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Cultural Relativism and the Theory of Value: *The Educational Implications*

By GLADYS PARKER FOSTER*

ABSTRACT. The *philosophy of science* developed by *John Dewey* in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* should be applied in the study of *philosophy* and the *social sciences* as it has come to be applied in the *physical sciences*. Dewey's methodology prescribes the use of both *reason* and *observation* in *problem-solving*, that is, both theory (hypothesis-making) and practice (fact-gathering), with movement back and forth between the two, revising the theory and gathering new facts until a conclusion is reached. The rightness of a conclusion should be evaluated in terms of its consequences and is always subject to modification in the light of later evidence. This philosophy means that a scientific criterion of judgment is possible, in this case Dewey's *instrumental theory of value*. *Higher education* should incorporate value theory explicitly into its curriculum and thereby help society to make choices about the good, the true, and the beautiful.

There are three great questions which in life we have over and over again to answer: Is it right or wrong? Is it true or false? Is it beautiful or ugly? Our education ought to help us to answer these questions.

SIR JOHN LUBBOCK

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I

Introduction

ALLAN BLOOM, in his controversial bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, launched a fierce attack on higher education for its failure to acquaint students with the philosophical heritage of Western civilization. He contended that higher education abandoned its core curriculum of the liberal arts and sciences in the sixties and replaced it with a curriculum of trendy, light-weight studies. One consequence of this change, says Bloom, has been the ascendancy of cultural relativism: students are unable and/or unwilling to evaluate cultures. Moreover, they are imbued with an "I'm okay, you're okay" philosophy. In short, they are given no assistance in answering the questions Lubbock thought so central.

Bloom's book touched a nerve. The response of the academic community has been scarcely less fierce than was Bloom's attack. To most academicians the book is elitist and anti-democratic, sexist, and racist; it excludes philosophies other than those of Western civilization; it ignores the virtues of diversity, pluralism, and democracy. But, as Sidney Hook (1989) says in an intelligent and cogent review, most of the attacks on Bloom have been academically bankrupt. While Hook has serious disagreement with Bloom, he agrees that many young people really are missing something, contends that Bloom has opened what should be a serious debate, and laments that such a debate has not been forthcoming.

Bloom, himself, seems to offer no clear alternative to cultural relativism other than some reprehensible position such as cultural absolutism, intolerance, ethnocentrism, and/or bigotry. And the academic community, in failing to address the question of cultural relativism, is vulnerable to the charge of believing in nothing, of nihilism, and of providing no way to distinguish between good and bad or between right and wrong. The general public is seemingly left with some not very attractive choices: right-wing elitism, ethical relativism, or nihilism.

II

Dewey's Methodology

HIGHER EDUCATION usually either ignores or disdains another way to think about these matters. This alternative way is to be found in the application of what has been termed the instrumental theory of value, developed largely by John Dewey.

Higher education should take seriously the message of Dewey and show the way to apply the scientific methodology, that is, the use of reason and evidence, to philosophy and the social studies in the same way that this methodology has at last, after centuries of agonizing, come to be applied in other subject areas. This scientific methodology can be employed to evaluate cultures without re-

liance either on any particular cultural values or on an absolutist approach, in the same way that inquiry in the physical sciences proceeds irrespective of the cultural background of those engaged in inquiry. Higher education should lead an effort to apply this methodology to Lubbock's questions.

It is curious that recent discussions of the philosophy of science and of methodology, at least those of which I am aware, do not include references to the "inquiry into inquiry" of Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. This is a study of how society adds to its stock of scientific knowledge; in other words, it constitutes a philosophy of science.

Before further examining the philosophy of Dewey, it is necessary to take a look at the meaning of "cultural relativism." The work of Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, and Melville Herskovits, among others, promoted what I take to be the standard definition, namely that cultural relativism is the view that standards of morality and normalcy are culture-bound. The implication that most draw from this is that it is not possible to evaluate cultures scientifically because those who do the evaluating do so in the light of standards derived from their own culture (see Renteln, 1988). It is from this insight that cultural relativism has come to be identified with tolerance, with a recognition of the dignity inherent in every body of customs, and with a denial of an ethnocentric assumption of Western superiority. It thus has come to be widely associated with liberalism; hence, the outcry from liberals over Bloom's assault has been particularly loud. To their credit, it is with this kind of definition of cultural relativism in mind that most academics have faulted Bloom.

Bloom, however, is attacking the renunciation of moral criticism that is sometimes associated with cultural relativism. It is in answer to the unresolved issue of cultural and moral relativism that I think Dewey's alternative methodology is relevant, a methodology that is neither relativist nor absolutist, and it is this alternative methodology that I urge the academic community to reexamine.

The reader will recognize that Bloom simply reopened an age-old issue, the question of the relationship between value and science. The lack of an answer to the question explains why Bloom made his arguments and why he has received so much attention. Instead of indulging in name-calling, we in academia should note his message and, as he suggested, begin a dialogue. Perhaps we are now in a position to add something to the ancient debates. The seventeenth century, says Dewey (1950, p. 76), witnessed the application of the new science to astronomy and general cosmology; the eighteenth century to physics and chemistry; the nineteenth to geology and the biological sciences. Will the twentieth and twenty-first centuries see the application of the scientific methodology to philosophy?

Evaluation, that is, the making of judgments, should be regarded in the humanities and the social sciences in terms of its consequences, just as it is in the

physical sciences. In the physical sciences it has become customary to seek knowledge, to pursue inquiry, through a process of problem-solving which involves hypothesis-making and fact-gathering, with a back-and-forth testing and modifying of hypotheses and new fact-gathering until the problematic situation is resolved. Indeterminate situations become determinate. This is Dewey's approach to the theory of inquiry.

In Dewey's problem-solving process the use of both reason (hypothesis-making) and observation (fact-gathering) are essential. Bloom too, it will be recalled, regards reason very highly, in fact with something approaching veneration. But his concept of reason seems to be akin to that of ancient Greek philosophy.

III

Certain Historical Views on Reason, Science, Values, Methodology, and Philosophy

THE CONCEPT of reason has undergone considerable evolution since Socrates set the direction of ancient Greek philosophy and science (which were one at that time) as based on reason and evidence. The beauty of that philosophy was its centerpiece of "sweet reason." The unfortunate aspect was that it fixed for subsequent intellectual history the separation of reason from experience and assigned to the former a pre-eminent position. Reason alone was "rational" and "pure" because uncontaminated by "practice." It was expected to supply principles fixed for all time. Ethics came to be dominated by the notion that its business was to discover some final end or good, or some ultimate and supreme law. Direct, practical experience of the natural world was relegated to the decidedly inferior domain of the artisan and trader. The effect on ethical theory of this approach was particularly deleterious. (See Dewey, 1938, p. 73, 1950, p. 131; Merrifield, 1949, Abstract, Ch. I, p. 3.)

In the eighteenth century when Immanuel Kant faced the problem posed by the encroachment of the natural sciences on the canons of faith, he attempted to reconcile science and faith by redirecting and reinforcing the dichotomy inherited from the ancient Greeks in such a way as to accept science and yet conserve moral behavior. According to this view, whatever certainty science may have, it does not shed any light on the "real" world, the world as it is in itself, or as it would appear to a perfect mind, freed from all human limitations, like that of God. Science does not and cannot include everything in its scope, and where science can neither prove nor disprove we are justified in having faith. Kant's idealism amounted to a "rational" defense of faith, a conception of the world beyond the reach of science as essentially a universal moral order (Randall, 1926, pp. 270, 300-04, 400-13, 575). Although reason was capable of operating in both areas, it was assigned a higher value in the independent mind

than in the practical world. "Pure" reason was seen to come from the capability of the mind to produce genuine *a priori* knowledge from its own resources by virtue of rational thought, independently of sense data. Thus a powerful intellectual stimulus was given, again, to the dualisms of knowing and doing, of theory and practice, of the objective and the subjective (Haney, 1949, pp. 8–10; Merrifield, 1949, Ch. I, pp. 9–11). The difficulty inherent in this way of thinking is that it commits the logical error of using conceptions as preconceptions (which is what neoclassical economics does) instead of as hypotheses, as truths rather than as operational tools for solving social problems (Merrifield, 1949, Ch. II, p. 54).

But the Kantian reconciliation proved to be an uneasy one. As Dewey put it, the new idealism represented merely a transitional state, an effort to put the new wine into old bottles. By contrast, the reconstruction in philosophy for which Dewey (1950, pp. 60–61) worked regards reason not as the original shaper and final cause of things, but as the purposeful re-shaper of those phases of nature and life that obstruct social well-being, in other words as the instrument for problem-solving.

Thus we come to Dewey's instrumental theory of value as providing an alternative to both cultural relativism and cultural absolutism, or, in a broader context, ethical relativism and ethical absolutism (see Tool, 1979, pp. 285–89). Dewey's instrumentalism, it must be understood, is to be distinguished from the "methodological instrumentalism" of Milton Friedman, by which is meant that theories are best viewed as nothing more than instruments, or as instruments only of prediction (Caldwell, 1982, p. 178). In the argument about prediction versus explanation, Dewey should be understood to regard theories as providing explanation, which will in his view permit prediction, about which more below.

The value-relativism Bloom deplors will be recognized to be akin to the general philosophical approach of orthodox neoclassical thought. Here again, his criticism should be taken seriously. Economics has for some time made claim to being scientific because it is a "positive" science, which is understood to mean that it is "value-free." It treats subjective preferences (tastes and wants) as if they are values and refuses to inquire into them. But as economists (some, not all) scramble over one another in their eagerness to proclaim that they are "value-free" and therefore scientific, the truth is, as Dewey (1929, pp. 211–12) points out, they are applying a theory of value, one based on the eighteenth and nineteenth century concept of natural law, in which laws are fixed and are to rule man's conduct, the logical conclusion of which is *laissez-faire*. Thus Bloom has, indeed, identified a genuine problem in the content of much of what is being taught today. It is with his apparent solution that this paper disagrees. Rather than a retreat to classical "reason" as defining an ultimate good,

what is required is movement toward a conception of reason as Dewey saw it and as it is used in the physical sciences.

Dewey's instrumental theory of value, that is, criterion of judgment, is a central tenet, if not the major tenet, of the institutionalist school of economic thought founded by Thorstein Veblen.

IV

Some Extensions and Refinements of Dewey's Theory As Applied to Economics

VEBLEN, as is well known, separated human behavior into two categories, the instrumental or technological, on the one hand, and the ceremonial, on the other. As these concepts are applied to economics, the first way of behaving is characterized by the use of tools, both conceptual and physical, in the production of real income. This behavior is dynamic and progressive. It changes as the human stock of scientific and technological know-how advances. Institutional economics, as developed by C. E. Ayres, following Veblen's lead, locates the theory of value in instrumental, as opposed to ceremonial, behavior.

Dewey used the term "instrumental" in the sense of using reason and logic to resolve a problematic situation, defined as the difference between "what is" and "what ought to be." Ayres (1964, p. 101) says the thinking process is an instrumental, or operational, process, that is, one that involves the use or operation of instruments and of tools generally. Where Kant excluded consequences from moral value, Dewey and Ayres put consequences at the center of moral value, as consequences are in the usual scientific disciplines. According to this view of the theory of knowledge, logic is grounded in the process of inquiry: logical forms arise within the actual operations of inquiry and are concerned with controlling it in such a fashion that inquiry yields warrantable generalizations as guides to policy-making. Deduction and induction are seen as cooperative, mutually reinforcing processes. Unlike the *a priori* conceptions of Kant, the conceptions of Dewey can be tested in experience. (See Dewey, 1957, p 44, 1938, pp. 173, 180, 1950, pp. 59, 91, 114–15, 128, 141; Merrifield, 1949, Ch. IV, p. 2).

Subsequent scholars in the tradition of Dewey and Ayres have expanded and refined these basic constructs. J. Fagg Foster (1948, p. 331) locates value in civilization, in the arts and sciences and their application to the problems of life. Charles W. Merrifield (1949, Ch. V, p. 11) states that man uses his endowments and focuses them toward ever-increasing environmental control through the arts of using tools and techniques. Marc R. Tool (1986, p. 10) offers the following value principle: act or judge in a manner so as to "provide for the continuity of human life and noninvidious re-creation of community through the instrumental use of knowledge."

The attribute of developmental continuity, which is apparent in the above, appears in virtually all instrumentalist concepts of value. Inherent in this attribute is the idea of progress. Wendell Gordon and John Adams (1989, p. 13), say that generally knowledge once acquired by society is not lost and that such knowledge generates other knowledge in an ongoing continuous process. Foster (1948, pp. 34, 331) observes that we cannot “unknow” something that we know, and that the generating process is never-ending. The provision for continuity, according to Tool (1986, p. 58), “implies a concern for conditions that cater to and elevate distinctively human traits and capabilities to think freely, to create imaginatively, to relate to others humanely, and to perfect skills assiduously.” Ayres (1949, pp. 19–20) says that achievements are to be judged “in terms of their fructifying effect upon further achievement in the same, and related, fields. A great painting is one that furthers the art of painting. A great symphony is one that ushers in a new era in music. A great scientific discovery is one that opens up new fields of discovery.” In economics, progress is attained by the allocation of existing resources in such a way that there will be continually more to allocate.

Control of nature, says Dewey (1950, pp. 59, 141), is the method by which progress is made; knowledge is power and it is achieved by learning nature’s processes of change. The end is no longer a terminus but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining. Merrifield (1949, Ch. II, p. 2) refers to the postulate of naturalistic continuity, which rests upon the accumulated evolutionary data which display “life on the planet as a developmental continuum from the simplest forms of organic life to the more complex.”

Note that according to this view there is a value principle, scientific in nature, applicable to philosophy in general and also to particular disciplines. What is meant, then, by philosophy as compared with science? According to Foster (1948, p. 13), philosophy and science are the same thing as far as intellectual process is concerned. Science is the process of building generalizations and constantly verifying or negating those generalizations through applications being made in the form of hypotheses. Philosophy is a deliberate effort to think coherently over the entire area of human experience and to set forth the inclusive and continuing factors of it. The only difference, then, between philosophy and science is the universe of inquiry or the universe of applicability of the principles, a universe being a separately identified area of inquiry. The universe of philosophy is the whole of human experience. Then there is the science of physics, or of biology, or of economics, and so on (Foster, 1948, pp. 14, 19). Philosophy and science, that is to say, are the same thing at any given level of inclusiveness. The philosophy of atoms is exactly the same thing as the science of atoms. The philosophy of human motivation is exactly the same thing as the science of human motivation (Foster, 1948, p. 15). Philosophy is an effort to develop the

principles that are applicable to all known phenomena. In the case of science so-called, the universe of inquiry is deliberately restricted. As one works back toward greater inclusiveness, one works back toward philosophy. Thus philosophy is the all-inclusive science, and the sciences are simply singular applications of philosophy. They differ only in the inclusiveness of their respective universes (Foster, 1948, p. 19). Philosophical questions are as much a question of fact as any "scientific" questions (Foster, 1948, p. 22). What has this to do with value? Making a judgment involves the application of a theory of value, and science is concerned with making judgments, with making choices. And in both philosophy and science, judgments are made in the light of consequences.

As for the question of prediction versus explanation, which arises out of Friedman's positivism, Dewey (1938, p. 110, 1950, p. 120) would hold that theories or hypotheses are developed as efforts to provide increased understanding, and that in so far as the understanding gained is accurate, prediction becomes possible (also see Foster, 1948, p. 336). Anticipating consequences is involved in the ability to predict. Dewey is at great pains to explain that all hypotheses, all conclusions, all predictions, are tentative.

In this hazardous world humankind has always been understandably anxious to find something that is certain, something unchangeable and fixed, something one can believe in. Hence the efforts of the ancient Greeks, of Kant, of Christianity. Dewey (1938, p. 110, 1950, p. 120) understands the appeal of a philosophy based on certainty but argues that this is not possible. The physical sciences have renounced the quest for certainty in favor of the hypothesis-making and fact-gathering process of inquiry that Dewey accredits. Prediction, then, is a matter of anticipating consequences with what Dewey calls "warrantable assertibility." It is a question of using the best methodology and the latest technology and the most careful observation and the best logic in an effort to exert the most control possible over one's environment. It is not possible to do away with problems, but it is possible to bring the highest powers of reason and observation to bear on problems, thus reducing the unexpected impacts of an always-changing environment. Note that it is not reliable to base prediction only on observation of events; an understanding of causal sequences, *i.e.*, theory, is needed as well. The capacity to predict requires an understanding of human behavior and of the setting sufficient to anticipate consequences, not with certainty but with some degree of confidence (see also Foster, 1948, p. 336; Merrifield 1949, Ch. IV, p. 16).

The question of predictability deserves comment because of the daunting recognition of how little we know and of the fatuousness of the assumption of perfect information. But in our eagerness to deal with the degree of uncertainty that exists in human affairs, we must not leap to the conclusion that all human behavior is random or chaotic. Far from it. In many areas of policy determination

we can predict well enough to justify the assumption of an advocacy role. For example, we can advocate a more progressive tax structure, some regulation of certain industries, programs for job training, restrictions on handguns, and so on. Were we unable to predict the outcomes of such policies, it would be impossible to justify assuming an advocacy role. It is a question of understanding cause-and-effect relationships, of applying Dewey's scientific methodology. It is not a question of holding that if a particular outcome occurs a certain number of times we will be justified in predicting that outcome without any understanding of causality, in other words, theory. Nor is it a matter of insisting upon standards for verification or falsification that render knowledge certain and irrefutable. What predictability does signify is a defense of the scientific methodology of formulating hypotheses, gathering evidence, and arriving at conclusions, that is, predictions, which, necessarily, are tentative and subject always to modification as knowledge progresses, but which still satisfy the tenet of warrantable assertibility.

The matter of predictability is inescapably connected with value theory. The application of a criterion of judgment *requires* the making of predictions. Making a choice, using the instrumental criterion of judgment, means selecting a position or action on the basis of its predicted outcome as compared with the predicted outcomes of alternative choices.

V

Summary and Conclusions

IN SUM, the foregoing is an argument that scientific reasoning and logic are applicable to philosophy and to the social studies just as they are to chemistry and biology. The scientific reasoning and logic advocated in this reconstruction of philosophy is not culture-bound; neither does it renounce moral judgment. But it is not that of Plato's ultimate reality, changeless and unalterable, or that of Kant's *a priori* conceptions that arise outside of experience. Logic, to Dewey (1950, pp. 114–28), is a clarified and systematic formulation of procedures of thinking that will permit the deliberate reorganization of experience. Conceptions, theories, systems of thought are always open to development through use. They are tools. The test of their validity resides in their capacity to accomplish the predicted result, as shown in the consequences of their use.

In answer to Allan Bloom, the humanities and the social sciences should make explicit a theory of value based on reason as applicable to problem-solving in everyday life. Evidence and moral reasoning in social research are simultaneously operative (Bellah, 1985, pp. 33–13). Ethics is a proper subject for higher education and for rational analysis and should be included explicitly in listings of courses in college curricula as well as within the subject-matter of courses.

Liberal learning can carve out a space for rational, deliberative reflection. It is foolhardy and unwise to consign decisions about the good, the true, and the beautiful to the area of private experiences or, in any case, to areas into which higher education cannot inquire. Bloom is right in arguing that higher education should be concerned with making such judgments; it is with his prescription as to how to do this that we should find fault.

We are called upon to choose. . . . A choice is rational to the degree that it integrates our past and our future into the interstices of the present. Schooling in the making of such choices is an intrinsic part of the vocation, the high calling, of the university as the place where reason resides (Schrag, 1988, pp. 1–4).

May the dialogue begin!

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