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Dewey's Conception of Philosophy

THERE ARE FASHIONS in philosophy as there are fashions in clothes, and John Dewey, like the long skirt, is no longer in fashion. People in education departments still fight about Dewey's philosophy of education, and neo-conservatives like Kirk and Hallowell or Marxists like Selsam and Wells blame Dewey for most of the ills and muddles of our cultural and intellectual life, but, for the most part, Dewey and the philosophical approach he initiated have, temporarily at least, passed from the center of interest.

True, Dewey has become an American institution; he is the subject of frequent doctoral dissertations—particularly at Columbia University—and he is regular fare in courses in American intellectual history. But like Sinclair Lewis in literature, Dewey, in philosophy, no longer captures the imagination.

The *avant-garde* among the professional philosophers in the United States, the Commonwealth countries and Scandinavia have centered their interest around what is variously called linguistic philosophy, conceptual analysis or analytic philosophy. Sometimes this takes the form of a keen interest in symbolic logic and the application of its formal techniques to philosophical problems. The technical work of Russell, Carnap and Tarski are the classical models for this approach. More recently, a kind of non-formal linguistic or conceptual analysis, utilizing natural languages, has come to the center of attention. This approach focuses attention not only on the uses of language in science and mathematics but also on its uses in law, morality, literature and religion. Broader in scope and more humanistically oriented, it has engaged the talents of many younger English-speaking philosophers. At present it is perhaps the dominant philosophical approach among technical philosophers in the English-speaking world. Wittgenstein, Moore, Wisdom, Ayer, Ryle and Austin are the major figures here.

On the Continent and in Latin America these linguistic philosophies have had little influence—there existentialism, phenomenology and, in certain institutional circles, Marxism and Thomism have held court—but Dewey's influence in these places has also been slight.

Professional philosophers apart, linguistic philosophy has not been—at least until recently—a major force in American intellectual life. As the influence of Dewey, James, Royce and Santayana waned among the educated public, the slack was not taken up by the rising forms of analytic philosophy; instead the existentialist-type philosophies of the Crisis Theologians, Niebuhr, Buber and Tillich, and then later the thought of the existentialists themselves, caught the imagination of the intellectuals. To the morally perplexed, religiously confused and perhaps personally bedeviled onlooker, linguistic analysis, with its scrupulous concern for the complexities of ordinary language or its obsession with the construction of artificial, logically perfect "languages," seemed remote, irrelevant to the problems of the age and the miseries, apprehensions, and longings of man. People in moral quandaries desperately wanted to know what is *good* and what they *ought* to do and not just whether "good" or "ought" is definable or indefinable, simple or complex, natural or non-natural. To these people such persistent philosophical questions were of no interest at all except where answers to such questions were thought to lead, directly or indirectly, to moral wisdom, to actual knowledge of good and evil. The existentialist attitude that "all useful philosophizing must be an attempt to work out a personal way of life" seemed to have a relevance that linguistic analysis could not possibly have to the honest seeker after truth who wanted to live authentically.

Though Dewey also wrote about "the problems of men," his philosophy was often thought to be as unrewarding as analytic philosophy while lacking its distinctive clarity. It seemed to many—perhaps because they were better acquainted with what Niebuhr said about Dewey than with what Dewey said himself—that Dewey's philosophy was an expression of a shallow, naively optimistic, scientistic faith. Dewey, blithely ignorant of the perversities and ambivalences of the "underground man" in us all, muddleheadedly thought he could save our souls with social science. Dewey, to many a cultural hipster, is synonymous with softness, confusion, and innocent liberal utopianism, unwilling or unable to come to grips with those dark forces of our social and personal life dug up by Marx, Freud and Pareto.

To many a professional philosopher, on the other hand, Dewey is hardly a philosopher at all. As a critic of prior philosophies he often substitutes an irrelevant genetic analysis for logical analysis of the difficulties in these theories. His accounts of "truth," "meaning," "knowledge" and "value," these philosophers contend, are thoroughly unrigorous. Dewey sings songs in praise of science and the scientific method, without any real understanding of the complexities of science. He writes about logic and semantics without real familiarity with or careful consideration of the techniques or puzzles of the symbolic logician. Worst of all, he hardly raises genuine philosophical questions at all, but substitutes a kind of vague sociology of knowledge for philosophical analysis, uncritically assuming just those very logical or conceptual points that are of the greatest philosophic interest.

There is some truth in these allegations against Dewey, but for the most part they are stereotyped and unfair, and not based on any sympathetic study of his work. Philosophy has come a long way since Dewey's germinal ideas developed, and the cultural scene is very different from the one which Dewey and Tufts faced when, in 1908, they published their text, *Ethics*. I am not a Deweyite, and I find the approach of Wittgenstein and Moore far more enlightening, even for thinking about the foundations of morality, than Dewey's, but I also find Dewey's approach and his very different conception of philosophic inquiry enlightening. It is my belief that we have a lot to learn from Dewey yet. This is particularly true for those who are perplexed about the place of reason in morality and society, for those who, like Kathleen Nott, think "that the only valid ethical statements are personal statements—of *my* experiences, *my* realizations, *my* choices and preferences"—and for those ethical absolutists, like Tillich and Vivas, who believe that you can only discover the ***ground*** of "the ethical" in some non-scientifically apprehended, logically inexpressible, "ontological realm."

I should like to elucidate Dewey's distinctive conception of philosophy, to contrast it with some more dominant approaches and to show its relevance to "vitally important" topics.

I

The word "philosophy" is vague, and it has undergone a complex historical development. Dewey's conception of the proper office of philosophy is unique. As commentators like Sidney Hook have pointed out, Dewey gives the very conception of philosophy itself a radical development—a development that is, in part, responsible for some of the misunderstandings of his thought.

If we ask the "plain man"—the philosophically untutored man—what philosophy is, he might well reply: "A man's philosophy is, well, you know, his standards, the things he will really try to live by or stand up for. All of us, whether we know it or not, have a philosophy." The "plain man's" uncoached response is to the point. There certainly is a standard use of the word "philosophy" that links it with man's basic beliefs about how he ought to live and die. To ask for a man's philosophy, in this sense, is to ask for his standards, his basic moral and intellectual commitments. But if we settle on such a usage, philosophy gets perilously close to religion, and when we note this, we usually hasten to add that a man's philosophy is his rationally articulated or articulatable convictions. Religion, it is fashionable to say, expresses our ultimate concern. But the objects of such concern, it is said, can be grasped only by faith, and crucial religious directives are allegedly given to us only by Revelation. The honest man, aware of his own misery, apprehends God with his heart; that is to say, as a knight of faith, he has an immediate, instinctive, unreasoned apprehension of God. But this so-called apprehension is, as Pascal and Kierkegaard well knew, not a "philosophical apprehension." Philosophy, they argued, could not possibly give us such truths, but such "knowing with the heart" was literally the way of faith; man driven to despair throws himself on God's grace. "Philosophy," even in its most primitive uses, means something very different from this. And, if like Jaspers, we must speak of a "philosophical faith," it remains a rational faith; a man's philosophy consists in the standards he is willing to defend intellectually.

But this primitive use of "philosophy" is not adequate for the philosopher. As Dewey himself points out, philosophy has been generally regarded as "an attempt to comprehend—that is to gather together the varied details of the world and of life into a single inclusive whole. . . ." This rationalist impulse, which was at its strongest in his Objective Idealist mentors and opponents, Bradley, Bosanquet and Royce, is a deep-seated one with philosophers. Philosophers have desired as complete an outlook upon experience as is possible. But this drive for generality is not just a drive for some very general descriptive or categorial features of the world. Instead, this drive for generality is linked with a *Weltanschauung* that will, hopefully, give us wisdom. Again, as Dewey puts it, "Whenever philosophy has been taken seriously, it has been assumed that it signified achieving a wisdom which would influence the conduct of life." In Greece the ancient schools of philosophy were also ways of living, and although the quests for a way of life of Christian philosophers like Augustine or Aquinas were supported by what seemed to them a far more secure base, i.e., the Christian Faith, philosophy even for them was also envisaged as affording an additional kind of wisdom that was essential to the highest forms of the good life.

In the great systems of rationalist thought and in scholastic thought today, philosophical statements are supposed to be very general statements about the nature of the world. Through Spinoza's massive system, for instance, we are supposed to be able to find the way to human freedom. Analytic philosophy has called in question this traditional position. It has sharply scrutinized the traditionalist's claim that philosophy gives us some very general truths about value, knowledge and being. It questions not only the legitimacy of philosophy as *Weltanschauung* but also of philosophy as a kind of "first science" or "super-science." We see here a complex conceptual development; we are now far from the primitive uses of "philosophy." "Philosophy" is indeed a term for many different activities.

Something more needs to be said about this development. As Ryle puts it, the clue to the difference between philosophy and science is the realization that while "science produces true (and sometimes false) statements about the world; philosophy examines the rules or reasons that make some statements (like those of good scientists) true-or-false, and others (like metaphysicians' statements) nonsensical." Philosophy, that is to say, becomes analysis: it talks about the uses of moral, religious, legal or scientific discourse. Philosophy no longer directly talks about the world but talks about the talk about the world. (It should be noted, parenthetically, that Ryle, Wittgenstein, Toulmin, Winch and others have come to say that this distinctively philosophical talk is also, *in a sense*, about the world; that is, we talk about the *uses* of the word "cause" or "morality," not just about the *word* "cause" or "morality." But this kind of talk is still very different from common sense or scientific assertions. It is conceptual rather than allegedly substantive in the way some "philosophy of being" would be. In understanding the jobs these words are characteristically employed to do, we come to understand the forms of life, the general categories, with which we organize and understand our lives. As Peter Winch has said, "to give an account of the meaning of a word is to describe how it is used; and to describe how it is used is to describe the social intercourse into which it enters."

And *in this way* philosophical talk about the uses of talk is also talk about reality.)

Both in the rationalist and the analytic phase of the development of the concept, philosophy tends to be increasingly shut off from its earlier, more primitive, conception as a normative statement of one's clarified standards. Among the linguistic analysts Anthony Quinton and G. J. Warnock have felt that the most crucial contribution of contemporary linguistic philosophy was not the elimination of metaphysics but the elimination of *Weltanschauung* conceptions from philosophy. Even in examining moral or religious uses of language the analyst must be neutral. His task is completed when he has given a sufficiently full description of the uses of the discourse in question in order to dispel perplexity over the actual functioning of our language in certain philosophically crucial areas. For example, the man who thinks no man is ever really free if determinism is true or that no inductions are really ever more than expressions of animal faith is in need of philosophical help. The philosopher dispels the philosophical fog by making it clear to the perplexed man what he and all other native users of the language mean by saying "You were free to come to the lecture or to stay home," or "It is as certain, as anything can be, that the sun will rise tomorrow." Thus, the philosopher is not to change the world or make any normative recommendations at all. Philosophy leaves everything as it is, but it gives us a clearer view of the actual operation of, say, scientific and moral discourse. When this job is done the philosopher's task is completed.

Dewey's approach contrasts with this. He has insisted that concern with *Weltanschauung* is not just some extraneous element that has clung on from the days in which "a philosophy" and "a way of life" were nearly synonymous. These are genuine concerns and should remain an integral part of the very office of philosophy. He would agree with Ryle and the logical empiricists that it is up to the scientists to explain to us what the world is like, that statements that so and so is the case, or that object X has properties of A, B and C, are empirical statements and are confirmable by the techniques of scientific inquiry. But, as Dewey pointed out in *Experience and Nature*, there may be also some very general statements (empirical truisms) that are at the very least part of enlightened common sense, assumed by the sciences and yet *not* a part of any scientific discipline. These are statements like "Thinking creatures inhabit the world," "Man is continuous with nature," "There are many colors in the world," "The world changes and there are many different kinds of processes in the world," "The life of each man will come to an end."

Furthermore, when the perplexed man, facing radical social change, asks, "What kind of a world am I going to live in?" or "What is the life of man like on earth?" certain very general empirical statements about "individuality and constant relations, contingency and need, movement and arrest, the stable and the precarious" may well require explicit statement. We may need to remind men that they are social animals with a long period of infantalization, that they are symbolic animals capable of guilt and happiness. These statements are usually not part of any science.[1] But they are not for that matter synthetic *a priori* truths or categorial utterances that must be assumed prior to and independent of any empirical examination. Certainly many of them are held prior to any investigation, and they are hardly the subject of empirical investigation any more than it is a subject for empirical investigation that "There are male students at Yale" or "There are female students at Smith." But such statements are empirically verifiable, and if we discover someone suffering from Cartesian doubts about these statements, we can verify them.

Thus while it is not the case that all statements about the world are scientific, it is the case—Dewey argues—that all genuinely factual claims are verifiable by the empirical testing techniques adopted by the scientists. In that sense it is true that what science cannot tell us mankind cannot know. But Dewey would not assert that these general empirical statements

[1] If it is said that they are basic statements in the social and behavioral sciences, this is only to say in effect that certain empirical truisms are assumed by these sciences. They are hardly laws or hypotheses of these sciences.

are never philosophical, as Ryle and most of the analytic philosophers have. Very general statements like "Man is a part of nature" and "There are many things in the world" are, under certain conditions at least, philosophical statements *and* very general empirical statements in Dewey's view. Dewey calls them metaphysical claims.

But in this use of "Metaphysical" there is no collision with the severest logical empiricist or anti-metaphysical analyst, for in such a use "metaphysical statements" are a sub-class of empirical statements. Some logical empiricists might claim that there is little point in uttering such empirical truisms, but they need not—and would not—at all deny that such statements have cognitive meaning. Furthermore, Dewey could reply (as Hook has) that as long as some people keep uttering absurdities like "Everything is really the same" and "Man is pure Spirit seeking to transcend nature," there is a point in coherently marshalling such empirical truisms into a metaphysics or "philosophical anthropology." This is one sense in which Dewey's conception of philosophy "goes beyond" the conception of philosophy prevalent among linguistic analysts.

But there is another way in which Dewey identifies his conception of philosophy with the *Weltanschauung* aspects of earlier philosophic conceptions. Philosophy for Dewey is concerned with social change and conflict. Philosophy is not just a passive reflex of civilization, but is, as Gail Kennedy puts it, "in reality, an argument and a plea for certain social ideals." Or, in Dewey's own words, upon occasion philosophy "proclaims that such and such *should* be the significant value to which mankind *should* loyally attach itself." Philosophy functions as a very general critic of civilization; it functions to convert "such culture as exists into consciousness, into imagination which is logically coherent and is not incompatible with what is factually known." The philosopher should also be the sage, and the need for sages in our culture is by no means, in Dewey's view, a thing of the past. Philosophers must also, upon occasion, be prepared to help instigate social change. A rational man must first understand the world, and it is a philosopher's duty to help man understand it, but like Marx, Dewey did not only want to understand the world, but, as an intellectual and as a dedicated man of thought, he also wished to change it.

Philosophy, to Dewey, is not just a neutral analysis of our various forms of discourse. He would not, of course, denigrate clarity, even if he himself is not, upon occasion, nearly clear enough. But Dewey, like H. H. Price, claims that clarity is not enough. We philosophize in order to attain a more rational view of the world in which we live and in order to attain something that has been called the life of reason. In doing this we must perforce not only understand what is meant by "social institution" and "a moral point of view"; we must also assess institutions and moral points of view in terms of certain fundamental rational criteria and bring the criteria of our own time and place under the steady gaze of reflected criticism. Philosophy ought not only to have an elucidating role; it ought also to have an "additive and transforming . . . role in the history of civilization." Philosophy is, in Dewey's celebrated phrase, "a criticism of criticisms."

As we have seen, Dewey did not identify philosophy with science. But science and the scientific procedure of verification play an important, if *negative,* role in the critical function of philosophy. Only the method of science provides an objective *test* for the values which tradition transmits and to which we often feel a deep but ambivalent commitment. This negative office of science is crucial in a philosophical assessment of which among conflicting ideals or practices is the more *worthy* of acceptance.

The use of this scientific criterion for fixing belief will not give us certainty, but it does provide an objective standard for fixing belief. Like Pierce, Dewey is a "fallibilist"; there is no self-evidence in philosophy, there is no intellectual point of view permanently free from the possibility of criticism and revision. But with fallibilism goes a "critical common-sensism"; that is to say, though there can be no privileged heralding of self-evident truths, there is no reason for wholesale or Cartesian philosophical doubt. Though nothing is indubitable, not everything can be doubted *at once*, and it only makes sense to doubt against a background in which certain statements in the context are not doubted. For there to be doubt, something must count as resolving doubt, and for this to be logically possible, there must be at least some accepted procedural rules and some statements that could count as instances of true or false utterances. Cartesian doubt *cannot be* real doubt at all. Over-all philosophical doubt is a caricature of doubt. Genuine doubts typically emerge where there is some specific break in commonsense or scientific knowledge.

II

There is another aspect of Dewey's conception of philosophy that needs emphasis here. It is an aspect that is very different from the view of philosophy as analysis, and in some important respects it is like the view of contemporary existentialists.

Dewey emphasized that philosophy was *not* something that was above cultural change or conflict. "Philosophers," he remarks, "are parts of history, caught in its movement; creators perhaps in some measure of its future, but also assuredly creatures of its past." Like Nietzsche, Dewey believed that philosophers must learn to think historically. They ought not to talk of men as if they existed somehow unhistorically, nor of human problems as if they were independent of a definite cultural background. In making generalizations about man's predicament we should be constantly aware of *which* man, *where* and *when* and faced with what specific predicaments. The conflict or supposed conflict between evolution and religion was a problem for the nineteenth-century thinker in a way that it is not a problem today. Squaring one's philosophical beliefs with the certainties of the Christian faith was a problem for Augustine, Scotus and Occam in a way it is not a problem for many philosophers today.

It is indeed true that the so-called perennial philosophies sought, in their quest for certainty, to give a rational articulation to certain necessary truths about an Unchangeable Reality. They sought a conception of the world that would be beyond change, that would not, as with the claims of science or Dewey's fallibilistic philosophical beliefs, be subject to possible revision. But, Dewey argues, their philosophies were not in actuality free from the preoccupations of their epoch. So-called "spiritual ideals" expressive of "deep unchangeable truths" were created under conditions in which men were unable to control their environment and lacked the scientific tools to genuinely understand it. Dewey puts it this way: "As long as man was unable by means of the arts of practice to direct the course of events, it was natural for him to seek an emotional substitute." This substitute would give men the feeling of certainty and control. But rational men must come to see there is no such immutable vantage point.

There grew up, in the ancient world, a division between knowing and doing, between genuine knowledge, on the one hand, and practical, everyday belief, on the other. Traditional philosophy was allegedly only concerned with the former. It claimed, in Dewey's words, to "grasp universal Being, and Being which is universal is fixed and immutable." Traditional "philosophy in maintaining its claim to be a superior form of knowledge was compelled to take an invidious and so to say malicious attitude toward the conclusions of natural science." There is, traditional philosophy maintained, a higher *a priori* road, beyond the vicissitudes of mere scientific or practical belief that would enable us to "achieve the ultimate security of higher ideals and purposes." Exercised by these ancient preconceptions even contemporary neo-scholastics talk about the so-called transcendental attributes of Being: Truth, Goodness and Reality.

These concerns of traditional philosophy seem far from a concern with a vision of how to order our lives, a concern that Dewey finds essential to any serious conception of philosophy. However, if we look behind the scenes at the cultural context in which these philosophies developed, we can see that such disguised mythical constructions, cloaked as *a priori* but synthetic truths, are intimately linked with some conception of how to live and die. Their underlying, though often masked, rationale remains practical. They have their inning where there is no scientific theory available actually to explain puzzling, seemingly inexplicable events. Men seeking a guide to right action and wisdom in a world in which ideals are constantly frustrated, precarious and hard to understand, much less to realize, will very naturally project onto the universe a secure "ontological realm of values" where there is no "discrepancy between existence and value," where evils are a necessary instrumentality in the fulfillment of a mysterious but immutable Good, and where a vision of the Good Life can escape the vicissitudes of habitat and the eccentricities of personality.

Faced with incessant and apparently irremediable moral perplexity, many men, from emotional necessity, project their own deepest desires onto admittedly mysterious "moral realms" in order to escape the relativism of a Montaigne or a Santayana. "After degrading practical affairs in order to exalt knowledge, the chief task of knowledge," for traditional philosophy, "turns out to be to demonstrate the absolutely assured and permanent reality of the values with which activity is concerned." "This is natural," Dewey adds, for "the thing which concerns all of us as human beings is precisely the greatest attainable security of values in concrete existence." The abstract metaphysical claims of traditional philosophy are always in fact—though not necessarily in theory—instrumental to this concern.

Like the existentialists, Dewey would argue that no matter how detached a philosophy may seem from cultural and personal concerns, it is always in fact deeply concerned with the pressing problems of men. It is in effect concerned to answer the Kierkegaardian question: How are we to live and die? What are we to seek as enduring and *worthwhile* ends?

Dewey would probably say that the point of philosophical analysis is to give us some purchase on these questions. Analyses in order to be good analyses must be neutral, but their *point* is never *just* intellectual enlightenment about the uses of our language. Their point is never just to give us a neat catalogue of the forms of meaningful discourse or the categories of thought. Rather, philosophical analysts should seek to dispel perplexity about the pressing problems of men. Dewey would certainly sanction Wittgenstein's remark that genuine thinking about personal problems is immeasurably nasty and difficult, yet he would add that if philosophy *only* enables us to think more clearly about "probability," "certainty" and the like, it will not have done all that it can do; for it should also enable us to think more clearly about ourselves, our fellows and the besetting problems of life. In doing this, it will help us to live with greater wisdom.

Traditional speculative philosophers worried about these problems of understanding and about human weal and woe too, but their attempts to meet them were mere rationalizations, giving us only the illusion of a solution. They, indeed, had "a house of theory," but upon analysis "the theory" proved to be no theory at all, but merely a road-block that prevented perfecting genuine *methods* of inquiry and intelligent action.

III

Dewey deliberately rejects the *a priori* methods of fixing belief characteristic of traditional philosophy. He seeks rather an empirical method for discovering reliable canons of inquiry, which, since ideas are instruments of action, would also give us an adequate method of action to enable us to meet harassing problems of conduct. There is no genuine sense of knowing, for Dewey, that does not involve doing. "Philosophy," in one of Dewey's few stylistically celebrated lines, "revitalizes itself when it ceases to deal with the problems of philosophers and deals with the problems of men." It should be "a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them." As Peterfreund recently put it, "Dewey believed that philosophy fulfills its function when it provides a methodology for dealing with social problems." Its aim is still to help us attain the life of reason. But Dewey's method for attaining this is distinctive; it involves a genuine departure from traditional philosophy; his basic concern is not to supply us with philosophical doctrines but with a method of inquiry. As Kennedy remarks, "Dewey's philosophy is not another 'system'; it is the development and application of a method. Whoever understands and accepts Dewey's philosophy does not take over a body of doctrine." *In this respect* Dewey's approach is strikingly like Wittgenstein's.

Philosophy then is a general method of criticism. Criticism occurs whenever we appraise what is observed, enjoyed or desired. We ask if what we desire is really desirable. We criticize when we ask the worth of anything, when we judge. Sensations and emotions supply judgments with its raw material. Judgments are acts of controlled inquiry, not just any reaction to our sense constituents. In judging we seek to discriminate and unify. "Philosophy is and can be nothing but this critical operation become aware of itself and its implications, pursued deliberately and systematically."

But this method of criticism is not primarily to be directed at the problems of the philosophers. Its primary concern is "to clarify, liberate and extend the goods which inhere in the naturally generated functions of experience." Philosophy ought not —and really cannot—create some superior world of "reality" *de novo*, nor can it delve into the secrets of Being, hidden from common sense and science. It has no stock of information or body of knowledge peculiarly its own. "If it does not become ridiculous when it sets up as a rival of science, it is only because a particular philosopher happens to be also, as a human being, a prophetic man of science." Rather than trying to discover eternal truths or allegedly rational "intuitions of Being," philosophy ought to accept and to utilize the best available scientific and commonsense knowledge of its own time and place. Its distinctive purpose "is criticism of beliefs, institutions, customs, policies, with respect to their bearing upon good."

Philosophy has no private source of knowledge. There is no "existential communication" even in Jasper's or Marcel's sense. Nor has philosophy any privileged access to what is good or valuable. "As it accepts knowledge of facts and principles from those competent in inquiry and discovery, so it accepts the goods that are diffused in human experience." The discovery of specific goods is the achievement of specific human beings acting, not in any professional capacity, but simply as human beings. It is not the private affair of any elite. Rather, in setting out the method of social criticism, philosophers ought to point out that in appraising values we must of necessity take into cognizance their causes and consequences. Furthermore, in discovering the causes and consequences of what we take to be good actions, scientific knowledge about human nature and about the "matter-of-fact efficiencies of nature" is indispensable.

In achieving this method of social criticism we need, in Dewey's terms, a "general logic of experience as a method of inquiry and interpretation." This "logic of experience" is Dewey's conception of the nature of inquiry.

Inquiry is the process of reflective thinking which is called up in a problematic situation—one in which we have real doubts about what to do. Inquiry always occurs in the context of problem-solving. But thinking takes place in a wider matrix of experience that cannot accurately be called cognitive. It is a matrix in which an organism interacts or transacts with his environment. Ideas or hypotheses are not meaningful when taken from the context in which they operate. Moral ideas, for example, must be examined, if we are really to understand them, in the actual contexts of moral decision; if we do not so examine them we will never understand the logic of moral discourse or fully understand what is desirable. Moral conceptions, if such advice is not heeded, will naturally be "understood" as an ineffable something-I-know-not-what or as the expression of the whims of mortal will.

It is Dewey's hope that this method of inquiry can be pushed from one field to another; it is his hope that it can become the one method of criticism for all the problems of men. The basic problem facing us today is—as he sees it—to extend this method of criticism to morality. Philosophy must show how we can use the sciences of man and the method of scientific inquiry to verify moral statements. Only if this is possible will the feckless effort to construct transcendental moralities cease or the feeling that moral utterances are at bottom unrationalizable expressions of preference be overcome; only by such a method of criticism in morality can a rational control of morality be instituted.

Dewey, of course, does not think that science can be a "sacred cow" telling us precisely what to do. Such a belief is too absurd to be seriously entertained. But in giving us some general knowledge of human capacities and wants and in enabling us to discover what are the likely consequences of acting on certain preferences in certain situations, it helps us develop some general reliable guides for a rational morality. To ask for more from a moral philosopher or from anyone else is to ask for something which cannot be had.

Nor does Dewey think that by such a method we are going to save our souls with social science by instituting a utopia in which the dark dilemmas of the human animal will become a thing of the past. Dewey may have been more optimistic than the facts warrant about the potentialities of human growth, though even here, the newly developing sciences of man may be able to do more about those dilemmas than people like Niebuhr suppose. But whether Dewey was too optimistic or not has nothing to do with the correctness of his philosophic method. In fact, only by such a method can we discover whether Dewey was too rosy-minded about human and social potentialities. If Dewey's hopes are illusory they can be discovered to be so. That the application of scientific intelligence to moral problems can, to some extent, relieve the inequalities and quandaries of our time is—in Dewey's words—"the reasonable object of our deepest faith and loyalty, the stay and support of all reasonable hopes." But how successful such a method will be is a matter of trial, not of dogma. And to express such a loyalty is "not to indulge in romantic idealization. It is not to assert that intelligence will ever dominate the course of events; it is not even to imply that it will save us from ruin and destruction. . . . Faith in a wholesale and final triumph is fantastic." Would that Reinhold Niebuhr had read and pondered these words of John Dewey!

IV

In this essay I have been more concerned with a sympathetic elucidation of some of Dewey's central ideas than with any attempt at a detailed criticism of them. Instead I have tried, in what for me is an act of love and intellectual piety, to make clear the conception of philosophy held by a great, but much maligned, frequently patronized and terribly misunderstood philosopher.[2] There is no room for detailed criticism here, but I would like to sketch out two central difficulties I find in that part of Dewey's thought I have emphasized.

First, his claim that the scientific method is the sole method for fixing belief seems to me to have serious difficulties, though not such obvious ones as are normally assumed. Connected with difficulties about this view is Dewey's claim—a claim which I believe to be false—that moral statements are empirical statements. It seems to me that Dewey here has not overcome the basic difficulties that both Hume and Mill stated about deriving an ought-statement from an is-statement; nor has he met the kind of difficulties that Moore has brought up with his so-called "naturalistic fallacy."

The basic considerations here are as follows: even if X is desired after an examination of the causes and consequences of desiring X, it still does not follow that X is desirable or X ought to be desired. But to carry out Dewey's program of identifying moral statements as a subspecies of empirical statement

[2] There is, of course, much more to be said of an elucidative nature. Since first writing this essay I have come across an article written by Charles Frankel with a somewhat similar intent. Frankel makes some of the points I make, and he stresses, in a way I did not, the sense in which Dewey had a vision of the order of things that permeated his whole approach. Frankel points out that "Dewey took the daily experience of individuals more seriously than he took anything else, and that he ultimately evaluated everything as an instrument for the enrichment of such experience." Dewey's "ideal was a world in which individuals lived with a sense of active purpose, exerting their individual powers, putting their mark on their environments, sharing their experiences, and making their own contribution to the common enterprises of humanity." (Charles Frankel, "John Dewey's Legacy," *The American Scholar*, XXXIX [Summer, 1960], 313-31.)

some such identity of meaning must be established. Suppose I ask, "If intelligent people still desire X after reflection on the probable causes and consequences of X or of desiring X, should X be desired, is X really desirable?" In asking this question, I am not asking a logically improper question, as I am if I ask, "If X is the male parent of John, is X John's father?" But if a theory like Dewey's is correct such a question ought also to be logically improper.

Some have defended Dewey at this point by talking about practical judgments, about "problematic situations supplying the ought," or about factual statements being really normative. But such talk does not really help Dewey here. It seems to me, as it seems to Isaiah Berlin, that Morton White's criticisms of Dewey's ethics in White's *Social Thought in America,* though defective in detail, are in principle correct or could be slightly modified so as to be correct and decisive. Sidney Hook and Gail Kennedy have tried hard to meet these criticisms, but I do not believe they have been successful.[3] But this is a long and complicated issue, on which I may well be wrong, and an issue on which it is impossible—as it always is in philosophy—to speak *ex cathedra.*

I shall here briefly consider only a central facet of the issue. If it is said that there is no gap to be closed between the "is" and the "ought," since all hypotheses are really normative or prescriptive, then I would argue that "normative" and "prescriptive" are being used in such a wide way as to obliterate distinctions we frequently make and practically need to make with such conceptions. If "Thousands of people starve each year in Asia" is really as normative as "Thousands of people ought to starve each year in Asia for it lessens the Yellow Menace," then "normative" is being used in such a way that a

[3] See Gail Kennedy, "Science and the Transformation of Common Sense: The Basic Problem of Dewey's Philosophy," *The Journal of Philosophy,* II (May 27, 1954), 313-25, and Sidney Hook, "The Desirable and Emotive in Dewey's Ethics," Sidney Hook, ed., *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom* (New York, 1950), 194-216.

logical gap emerges between the norm "Thousands of people starve each year in Asia" and the further norm "Thousands of people ought to starve each year in Asia"; for it is certainly intelligible to say that people can starve when they ought not to. We would then have to say we can't derive moral norms from factual psychological norms unless we assume some other moral norm as a premise or as a leading principle, but this is to re-admit, in a cumbersome way, just the distinction between the "is" and the "ought" that Hume, Sidgwick and Moore were trying to enforce. It is simpler and more adequate to assert that we cannot derive from a factual statement alone any normative or moral conclusions at all. If one persists in talking in the complicated way described above, it still remains the case that one cannot derive a moral norm from factual norms. Dewey's dream of making morality into "a science of valuation" has not been fulfilled.

But the admission that Dewey is wrong in claiming that moral statements are empirical statements does not seem to me to be as destructive to his over-all program about the place of reason in ethics as it does to Professor Kennedy and some other close students of Dewey.[4] Rather than betokening a "schizophrenic strain" in our culture, it seems to me to express the logical truth that to evaluate is to evaluate, and to describe is to describe, and to predict is to predict, and that no one of these activities can be reduced to the other. And if to admit this distinction is to be schizophrenic or to create a new "unjustified bifurcation in nature," then I should say, "All rational men ought to be schizophrenic dualists." To evaluate intelligently we must know the facts; to alter the world intelligently we must first know what it is like. To do these things we must be able to distinguish what is the case from what we want to be the

[4] In Frankel's sympathetic account of Dewey's thought, similar questions and reservations occur. Frankel is aware that Dewey's fear of "dualisms" carried him too far, and he points out that "to argue . . . that thinking about values is not independent of thinking about facts is one thing. But to say that a value judgment cannot be distinguished from a judgment about facts is quite another." (Frankel, 325.)

case and from what ought to be the case. We must not confusedly blur these distinctions into a kind of Hegeloid muck.

However, if we ask how we justify our evaluations, it seems to me that much of Dewey's method of criticism, including much of his use of science, could still be reasonably employed. Dewey's great failure in talking about morality was in not realizing how very different "facts" and "values" are; his great success was in seeing the extensive relevance of scientific knowledge and method to the making of intelligent moral appraisals. What in the name of clarity we must do now, in interpreting Dewey, is to make it perfectly clear we can admit that evaluative utterances are not some form of factual statement without giving up Dewey's insight that to be rational in our moral appraisals we must know the nature of human nature and know intimately what this world of ours is like.

Secondly, I don't think Dewey's conception of philosophic criticism is as clear as it might be. Yet it is an important and fertile idea. This activity of criticism is indeed needed in our culture. As Iris Murdock has recently remarked, after we have, by linguistic analysis of moral and political discourse, made clear its formal features, it is still necessary to argue for some substantive, though very general, normative principles of appraisal. To someone preoccupied with linguistic analysis this may seem a shocking thing to say. A philosopher working out of this tradition would be inclined to exclaim, "Philosophy just isn't equipped to handle this kind of question"—but a belief that philosophy could handle substantive normative issues was at the center of Dewey's thought from the beginning. It does not seem to me to be in conflict with Wittgenstein's approach—except trivially over the extension of the use of "philosophy"—but rather to be a non-conflicting, complementary alternative to it. It seems to me that it is important to do both things, but it is important to keep them clearly distinct in a way Dewey did not.

Dewey's ideas about philosophy as criticism are suggestive but vague. Philosophy, for him, should assess institutions and moral points of view in terms of certain fundamental rational criteria. We ought to criticize beliefs, institutions, customs and policies with respect to their bearing on the good. To do this we need a general "logic of experience." But what, precisely, does all this mean? As a plea—a bit of secular preaching—that we behave like rational human beings and reflect critically on our institutions, it is reasonable, but by now a truism, though one might well go on to say that it is Dewey who has helped to make it so. Dewey certainly means something more, but what, then, has he in mind? What precise role has philosophy to play as a "criticism of criticisms" beyond that of making acute conceptual analyses of the categories of social appraisal? Remember that Dewey wants something more, something that is substantive and normative. But what is it? What does Dewey do *qua* philosopher or direct us to do as philosophers that is not conceptual analysis or something of the same sort as that which social scientists, psychologists, literary critics, reflective journalists all do when they make normative recommendations? How are we philosophically and substantively to assess our social institutions in a way that would differ in kind from the appraisals of social scientists or journalists? What is this criticism of criticisms if it isn't conceptual analysis?

There is one answer Dewey *might* give that is in harmony with some of his claims made in *Experience and Nature*, but I think it would lead him into serious difficulties. He might say boldly, as has John Anderson (whose influence in Australia has been comparable to Dewey's influence in the United States), that "philosophy is science and has true statements to make about the very things any special scientist is examining—and he will know these things better, i.e., be a better scientist, if he knows their philosophical features." When Dewey talks about an "empirical metaphysics" he seems sometimes to be laying claim to something very much like what Anderson is claiming philosophy can do. And this sort of thing may not be entirely without point. Sometimes it is important to remind some people of certain empirical truisms. People, dulled by too much talk about Being or "the Encompassing," need to be reminded of these plain truths. Linguistic philosophers frequently forget what strange animals we have in the philosophic zoo and what idiocies still get enshrined as wisdom. But beyond enunciating these empirical truisms, could any further attempt at scientific philosophy amount to anything more than a rather outmoded restatement of certain basic scientific discoveries? What could the drive for generality amount to beyond conceptual analysis or a renewed "quest for being"? And would not the latter involve all the difficulties of the type common to those rationalistic philosophies that Dewey himself criticizes? Dewey, as we have seen, has argued there are no discoveries to be made about the world that are not testable by the scientific method and that any attempt on the part of the philosopher to go beyond the scientist and pronounce on matters of fact is fatuous. He has also claimed that philosophy does not have a special subject matter of its own, or truths of its own. Its function is critical. If Dewey intends by this anything more systematic or substantial than what we have allowed above, it is difficult to see how he could make a convincing case for such a claim in the face of 1) his own critical comments on the efforts of traditional philosophies, 2) the nearly unbelievable evolution and technicality of the sciences, and 3) the careful criticisms of this kind of philosophical approach made by the Vienna Circle, Ryle and Wittgenstein.

V

I think, however, that we ought to look again at Dewey's conception of "a criticism of criticisms," for most of the time, at least, Dewey meant by it something rather different from what I have discussed above. Remember we are to appraise social institutions, beliefs and policies with respect to their bearing on the *good.* And here, I repeat, Dewey had something rather important in mind. Political scientists explain voting behavior and power structures in politics. Sociologists explain marriage patterns, the functions of churches in Suburbia, the effect of the new Australian emigrants on the behavior patterns of the "old Australians," etc. But, *as political scientists or sociologists,* these men cannot pass moral judgments on what should be done. More generally, scientists cannot do that sort of critical thing at all while functioning as scientists. As Wittgenstein has remarked in his *Tractatus*, "We feel that even if all possible scientific questions have been answered, still the problems of life have not been touched at all." Many people have become acutely aware that we need, in the best French tradition, some people to concern themselves with the task of a *moraliste*. Dewey, I believe, is searching for some kind of method whereby this most exacting task could be carried out in a less impressionistic way than Montaigne, Voltaire, Gide or Camus seems to have carried it out. Many of the very same people who are suspicious of the social scientists are rightly deeply skeptical that any such method of criticism can be usefully systematized. Analytic philosophers also can point out that when we actually watch what Dewey does we find a blend—often a confused blend—of conceptual analysis, moralizing of the same impressionistic kind that Montaigne *et al.* indulge in, and a certain amount of exhortation to be scientific and pluralistic in our attitudes.[5] There is truth in these claims. And it may even be impossible to develop such a *method* of moral criticism because of the very complexity of morality; but this widely held view is not an *a priori* truth, and Dewey's moderate and rather general remarks about it are not obviously false. In fact, I am inclined to think that there is more truth in them than is generally thought, and I would recommend that Dewey be reexamined with an eye to what he can tell us about general procedures of moral criticism. *In this sense* a "scientific *moraliste*" may not be a contradiction in terms.

Some of Dewey's followers lament that analytic philosophers are too preoccupied with the language of morals. They claim too much time goes to analyzing "good" and "moral," or to isolating special rules of evaluative inference. What we need, they argue, is a really philosophically articulate *moraliste* to clearly speak out on general substantive moral questions. Mooreans, on the other hand, complain of the conceptual unclarity of

[5] I have tried to distinguish and correctly place these distinct activities in my "Speaking of Morals," *The Centennial Review*, II (Fall, 1958), 414-444.

Deweyans and of their failure to ask "really philosophical questions." To my mind, what we need are men with both Moore's interest in the complexities and importance of ordinary discourse and Dewey's interest in the substantive problems of men and the sciences of man. In articulating and defending the life of reason both are essential. In recalling to our attention that we need a group of people—and why not call them philosophers—who ask questions about the justifiability of a refined culture for the elite in the face of economic insufficiency for the masses, Dewey has reminded philosophers of something they frequently have forgotten. We should ask these questions as well as questions about the logic of moral discourse. Both activities are essential, neither can be replaced by the other or reduced to the other, and only chaos will ensue if they are confused. In thinking intelligently about the moral life we need both Dewey and Moore. Morton White has recently said that he loves the qualities of Moore's mind. I love them too, but I also love Dewey's concern for reasonableness about one's personal life and society in an age bent on neglecting reason and moral seriousness.