

The Good Life—
Some Deweyan Lessons

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In memory of Dick Bernstein – with gratitude

1.

Dewey's writings, as I interpret them, are centered on human progress. He rightly sees our history as one in which advances are chancy, achieved through luck and frequently reversed. In his explorations of various domains of human activity – politics, art, ethical life, religious practice, education – he hopes to make our progress less chancy than it has historically been.

Dewey does not conceive progress in teleological terms. There is no long-term goal that would represent the summit of the human condition. Rather, we make progress by solving the problems that beset our lives, and by expanding the limits of human existence. Much of his philosophical work is diagnostic, seeking to uncover the character of our difficulties and of the factors that hem us in. He is largely concerned with progress *from*, with *pragmatic* progress.

Thus, when he takes up the ancient question of the good life – the oldest and most central problem of philosophy – he does not offer an ideal answer. Instead, he rephrases the question. How can lives be helped to go better than they presently do? What forces diminish our lives and often defeat us? What can we do to ameliorate the current condition? The question is comparative. Dewey is not a perfectionist but a meliorist.

That attitude explains, I think, his reluctance to engage in general discussions of “the good life.” His attacks on the ancient question are focused on specific sources of trouble. Yet there is one clear – and eloquent – passage suggesting a vision that guides his diagnostic searches. It occurs at the end of *A Common Faith*.

The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.¹

¹ John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882 - 1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967 - 1990), LW 9:57 - 8.

This passage points to a human project, spanning the generations from our ancestors (pre-human, as well as human), through which we are enabled to live the lives we do, and to which we contribute. Lives fulfill themselves not only by receiving things we value, but also by giving back, by making our own individual additions to the lives of people around us, some of whom will outlive us. Human lives go better when they participate more fully in this double process of receiving and of giving.

2.

How can we connect this thought, this first Deweyan lesson, with the centuries-old reflection on the good life? Simplifying for present purposes, we can divide the history of such reflections into three main periods. First, among the ancients, a conversation about the objective features that characterize the lives of those who live well. For many contemporary thinkers that conversation remains valuable. Their own conceptions of the good life draw up “objective lists”, often inspired by Plato or Aristotle or the Stoics or the Epicureans. With the rise of Christianity, however, the conversation in the West changed decisively. Through a long second period, the character of the good life was drawn from theological deliberations, aimed towards discerning patterns for human living that accord with divine intentions. The transition to a third period comes with the Enlightenment. The theological embedding gives way to an emphasis on human freedom. Thus, in a tradition begun by Kant and von Humboldt, forcefully developed for Anglophone audiences by John Stuart Mill, thinking about the good life starts from the thought that the life you live should be your own. Mill encapsulates it in an inspiring sentence:

The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.²

In English-language philosophy, that sentence has inspired a main rival to the “objective list” approach. I shall call it the *liberal tradition*.

² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, The World's Classics, 2008) 17.

Prominent versions of that tradition in recent philosophy are those of John Rawls, Bernard Williams, and Susan Wolf. Each of these writers views lives as going well when they follow a freely-chosen pattern – a “project” or “plan of life” – and attain some success in pursuing it. For any view of this kind to escape obvious objections, it must avoid supposing that the choice must result from a process of explicit reflection, or that it is made once and for all at some early life-stage (in late adolescence, say, or early adulthood); I shall not explore the ways in which these qualifications might be elaborated. Yet, if the liberal hopes to characterize the good life without borrowing from some objective list, one fundamental question must be answered: Can *any old* freely-chosen project anchor a good life?

The classic example used in raising this question imagines a person who dedicates their entire life to counting the blades of grass in some particular region. I'll elaborate the thought by supposing this person to retreat from society as a young adult, to live completely independently from then on, and, as death approaches, to destroy all the records (*accurate* records) that have been compiled, so that nobody else may have access to the data. Most people would judge this life as a waste. It hardly seems that the protagonist has discovered some hitherto unappreciated project for a life, engaging in a profitable “experiment of living.”

If that response is correct, the liberal has to add some further constraint to distinguish the valuable projects from the worthless ones – or so it would seem. The passage from Dewey appears to point in a promising direction. Does the trouble lie in the withdrawal from society, in the abandonment of any possibility of contributing to the multi-generational human enterprise? An affirmative answer can be motivated by restoring connections between the hero and other people. If, despite the protagonist's excited efforts to bring the daily totals to the attention of the wider public, there is never an audience for the bulletins, the grass-counting continues to appear a waste of a life. Suppose, however, our grass-counter is greeted by a group of aficionados, people who are eager to learn just how many blades have been found each day. Their lives, as they understand them, are improved by the information they receive. The situation now begins to look different. The hero is part of a community, one that may even endorse the efforts as heroic. The grass-counters' association is not, after all, so different from the clubs of Sherlockians (devoting large chunks of their lives to esoteric knowledge about late Victorian London), or of chess enthusiasts, or even of groups of people who focus on the most recondite parts of mathematics or theoretical physics. When questions with no practical bearing are enthusiastically pursued by

people who collectively dedicate their lives to finding answers, and when the pursuit comes to occupy the center of their lives, those who successfully investigate the questions are no longer easily written off as failing to contribute to the pan-human enterprise Dewey celebrates. We may not know just where to draw the line, but the social connection complicates the verdict.

Perhaps, then, the liberal tradition should insist on social connection, on a project's enhancing the value of some cluster of human lives. Mill's inspiring sentence inherits from previous Anglophone political theorists an emphasis on negative freedom. He should have written it slightly differently:

The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we thereby assist others in the pursuit of theirs.

The privileged projects are those intended to enhance other lives, and that succeed in doing so. Drawing a further lesson from Dewey, we can bypass hard questions about how much social connection is required (and about how much success is needed) by adopting the melioristic, comparative approach.

Lives go better when the projects they pursue attain more of their goals and thereby contribute more to the lives of others.

Hence, it appears, Dewey has helped the Millian liberal to address an important problem, and to achieve a more satisfactory – maybe even completely satisfactory – liberal account of the good life.

I once thought something like that. I made this thought the core of my approach to human progress, presenting this version of liberalism in talks intended to rescue a – pragmatic, Deweyan – concept of progress.

Until an occasion at *The New School for Social Research* ...

3.

Shortly after I moved to New York in 1999, Sidney Morgenbesser helped me to see that I had been something of a Deweyan pragmatist all along, inspiring me to turn explicitly to the classical pragmatists, and to Dewey in particular. Shortly after taking that turn, I met Richard Bernstein, some of whose work I had previously read. A friendship quickly sprouted between us, set strong roots, and continued to grow and flourish for the better part of two decades. Dick, who had been Dewey's staunchest

champion during the long period during which Dewey's works had languished in the philosophical wilderness, was a wonderful mentor for someone who had belatedly discovered philosophical sympathies that ought to have been developed far earlier.

His reaction to my *New School* presentation was characteristically decisive. Other commentators were chipping away at the point he wanted to press, but, after a brief expression of the discontent he shared, he announced that he was going to his office and would soon be back. When he returned he was carrying a stack of familiar books, various volumes of the *Middle Works and Later Works* (possibly even one of the *Early Works*), from which he read. I quickly capitulated on one point. The amended Millian view I had offered might be seen as informed by Dewey's ideas – it was definitely not Deweyan. For, at its heart, it presupposed a vision of the self as formed asocially. It took the typical stance of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of political theory, in which Mill is a prominent member. Political questions are posed by considering fully-developed human agents, and then asking what kinds of socio-political interactions among them should be fostered.

As Dick conclusively demonstrated, that was not Dewey's stance (and he was kind enough to refrain from chiding me for not knowing better.) One of the passages he cited is a famous extract from *Democracy and Education*:

As a matter of fact every individual has grown up, and always must grow up, in a social medium. His responses grow intelligent, or gain meaning, simply because he lives and acts in a medium of accepted meanings and values. ... Through social intercourse, through sharing in the activities embodying beliefs, he gradually acquires a mind of his own. The conception of mind as a purely isolated possession of the self is at the very antipodes of the truth. The self achieves mind in the degree in which knowledge of things is incarnate in the life about him; ...³

Philosophers who have been deeply immersed in Hegel (several of whom had objected to my Millian account of the self) would never have missed the significance of these sentences. Only those in whom the methodological individualism of Anglophone political philosophy is deeply instilled will glide over the passage, and make their misguided journey to the antipodes.

³ Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, op. cit., MW 9:304.

But does recognizing the self as socially-formed and socially-embedded make any serious difference to the Millian account? Doesn't my amendment of Mill's inspiring sentence already take the crucial step, recognizing a condition – we might call it the *Community Condition* – on appropriate choices of a person's own good, thus filtering out those projects that strike us as inadequate for fulfilling human lives? The passage just quoted appears to recall a straightforward causal truth, for which no mysterious Hegelian baggage is needed: we develop as people through causal interactions with others. It was written after Darwin had replaced Hegel as Dewey's favorite historicist, expressing a bio-psychological commonplace every Millian liberal should accept. Isn't the important point for understanding how to live that, once an individual has been formed in this way, the freely chosen project should also have positive impacts on the lives of others? What more needs to be said?

Further conversations with Dick, and reflections on them, convinced me that this response is too shallow. Not all the Deweyan lessons had yet been absorbed.

4.

To appreciate this point, we should scrutinize the centerpiece of the liberal program, the idea of a *freely-chosen* plan, in light of the bio-psychological commonplace. An individual *achieves* a distinctive constellation of psychological propensities as a result of interactions with people whose attitudes are permeated by the understandings and values of the ambient society. Each of us is limited by the available cultural repertoire. Why should we think of what occurs in early development as equipping us with a capacity for making a free choice, for formulating our own distinctive conception of the good and our own way of pursuing it? Why isn't the Millian individual a mythic figure, a being whose choices are fixed by a sequence of social impositions?

As Mill and his successors appreciate, imposition has often been the human condition. Probably the vast majority of human lives have been largely shaped by the surrounding social structures: people's lives are fitted into pre-existing patterns delineated by caste or race or social class or sex (or some combination of these). The bio-psychological point can easily induce a sense that autonomy vanishes, that genuine freedom of choice is impossible. Once again, we do better to think comparatively. The inhabitants of the *polis* may all be formed to fit into the structure of a social system, but they are not all equally unfree. The well-born males with whom Plato and Aristotle discuss the good life have more freedom than their male slaves and the women who are confined to their quarters. The nineteenth century entrepreneur

may be enmeshed in and restricted by Capitalism, but he enjoys more freedom than his workers. John Stuart Mill is limited by the contours of the educational regime his father designed for him, and those contours even inform his rebellion against the prefigured pattern; yet he possesses a greater degree of autonomy than most of his Victorian contemporaries, including the young Harriet Taylor. How are we to make sense of these differences in freedom?

An obvious approach to this question would identify sound education with eliciting, leading out, what is prior to the process. Development goes well when its end product corresponds to the individual who precedes the process of social formation. The innate propensities are mirrored in the fully-grown person. Yet this murky thought won't survive the light cast by a Deweyan insight. In the passage from *Democracy and Education*, and, at much greater length in Chapter 7 of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey takes mind to emerge (in ontogeny and in phylogeny) from biological processes. The correspondence must then be between something with only biological properties – a zygote, an embryo, a fetus, a newly-born infant – and something with additional psychological properties, a fully-developed person, capable of reflecting on what is good and to be pursued. The idea of any such correspondence seems far-fetched, if not outright absurd.

Yet, just as we can differentiate degrees of freedom, so too we can register variations in the processes through which the development of the individual proceeds. Those who interact with the growing child may set rigid boundaries, allowing only for certain types of experiences and specific forms of conduct; they may never attend to the inclinations expressed by an immature person at particular developmental stages; they may never be on the lookout for distinctive tendencies or talents. Each of us comes to mature adulthood through participating in a dialogue with the surrounding society.⁴ The dialogue may effectively be reduced to a monologue, in which society's representatives command, and the child conforms. Or it may be a genuine exchange, in which the child's interlocutors listen closely and amend their next contributions in light of what they hear. Those interlocutors may be many or few, uniform in their habits and opinions, or highly diverse. As a result, the growing child may become aware, may even explore in safety, a smaller or larger range of "experiments of living."

We have, I think, a partial understanding of how a healthy process of development should go, even though neither Dewey nor any of his successors as

⁴ Philip Kitcher, *The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) 104-108.

educational theorists can provide an account that is either full or precise. The ability to make some distinctions is, however, enough to ground attributions of different degrees of freedom, to say of some people that they have acquired a greater capacity for choosing their own good and pursuing it in their own way. (Mill, I believe, already arrived at some understanding of this important point; he is not the pure methodological individualist he is usually interpreted as being).⁵ Moreover, when the concept of autonomy as a binary notion is abandoned, the melioristic reform of the ancient question once again liberates us from drawing lines to mark where the good life begins. Just as we do not need to say how much success in pursuing one's chosen good is required for a life to go well, we do not have to specify a degree of freedom beyond which a project counts as freely-chosen. Human progress occurs when human lives enjoy greater success in their pursuits, or when the processes through which they develop equip them with higher degrees of freedom.

5.

The recognition of the self as socially formed thus modifies my Millian account in helpful ways. But that is not the end of the matter. To be capable of participating in the kind of dialogue through which the freedom of growing individuals would be enhanced, to be the kind of representative of society who would cultivate individuality, requires a capacity to identify the predilections, aspirations, intentions and desires of others, and to shape conduct so as to foster their development. As I have argued at some length (Kitcher 2011, Kitcher 2021a), that capacity – *responsiveness* – is one we share with our evolutionary cousins, the chimpanzees and bonobos, but in them, as in the most recent common ancestor from whom contemporary chimps, bonobos, and human beings descend, the capacity is extremely limited. Human life in its current forms has come about through our invention of a technology for amplifying that capacity: in its first incarnation, morality; in its later version, ethics. The degree to which we have developed that capacity and the sensitivities that flow from it (Kitcher 2021a, Chapter 3) represents the extent of our status as ethical agents, as well as our ability to cultivate the freedom of others.

Let us now return to the eloquent close of *A Common Faith*. Dewey enjoins us to “conserve, transmit, rectify and expand the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure.” Adapting that

⁵ Kitcher, *On John Stuart Mill* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023) 65.

injunction to the liberal approach to living well, we can see it as asking us to replicate, in our lives, and in the projects we pursue, the responsiveness to others that has afforded us the degree of freedom we possess. Thus the *Community Condition* I envisaged earlier should no longer be viewed as some independent addition to the liberal account. It is a consequence of the fundamental requirement for ethical agency, and of the apparently banal commonplace embodied in the passage from *Democracy and Education* quoted above: that each generation in the human project helps to form the individuals who will succeed it. Our duty is thus to fashion our life plans, our distinctive projects, to direct them towards others. The amendment of Mill's inspiring sentence follows immediately.

6.

Dewey's lessons for the liberal tradition were thus more extensive than I originally recognized. Without the wise advice of Richard Bernstein – a wide-ranging philosopher, a generous mentor, and a good friend – I would never have appreciated their full significance.

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