

John Dewey's Moral Philosophy and Kant's Two Imperatives.

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I would like to highlight some of the less explored features of John Dewey's moral theory. This will be done through a contrast with Kant's dichotomy between Categorical and Hypothetical Imperatives, with special reference to its influence on our common-sense morality.

1. Dewey's criticism of Kant: autonomy, obligation and duty.

According to Dewey, Kant retains a medieval-scholastic belief in knowledge as ultimately based on the principle of identity: a rationalistic or "dialectic" philosophy that eschews what he calls "existential conditions". This accusation is, in part, a way to highlight a crucial difference with respect to his own theory: Kant's architectonic is glued together, among other things, by the concern to clearly differentiate and de-marcate the *strictly* necessary from the *strictly* contingent, a concern that a pragmatist specifically wants either to collapse or to avoid. From a Deweyan perspective then, the Kantian *autonomy* of the realm of the categorical-moral from the hypothetical-technical is the result of his general «conservative» approach (Thayer 1968, p.7), what Dewey, not without irony, called the «great achievement: demarcation of two realms...» separate but compatible. This was both an achievement and a «dangerous procedure» (MW15:10).

The approach of Dewey, and to a certain extent of pragmatism itself, is very different. From a Deweyan perspective the categorical-hypothetical dichotomy does not point to a logico-formal difference *only*, but at also to a difference in *empirico-cognitive* content: a difference that, if we accept Dewey's ontology, is as real as stones and democracy.

The importance of that difference, moreover, is essential for the activity of our common-sense practical reason. Even though Kant differentiates in the *Groundwork* between «obligation» (as empirical motive elevated to universal concept) from «properly moral duty» (as motive represented *a priori*, AK 391/1-5), it is doubtful, according to Dewey, whether he succeeded in separating the *a priori* concept from the phenomenological motive, and what is doubtful is whether it is even possible to do this demarcation (logically) clear and effective enough. One of Dewey's central themes is precisely to stress how the fact that both "Good" and "Pleasurable", or "Valuable" and "Valued", are conceptually and experientially different should be used as a reason to highlight the capacity for exploring and exploit their relationship and interdependence.

To him, what Kant did was to make out of that same difference the line on which to cut, logically (*Sein/Sollen*), epistemologically (Phenomenon/Noumenon) and phenomenologically (*das Gut/das Wohl*), the realm of Nature from that of Freedom. In the moral domain it took the form of a separation between the Categorical-rational and the Hypothetico-prudential. The way Dewey deals with this gap is a form of non-reductive metaethical naturalism that does not fit easily into our

broadest metaethical traditions, a feature that for stylistic as well as historical reasons is downplayed in his own writings.

2. Denying the Categorical: intrinsicity as substantialized abstraction.

I would like to express what I think is Dewey's answer to Kant's two kinds of imperatives in a rather blunt, but I think useful way (H): *all judgments, moral included, are hypothetical.*¹ While obviously anti-Kantian, this statement is also at odds with the most extended common-sense (Western) moral tradition. For starters – it would be argued – it is anti-intuitive: the Categorical-Hypothetical dichotomy has a robust place in our moral phenomenology: a) there are things that one does, or does not, *on principle*; similar and connected to it b) there are things one ought, or ought not to do, *for themselves*. What (a) does, in a Kantian perspective, is to express the autonomous *origin* of the imperative, his being the “axis” on which the moral compass moves: the «reine Selbsttätigkeit» (Ak 452/10) of Kantian Will; while (b) brings *direction* to the moral compass by pointing to its “end”, a concept which common-sense morality finds most intuitive in terms of the formula of “humanity as an end”. Of course, the Categorical Imperative expresses something more, and more precise, than this, but for the present I will concentrate on this kind of formulations which intuitive pull owes to Kant, who in great part gathered, abstracted and systematized in logical terms a Christian-European framework of morality which force persists today.

According to Dewey's theory propositions such as (a) and (b), are but subproducts of larger, metaethical beliefs which, with all their differences, all fall on the common ground of the *essential autonomy* of the ethico-moral, versus the merely heteronomous, causal-mechanic relation between ends and means. Now, if Dewey is right, this wider, somewhat unconscious metaethical belief is caused, at least in part, by the famous double-barreledness of Experience: it created the illusion that the immediate-primary (in which we experience quality and feeling) and the delayed-reflexive (from which we abstract relations and possibilities) were so essentially different to be mirrors of a similar differences in ontological, metaphysical and ethico-moral structure.

Dewey's position on the dichotomy between means/end and intrinsicity/extrinsicity, while not always consistent in its writings, I think can be summarized like this: 1) “means” and “ends” exist in an experiential flux in which one and the other are objects resulting from reflective abstraction; what is abstracted is a difference in experiential quality and in practical role of the steps to be taken in evaluative conduct: the conditions (relational means) and the direction (individual ends) of a *part* of the whole set of individual and collective activity; 2) extrinsicity and intrinsicity, in Dewey's picture, are not “properties” of either moral concepts (a token of what he calls “refined object of reflection”) or of moral activity, but express the difference in felt *distance*,

¹ In *The Quest for Certainty* he does say something similar, although not about morals: «all general conceptions (ideas, theories, thought) are hypothetical.» (LW4:132)

strength, and *causality* of types of consummatory experiences, instrumental manipulations, and “ends-in-view”.

If he’s right, I think that what (H) does, and what Dewey says without giving much weight to it, is no less than *denying the existence of intrinsic value*, something that Beardsley (1965), among others, has specifically recognized in Dewey.

3. To Relocate and to reduce: conceptual independence towards intelligent choice.

Now, Dewey is not denying that (a) and (b) are real qualitative experiences of the moral. His theory does not aim towards showing Kant’s or common-sense morality’s falsity, rather their partiality (Cfr. LW1:369). Of course the Darwinian Dewey would criticize the way Kant defends the absolute value of the Good Will (Ak 394/35), defended in the *Groundwork* through a teleological argument without which, as Kant himself holds, its intrinsic value would be nothing but a fantasy (Ak 394/35). But Dewey does recognize the existence of an *experience* of moral duty, which is not the same as an *illusion* of moral duty. Such experience can be explained in terms of a circle of motivational-behavioral self-reinforcement: only in *that* specific sense it can be called “internal” regulation, as he does in *Ethics*, rather than “intrinsic”. His moral theory then *relocates* the facts of moral experience as well as of Reason and Will (the main pieces of Kant’s moral compass). He does so by providing an interesting phenomenological-functionalist description of Duty and Will, as well as of the Good and the Virtuous. These are factors which operativity in moral experience, while not denied on the plane of the biconditional interaction between humans and world, is yet denied on the plane of *independent existence*.

According to Dewey, Kant’s definition of the Categorical Imperative while trying to isolate a systematic pattern, it exaggerates a real necessity: the universability formula rather than ignore consequences, it tries to preserve and regulate, at the same time, *all possible consequences* (MW 5:219). The Categorical then is a way of substantializing what in attitude is a «stimuli to a widening of the area of consequences to be taken into account in forming ends and deciding what is Good [... it calls] attention to the good which is wider than that of immediate convenience or strong appetite.». Relocating the experience of duty in this senses (phenomenology of self-regulation, plus duty as reminder to “widen the area of consequences”) , according to Dewey, it does not nullify its importance, rather it makes Right and Good something that emerges out of empirical interaction and adaptation, extrinsic in the sense of publicly and empirically discussable and discussed, assessed, evaluated.

According to his theory, the way to analyze intrinsic value is by looking for its connections with *all* the layers through which moral as well as nonmoral experience emerges: the historical, psychological, physico-biological, socio-cultural, etc. This set of connections *becomes*, through time and collective internalization, what is experienced as intrinsic value. “Categoricity” then,

emerges out of the same process: it's a derivative experience in the sense of being the result of the condensation or crystallization of the *results* of a historical, psycho-social process that *de facto* had, and it still has, the underlying form of a reiterated series of hypothetical means-ends dialectic (LW4:66-99): trial and error, hypothesis and analysis, correction and experimentation, what he calls «humanity's experiment» (LW17:355). This experiment, of course, has its material provided by an existing substratum of collective idealized wants and desires: from there it makes explicit the set of implicit rules and structures that a society thinks should regulate other and pre-existing rules and structures for the goal of modifying the rest of the existential factors.

So, what Kant thought we were *required* to do, taking the Will as the beginning of the conditional chain of the Good (X is good if Y, Y is good if Z, etc.) on pain of *regressus in infinitum*, for Dewey constitutes, at least to a certain extent (the situation limits what we can reasonably take as a starting point), a matter of “intelligent” *choice-evaluation*. Reason and Will are *essential*, but not sufficient parts of a moral reality composed of a manifold of existential data not all of which human-dependent.

Then, what (H) broadly means is that all experience belongs to, and is constituted by, a multi-layered field of factors, both in vertical-synchronic and in horizontal-diachronic terms, which intricacy and ramifications we grasp only very roughly. This type of analysis lets Dewey keep the *conceptual independency* of most moral concepts, omitting the logico-philosophical definition in order to account for the active existential-behavioral role that such concepts play in the wide spectrum of activities out of which moral experience emerges (LW7:225).

From here, nothing stops us from create or recognize (Cfr. LW1:377) Categorical starting points (as, for example, concepts like the Human Rights), but even if and when we do so, their value would be «*only* as a preliminary to cooperative undertaking of investigation and thoughtful planning; as a *preparation*, in other words, for systematic and consistent reflection.» (LW7:178, my emphasis). This is what, *in nuce*, is a hypothesis for Dewey: to embody a case of “scientific attitude”, that being an attitudinal *method*, appears «in all walk of life» (LW13:273). Thus he can say that «Moral as well as physical theory needs a body of dependable data and a set of intelligible working hypotheses. » (LW7:178), meaning by “hypothesis” both the set of beliefs from which every investigation starts *and* the biconditional process between what today we would call the “context of discovery” and that of justification.

4. “Complexity” and Kant’s legacy for a practical antinomy.

What denying the existence of human-independent intrinsic value does for us, is to remark something that Dewey mentioned without giving an in-depth analysis (LW4:173, 216): the real, unreduceable, ontologically multi-leveled nature of what we perceive as the ethico-moral realm. What I'd like to call here, following both Dewey and its etymology, *a complex: a whole of*

interrelated parts. This means that no normative or metaethical theory, by itself, can find a principle from which derive or on which build the entire ethico-moral edifice, for it is nothing like an edifice. The moral realm dependability on human-world interaction appears, to put it in a rough metaphor, as a moving cloud of interconnected psycho-physical data (“data” here means subject-matter for further thought, experimentation and definition. Cfr. LW4:80). Data that, in isolation from the network from which it borrows sense and meaning, cannot be isolated into its atomic points of reference (as some empiricists and naturalists have tried to do) nor, *a la* Kant, be understood through a broad classification in logico-formal and mutually exclusive terms.

However, this network-like picture (LW4:232) seems to ignore something fundamental, namely humanity’s dignity and life: it’s considered common sense to take this as *necessarily* valuable, that is, they are experienced as having “intrinsic value” in a sense in which everything else has it only derivatively. At the same time, it seems to ignore the appeal of a Categorical rule: the serious limiting role it plays in keep this kind of values safe from hypothetico-technical demands. Indeed, this is an issue that Dewey, to my reading, takes mostly for granted in his writings. He mentions without really exploring it, the consequences of this kind of “negativity” (though in the 50’ some did linked or compared pragmatism and existentialism, see both Barrett and Hook, 1958)

We do owe to Kant, in this sense, to have left us with a way to do moral philosophy, in terms of symmetrical and legalistic generalizations, not only *de facto* successful but also conceptually useful for the kind of decisions that a mass-society has to take in a field of conflicting and heterogeneous relationships. Kant can, if appropriated by the pragmatist, draw attention to this feature, by forcing a Deweyan moral theory to go beyond the first-person view of morality, towards an analysis of what is, and what it should be, the moral experiment that, through history, has grown its own, although hypothetical, essential features. (Cfr. LW1:377;LW4:119-134).

I think then that Dewey’s theory has the strength to stand its foot on categoricity and intrinsicity even on such fundamental features. What we need, and the problem that emerges from the encounter of such different moral philosophies as Kant’s and Dewey’s, is that of specifying a functioning relationship between antinomies that, for the pragmatist, are more practical than theoretical; for the Deweyan pragmatist *can* hold different and apparently contradictory thesis, such as the independent *inexistence* of intrinsic value, the ontologically “complex” (in the sense above) nature of morality and the essential and efficacious existence of value. The challenge is practical, for it is difficult to see how to translate in socio-political terms such cohabitation as, for example, between some form of moral particularism and political legalism, or between onto-methodological naturalism (with what of nihilistic and/or fictionalist that it implies) and a non-relativistic political meliorism.