

Theories of Morals (1916)

John Dewey

1. The Inner and the Outer



Since morality is concerned with conduct, any dualisms which are set up between mind and activity must reflect themselves in the theory of morals. Since the formulations of the separation in the philosophic theory of morals are used to justify and idealize the practices employed in moral training, a brief critical discussion is in place. It is a commonplace of educational theory that the establishing of character is a comprehensive aim of school instruction and discipline. Hence it is important that we should be on our guard against a conception of the relations of intelligence to character which hampers the realization of the aim, and on the look-out for the conditions which have to be provided in order that the aim may be successfully acted upon. The first obstruction which meets us is the currency of moral ideas which split the course of activity into two opposed factors, often named respectively the inner and outer, or the spiritual and the physical. This division is a culmination of the dualism of mind and the world, soul and body, end and means, which we have so frequently noted. In morals it takes the form of a sharp demarcation of the motive of action from its consequences, and of character from conduct. Motive and character are regarded as something purely "inner," existing exclusively in consciousness, while consequences and conduct are regarded as outside of mind, conduct having to do simply with the movements which carry out motives; consequences with what happens as a result. Different schools identify morality with either the inner state of mind or the outer act and results, each in separation from the other. Action with a purpose is deliberate; it involves a consciously foreseen end and a mental weighing of considerations pro and con. It also involves a conscious state of longing or desire for the end. The deliberate choice of an aim and of a settled disposition of desire takes time. During this time complete overt action is suspended. A person who does not have his mind made up, does not know what to do. Consequently he postpones definite action so far as possible. His position may be compared to that of a man considering jumping across a ditch. If he were sure he could or could not make it, definite activity in some direction would occur. But if he considers, he is in doubt; he hesitates. During the time in which a single overt line of action is in suspense, his activities are confined to such redistributions of energy within the organism as will prepare a determinate course of action. He measures the ditch with his eyes; he brings himself taut to get a feel of the energy at his disposal; he looks about for other ways across, he reflects upon the importance of getting across. All this means an accentuation of consciousness; it means a turning in upon the individual's own attitudes, powers, wishes, etc.

Obviously, however, this surging up of personal factors into conscious recognition is a part of the whole activity in its temporal development. There is not first a purely psychical process, followed abruptly by a radically different physical one. There is one continuous behavior, proceeding from a more uncertain, divided, hesitating state to a more overt, determinate, or complete state. The activity at first consists mainly of certain tensions and adjustments within the organism; as these are coordinated into a unified attitude, the organism as a whole acts—some definite act is undertaken. We may distinguish, of course, the more explicitly conscious phase of the continuous activity as mental or psychical. But that only identifies the mental or psychical to mean the indeterminate, formative state of an activity which in its fullness involves putting forth of overt energy to modify the environment.

Our conscious thoughts, observations, wishes, aversions are important, because they represent inchoate, nascent activities. They fulfill their destiny in issuing, later on, into specific and perceptible acts. And these inchoate, budding organic readjustments are important because they are our sole escape from the dominion of routine habits and blind impulse. They are activities having a new meaning in process of development. Hence, normally, there is an accentuation of personal consciousness whenever our instincts and ready formed habits find themselves blocked by novel conditions. Then we are thrown back upon ourselves to reorganize our own attitude before proceeding to a definite and irretrievable course of action. Unless we try to drive our way through by sheer brute force, we must modify our organic resources to adapt them to the specific features of the situation in which we find ourselves. The conscious deliberating and desiring which precede overt action are, then, the methodic personal readjustment implied in activity in uncertain situations. This role of mind in continuous activity is not always maintained, however. Desires for something different, aversion to the given state of things caused by the blocking of successful activity, stimulates the imagination. The picture of a different state of things does not always function to aid ingenious observation and recollection to find a way out and on. Except where there is a disciplined disposition, the tendency is for the imagination to run loose. Instead of its objects being checked up by conditions with reference to their practicability in execution, they are allowed to develop because of the immediate emotional satisfaction which they yield. When we find the successful display of our energies checked by uncongenial surroundings, natural and social, the easiest way out is to build castles in the air and let them be a substitute for an actual achievement which involves the pains of thought. So in overt action we acquiesce, and build up an imaginary world in, mind. This break between thought and conduct is reflected in those theories which make a sharp separation between mind as inner and conduct and consequences as merely outer.

For the split may be more than an incident of a particular individual's experience. The social situation may be such as to throw the class given to articulate reflection back into their own thoughts and desires without providing the means by which these ideas and aspirations can be used to reorganize the environment. Under such conditions, men take revenge, as it were, upon the alien and hostile environment by cultivating contempt for it, by giving it a bad name. They seek refuge and consolation within their own states of mind, their own imaginings and wishes, which they compliment by calling both more real and more ideal than the despised outer world. Such periods have recurred in history. In the early centuries of the Christian era, the influential moral systems of Stoicism, of monastic and popular Christianity and other religious movements of the day, took shape under the influence of such conditions. The more action which might express prevailing ideals was checked, the more the inner possession and cultivation of ideals was regarded as self-sufficient—as the essence of morality. The external world in which activity belongs was thought of as morally indifferent. Everything lay in having the right motive, even though that motive was not a moving force in the world. Much the same sort of situation recurred in Germany in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; it led to the Kantian insistence upon the good will as the sole moral good, the will being regarded as something complete in itself, apart from action and from the changes or consequences effected in the world. Later it led to any idealization of existing institutions as themselves the embodiment of reason.

The purely internal morality of "meaning well," of having a good disposition regardless of what comes of it, naturally led to a reaction. This is generally known as either hedonism or utilitarianism. It was said in effect that the important thing morally is not what a man is inside of his own consciousness, but what he does—the consequences which issue, the charges he actually effects. Inner morality was attacked as sentimental, arbitrary, dogmatic, subjective—as giving men leave to dignify and shield any dogma congenial to their self-interest or any caprice occurring to imagination by calling it an intuition or an ideal of conscience. Results, conduct, are what counts; they afford the sole measure of morality. Ordinary morality, and hence that of the schoolroom, is likely to be an inconsistent compromise of both views. On one hand, certain states of feeling are made much of; the individual must "mean well," and if his intentions are good, if he had the right sort of emotional consciousness, he may be relieved of responsibility for full results in conduct. But since, on the other hand, certain things have to be done to meet the convenience and the requirements of others, and of social order in general, there is great insistence upon the doing of certain things, irrespective of whether the individual has any concern or intelligence in their doing. He must toe the mark; he must have his nose held to the grindstone; he must obey; he must form useful habits; he must learn self-control,—all of these precepts being understood in a way which emphasizes simply the immediate thing tangibly done, irrespective of the spirit of thought and desire in which it is done, and irrespective therefore of its effect upon other less obvious doings.

It is hoped that the prior discussion has sufficiently elaborated the method by which both of these evils are avoided. One or both of these evils must result wherever individuals, whether young or old, cannot engage in a progressively cumulative undertaking under conditions which engage their interest and require their reflection. For only in such cases is it possible that the disposition of desire and thinking should be an organic factor in overt and obvious conduct. Given a consecutive activity embodying the student's own interest, where a definite result is to be obtained, and where neither routine habit nor the following of dictated directions nor capricious improvising will suffice, and there the rise of conscious purpose, conscious desire, and deliberate reflection are inevitable. They are inevitable as the spirit and quality of an activity having specific consequences, not as forming an isolated realm of inner consciousness.

2. The Opposition of Duty and Interest



Probably there is no antithesis more often set up in moral discussion than that between acting from "principle" and from "interest." To act on principle is to act disinterestedly, according to a general law, which is above all personal considerations. To act according to interest is, so the allegation runs, to act selfishly, with one's own personal profit in view. It substitutes the changing expediency of the moment for devotion to unswerving moral law. The false idea of interest underlying this opposition has already been criticized (See Chapter X), but some moral aspects of the question will now be considered. A clue to the matter may be found in the fact that the supporters of the "interest" side of the controversy habitually use the term "self-interest." Starting from the premises that unless there is interest in an object or idea, there is no motive force, they end with the conclusion that even when a person claims to be acting from principle or from a sense of duty, he really acts as he does because there "is something in it" for himself. The premise is sound; the conclusion false. In reply the other school argues that since man is capable of generous self-forgetting and even self-sacrificing action, he is capable of acting without interest. Again the premise is sound, and the conclusion false. The error on both sides lies in a false notion of the relation of interest and the self.

Both sides assume that the self is a fixed and hence isolated quantity. As a consequence, there is a rigid dilemma between acting for an interest of the self and without interest. If the self is something fixed antecedent to action, then acting from interest means trying to get more in the way of possessions for the self—whether in the way of fame, approval of others, power over others, pecuniary profit, or pleasure. Then the reaction from this view as a cynical depreciation of human nature leads to the view that men who act nobly act with no interest at all. Yet to an unbiased judgment it would appear plain that a man must be interested in what he is doing or he would not do it. A physician who continues to serve the sick in a plague at almost certain danger to his own life must be interested in the efficient performance of his profession—more interested in that than in the safety of his own bodily life. But it is distorting facts to say that this interest is merely a mask for an interest in something else which he gets by continuing his customary services—such as money or good repute or virtue; that it is only a means to an ulterior selfish end. The moment we recognize that the self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action, the whole situation clears up. A man's interest in keeping at his work in spite of danger to life means that his self is found in that work; if he finally gave up, and preferred his personal safety or comfort, it would mean that he preferred to be that kind of a self. The mistake lies in making a separation between interest and self, and supposing that the latter is the end to which interest in objects and acts and others is a mere means. In fact, self and interest are two names for the same fact; the kind and amount of interest actively taken in a thing reveals and measures the quality of selfhood which exists. Bear in mind that interest means the active or moving identity of the self with a certain object, and the whole alleged dilemma falls to the ground.

Unselfishness, for example, signifies neither lack of interest in what is done (that would mean only machine-like indifference) nor selflessness—which would mean absence of virility and character. As employed everywhere outside of this particular theoretical controversy, the term "unselfishness" refers to the kind of aims and objects which habitually interest a man. And if we make a mental survey of the kind of interests which evoke the use of this epithet, we shall see that they have two intimately associated features. (i) The generous self consciously identifies itself with the full range of relationships implied in its activity, instead of drawing a sharp line between itself and considerations which are excluded as alien or indifferent; (ii) it readjusts and expands its past ideas of itself to take in new consequences as they become

perceptible. When the physician began his career he may not have thought of a pestilence; he may not have consciously identified himself with service under such conditions. But, if he has a normally growing or active self, when he finds that his vocation involves such risks, he willingly adopts them as integral portions of his activity. The wider or larger self which means inclusion instead of denial of relationships is identical with a self which enlarges in order to assume previously unforeseen ties.

In such crises of readjustment—and the crisis may be slight as well as great—there may be a transitional conflict of "principle" with "interest." It is the nature of a habit to involve ease in the accustomed line of activity. It is the nature of a readjusting of habit to involve an effort which is disagreeable—something to which a man has deliberately to hold himself. In other words, there is a tendency to identify the self—or take interest—in what one has got used to, and to turn away the mind with aversion or irritation when an unexpected thing which involves an unpleasant modification of habit comes up. Since in the past one has done one's duty without having to face such a disagreeable circumstance, why not go on as one has been? To yield to this temptation means to narrow and isolate the thought of the self—to treat it as complete. Any habit, no matter how efficient in the past, which has become set, may at any time bring this temptation with it. To act from principle in such an emergency is not to act on some abstract principle, or duty at large; it is to act upon the principle of a course of action, instead of upon the circumstances which have attended it. The principle of a physician's conduct is its animating aim and spirit—the care for the diseased. The principle is not what justifies an activity, for the principle is but another name for the continuity of the activity. If the activity as manifested in its consequences is undesirable, to act upon principle is to accentuate its evil. And a man who prides himself upon acting upon principle is likely to be a man who insists upon having his own way without learning from experience what is the better way. He fancies that some abstract principle justifies his course of action without recognizing that his principle needs justification.

Assuming, however, that school conditions are such as to provide desirable occupations, it is interest in the occupation as a whole—that is, in its continuous development—which keeps a pupil at his work in spite of temporary diversions and unpleasant obstacles. Where there is no activity having a growing significance, appeal to principle is either purely verbal, or a form of obstinate pride or an appeal to extraneous considerations clothed with a dignified title. Undoubtedly there are junctures where momentary interest ceases and attention flags, and where reinforcement is needed. But what carries a person over these hard stretches is not loyalty to duty in the abstract, but interest in his occupation. Duties are "offices"—they are the specific acts needed for the fulfilling of a function—or, in homely language—doing one's job. And the man who is genuinely interested in his job is the man who is able to stand temporary discouragement, to persist in the face of obstacles, to take the lean with the fat: he makes an interest out of meeting and overcoming difficulties and distraction.

3. Intelligence and Character



A noteworthy paradox often accompanies discussions of morals. On the one hand, there is an identification of the moral with the rational. Reason is set up as a faculty from which proceed ultimate moral intuitions, and sometimes, as in the Kantian theory, it is said to supply the only proper moral motive. On the other hand, the value of concrete, everyday intelligence is constantly underestimated, and even deliberately depreciated. Morals is often thought to be an affair with which ordinary knowledge has nothing to do. Moral knowledge is thought to be a thing apart, and conscience is thought of as something radically different from consciousness. This separation, if valid, is of especial significance for education. Moral education in school is practically hopeless when we set up the development of character as a supreme end, and at the same time treat the acquiring of knowledge and the development of understanding, which of necessity occupy the chief part of school time, as having nothing to do with character. On such a basis, moral education is inevitably reduced to some kind of catechetical instruction, or lessons about morals. Lessons "about morals" signify as matter of course lessons in what other people think about virtues and duties. It amounts to something only in the degree in which pupils happen to be already animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiments of others. Without such a regard, it has no more influence on character than information about the mountains of Asia; with a servile regard, it increases dependence upon others, and throws upon those in authority the responsibility for conduct.

As a matter of fact, direct instruction in morals has been effective only in social groups where it was a part of the authoritative control of the many by the few. Not the teaching as such but the reinforcement of it by the whole regime of which it was an incident made it effective. To attempt to get similar results from lessons about morals in a democratic society is to rely upon sentimental magic.

At the other end of the scale stands the Socratic-Platonic teaching which identifies knowledge and virtue—which holds that no man does evil knowingly but only because of ignorance of the good. This doctrine is commonly attacked on the ground that nothing is more common than for a man to know the good and yet do the bad: not knowledge, but habituation or practice, and motive are what is required. Aristotle, in fact, at once attacked the Platonic teaching on the ground that moral virtue is like an art, such as medicine; the experienced practitioner is better than a man who has theoretical knowledge but no practical experience of disease and remedies. The issue turns, however, upon what is meant by knowledge. Aristotle's objection ignored the gist of Plato's teaching to the effect that man could not attain a theoretical insight into the good except as he had passed through years of practical habituation and strenuous discipline. Knowledge of the good was not a thing to be got either from books or from others, but was achieved through a prolonged education. It was the final and culminating grace of a mature experience of life. Irrespective of Plato's position, it is easy to perceive that the term knowledge is used to denote things as far apart as intimate and vital personal realization,—a conviction gained and tested in experience,—and a second-handed, largely symbolic, recognition that persons in general believe so and so—a devitalized remote information. That the latter does not guarantee conduct, that it does not profoundly affect character, goes without saying. But if knowledge means something of the same sort as our conviction gained by trying and testing that sugar is sweet and quinine bitter, the case stands otherwise. Every time a man sits on a chair rather than on a stove, carries an umbrella when it rains, consults a doctor when ill—or in short performs any of the thousand acts which make up his daily life, he proves that knowledge of a certain kind finds direct issue in conduct. There is every reason to suppose that the same sort of knowledge of good has a like expression; in fact "good" is an empty term unless it includes the satisfactions experienced in such situations as those mentioned. Knowledge that other persons are supposed to know something might lead one to act so as to win the approbation others attach to certain actions, or at least so as to give others the impression that one agrees with them; there is no reason why it should lead to personal initiative and loyalty in behalf of the beliefs attributed to them.

It is not necessary, accordingly, to dispute about the proper meaning of the term knowledge. It is enough for educational purposes to note the different qualities covered by the one name, to realize that it is knowledge gained at first hand through the exigencies of experience which affects conduct in significant ways. If a pupil learns things from books simply in connection with school lessons and for the sake of reciting what he has learned when called upon, then knowledge will have effect upon some conduct—namely upon that of reproducing statements at the demand of others. There is nothing surprising that such "knowledge" should not have much influence in the life out of school. But this is not a reason for making a divorce between knowledge and conduct, but for holding in low esteem this kind of knowledge. The same thing may be said of knowledge which relates merely to an isolated and technical specialty; it modifies action but only in its own narrow line. In truth, the problem of moral education in the schools is one with the problem of securing knowledge—the knowledge connected with the system of impulses and habits. For the use to which any known fact is put depends upon its connections. The knowledge of dynamite of a safecracker may be identical in verbal form with that of a chemist; in fact, it is different, for it is knit into connection with different aims and habits, and thus has a different import.

Our prior discussion of subject-matter as proceeding from direct activity having an immediate aim, to the enlargement of meaning found in geography and history, and then to scientifically organized knowledge, was based upon the idea of maintaining a vital connection between knowledge and activity. What is learned and employed in an occupation having an aim and involving cooperation with others is moral knowledge, whether consciously so regarded or not. For it builds up a social interest and confers the intelligence needed to make that interest effective in practice. Just because the studies of the curriculum represent standard factors in social life, they are organs of initiation into social values. As mere school studies, their acquisition has only a technical worth. Acquired under conditions where their social significance is realized, they feed moral interest and develop moral insight. Moreover, the qualities of mind discussed under the topic of method of learning are all of them intrinsically moral qualities. Open-mindedness, single-mindedness,

sincerity, breadth of outlook, thoroughness, assumption of responsibility for developing the consequences of ideas which are accepted, are moral traits. The habit of identifying moral characteristics with external conformity to authoritative prescriptions may lead us to ignore the ethical value of these intellectual attitudes, but the same habit tends to reduce morals to a dead and machinelike routine. Consequently while such an attitude has moral results, the results are morally undesirable—above all in a democratic society where so much depends upon personal disposition.

4. The Social and the Moral



All of the separations which we have been criticizing—and which the idea of education set forth in the previous chapters is designed to avoid—spring from taking morals too narrowly,—giving them, on one side, a sentimental goody-goody turn without reference to effective ability to do what is socially needed, and, on the other side, overemphasizing convention and tradition so as to limit morals to a list of definitely stated acts. As a matter of fact, morals are as broad as acts which concern our relationships with others. And potentially this includes all our acts, even though their social bearing may not be thought of at the time of performance. For every act, by the principle of habit, modifies disposition—it sets up a certain kind of inclination and desire. And it is impossible to tell when the habit thus strengthened may have a direct and perceptible influence on our association with others. Certain traits of character have such an obvious connection with our social relationships that we call them "moral" in an emphatic sense—truthfulness, honesty, chastity, amiability, etc. But this only means that they are, as compared with some other attitudes, central:—that they carry other attitudes with them. They are moral in an emphatic sense not because they are isolated and exclusive, but because they are so intimately connected with thousands of other attitudes which we do not explicitly recognize—which perhaps we have not even names for. To call them virtues in their isolation is like taking the skeleton for the living body. The bones are certainly important, but their importance lies in the fact that they support other organs of the body in such a way as to make them capable of integrated effective activity. And the same is true of the qualities of character which we specifically designate virtues. Morals concern nothing less than the whole character, and the whole character is identical with the man in all his concrete make-up and manifestations. To possess virtue does not signify to have cultivated a few namable and exclusive traits; it means to be fully and adequately what one is capable of becoming through association with others in all the offices of life.

The moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical with each other. It is then but to restate explicitly the import of our earlier chapters regarding the social function of education to say that the measure of the worth of the administration, curriculum, and methods of instruction of the school is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit. And the great danger which threatens school work is the absence of conditions which make possible a permeating social spirit; this is the great enemy of effective moral training. For this spirit can be actively present only when certain conditions are met.

(i) In the first place, the school must itself be a community life in all which that implies. Social perceptions and interests can be developed only in a genuinely social medium—one where there is give and take in the building up of a common experience. Informational statements about things can be acquired in relative isolation by any one who previously has had enough intercourse with others to have learned language. But realization of the meaning of the linguistic signs is quite another matter. That involves a context of work and play in association with others. The plea which has been made for education through continued constructive activities in this book rests upon the fact they afford an opportunity for a social atmosphere. In place of a school set apart from life as a place for learning lessons, we have a miniature social group in which study and growth are incidents of present shared experience. Playgrounds, shops, workrooms, laboratories not only direct the natural active tendencies of youth, but they involve intercourse, communication, and cooperation,—all extending the perception of connections.

(ii) The learning in school should be continuous with that out of school. There should be a free interplay between the two. This is possible only when there are numerous points of contact between the social interests of the one and of the other. A school is conceivable in which there should be a spirit of companionship and shared activity, but where its social life would no more represent or typify that of the world beyond the school walls than that of a monastery. Social

concern and understanding would be developed, but they would not be available outside; they would not carry over. The proverbial separation of town and gown, the cultivation of academic seclusion, operate in this direction. So does such adherence to the culture of the past as generates a reminiscent social spirit, for this makes an individual feel more at home in the life of other days than in his own. A professedly cultural education is peculiarly exposed to this danger. An idealized past becomes the refuge and solace of the spirit; present-day concerns are found sordid, and unworthy of attention. But as a rule, the absence of a social environment in connection with which learning is a need and a reward is the chief reason for the isolation of the school; and this isolation renders school knowledge inapplicable to life and so infertile in character.

A narrow and moralistic view of morals is responsible for the failure to recognize that all the aims and values which are desirable in education are themselves moral. Discipline, natural development, culture, social efficiency, are moral traits—marks of a person who is a worthy member of that society which it is the business of education to further. There is an old saying to the effect that it is not enough for a man to be good; he must be good for something. The something for which a man must be good is capacity to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others balances with what he contributes. What he gets and gives as a human being, a being with desires, emotions, and ideas, is not external possessions, but a widening and deepening of conscious life—a more intense, disciplined, and expanding realization of meanings. What he materially receives and gives is at most opportunities and means for the evolution of conscious life. Otherwise, it is neither giving nor taking, but a shifting about of the position of things in space, like the stirring of water and sand with a stick. Discipline, culture, social efficiency, personal refinement, improvement of character are but phases of the growth of capacity nobly to share in such a balanced experience. And education is not a mere means to such a life. Education is such a life. To maintain capacity for such education is the essence of morals. For conscious life is a continual beginning afresh.

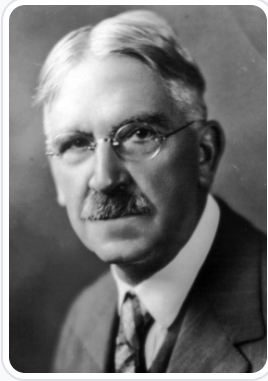
Summary



The most important problem of moral education in the school concerns the relationship of knowledge and conduct. For unless the learning which accrues in the regular course of study affects character, it is futile to conceive the moral end as the unifying and culminating end of education. When there is no intimate organic connection between the methods and materials of knowledge and moral growth, particular lessons and modes of discipline have to be resorted to: knowledge is not integrated into the usual springs of action and the outlook on life, while morals become moralistic—a scheme of separate virtues.

The two theories chiefly associated with the separation of learning from activity, and hence from morals, are those which cut off inner disposition and motive—the conscious personal factor—and deeds as purely physical and outer; and which set action from interest in opposition to that from principle. Both of these separations are overcome in an educational scheme where learning is the accompaniment of continuous activities or occupations which have a social aim and utilize the materials of typical social situations. For under such conditions, the school becomes itself a form of social life, a miniature community and one in close interaction with other modes of associated experience beyond school walls. All education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral. It forms a character which not only does the particular deed socially necessary but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth. Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest.





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John Dewey was an American philosopher and educational reformer. He is most well-known for his contributions to the philosophy of pragmatism and his attempts to enact educational approaches and create educational institutions that espoused democratic ideals.



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