive quality of each problematic situation, we would find absurd the need forantecedent knowledge of the good life or some outside standpoint to know whether or not we are doing well. As Dewey said,

there are plenty of negative elements, due to conflict, entanglement and obscurity, in most situations of life, and we do not require a revelation of some supreme perfection to inform us whether or no we are making headway in present rectification. (MW 14:195)

It is in and because of the felt intolerance and the superficial and mechanical aspects of our relations and discussions that we seek to democratize our experience. In the process of transforming these situations of conflict, entanglement, and obscurity, we need to rely on the sense of relevance and guidance found in the concrete situations where these problems are felt. We do in fact judge better from worse when guided by the same qualitative context that raises the issue, and we do this without the need for a God's-eye point of view. If Dewey's view seems like an invitation to anarchy, it is because, as opposed to most philosophies, it holds that what ultimately guides judgment cannot be articulated in terms of any sort of propositional knowledge. What can save us from nihilism in a world without foundations is qualitative, unique, and pre-conceptual.

Dewey's emphasis on primary qualitative and situated experience does not rule out the possibility of formulating general principles of democratic discourse or interaction. It may be useful in certain circumstances to lay out some rules of proper deliberation in a democracy in order to criticize present institutions. What must be avoided is overlooking the fact that these rules are only tools derived from, not prior to, having a certain quality of communication. Democracy as experience means that it arises and is ultimately justified by having certain experiences in particular situations. This is a bottom-up justification of democracy.

Have we succeeded in avoiding the charge of circularity in justification? We could play the skeptic and push the objection one more time. To test democracy by its quality in lived experience is to rely on the experimental method. But what in turn supports a reliance on experimental method? If we say that it is itself something to be tested by proceeding and guiding our lives in a certain way, then we seem to be arguing in a circle. Does not testing openness require openness? This is indeed a circle, but it is hardly a damaging or objectionable one. Being experimental about the experimental method in our lives is hardly as objectionable as assuming in a deductive justification the same conclusion we set out to prove. First, in the context of our lives this lived process of validation is never a return back to the same (or prior) place, so that perhaps a spiral, rather than a circle, is a better analogy. More importantly, it is precisely the capacity to move in a spiral motion that makes the experimental way of living attractive to Dewey. That is to say, it holds the promise of being a self-corrective process. It can be applied to itself without an appeal to an external standard to determine its direction and movement. Dewey proposed a way of approaching our problems that promises not only to ameliorate them but to ameliorate itself in the process. He was interested in the sort of moral life that can develop in its own ongoing course the standards to which further living should be submitted, as well as the experiences by which these standards must themselves be tested. Democracy is a way of life that tries and hopes for salvation from within this process. Non-democratic systems and communications do not have the built-in means to improve themselves or respond adequately to change.

We could raise one more skeptical challenge to all of this. Is Dewey warranted in hoping that we can deepen and regulate everyday experience by its own means? This is to raise a question about his underlying faith in experience. Dewey was explicit that democracy ultimately rests on faith.

Democracy and Faith in Experience

To be both empirical and to appeal to faith may seem contradictory or incoherent. In particular, how can democracy be empirically grounded when it is only an imagined possibility with much evidence against it? Granted, ideals are the sort of thing that are supposed to be beyond evidence, but aren't we in the case of democracy going beyond what is reasonable? Why should we persist in believing in what we know, based upon the evidence, cannot be? Is it not more reasonable to abandon faith? Is not relying on faith as the basis of democracy a recognition that it lacks the reasonableness of our most rational commitments?

These questions and most of the traditional polemics about the justification of faith are sustained without questioning the assumptions either
that faith is a special form of knowledge or that it is unimportant or invalid. But Dewey inherited from William James an alternative model of faith. He points out that "change from the one conception of faith to the other is indicative of a profound alteration" (LW 5:267).

James knew that it is only by presupposing the traditional epistemic conception of a believer (i.e., a detached and neutral spectator of propositions) that one can hold that faith is an auxiliary faculty, an add-on to reason (and what is reasonable) after reason can go no further.38 Having faith is a type of commitment, an insistence on a possibility, and a tendency to act upon it, fully aware of the risk involved in a particular context. Faith is necessary and important in all dimensions of life and not something confined to religion.

Faith is a complex and rich phenomenon where different modes of experience are brought together. And it is an active organic cooperation between the plurality of demands placed on the believer. Since we are not merely cognitive beings, says James, we represent the appeal of our beliefs to be "our whole nature's loyalty and not to any emaciated faculty of syllogistic proof."39

Hence, determining or evaluating the reasonableness of a faith in democracy is different from determining whether democracy is true or false, and different from validating a knowledge claim. There are contextual reasons relevant to this determination that go well beyond evidence or any other epistemic reasons. There is, strictly speaking, no faith in democracy in general; there are only particular faiths. Ultimately the issue of justification is a contextual one; that is, the unique context of each individual as each confronts a different set of circumstances (including evidence and needs) determines whether a particular faith is justified.

But what, then, about the question of whether Dewey was justified in his particular faith in democracy? All of the reasons presented would have to count in favor of a positive answer, but we cannot pretend here to exhaust all of the personal and non-epistemic reasons Dewey may have had to continue to have faith in democracy in spite of contrary considerations and challenges. We can say, however, that his faith was reasonable insofar as it was not uncritically adopted. As Michael Eldridge has demonstrated, Dewey's faith was "a set of enduring beliefs that ran beyond the evidence available at any given time, but that remained correctable by continued experience."40

The view that justification of faith is something individual and contextual does not entail that a philosophical defense of democracy is futile. A philosopher can provide support that may become part of the con-

textual set of reasons to be considered by an individual. In other words, the reasons Dewey gives in favor of democracy may lead others with similar commitments and circumstances to adopt a faith, or strengthen their faith, in democracy.

The different understanding of faith which is based upon a pragmatist view of experience underscores the importance and necessity of faith for democracy. James understood that the traditional conceptions of faith had been built upon the model of a passive, cognitive subject in a static universe. If the world is complete, then all the beliefs in what we want the world to be seem futile or like wishful thinking. Faith in democracy seems like believing something that is false. But if reality is in transformation—in the making—then faith is an active agency; it is not a passive certitude, but a formative factor. For often it is only by taking this kind of risk in our beliefs that we can bring about significant positive changes in the world; and "often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true,"41 as James put it. In short, faith is a formative factor necessary to actualize our ideals.

Depending on their consequences, some faiths will surely be better than others, but we cannot know a priori what those consequences will be. We need to engage in "faith ventures" to find out. Sometimes we have to be explorers, open new trails, and adopt a willingness to learn from our mistakes. James and Dewey were meliorists, that is, they believed in the possibility that we can make this a better world. But they were aware that this might require a good will not only in our actions, but in our beliefs. For it might be the case that one of the first risks we need to take in order to actually make this a better world is to believe that we can.

But by basing democracy on faith, how do we avoid the risks of wishful thinking and self-deception? The answer is that we do not. These are dangers, but they should not be met by simply ruling out faith altogether or discouraging it, for there are equal, if not greater, risks involved in paralyzing our "native capacities for faith."42 A failure to take the risk involved in having faith in democracy (and surrendering to skepticism and cynicism) is not altogether to avoid risk, but to take a different kind of risk, namely, the risk of losing those things that might depend on believing in the possibility of democracy. One of the things lost may be democracy as a way of life. Democracy requires faith for its own realization.

I claimed earlier that one of the considerations in determining the reasonableness of an ideal is how it relates to one's other central commitments and hopes. An important part of my present task has been to make explicit how Dewey's views on morality, democracy, and philosophy are
part of a coherent vision. In order to engage in criticism and to learn one needs to have a clearer and more organized vision of one's commitments. Dewey thought this was a task for philosophy.

The clearer and more organized vision of the contents of beliefs may have as an immediate outcome an enhanced sense of their worth and greater loyalty to them. But nevertheless the set of beliefs undergoes more than a sea-change in the process. (LW 6319)

It is perhaps a mistake to ask which of Dewey’s commitments and beliefs was more fundamental, for this presupposes the kind of foundational model of justification that he did not adopt. Instead, among them there was a supporting relationship in any ongoing inquiry. Dewey’s philosophical investigations into each such commitment led him to continuously develop, modify, and refine the conceptions of the others. He sought a view of experience that supports his moral ideal as much as he sought a moral ideal that is congenial to his view of experience. His philosophy of experience served as a way of reinterpreting the democratic ideals and of holding that the world we live in is one in which faith in democracy is reasonable. However, it is equally true that he found in democracy an affirmation of the potentialities of experience.

The ideal moral life is one that is based on and is supportive of faith in experience. Dewey could not have been more explicit that the pursuit of democracy was such a life. He claimed that, compared to other general modes of social and moral participation, it is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means... Democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. (LW 14:229)

What is it about democracy that makes it the way of life most consistent with the pragmatist faith in experience? In social and moral matters we are accustomed to assume that amelioration and solutions must come from the top down, especially from means that are beyond or above experience. “Men have not been able to trust either the world or themselves to realize the values and qualities which are the possibilities of nature” (LW 4:240). For Dewey, this general distrust in nature is intimately tied to a distrust of those who serve as the backbone of most aristocratic ideals. Democracy’s faith in the people is understood by Dewey as a faith in the potentialities and self-sufficiency of the everyday transactions of individuals if the proper conditions are provided. “Every other form of moral and social faith rest upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control; to some ‘authority’ alleged to exist outside the process of experience” (LW 14:229).

For Dewey, formal and political notions of democracy are not sufficiently robust to counteract the need for some aristocratic scheme to regulate our everyday affairs. On the other hand, if democracy is understood as merely following the conversations and wishes of the people, then this seems like the abandonment of any standards. Only a robust notion of democracy that requires communal inquiry (with all that this implies) can be supportive of the faith that experience can provide the standards to which further experience may submit. Aristocracy and the need to look outside our direct qualitative world and communications for guidance will continue to appeal and flourish so long as democracy is devoid of its most promising possibilities. For Dewey, the alternative to the disillusionment with formal democratic societies where people are merely drifting, are apathetic, or are mere consumers of entertainment is more democracy; it is not the search for the guidance of a wise and benevolent dictator. Again, to take this stand requires a lot of faith in the people.

The connection between Dewey’s faiths in experience and democracy is made even stronger when the latter is understood from the point of view of his ethics. Democracy fits his conception of an ideal moral life because it has in its generic features, phases, and dynamics all of the features of an intelligent and aesthetic moral life. Democratic inquiry embraces, affirms, and relies on everyday life in all of its contingency and qualitative richness to settle disagreements or to come to decisions. It so trusts the grain of experience that it tries to turn even error, conflict, incompleteness, pluralism, uncertainty, and tragedy into sources of instruction. This makes possible a moral life that can be self-educational and capable of ameliorating its problems through its own resources.

Experience cannot become educational and grow in ordered richness when our relationships are not democratic. Certain ways of interacting are cumulatively enriching and meaningful, whereas others are not. It is in democratic communication that the conditions for experience to educate, enlarge, and enrich itself are maximized. These conditions consist of the predominance of the traits already mentioned: full and free communication and cooperation, generous give-and-take (reciprocity and sharing), and the exchange of experiences and ideas in an environment of sympathetic intercommunication where everyone contributes and corrects her individual limitations. The truth of this claim may be intuitively obvious to those who have had the opportunity to be part of this kind of interaction. But I think there are more general and basic assumptions that are
worth disclosing behind Dewey’s preference for the organic interactions that characterize a democratic way of life.

If we think of a self, a relationship, a community, or a society as wholes (constituted by transacting parts) in the context of transacting with other wholes, then this allows us to abstractly, but usefully, highlight the most general features of democratic interactions, and to highlight some of Dewey’s hidden working hypotheses. In previous chapters I characterized the ideal self and community as wholes in which inclusivity, openness, diversity (distinctiveness of its parts), and flexibility coexist with fullness and intimacy of interaction. I also characterized the tension-filled nature of this coexistence in terms of centripetal and centrifugal forces, values, or tendencies. Each of these correspond to two different ways in which present experience is subject to qualitative improvement, namely, it can both deepen and widen.

The centrifugal tendencies allow a self and a community the richness of experience that comes from expansion and increased breadth. Widening the experience of children should be the result of growing up in a community or in relationships where certain virtues are encouraged. Dewey seems to be committed to the hypothesis that inclusivity and diversity as features of organic, interactive wholes are better traits than exclusivity (or “closedness”) and homogeneity. In both the ideal character and the ideal community he assumes that more points of transactions and opportunities for new and diverse relations signify more opportunities for learning and releasing unknown potentialities. Expansion of horizons leads to a rich and diversified experience. On the other hand, exclusiveness, one-sidedness, homogeneity, and suppression are usually restrictions of experience. They are barriers to full development and growth that can starve the whole and its parts.

But breadth does not guarantee depth. In fact, it can be a threat if taken to an extreme. The wider and expansive self and community are not improvements in experience if there is no genuine transaction between its parts, that is, the sort of wholehearted reciprocal interaction where the parts are affected. Dewey’s hypothesis is that fullness is usually better than halfflucent or superficial interaction. Interdependence and solidarity are positive traits. Where there is isolation, compartmentalization, segregation, suppression, fragmentation, and polarization there are barriers that can impoverish the lives of everyone.

The possibility of democracy is then for Dewey the possibility of widening and deepening present experience. “Every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched” (IW 14:229–30). The ideal is for generosity, openness, and inclusivity not to undermine fullness of interaction. The democratic community is wide and open, both vertically and horizontally, without losing its integrity. The features that provide its ability to widen experience are also responsible for its freedom and flexibility; and the ones that make depth and fullness possible contribute to its stability and order. As with any work of art there is a very delicate balance between the stable and the precarious, as well as between its centripetal and centrifugal values.

The intelligent and aesthetic characters of democracies are mutually dependent. The community most capable of learning from experience is also the one that has all the features that define aesthetic activity, which for Dewey is the most inherently meaningful type of activity in experience. The democratic way of life is able to maintain the kind of balance and rhythm in its everyday doings and undergoings that, for Dewey, characterize aesthetic experience: a balance of tensions with rhythmic variety. Ideal activity is a merging of playfulness with seriousness that allows richness and flexibility without sacrificing stability. Democracy signifies for Dewey this possibility at a social level. The democratic community is also the aesthetic community because it is constituted by relationships that are neither fixed, routine, or mechanical, nor anarchical, capricious, or arbitrary.

The democratic community falls between the extremes of a community that is disintegrated and one that is kept stable only because of some imposed external authority. In other words, it is capable of preserving its own integrity without the need of external foundations. A stability achieved through full interaction and openness and not through force or repression is required to procure its ordered richness. Since it can steer safely between complete radicalism and complete conservatism, it can rely on what is stable without falling into drudgery. But it can also be playful and welcome change without degenerating into chaos. The non-democratic ways of dealing with moral and social problems represent for Dewey a failure to use the resources and potentialities of experience. For example, in dealing with change, uncertainty, ambivalence, and pluralism, it is ineffective to deny their reality (as is often the strategies of authoritarian, dualistic, and rule-guided views). The best way to preserve order is not by trying to get rid of participation or of the diversity present in human experience.
13. A PHILOSOPHICAL JUSTIFICATION OF DEMOCRACY

2. Ibid., 16.
4. Ibid.
5. Matthew Engelstein, for example, argues in his Pragmatism and Political Theory: From Dewey to Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) that Dewey offers a plausible, but incomplete, philosophical justification for his normative ethical and political theory.
6. This is a quote from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., that Dewey uses in LW 1:313.
10. Recall that, for Dewey, nature (i.e., reality) is not something apart, outside, or behind experience.
12. Michael Eldridge, Transforming Experience (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 83. Eldridge traces the history of this objection to Dewey (see pp. 70–84). Eldridge defends Dewey against Walter Lippmann, John Herman Randall, Jr., and Robert Westbrook by providing some Deweyan guidelines that could be part of a “Deweyan manual to political action” (113). My defense of Dewey consists, instead, in raising doubts about what is assumed by the objection.
15. For a recent book on this issue from a pragmatic standpoint, see Erin McKenna, The Task of Utopia (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
17. Reinhold Niebuhr was the most persistent critic of Dewey on the issue of naivete. For the history of this criticism of Dewey, see Westbrook, John Dewey and American Democracy, 523–36; and Eldridge, Transforming Experience, 52–62.
18. Eldridge, Transforming Experience, 54.
19. For instance, in The Public and its Problems, Dewey says, “As long as interests of pecuniary profit are powerful, and a public has not located and identified itself, those who have this interest will have an unresisted motive for tampering with the spring of political action in all that affects them” (LW 2348).
20. He was aware of “the influence of private interests in procuring suppression, secrecy and misrepresentation,” and of “the triviality and ‘sensational’ quality of so much of what passes as news” (LW 2347).
22. Ibid., 212.
27. Ibid., 51.
28. See LW 10:54.
30. As Michael Eldridge has argued in Transforming Experience, there is more to inquiry than having a rational discussion; see pp. 24–42.
33. Ibid.
35. For textual support of this claim, see endnote #9 in this book’s introduction.


37. This is the view of Hilary Putnam in “A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy,” Renewing Philosophy, 180–200.


40. Eldridge, Transforming Experience, 145.


42. Ibid., 7.

43. Dewey’s metaphysics, as Westbrook correctly suggests, is a metaphysics that supports democracy; it is a “metaphysics for the common man.” Westbrook, John Dewey and American Democracy, 361.


CONCLUSION

1. Dewey’s views on moral education and his moral philosophy are closely intertwined and perhaps inseparable. Nevertheless, these are different inquiries initiated by a different problem. We must not confuse the standpoint of an educator concerned to provide the best tools or prepare others for moral life with the standpoint of a philosopher concerned with ethics as an inquiry of morality as it is experienced. Interpretations of Dewey that take his emphasis on growth and the cultivation of our characters as central to his ethics sometimes confuse these two standpoints.


3. I owe this way of articulating this point to Steven Fesmire.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


