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Author

Axtell, Guy

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Utilitarianism and Dewey's "Three Independent Factors in Morals"

Guy Axtell
University of Nevada, Reno

Abstract. The centennial of Dewey & Tuft's *Ethics* (1908) provides a timely opportunity to reflect both on Dewey's intellectual debt to utilitarian thought, and on his critique of it. In this paper I examine Dewey's assessment of utilitarianism, but also his developing view of the good (ends; consequences), the right (rules; obligations) and the virtuous (approbations; standards) as "three independent factors in morals." This doctrine (found most clearly in the 2nd edition of 1932) as I argue in the last sections, has significant forward-going implications for debates in ethics, insofar as it functions to deflate debates among ethicists that turns on claims about the conceptual primacy of any one of these three ethical concepts over the other two. To find what "permanent value each group contributes to the clarification and direction of reflective morality" was the task Dewey set for himself. But to carry that project through demands showing also why the application of considerations of ends, rules, and virtues to problems of practice is not quite as many self-described utilitarians, deontologists, and virtue ethicists conceive it.

1. Introduction.

Dewey and Tufts position in the 1908 first edition of *Ethics* was that of a "socialized utilitarianism." Dewey's debt to and sympathies with utilitarianism are readily apparent. The recognized positive truths of utilitarianism include that the moral quality of any impulse or active tendency can be told only by observing the sort of consequences to which it leads in actual practice; Utilitarians are right to insist that we become aware of the moral quality of our impulses on the basis of the results they engender. The moral quality of any impulse cannot be found except through observing the consequences to which it leads in actual practice, and there is very often a practical importance of defining the springs of action by results.

But along with this, Dewey also effected a critique of both utilitarianism and deontology. By contrast with both, Dewey thinks that we only rarely "invert our moral judgments of doer and deed. "Intention and motive are upon the same moral level. Intention is the *outcome* foreseen and wanted; motive, this outcome *as* foreseen and wanted." They both appeal to a distinction between inner and outer, and this separation underlies both the Kantian and Utilitarian theories.

In criticizing Kantian deontology, he held it to be a mistake "to think that motive apart from intention, apart from the view of consequences flowing from the act, is the source and justification of its morality" (236). But Mill, Dewey points out, also wanted to distinguish motives and intentions, in order to argue contrarily to this Kantian line, that

motive makes no difference to the morality of the act: morality depends upon intention, but not motive—to say in effect that motive makes a difference in our moral estimate of the doer, but none in our judgment of his action.

For Dewey, Bentham undermines himself when he concedes that “motives are the causes of intentions,” because this point should make any sharp distinction between act and agent evaluation otiose.¹ “The distinction between motive and intent is not found in the facts themselves, but is simply the result of our own analysis, according as we emphasize either the emotional or the intellectual aspect of an action’; “The key to a correct theory of morality is recognition of the essential unity of the self and its acts” (LW 7: 175; 288); “There is no character excepting as manifested in conduct, there is no conduct excepting that which expresses character.”² As Pappas summarizes Dewey’s stance makes it a condition on an adequate account “Dewey holds that we can distinguish judgments of character from judgments of conduct without assuming that they are about separated domains of moral discourse or moral experience. On the contrary, the way we make moral judgments suggests that character and conduct are mutually dependent and inseparable facets of our moral experience” (Pappas, 132).

Given both this double-edged critique of deontology and utilitarianism, and the keen interest in character exhibited in his philosophy of education, if not always his ethical writings, a good number of authors have aligned Dewey as a predecessor and resource for “virtue ethics” as an alternative to the more traditional contrast between these two main Modernist ethical theories (Rice, Teehan, Olson). Philip Olson, thinks that it is unfortunate that Dewey’s work has received little attention from contemporary virtue theorists, “because Dewey’s philosophy contains resources for developing a theory of virtue that establishes deep continuities among the moral and intellectual virtues....” In “Dewey’s Virtues” (2007), he argues that “Along with the success of virtue ethics, and the rise of virtue epistemology, comes an excellent opportunity to locate continuities among the moral and epistemological, the practical and theoretical phases of human experience—which was a topic of deep concern for Dewey” (3).³

I agree that Dewey’s thought does have such resources, but whether one should identify him as a “virtue theorist” is a somewhat anachronistic question. He might, indeed, be a transformer of it.⁴ But the question at least allows us to reflect upon the present bi-centennial of influential papers of 1958 by G.E.M. Anscombe and Philippa Foot, which are often noted as starting points for a turn away towards character traits and resources in classical tradition as corrective both to the repetitious conflict between deontology and consequentialism, and to the non-cognitivism that predominated in ethics during the post-war heyday of logical empiricism.

Dewey did want to see an explicit recognition of the fundamental role of character in the moral life (1908, 234). I think he would agree with many of the criticisms that Foot and Anscombe made, and still more that later virtue-theoretic authors like Bernard Williams would make in later decades. **[Identify more specific ideas here].**

Moreover, Dewey may be in a better position that “virtue ethics,” firstly in the sense that it is sometimes accused of being a misleading category (Hurka; Nussbaum) when represented as a ‘third force’ among ethical theories, and secondly because it has recently come under fire from ethical “situationists” who find at least some of its versions committed to a strong realism about trans-situationally stable or “global” traits of moral character that the situationists contend is empirically falsified by social experiments on

human ethical behavior (Doris; Harman). Matt Pamental, for example, argues persuasively that Dewey's "socio-cognitive" account of character provides his account substantial advantages over neo-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics that have accounts of global moral character that presuppose a kind of motivational self-sufficiency.

Gregory Pappas' new book *John Dewey's Ethics* provides a direct and challenging response to the question of what Dewey would say about "virtue ethics" and the broader "third force" issue. Pappas thinks it is a mistake to assimilate Dewey to virtue ethicists despite the criticisms they share of deontology and consequentialism, but that those criticisms do vindicate his own approach as a genuine 'third way' that virtue ethics should adapt themselves to.

It has been assumed that the great divide in ethics is between act-centered views, ethics of doing, and character-centered views, ethics of being; in other words, morality should be conceived as a matter of doing good or being good...John Dewey anticipated it and evaluated its legitimacy. Dewey undermines the grounds for the divide issue, and he proposes a way to move beyond the debates between character-centered and act-centered ethics. (2008, 129)

Pappas concludes his Chapter 7, "Character and Conduct," by arguing that "in spite of similarities, it would be a mistake to regard Dewey's ethics as a form of virtue ethics. This mistake is costly since it precludes the appreciation of the distinctive character of Dewey's ethics. His ethics is an alternative that avoids the atomistic view of acts, the legalistic form of morality, and the neglect of the self and communal context that characterized many modern act-centered views.

Now Pappas' claim is one he thinks isn't evidenced by first edition of *Ethics* alone, though there are shades of it there. The evidence comes especially from consideration of the "Three Independent Factors in Morals" paper that Dewey wrote in 1930, the main ideas of which were then developed further and included in the substantially revised Part II of the second edition of *Ethics* in 1932. Here, then, I approach my own thesis, which is that in order to assess the question of Dewey's relationship to virtue theory, we need to go back a full century, and then see the development of Dewey's thought from the first ('08) to the second ('32) editions. When we do so, as I'll argue, we find firstly that Pappas is correct that Dewey's re-reading of the British moralists led him to anticipate the revival of virtue ethics, but also, when cast as a shift 'from' act to agent-centered views, or again, 'from' the 'what should I do?' to 'who should I be?' questions, and to provide reasons for thinking these contrasts are misleading as Pappas alleges. But, I'll argue, it also provides reasons to resist the reduction of our theoretical options back into the familiar modernist contrast between Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, and to affirm some of Olson's claims that Dewey provides resources for a kind of ethical theory that is genuinely a potential 'third force' among ethical theories. Part 2 of the paper will discuss the development of Dewey's thought through the "Three Independent Factors" paper and culminating in the re-organization of the second edition of *Ethics* to give character-based ethics recognition alongside deontology and utilitarian consequentialism. Part 3 will consider Martha Nussbaum's charge that we should 'do away' with the recent trend towards

acknowledging virtue ethics as a third force, and her reduction of the motivations of self-described virtue ethicists to those of “anti-Kantians” or “anti-utilitarians,” and what reply a Deweyan should make to it.

2. Non-Reductionism and the “Three Independent Factors” in Reflective Morality

Pappas would agree with Nussbaum that virtue ethics is a misleading category, to the extent that it leans upon a contrast of character-centered and act-centered conceptions of reflective morality. The comparison of these, often accompanied by admonitions that ethics is about the “who ought I to be?” question and not so much as about the “what should I do?” question, will ring hollow with Dewey.

Pappas (1997, 448) argues, this has in recent decades constructed only another “Great Divide”: **“It has been assumed that the great divide in ethics is between act-centered views ('ethics of doing') and character-centered views ('ethics of being'). The basic issue that separates moral theorists is whether morality should be conceived as a matter of 'being good' or 'doing good'.”**⁵

The key to how Dewey anticipates and responds to what Pappas, rightly or wrongly describes as a ‘Great Divide’ he finds in ethical theory today, is the development with the ’32 2nd Edition of *Ethics*, and Dewey’s mature theory of value in ___ a few years later, of the non-reductive account of aims, rules and virtues as independent factors. So Dewey’s essential problem in “Three Independent Factors in Morals” is “the source and the origin in concrete experience of what I have called independent variables What reasons are there for accepting the existence of these three factors?” (LW 5: 281), The “good and right have different origins, they flow from independent springs, so that neither to the two can derive from the other” (LW 5: 281). Furthermore, “there is no uniform, previous moral presumption either in one direction or the other, no constant principle making the balance turn on the side of good or of law” (ibid). “There is an intrinsic difference, in both origin and mode of operation, between objects which present themselves as satisfactory to desire and hence good, and objects which come to one as making demands upon his conduct which should be recognized. Neither can be reduced to the other” (281). Dewey holds that empirically, there is a third independent variable in morals. “Individuals praise and blame the conduct of others.”

Dewey claims that “Each of these variables has a sound basis, but because each has a different origin and mode of operation, they can be at cross purposes and exercise divergent forces in the formation of judgments. From this point of view, uncertainty and conflict are inherent in morals; it is characteristic of any situation properly called moral that one is ignorant of the end and of good consequences, of the right and just approach, of the direction of virtuous conduct, and that one must search for them. The essence of the moral situation in an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator” (LW 5: 280).

We see these themes developed in the second edition of *Ethics*. The shift from customary to reflective morality puts the burden on the individual, and hence makes it the first business of ethics to get an outline of the factors which constitute personal disposition. But “Why must moral theorists decide if becoming a good character or doing the right actions is the end of our moral life? The demand to find out which end is

primary follows from what Dewey called the ‘Doctrine of fixed means and ends.’ This is the view that in moral life there are fixed means and ends, and that the task of the philosopher is to find out which one it is” (LW 7: 133). There is, for Dewey, no reason to take either character considerations (virtues, ideals, projects) or act considerations (rules, principles, consequences) as the defining paradigm of moral engagement.⁶

“...theories will be found to vary primarily because some of them attach chief importance to purposes and ends, leading to the concept of the *Good* as ultimate; while some others are impressed by the importance of law and regulation, leading up to the supremacy of the concepts of *Duty* and the *Right*; while a third set regards approbation and disapprobation, praise and blame as the primary moral fact, thus terminating with making the concepts of *Virtue* and *Vice* central.”

This third group, recognized explicitly in the 2nd edition, is a “group of thinkers who feel that the principle of ends and rational insight places altogether too much emphasis upon the intellectual factor in human nature, and that the theory of law and duty is too legal, external, and stringent” (LW 7: 182). Dewey wants not to judge which is true and which is false, but “to see what factors of permanent value each group contributes to the clarification and direction of reflective morality” (183). The conclusion to this question comes at the very end of Part II, which Dewey wrote in both editions. That conclusion is that “Moral conceptions and processes grow naturally out of the very conditions of human life” (308). “The facts of desiring, purpose, social demand and law, sympathetic approval and hostile disapproval are constant...The fundamental conceptions of morals are, therefore, neither arbitrary nor artificial.” The particular emphasis that theories or even cultures take on are transient, “But the framework of moral conceptions is as permanent as human life itself” (309).

It is the shift from customary to reflective morality puts the burden on the individual, and hence makes it the first business of ethics to get an outline of the factors which constitute personal disposition. Dewey claims that “Each of these variables has a sound basis, but because each has a different origin and mode of operation, they can be at cross purposes and exercise divergent forces in the formation of judgments. From this point of view, uncertainty and conflict are inherent in morals; it is characteristic of any situation properly called moral that one is ignorant of the end and of good consequences, of the right and just approach, of the direction of virtuous conduct, and that one must search for them. The essence of the moral situation in an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator” (LW 5: 280).

In calling these three elements independent variables, Dewey does “not mean to assert that they are not intertwined in all actual moral situations. Rather is the contrary the case. Moral problems exist because we have to adapt to one another as best we can certain elements coming from each source,” something made more difficult by the fact that these various lines of distinction “cut across one another.” What is good from one standpoint may not be from another.⁷

3. Dewey as Non-Centralist

Even if one cannot really judge character without conduct and vice versa, many ethicists might still make the claim that one of these judgments must be basic. Pappas says the arguments to support this are unsound from the point of view of Dewey's ethics. But this issue is important to the third-force question, and since "character" and "conduct" can also be seen as a contrast of the "thick" and the "thin," and priority claims have abounded in debate between thickies and thinnies, we need to look further at where what Dewey says accords with or disagrees with Bernard Williams. The priority claim is a reductive one, whichever theory it supports

In Williams' own critique of utilitarianism, he also held that it fails to capture the sense in which moral persons identify with their actions. As Pappas puts it, "The notion that character is only, at best, a means to right conduct presupposes a distance or separation between the moral self and its acts that is counterintuitive to those who live meaningful moral lives." But Pappas insists that while Dewey would agree with these criticisms, "he does not think this entails that morality should be agent-centered as Williams and other virtue theorists seem to think" (140).

This question is I think clarified if we distinguish between ethical "centralism," "non-centralism," and "anti-centralism." Those who Simon Blackburn refers to as ethical "thickies" are deniers of what Bernard Williams identifies as "centralism," a key target in his ethical thought. Ethical Centralism the claim of the explanatory priority of thin deontic and evaluative ethical concepts over thick evaluative ethical concepts. Williams takes centralism to be "a doctrine about language and linguistic practice," a doctrine holding "that very general ethical truths were logically prior to more specific ones" (1995, 184).

The implication of the three factors idea, Dewey's avowed non-reductionism, is that Dewey will be a non-centralist along with Williams and many others. Centralism is a reductionistic thesis, and reduction plans, even if some of them are not non-cognitivist as Williams and Putnam both allege them to be, will depend on a F/V dichotomy that Dewey as well as Williams and Putnam are explicit in their rejection of. Dewey's non-centralism can be inferred from his response to Stevenson's two-component model of linguistic reduction for ethical statements. Dewey concedes that ethical sentences may have a different interest from that of science, but such a difference of interest is not a component of the subject-matter. "It is quite another thing to convert the difference in function and use into a differential component of the structure and contents of ethical sentences" as Stevenson (and Blackburn and Hurka) does (Edel, 82). Within the domain of normative concepts, it is common to distinguish between two classes: deontic and evaluative. Deontic concepts, such as 'right', 'ought', 'permissible', and 'forbidden,' are by definition thin concepts. But within the terrain of evaluative concepts, philosophers distinguish between those that are thin--such as 'good', 'bad', 'desirable', etc.--and those thought to be thick, examples of which include trait concepts like 'courageous' and 'open-minded,' and affective concepts like 'rude', 'lewd', etc. Those who prioritize the deontic concept of the Right, and those who prioritize the thin evaluative concept of the Good, are committed ethical centralists, and so centralism is an assumption shared by Deontologists and Utilitarians.

So I am allowing that there are indeed what Nussbaum and Pappas would both see as "confused stories" that motivate the idea that there is such a thing as 'virtue ethics,' that

has a definite describable character and a certain degree of unity, and that it is a major alternative to both the Utilitarian and the Kantian traditions" (164). But I would insist against both that authors that the commitment of emotivists like C. L. Stevenson, whose reductive analysis Dewey explicitly criticized in his *Theory of Valuation*, is a commitment to centralism, as Williams and Putnam both appear to hold. If we add that Deontology and Utilitarianism commit themselves to it as well, in through their respective prioritizing of motives and as ends as the source of moral justification and value, are also committed ethical centralism, then there remains an argument for a 'third force' in the approach we have taken.

Pappas would certainly vindicate Dewey on this score, even if Nussbaum would want to classify him either as neo-Humean or neo-Aristotelian. Nussbaum proposes "that we do away with the category of 'virtue ethics' in teaching and writing. If we need to have some categories, let us speak of Neo-Humeans and Neo-Aristotelians, of anti-Utilitarians and anti-Kantians" (201). But Dewey, as Pappas allows but she does not, would rightly decline any such description of his views or his primary philosophical motives. There is in the non-reductive stance a very significant common ground, as there is in the rejection of the particular reductionistic thesis Williams calls ethical centralism. Nussbaum, indeed, classifies Blackburn and Williams together as anti-Kantians, without acknowledging the crucial and deep difference in their views about the relative primacy of thin and thick normativity, respectively. No such classification that takes the reductive project as a given can be acceptable to Dewey, or to contemporary Deweyans like Pappas and Hilary Putnam. Putnam would certainly count Dewey among 'friends of entanglement.' Especially when we take into account that virtue epistemologies and not just virtue ethics is in question, we find that there is in Dewey a concern for a general theory of value that Nussbaum's taxonomy, which only countenances ethical theories, does not well account for.

Pappas asserts that, "To move beyond the divide issue requires an ethics where action and character are equally central objects of moral evaluation, and neither one is to be taken as the exclusive or even more basic concern of moral philosophy." He thinks this is possible, and Dewey's approach would indeed describe a genuinely novel, its rejection of centralism being my way of updating and re-focusing the shared assumptions in the contrast that on Nussbaum's taxonomy are simply exhaustive of the alternatives. The claims that self-described ethicists agree upon, she argues, involve no real break either with Kantianism or with Utilitarianism. But Dewey's independent factor approach, and the implication that his approach is therefore non-centralist, does constitute a very significant break. [That break is all the more significant when we non-centralism becomes a basis for a general theory of value as I have elsewhere argued elsewhere is a project that virtue ethics and virtue epistemology are both today contributing to, a theory of value and normativity distinct from those that deontologists and consequentialists give (Axtell, 1996; 2008a; 2008b).]

That "The framework of moral conceptions is as permanent as human life itself" characterizes Dewey's unique and non-reductive stance. Bernard Williams' target of ethical centralism, reflecting Anscombe's and Foot's key concerns, and the theses of linguistic reduction of thick ethical concepts in writers from Stevenson, to Blackburn, to Hurka would also be rejected by Dewey. If an ethical 'thickie' is a non-centralist, and Dewey's approach would lead us to reject ethical centralism along with Williams, then

we have arrived at the conclusion that the approach Dewey takes is not what Nussbaum calls either neo-Aristotelians nor neo-Humeans, nor (merely or primarily) what she calls “anti-Kantians” and “anti-Utilitarians” (201). Again, the approach Dewey takes is:

1) not what Pappas calls the kind of virtue theory that derives from moving the question of what to do to the question of who to be; and

2) not what I call being “Anti” as opposed to “Non” Centralist, or calling for a move ‘from’ traditional “thin” concerns with the rightness of actions and the thinness of a generalized goal or end, ‘to’ an inverse prioritizing of “thick” ethical and affective concepts.

[add Nussbaum post #2 notes and Olson/pamental post notes to develop the conclusion]

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Notes

¹ A motive can be blind feeling, an impulse without thought; but it sometimes is aware of its own probable outcome when carried into effect. “Up to a certain point, [utilitarianism, by its ‘thoroughly social aim’] reflected the meaning of modern thought and aspirations. But it was still tied down by fundamental ideas of that very order which it thought it had completely left behind: The idea of a fixed and single end lying beyond the diversity of human needs and acts rendered utilitarianism incapable of being an adequate representative of the modern spirit” (MW 12, 184).

² John Dewey, *Lectures on Psychological and Political Ethics, 1898*, ed. Daniel Koch (N.Y.: Hafner Press, 1976, 79. As Gregory Pappas summarizes, “Dewey believed that both Kant and Mill based their ethical views on the differences and divergences between judgments of character and judgment of conduct in situations. Mill claims that one can get the same objective good act from different motives, even from bad ones...Kant believes that the goodness of a good will does not depend on the rightness of its actions....” (2008, 130).

³ It is, more specifically, Dewey’s derivation of the virtues from inquiry, and his transactional account of experience “that should be seen as a valuable resource for addressing some central concerns in contemporary virtue theory. For Dewey a character trait (habit, disposition or human potency) is a virtue if it facilitates intelligent problem-solving, and a vice if it hinders this. Since inquiry as intelligent problem-solving is an indispensable part of *growth* in all areas of human experience, Olson argues that “Dewey’s philosophy already possesses many of the resources necessary for connecting virtue with human flourishing” (10).

⁴ The Deweyan conception of character is closely linked to his conceptions of “habit” and “character,” all three being conceived as “interactions” with the physical and social environment, and in moral reflection, with a morally problematic situation. Habits are the most general term. “Habit reaches...down into the very structure of the self” and covers “the very make-up of desire, intent, choice, disposition” (TML, 13). Virtues like all habits are conceived as “interactions” (+ Doris vs MS-S & mentalism).

⁵ “The first assumes the independence of each sort of discourse to the other or, in other words, the *autonomy* of each. It then raises the question: which sort of discourse represents the distinctively moral concern? The second formulation of the issues assumes that both sorts of discourse are genuinely moral but that, therefore, one must be *basic* in some manner to the other” (449). But, Pappas argues and I think correctly, Dewey rejects both of these formulations, and therefore is not a proponent of virtue theory in the sense of a character-based account *in contrast* with an act-based one.

⁶ The correlativity of character and conduct “virtually disposed” of the opposition between two opposed forms of reductionism, that which holds that motives are the only thing that counts morally, and that which holds that consequences are the only thing of

moral import. “Our analysis shows that both views are one-sided. At whichever end we begin we find ourselves intellectually compelled to consider the other end. We are not dealing with two different things but with two poles of the same thing” (*LW* 7: 173).

⁷ Pappas misses that Dewey thinks that “as categories, as principles, the virtuous differs radically from the good and the right. Goods, I repeat, have to do with deliberation upon desires and purposes; the right and obligatory with demands that are socially authorized and backed; virtues with widespread approbation” (286), though Dewey himself arguably doesn’t distinguish these clearly enough. I defer to Edel’s study. “[O]ne cause for the inefficacy of moral philosophies has been that in their zeal for a unitary view they have oversimplified the moral life. The outcome is a gap between the entangled realities of practice and the abstract forms of theory. A moral philosophy that should frankly recognize the impossibility of reducing all the elements in moral situations to a single commensurable principle, which should recognize that each human being has to make the best adjustment he can among forces which are genuinely disparate, would throw light upon actual predicaments of conduct and help individuals in making a juster estimate of the force of each competing factor” (*LW* 5, 288).