

DEWEY'S ASPIRATIONAL VIEW OF DEMOCRACY

Posts in this series

In the last post we looked at John Dewey's view of democracy based on *The Public And Its Problems*, which I called a functional view. He explains the minimum requirements for maintaining a democratic form of government. The text for this post is *The Ethics of Democracy*, published in 1888, when Dewey was 29 and a professor at the University of Michigan. It offers the uplifting vision of democracy that was missing in the prior post. [1]

This is a philosophy paper. I take it to be a statement of the ideal, grounded in the reality Dewey sees, but laying out his hopes for the future if we pursue this ideal. It's aspirational, not descriptive.

Dewey doesn't assert that there a foundational principle from which he can reason his way to his views. His argument responds to the ideas of other writers, using them as a way of demonstrating his own thinking. Dewey takes up the ideas of Sir Henry Maine in his book *Popular Government*, and Plato's *Republic*. Plato and other ancient Greek thinkers took as the highest virtue is excellence, arete, in action and contemplation. I think it helps to keep this in mind as we examine this work.

Maine was a British jurist. Dewey reads his book to say that democracy is fragile, accidental, and bound to failure. Dewey quotes Maine saying democracy will end "... in producing monstrous and morbid forms of monarchy and aristocracy." In short Maine writes a defense of rule by an aristocracy of the best people, which I assume he derives from Plato's *Republic*. Maine says democracy is the rule of the many, by which he means a quantitative, numerical form of government derived from the votes of a horde of isolated atomized individuals, all acting solely

in their own interest. Dewey says that for Maine, "Democracy is nothing but a numerical aggregate, a conglomeration of units."

Dewey compares society to an organism whose existence emerges from the actions of the people who make it up. Society exists only through the actions of its members, and we only know society by looking at the actions of the members. The success of the society depends on the success of the individuals and vice versa. Dewey claims that this view arises from the *Republic*.

Dewey thinks that our actions are mediated by our socialization (my word), so that in acting we are not isolated atoms. Instead, each of us is a different way of expressing that socialization, and thus part of the group. Dewey thinks that the will of society is expressed in this way, through the combined acts of members. The will of society gains some expression through the functional definition of democracy as selecting and overseeing our officials.

The key point of the paper for me is Dewey's explanation of the value of democracy, the ethical justification for it. [2] In the first part of the paper, Dewey compares and contrasts aristocracy and democracy, as if they were merely two possible forms of government.

Democracy, like any other polity, has been finely termed the memory of a historic past, the consciousness of a living present, the ideal of the coming future. Democracy, in a word, is a social, that is to say, an ethical conception, and upon its ethical significance is based its significance as governmental. Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association.

Dewey says that aristocracy can make the same claims. But appointing the best and wisest doesn't work. They become corrupt, or lose sight of the needs and desires of the majority. Every

movement to greater democracy increases the number and diversity of the people who operate as the government and who oversee that operation.

Every forward democratic movement is followed by the broadening of the circle of the state, and by more effective oversight that every citizen may be insured the rights belonging to him. P. 21.

The aristocratic ideal is that the wisest force people into the spheres in which they can best serve the state. Dewey is appalled by the idea that the individuals in a society can be pushed around by anyone, let alone a group identifying itself as the best and wisest. He doesn't say it, but the idea that the wisest know the needs of society is absurdly hubristic. In a democracy, people find their own way into what Dewey calls "their proper positions in the social organism." P. 21. They take up roles in which they can best carry out the goals of society. They do this as individual persons, each with their own set of attributes.

There is an individualism in democracy which there is not in aristocracy; but it is an ethical, not a numerical individualism; it is an individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative to and for the ethical ideal, not an individualism of lawlessness. In one word, democracy means that personality is the first and final reality. P. 23.

I think we would use personhood instead of personality. I think this means that the full flowering of the individual, with all the influence of society, is the driving force of democracy. It is from this personhood, this ethical individual, that other aspects of democracy emerge: including liberty, equality and fraternity. Dewey gives illustrations of the

first two.

Liberty in the dominant view means the freedom to do as one chooses, without regard to any other concern. In this view, the law is meant to punish actions that society deems unacceptable.

Dewey rejects this view. Society creates law, using that term in a broad way to cover statutes and formal rules of the state, moral and cultural demands and taboos, and informal rules of behavior. The law of a society represents its will at any time. The personhood of each individual is formed under the influence of this law. Today we would say that each individual internalizes the law. Thus the exercise of liberty by an individual is controlled by the law as instantiated in that individual. [3]

In this way, liberty is self-restricted, but at the same time, the individual is free to explore the limits imposed by the law, and to seek changes. The individual is required to follow the formal laws and rules, but is free to flout the moral and cultural demands and taboos, and the informal rules, subject, of course, to social sanctions, like shunning and shaming. At bottom, in a democracy, the law is not imposed by an external force. It is shaped by individuals as one of their social roles, and internalized. It's function is to channel the exercise of liberty.

Turning to equality, the vulgar meaning is numerical equality, equal portions of each desirable good. Dewey says that in a democracy equality has an ethical meaning. It begins with the view that each individual person is equivalent in moral worth to every other individual.

Wherever you have a man, there you have personality, and there is no trace by which one personality may be distinguished from another so as to be set above or below. It means that in every individual there lives an infinite and universal possibility; P. 25.

This is the beauty of democracy: every person has the opportunity to become all that they can be, and those possibilities are unlimited. [4]

Discussion

This is a strikingly contemporary vision of democracy. Dewey lays out a set of values associated with democracy that resonate with my own. I wonder how many Republican legislators would support Dewey's understanding of democracy.

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[1]The views in this paper did not change throughout his life.

At the core of his political thinking are the beliefs that science and democracy are mutually supportive and interdependent enterprises, that they are egalitarian, progressive and rest on habits of open social communication, and that powerful interpretations of liberal individualism and democracy have become ossified and self-defeating.

[2] See pages 19-24. I'm skipping a large part of this paper, There is a lot of it that is obscure. Some of the reasoning feels dated to me. I'm not familiar with the writings of some of the people he quotes. None of that detracts from my admiration for his overall conclusions.

[3] See page 23. I think I have summarized it correctly, but the language is obscure. Comments are welcome.

[4] This conception comports with the views of Elizabeth Anderson, which I discuss in this series. Anderson identifies as a follower of Dewey and a Pragmatist.