

Dewey on Moral Principles as Hypotheses

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General and Specific Theses of Dewey

All truths whether theoretical principles or practical moral guidelines are hypotheses that need to be tested.

We will focus on moral principles.

Parts of the Paper

- **Analysis of examples of**
 - **(1) negative moral rules and (2) positive moral rules**
 - **to see if they are in fact better interpreted as hypotheses in need of testing in our lives rather than as absolute rules, and then,**
 - **(3) to examine with George Herbert Mead why theoretical and moral principles are well conceived of as hypotheses.**

(1) Negative Moral Principles as Hypotheses

- **(a) The principle that “no direct action with humans should be undertaken if it may be harmful to them.”**
- **(b) The principle that “in terrible human suffering no suicide and no direct euthanasia should be allowed.”**
- **(c) The principle that “capital punishment is lawful in the most serious of killings.”**
- **(d) The case of Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 US 537 (1896) in which the Supreme Court decided that separate but equal educational facilities were allowable under the 14th Amendment which required the equal application of all laws to all citizens.**

Evaluation of (c) The principle that “capital punishment is lawful in the most serious of killings.”

- **Must we not question capital punishment now that we realize that innocent people have been convicted of capital crimes and placed on death row only to be completely exonerated later?**
- **Here there are cases where the principle that “the state should never kill an innocent person” outweighs the principle that “capital punishment is lawful in the most serious of killings.”**
- **The capital punishment rule is not an absolute moral rule.**

(2) Positive Moral Principles as Hypotheses

- **(a) The rule that a marriage contract may only be undertaken by heterosexual couples whereby the legal duties and rights of these couples are protected by law.**
- **(b) The rule that marriage may only be undertaken by adults who are at least 18 years old, able to give their mature and free consent.**
- **(c) The various rules for divorce from marriage which were meant to protect the bond of marriage.**
- **(d) The classic definition of virtue by Aristotle: “Virtue, then, is a character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which a man of practical wisdom would determine it.”**

Evaluation of Aristotle's Definition of Virtue

- **But this mean between extremes is not to be calculated deductively with the certainty of mathematics from some absolute, self-evident mathematical truth, but worked out practically as a person of practical wisdom would do so.**
- **Aristotle insists that living virtuously is well conceived as an art when he notes:**
- - **“[T]hat every art does its work well by looking to the intermediate [the mean] and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work, and if virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate [*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, Section 6].”**

Fesmire's Summary of Dewey

- **Fesmire rightly sums up the hypothetical character of moral ideals when he writes:**
- **“Dewey accommodates what is sound in the utilitarian intuition that we should act so as to bring about the most good for the most people. But he does not get mired in an ultimate moral principle or supreme principle that, when applied formulaically, can be shown to violate basic rights, forgo colloquy, ignore cultural and personal differences, and forsake the direct satisfaction of moral engagement.”**

Dewey and Mead on Why Theoretical Principles are Hypotheses

First, we will consider theoretical truths and even the most practical of factual statements. We can see the hypothetical character of a scientific theory according to this procedure:

- **If a hypothesis is true, then new observations will be found under experimental conditions in an experimental group but not in the control group. If P is true, then Q occurs. For example, if it rains, then my car gets wet.**
- **The observations are in fact found under experimental conditions but not in the control group. Q does occur. My car is getting wet.**
- **Therefore, the hypothesis is verified not as an absolute truth but as a well-verified hypothesis. Therefore, P is verified as probably true. Therefore, it is probably raining.**

Factual Statements as Hypotheses

- **For example, if I say that “this is a computer keyboard that I see before myself.” I can understand this statement as hypothetical in the following way:**
 - **If this is a computer keyboard which I see before myself and if I continue using this tool, then I will get words processed upon my computer screen. If P is true, then Q is true.**
 - **I am getting words processed upon my computer screen. Q is true.**
 - **Therefore, this is probably a computer keyboard. P is probably true.**
- **The reason P is probably true rather than absolutely true is that it is possible that the observed effects could occur because of some other hypothesis. For example, I could be dreaming, and I am not typing on a keyboard.**

Mead on Why Moral Principles are Hypotheses

- Fesmire suggests the importance of Dewey's agreement with George Herbert Mead on our need to understand sympathy's key role in our understanding of the interaction of the self with the other for ethical deliberation.
- However, Fesmire does not use the thought of Mead to elaborate a pragmatic understanding of moral deliberation as imaginative, dramatic rehearsal [Fesmire, pp. 66, 81].
- It is precisely this pragmatic understanding of moral deliberation as imaginative, dramatic rehearsal of self interacting with community which this paper will now develop from Mead's grasp of the self as involving both the "I" and the "Me".

The Self as Process of “Me” and “I”

- Mead affirms that whatever a self is doing may be understood as playing a social role, a “Me,” say as a teacher, in interaction with others as students.
- However, the self is more than just a “Me;” the self is also an “I.” The “I” is the response of the organic individual to the attitudes of others.
- This response can either accept, reject *or* modify the individual's “me,” the role which others may expect an individual to play in the interaction.
- The continuing responses of others to the “Me” which “I” present to them, continues an ongoing development.

Four Step Process of Becoming Rational and Free by Ever Expanding Communities

- **(1) The individual is free from her own impulses by belonging to a group and being self-conscious, aware of herself and able to evaluate her impulses as to how such impulses would affect her membership in the group and her awareness of herself.**
- **For example, a child has the impulse to whine. But her parents criticize such behavior. The child is able to look upon her impulse from the viewpoint of his family and can learn to control that impulse in order to be accepted as a more adult member of the family.**
- **This is the beginning of moral evaluation of one's impulses that may hurt one's original but still developing "Me," my role in my group.**

Four Step Process of Becoming Rational and Free by Ever Expanding Communities

- **(2) The individual is free from any particular group by belonging to other groups which enable her to evaluate that particular group from the standpoint of the other groups.**
- **For example, the child above learns not to whine, but she also learns the prejudices of her family, for example, their prejudice against foreign-made products. But she can evaluate the prejudices she has adopted from her family by evaluating them from the viewpoint of experts in a relevant field of manufacturing or simply from the viewpoint of an educated consumer.**
- **This can be the beginning of moral evaluation of one's original group.**

Four Step Process of Becoming Rational and Free by Ever Expanding Communities

- **(3) The individual is free from any existing groups by being able to imagine new groups or new variations of old groups and by being able to evaluate those existing groups from the viewpoint of the imagined group.**
- **For example, Socrates evaluates previous philosophers and adopts significant points from them. However, he restates them in the context of a new emphasis in philosophy which examines human knowledge and morality by the method of the Socratic dialogue, searching for universally accepted definitions of knowledge and virtues.**
- **This can be the continuation of a moral evaluation of one's membership in any existing group, looking to the future development of a new group with new "Me's."**

Four Step Process of Becoming Rational and Free by Ever Expanding Communities

- **(4) The two aspects of an individual's freedom,**
 - **(i) freedom from any unevaluated habit of feeling, thinking, choosing, or acting and**
 - **(ii) freedom for developing evaluated habits of feeling, thinking, choosing, or acting**
- **are always in process, potentially leading the self to an identity in a universal community of feeling, thinking, choosing, and acting.**
- **This can be the deepening of the moral evaluation of one's membership in any existing group, looking to the future development of a new group with new "Me's."**

Conclusion

- **In this paper we have evaluated John Dewey's claim that theoretical and moral principles are well understood as hypotheses in need of being tested through our future interaction with the world and with social others.**
 - **(1) We have examined four cases of negative moral principles and have found good reason to defend exceptions to these principles because of complex, future interactions. For example, we have found good reason to challenge the absolute quality of capital punishment by examination of the more important principle that the state should not allow itself to execute an innocent person on death row.**
 - **(2) We have examined four cases of positive moral principles and have found good reason, for example, to defend the creativity of the wise moral decision in Aristotle's famous understand of moral virtue as the greatest of the arts, the art of moral living between excess and defect relative to the individual as a person of practical wisdom would do so and not as a mathematician calculating an absolute arithmetic mean, deductively the same for every individual.**

Conclusion, continued

- **(3) Finally, in order to understand how moral principles and ideals always have a hypothetical quality, we have explored George Herbert Mead's pragmatic analysis of the self as a combination of the "I" and the "Me."**
- **For Mead, the self's adopted roles are always being tested through social interaction with others in various communities in order to see:**
 - **how best to realize the mutual understanding of both self and others, and**
 - **how our social interaction may be able to affirm and enhance both our mutual creativity and our mutual sympathy in an ongoing process.**

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