

DEWEY'S FUNCTIONAL DESCRIPTION OF DEMOCRACY

Posts in this series

In this post I described Dewey's theoretical description of democracy:

Democracy is a word of many meanings. ...
But one of the meanings is distinctly political, for it denotes a mode of government, a specified practice in selecting officials and regulating their conduct as officials. P. 121.

It's a functional definition, not a poetic one; it doesn't conjure up images of purple mountain majesties. It's not even exactly a definition, though I'll use the word. In the same way Dewey's descriptions of the public and the state aren't exactly definitions. I have high hopes for Dewey's conception of government, this bare theory, this skeleton on which we can build. As we consider these descriptions we can see the limits of theory, and particularly the limits of philosophy. [1]

The Problem of the Public

Dewey says that the Public is a group of people who face problems arising from the conjoint actions of others. That makes a lot of sense in a small community. People might be worried about speeding in their neighborhood. That's a specific group of people, a public, facing a specific problem with a relatively small set of solutions, and a hierarchy of officials who are charged with handling problems like this.

The problem is that this description doesn't translate well to a larger society. Our huge society contains an enormous number of publics, and we're all members of more than one. What does this mean for actual practice? In Chapter 4, Dewey says that publics are confused by their

own multiplicity and find it hard to identify themselves as publics. This problem is hard to unravel. For now, I'll just point out that this creates problem when others in a public have different priorities, and even bigger problems as more people are drawn into a single public.

Selecting Officials

The two legacy parties each select one person to run in the general election in what is most often a two-person contest. Some people assert allegiance to one of the parties, and others pick and choose candidates from both. One wins. The elected group meets and carries out its duties, representing the public interests. The idea is that the group representing one public will work with the group representing the opposing public to come to a decision that somehow reflects the interests of both. That presents many problems, not least of which is the plain fact that some of those winners refuse to compromise.

1. The schematic story hides the influence of the rich and powerful, who come to dominate the system, a point Dewey discusses. If there is a large group of single-issue voters, they can have similar power on that issue, even if their demand on that issue is rejected by a substantial majority. A politician might work to create large group of single-issue voters as a springboard to election.
2. Is there a common ground between two opposing publics? We might think there is common ground in the center, with the two wings complaining about losing. How does that work with racism? Consider abortion. If there were a middle ground, why isn't it *Roe v. Wade*?
3. It's one thing for officials to make decisions about how to proceed with legislation or administration of law when there is general agreement. But it's extremely hard when the public is genuinely divided. Consider systemic racism. Apart from a significant number of outright racists and white supremacists, a huge

number of us refuse even to examine the question seriously, as was demonstrated in the Merrick Garland hearings by Louisiana Sen. Kennedy:

Later, Kennedy pushed Garland on the “concept” of implicit bias, asking, “Does that mean I am a racist no matter what I do or what I think?”

Garland said everyone has biases and stereotypes. The department would investigate when an institution has a pattern of biased behavior that could be identified and remedied.

“You shouldn’t take it as pejorative,” Garland said. “It’s an element of the human condition.”

4. What kind of problem is amenable to solution by the state? People can claim that many of the actions of others are a problem for them, and demand state action. Dewey’s descriptions don’t give us any help deciding which problems we should hand over to the state for solution.

What can we learn from Dewey?

A. The definitions and concepts Dewey uses to deal with government don’t lead to normative conclusions. The idea of democracy is that the best solutions for specific problems arise from open-ended informed discussion. There are no foundational concepts [3] that we can use to reason our way to answers. Put another way, politics is the realm of persuasion, not of deterministic rationality. Dewey’s approach establishes a framework for persuasion.

B. I think it’s helpful in stressful times to remember that the goal of a public is to deal with a certain kind of problem.

Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences. P. 157.

Consider prayer in public school. What is the conjoint action that has extensive, enduring and serious consequences of barring prayer in public schools?

I think we should be very careful about forcing public officials to deal with abstract harms; and I think, or hope, Dewey would agree. If an issue doesn't involve a tangible harm caused by the conjoint action of other people, it should be avoided. Most culture war issues only raise abstract harm, if they bother claiming any kind of harm. Marriage is the perfect example. Not a single person is harmed when people are allowed to marry the people they love. But denying that right harms real people. There are real problems causing tremendous damage to all of us: the pandemic, racism, climate destruction and more. We need to focus on problems we can actually fix.

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[1] As we will see, the rest of the book is about how things work in the real world.

[2] Oddly, these are the same people waving Don't Tread On Me flags.

[3] I've been trying to learn about conservative political philosophy as in Oakeshott and Strauss. Maybe I'll have more to say about it later. Here I'll just note that systems that claim to be able to identify the foundations of political philosophy seem likely to lead to bad outcomes. If you are certain of the truth, why shouldn't you use force to bring it about?