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TEXTBOOK ANALYSIS: No. 1;

JOHN DEWEY'S

Human Nature and Conduct

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THE method of education here to be analyzed, instead of misrepresenting the Christian position, largely ignores it and substitutes something entirely incompatible with it. It is the method of John Dewey in his well-known volume, *Human Nature and Conduct*.

To show this, little proof is needed beyond a reference to some incidental attacks on Christianity and some concrete proposals inconsistent with Christian ideals.

The first of these are exemplified on pp. 49, 50, and 295, where Dewey brands as superstitious the belief in a future life with divine rewards and punishments. This leads him to repudiate the view that punishment of crime vindicates justice. On page 17 he writes, "The abstract theory of justice which demands the 'vindication' of law irrespective of instruction and reform of the wrong-doer is as much a refusal to recognize responsibility as is the sentimental gush which makes a suffering victim out of a criminal."¹ Now, since a dead man cannot be instructed and reformed, it follows that Dewey is here opposing capital punishment; and since capital punishment is given divine sanction in the Bible (Genesis IX, 6 and Romans XIII, 4), it is clear that Dewey is advocating a non-Christian society. The second are exemplified in the desire to abolish old institutions (p. 73). One of these is the home; the family, with its parental discipline (p. 98). Dewey complains that adults enforce habits on children because they distrust the child's intelligence. Apparently he thinks that a child is quite able to cope with the world without parental instruction. "The habits of the growing person are jealously kept within the limit of adult customs. The delightful originality of the child is tamed" (p. 98). It is not unreasonable to see in this theory of progressive education, as it is called, the cause of a great deal of today's juvenile delinquency and of the general lowering of the academic standards of schools and colleges. Dewey describes the result of parental training as follows; "These 'infantilisms' account for the mass of irrationalities that prevail among men of otherwise rational tastes. These personal 'hang-overs' are the cause of what the student of culture calls survivals. But unfortunately these survivals are much more

¹ Quotations from *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey, are made by permission of the publishers, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1922.

numerous and pervasive than the anthropologist and historian are wont to admit. To list them would perhaps oust one from 'respectable' society" (pp. 98, 99). In advocating that children be left to learn by their own intelligence, without the "evil" of parental discipline, in attacking morality and respectability, Dewey is clearly attacking Christianity.

Still more important than the bare fact that someone does not like the divinely ordained institution of the family, is the method by which such an attack is made plausible to the reader. Christian faith is not injured so much by clear denials of it, as by the methods of persuasion used in bringing others to deny it. And Dewey's methods of argumentation are worth studying.

The book is well named; it treats throughout of human nature and conduct. In the introduction there is the complaint, often repeated, that morals have been severed from human nature. "Until the integrity of morals with human nature and of both with the environment is recognized, we shall be deprived of the aid of past experience to cope with the most acute and deep problems of life" (pp. 12, 13). Apparently to support this proposition Dewey gives a series of oddities in common moral thinking. But why should one be so concerned to prove this proposition? Has anyone, regardless of his personal oddities, argued that morality should be divorced from human nature and conduct? Is not Dewey wasting words on what is perfectly obvious? No, Dewey is not saying what is obvious, at least he does not mean to say the obvious. The reader is at first struck with the obvious, that is, the superficial truth of the statement and is carried along by what seems to be good common sense. But at length it appears that Dewey has meant something else altogether. In the meantime the reader has adopted Dewey's position and fails to see that the meaning of words has changed. On page 52 Dewey is arguing against transcendental moral principles, principles that are not empirical generalizations but eternal verities. With respect to an appeal to such principles for moral guidance he says, "Objectivity is saved but at the expense of connection with human affairs."

Here one sees what he means by a separation of morals from human nature. Here the meaning of the integrity of morals with conduct becomes clear. To be connected with human nature, morals must have no connection with a supernatural world. If morality is regarded as a matter of God's law, then it cannot be connected with human conduct. Now, whether one accept the Christian philosophy or not, it is evident that the two propositions, *Morals should concern human nature*, and *Moral principles cannot be divinely ordained*, are not logically equivalent. Let us grant that Dewey has proved the first proposition. It did not need proof. But what of the implication; since morals must concern human conduct, it is impossible that God should require a certain type of conduct? This latter proposition Dewey does not even attempt to prove; he is content to begin with a truth superficially obvious and pass surreptitiously to his own, quite different, opinion.

Another illustration of this method of argumentation is his attack on the institution of private property. It is fairly well summed up in the statement, "... only a calloused imagination fancies that the institution of private property as it exists A.D. 1921 is the sole or indispensable means of its [the acquisitive instinct's] realization" (p. 117). From the fact that some accidental characteristic of the situation in 1921 could possibly have been improved, it is not right to cast doubt on the wisdom and morality of all forms of private property. Notice too, how the word *sole* in the quotation beclouds the issue. No doubt acquisitive desires can be partially satisfied in other ways; but this does not prove that private property may be dispensed with. Someone might object that Dewey does not repudiate private property in general. This is true of his words on this page, taken literally. But his main thesis is that no institution is permanent; the general tone is adverse to private property, and nothing is said in its favor.

This method of argument pervades the book. Dewey makes a statement obviously true in a superficial or literal sense, and then he passes to a new meaning unsupported by argument, analysis, or fact.

Turning now to the main thesis of the book, Dewey's view of human nature and conduct, one finds that like the ancient Sophists he holds that morality is conventional. And a thorough acquaintance with Plato's arguments in the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus* shows how changeless is the philosophy of change. For Dewey morality is like language (p. 79). Men did not intend language; rather, language grew unconsciously out of unintelligent babblings. And neither in grammar nor in morality is there any principle that should remain unchanged. "... life is a moving affair in which old moral truth ceases to apply" (p. 239). True, history has provided "cumulative verifications which give many principles a well earned prestige." And for this reason they are not to be "thrown away", but "revised", "adapted", and "altered". In any case moral principles are to be changed as their truth becomes obsolete. Consider in passing the effect of this view on the principle, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy sou!, and with all thy mind."

To make matters worse there is no criterion by which to judge of change, nor is there a goal which fixes the direction of progress. In arguing against utilitarianism, Dewey not only stresses the impossibility of completing the calculus of pleasures, but stresses even more the force of habit and instinct on conduct. "The baby does not move to the mother's breast because of calculation of the advantages of warmth and food over against the pains of effort. Nor does the miser seek gold, nor the architect strive to make plans, nor the physician to heal, because of reckonings of comparative advantage and disadvantage. Habit, occupation, furnishes the necessity of forward action in one case as instinct does in the other" (pp. 199, 200). And further on he repudiates all notions of a final end of action by approximation to which one may judge the amount of progress (p. 284.). He has no use for an

ideal, stable condition toward which man may strive. In particular, the Christian conception of heaven has less claim to ideal finality than the primitive simplicity of Rousseau and Tolstoi, Stoic indifference, or Buddhistic Nirvana (pp. 285, 286). Dewey dislikes them all; but one may reasonably doubt that anyone of them is less preferable to Dewey's view of an endless struggle in which problems only get more complicated.

In the absence of a final goal the world is "open", and "chance", "luck", and "accident" cannot be denied. "A free man would rather take his chance in an open world than be guaranteed in a closed world" (p. 311). And Dewey continues by indicating that a man who would choose a guarantee in preference to chance is a coward. But how is it possible on Dewey's position to say that cowardice is a vice rather than a virtue? Dewey constantly appeals to consequences as justifications of previous choices. Certainly the guarantee of a final end would guarantee the consequences. Does not this justify the choice? Dewey may call it cowardice and fatalism; but what is wrong with fatalism if it produces the results? A metaphysical ideal might provide a basis for rejecting fatalism, but Dewey, without a stable standard, cannot do so.

In fact Dewey, regardless of his categorical imperative, "So act as to increase the meaning of present experience" (p. 283), empties life of all purpose and meaning. Consider the following quotations in preparation for a pertinent question.

"... there is no such thing as the single all-important end" (p. 229); because, as he says at the end of the chapter, there is no fixed truth. "If quiescence were the end and it could be perpetuated, this way of removing disagreeable uneasiness would be as satisfactory a way out as the way of objective effort" (p. 252). Here Dewey states that quiescence of Nirvana would, if permanent, be as satisfactory as the constant struggle toward no fixed goal. Then why not commit suicide? For him, with his denial of an immortal soul, death is permanent quiescence. The Christian, with his belief in divine rewards and punishments, has a reason,--call it metaphysical, transcendental, or by any other frightful adjective--, for regarding suicide as immoral. Dewey has none. He says indeed that "Man continues to live because he is a living creature, not because reason convinces him of the certainty or probability of future satisfactions and achievements. He is instinct with activities that carry him on" (p. 289). This no doubt explains why most people as a matter of fact do not commit suicide. But unless this instinct is a moral endowment from the Creator it is no reason why men ought not commit suicide. Dewey urges us to reflect on experience. But does not reflection on the world's ills, its wars and brutalities, its endless struggle toward nowhere, bring us to the belief that suicide is best? Some have come to that conclusion and have killed themselves. Are they not the wisest and best of men? If there were a heaven to be attained, perhaps even if there were a goal to be approximated, life would be worth living; but Dewey's

theory of morality in flux without norms and criteria makes morality impossible and life useless.

Most basically of all, morality is impossible because truth is impossible. Dewey eschews epistemology. And because he evades the problem of knowledge, he can the more easily slip into a behavioristic psychology. There is no distinction between overt behavior and consciousness (p. 82). An individual mind is a complex of bodily habits. "What then is meant by individual mind, by mind *as* individual? In effect the reply has already been given. Conflict of habits releases impulsive activities which in their manifestation require a modification of habit, of custom and convention" (p. 87). "The more flexible they [habits] are, the more refined is perception in its discrimination and the more delicate the presentation evoked by imagination. The sailor is intellectually at home on the sea, the hunter in the forest, the painter in his studio, the man of science in his laboratory. These commonplaces are universally recognized in the concrete; [now notice the conclusion Dewey draws from this excellent premise] but their significance is obscured and their truth denied in the current general theory of mind. For they mean nothing more or less than that habits formed in process of exercising biological aptitudes are the sole agents of observation, recollection, foresight and judgment: a mind or consciousness or soul in general which performs these operations is a myth" (pp. 175, 176). "Concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing . . . and reasoning that is done" (p. 177).

Although the importance of evading epistemology and of denying the existence of consciousness can scarcely be exaggerated, a long and technical discussion of them must be regretfully omitted.² It can only be said in conclusion that Dewey follows in the skeptical footsteps of Heraclitus, Cratylus, and the Greek Sophists. All is flux. Nothing remains true. Morality is convention, and life is devoid of purpose.

² For an excellent analysis study Brand Blanshard's *The Nature of Thought*, Vol. I, Chs. IX, X. Gordon It Clark, Ph.D., formerly taught philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania and at Wheaton College. He is the author of several well-known books on philosophy.