

Social and Political Values and State Authority

In the previous two papers on Man and Society and Rights, we identified freedom and individuality as potentialities which need the social relationship and social institution to bring "the I" to development. The argument is that only intelligent affirmation of the rights of the individual as well as of society (other individuals) can bring freedom to its proper development.

The fundamental presupposition of Dewey's concept of freedom strikes right at the basic assumption of behaviorism. The behaviorist approach assumes that all behaviors are explicable in terms of general laws. This assumption neglects the individuality and selectivity of all natural things which in human behavior gives rise to creative, deliberate selectivity. Bernstein states the fundamental assumption of Dewey:

Everything that exists exhibits selective or preferential behavior. Whether an electron or a human being, it reacts positively or negatively in the presence of other things. These 'preferences' express the constitution of the particular existence and are evidence of at least a rudimentary individuality in all things. Individuality is more than selective behavior: an individual is a history [a transaction with itself], an extensive event or series of events, each of which takes into itself something of the past and leads on to the future. In other words, the unique ways of responding to presented conditions are themselves affected by past occurrences. The uniqueness of this historical or temporal development is the essence of individuality. (Knowledge, Value, and Freedom, Dewey & the Experimental Spirit in Philosophy, ed. by Hendel, p. 87)

As I remember a story about elephants, the story exemplifies Bernstein's analysis of individuality constituting itself historically through past preferences affected present preferences. When elephants eat the leaves of a certain tree and then drink water, the leaves begin to ferment immediately in their stomachs; and they become riotously drunk, ripping up trees and stampeding around. Obviously, as the behaviorist would say, the behavior is reinforcing. These elephants will continue to become very different, "unique among elephants." Their individuality becomes more specific as their history develops. Perhaps the best example where history individuates occurs in species which was once single but then becomes several because they live in several geographic regions separated from each other and their resultant breeding over a period of time creates several species.

On the human level, our past preferences and selected behaviors such as the development of symbolic speech in addition to emotional, signal speech, has made us capable intelligent, deliberate, symbolic choice. Bernstein sums up the transition from natural individuality to human individuality in the following way:

Human choice is grounded in this individuality which is exhibited by all existences, for unless we could uniquely respond to challenges, choice would be impossible. As we move from the level of the inanimate to that of human life, there is an increased complexity, variety, and flexibility

in this behavior. While the 'preferential' behavior of a stone is relatively fixed and limited, the opposite is true for man.

The distinctive feature of human choice is that man can anticipate and deliberately select among alternative preferences. He can evaluate future possibilities and intelligently enlighten his choices, thereby giving direction to his life history. As Dewey phrases it, 'In so far as a variable life-history and intelligent insight and foresight enter into it, choice signifies a capacity for deliberately changing preferences.' The decisive issue concerning man's freedom is not whether his choices have causes—for Dewey insists that they do—but the type of cause which determines his choices. If we allow ourselves to be pushed and pulled, then for all practical purposes we **have no freedom**; but insofar as understanding and foresight enter into our deliberation, then we become free. (Ibid. 87-88)

Of course, the pragmatist Dewey affirms that intelligent choice is pragmatic choice. Pragmatic intelligence is modeled upon the scientific method and the community of scientific investigators. The scientific method rejects absolutes in favor of working hypotheses which become true (good) to the extent of their fruitfulness for the free and intelligent life. Furthermore, the scientific method assumes a cooperative enterprise: any idea may be submitted by any scientist, and every hypothesis must be submitted to the public test.

The objection against the pragmatic modeling of intelligence upon scientific method is that science is neutral in regard to values. The objection is that the results of science can be used for good or for evil, that atomic energy can create bombs or electricity. Bernstein's answer is:

Scientific inquiry is not morally neutral. Scientific inquiry demands sensitivity to specific situations; fertile imaginations; a willingness to test our hypotheses, submit them to public tests of confirmation, and to reject or modify hypotheses in the light of further experience. These are the very traits required for making intelligent decisions and choice. "Wide sympathy, keen sensitiveness, persistence in the face of the disagreeable, balance of interests, enabling us to undertake the work of analysis and decision intelligently are the distinctively moral traits—the virtues or moral excellences." (Dewey) (Bernstein, John Dewey, paperback, p. 128)

Bernstein has distinguished between the results of science and the method of science. The traits of human character that make for the good or intelligent scientist also make for the morally good or wise person. Dewey compares the experimental method with the method of democracy:

The experimental method demands observation of particular situations, rather than fixed adherence to a priori principles;

that free inquiry and freedom of publication and discussion must be encouraged and not merely grudgingly tolerated; that opportunity at different times and places must be given for trying different measures so that their effects may be capable of observation and of comparison with one another. It is, in short, the method of democracy, of a positive toleration which amounts to sympathetic regard for the intelligence and personality of others, even if they hold views opposed to ours, and of scientific inquiry into facts and testing of ideas. (Dewey and Tufts, Ethics, from Social and Political Philosophy, eds. Somerville and Santoni, p. 488)

The use of the experimental or scientific method does not require that there be no precedents in laws and constitutions; on the contrary, scientific progress always assumes some dominant model of the universe such as Newton's and within that precedent, particular problems may be solved. Of course, there came a time in the early 1900's when the problems proved to be insoluble in terms of the Newtonian precedent; the time was proper for a scientific revolution, for the creation of Einsteinian physics. In a similar way, democracy must work within the precedent of a constitution and previous court decisions. However, if a problem proves to be insoluble in terms of the established authority, then that authority may have to be modified, either partially or totally. The ill-fated 18th Amendment attempted to solve the problem of alcoholism and drinking by prohibition but only succeeding in causing more problems in society. Hence, the people repealed the amendment. The American tradition has been partial reform: rather than wholesale dismantling of the governing framework.

Because all social institutions influence the development of the individual's Me, Dewey proposed that all institutions be continually evaluated and reconstructed by the experimental method to achieve the goals of democracy. This evaluation and reconstruction can be gradual or rapid, piecemeal or wholesale, depending upon the nature of the problems faced. Since education is the process of socialization into the institutions of society, Dewey believed that the pragmatic reconstruction of educational institutions and the educational process was the best means for teaching people in a democratic society how to reconstruct other institutions.

Progressivism, Dewey's pragmatic and democratic reconstruction of education, is not child-oriented in the sense that it would sentimentalize and idealize the child. Dewey wrote, in Bernstein's quote:

"Doing as one pleases signifies a release from truly intellectual initiative and independence," and when unlimited free expression is allowed, children "gradually tend to become listless and finally bored, while there is an absence of cumulative, progressive development of power and of actual achievement in results." In opposition to this view Dewey argues for the necessity of deliberate guidance, direction, and order. Education ought to be a continuous process of reconstruction in which there is a progressive movement away from the child's immature experience to experience that becomes more pregnant with meaning, more systematic and controlled. . . . The goal of education is the development

of creative intelligence. . . . Intelligence is not to be identified with a narrow concept of reason considered as the ability to make inferences and draw conclusions from explicitly stated premises. Intelligence consists of a complex set of flexible and growing habits that involve sensitivity; the ability to discern the complexities of situations; imagination that is exercised in seeing new possibilities and hypotheses; willingness to learn from experience; fairness and objectivity in judging and evaluating conflicting values and opinions; and the courage to change one's views when it is demanded by the consequences of our actions and the criticisms of others. . . . The function of education is to bring about the effective realization of the experimental spirit in all phases of human life. "It is the business of the school environment to eliminate, so far as possible, the unworthy features of the existing environment from influence upon mental habits and attitudes. It establishes a purified medium of action. . . . As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as to make a better future society. The school is the chief agency for the accomplishment of this end." (Bernstein, Praxis and Action, 222-223)

Having given this sympathetic presentation of Dewey's position on social change through education, Bernstein criticizes Dewey's position as naive, as underestimating the powerful social, political, and economic institutions resistant to change. Bernstein writes:

Despite Dewey's intention, the consequence of his own philosophy is to perpetuate the social evils that it seeks to overcome. . . . No capitalist society will tolerate a school system that is designed to overthrow it. (Ibid., p. 223)

Bernstein argues that we cannot find even in the school system the growth of creative intelligence and the sharing of democratic values. We do not find the application of science to the solution of the problems of our industrial democracy, although we are aware now of the need for ecological balance in nature and for recognition of the esthetic quality needed in our relation to nature. We do not find unions as democratic communities but as fiefdoms of labor persons dominating the workers. We do not find solutions to the problems of our cities in housing and education. Dewey was overly optimistic and unrealistic with his method of social change, argues Bernstein. (Ibid. pp. 223-229)

The Handout "Reconstruction in Social Philosophy" summarizes a chapter from Reconstruction in Philosophy and indicates that Dewey agrees with the Marxist evaluation of 19th and 20th century economic and social history. Dewey agrees with Marx that the individualist concept of economic liberty favored the capitalist to the detriment of the worker, but the radicalism of Dewey is not the radicalism of Marx. The radicalism of Marx has been made to be by Lenin, Stalin, and Mao the denial of the democratic method and the use of violent overthrow of existing institutions. Dewey's comment on violent radicalism is that:

The idea of forcing men to be free is an old idea, but by nature it is opposed to freedom. Freedom is not something that can be handed to men as a gift from outside,

whether by old-fashioned dynastic benevolent despotisms or by new-fashioned dictatorships, whether of the proletarian or of the fascist order. It is something which can be had only as individuals participate in winning it, and this fact, rather than some particular political mechanism, is the essence of democratic liberalism. . . .

Discontent with democracy as it operates under conditions of exploitation by special interests has justification. But the notion that the remedy is violence and a civil war between classes is a counsel of despair.

If the method of violence and civil war be adopted, the end will be either fascism, open and undisguised, or the common ruin of both parties to the struggle. The democratic method of social change is slow; it labors under many and serious handicaps imposed by the undemocratic character of what passes for democracy. But it is the method of liberalism, with its belief that liberty is the means as well as the goal and that only through the development of individuals in their voluntary cooperation with one another can the development of individuality be made secure and enduring. (Dewey, Problems of Men, pp. 132-133)

Dewey's reply, then, to Bernstein's evaluation is that there is no other way for a democracy than use of the democratic method. Primarily, the democratic method should be taught through example in school, but obviously it should not be limited to that. That is only the beginning. The democratic method allied with the scientific temper can animate any institution, whether government, religion, economics. I suppose that Dewey would approve of government hired lawyers (as through the OEO, the Office of Economic Opportunity) being able to sue the government for the poor and for those on welfare. I suppose that Dewey would approve of Common Cause and its effort to open up the business of politics to public scrutiny in both the national and state legislatures. I suppose that Dewey would approve of the League of Women Voters and its attempt to educate people and bring them into the making of decisions. I suppose that Dewey would approve of Ralph Nader's attempt to democratize the AAA automobile clubs from the special interest groups that now control them.

More important than who is in control of government and for what ends they govern is that the process of government is democratic as Dewey as understood that term.