

**Dewey, John, *Human Nature and Conduct*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922.**

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher and educator. Dewey was one of the founders of the philosophical school of Pragmatism. Dewey worked as a college professor at Columbia University for forty-seven years, where he was known as an anti-war activist, popular lecturer, and prolific writer.

**Introduction:** Morals must be based in study of human nature. Character and society derive from reciprocal influences of human nature and the social and physical environment.

**Chapter 1, §1: Habit as Social Function.** Conduct is social. Improving character requires changing the social and institutional environment, as well as exhortation. Character is habit. We must be loyal to what makes excellent life possible.

**Chapter 1, §2: Habits and Will.** Habits constitute the self. Human life is a series of acts which are means, and should be intelligently controlled. Habits can be changed by indirect address, a course of action that achieves its purpose without confronting the habit directly. Focus on the next act, not the end. In one's character, habits interpenetrate. Habit is an acquired predisposition to response.

**Chapter 1, §3: Character and Conduct.** Will is a body of habits, active dispositions which make a man do what he does. The moral situation has two defining facts a) we judge morality by its consequences, and b) consequences are deeply related to human habit (desire and disposition). Every man's character is mottled. In morality, we can determine and identify tendencies in habits that are good or bad, and not more than that. Certitude or absolutism is beyond the scope of moral inquiry. "Tendency" means that the outcome of any habit, however well-established, depends upon the circumstances under which the habit is exercised. We must be satisfied with penultimate results. Dewey specifies the errors of utilitarianism. One's morality must be empirical, and if it is, it will be a powerful force for societal change.

**Chapter 1, §4: Custom and Habit.** The individual acquires in infancy the morality of his social group. Custom (social interaction) precedes the individual, but logically and historically. Custom shapes individuals, not individuals custom (except marginally). What makes a habit bad is enslavement to ruts. It creates carelessness about present and actual good. Dewey's ethics are about perfecting democracy.

**Chapter 1, §5: Custom and Morality.** Morals means established collective habits. Emotion is the painful effort of disturbed habits to readjust themselves. It is moral error to think: 1) that morals derive from emotion, not habit (per Westermarck), 2) that morals derive from rationality (per Sumner), not habit, 3) that morals derive from metaphysical realities (per Plato), and 4) deriving morals from habit vacates their authority. Dewey describes the origin of societal institutions. The reason morals have authority over us is unanswerable, regardless of the derivation of morals. The authority of morals is life. One cannot escape morals; he can only choose how to engage them. And 5) it is moral error to think that morals derive from an immutable base, which error leads to societal fragmentation and conflict.

**Chapter 1, §6: Habit and Social Psychology.** Dewey summarizes his argument so far, then criticizes the fictional independent mind and mind-body dualism. Psychological individualism is a compensatory reaction to institutional rigidity. Dewey criticizes psychoanalysis. The "individual" results when habits conflict with culture and a mind struggles to reconcile itself to its social context.

**Chapter 2, §1: Impulses and Change.** Human drives, which Dewey calls impulse, interact with the social environment, first, giving shape to the individual, and, subsequently, modifying the social environment. Nature versus nurture is a false dichotomy; when a hen bears and nurtures an egg, the egg can become a new sort of hen, under the right circumstances.

**Chapter 2, §2: Plasticity of Impulse.** Innate behaviors can become a host of specific habits in individuals. The specific outcome depends upon the habits a culture inculcates, and how those habits interact. Human society is perpetually reconstructing itself, but unintentionally. True education is intelligent retraining of human instinct to effect a better society. Most education is mere training. Nations do not degenerate because of age, but because of rigidity of customs.

Nations remain vital when they make customs flexible and subject to innovations of youth. The moral problem is how to use instincts to adapt old habits to service new situations. A valid moral theory rests not in seeking rigid perfection, nor in surrender to unbridled impulse, but in conscious adaptation to what is new in our societal circumstances. People can become habituated to learning.

**Chapter 2, §3: Changing Human Nature.** Revolutionaries rely on educating a wholly plastic human nature. Conservatives rely on a wholly immutable human nature. Both are wrong. Society has huge inertia, and human nature is not monolithic, but fragmented. War, for example, is entrenched in human habit, but is not necessarily so. Capitalism is entrenched and well summarized in perversion of the Cartesian dictum, “I own, therefore I am.” But capitalism is not necessary to human life. It is a habit. Dewey analyzes incentive and motive. Man is inherently active. Dewey defines motive and analyzes labor. Retirement is evading the theological critique of sin as sweat of the brow.

**Chapter 2, §4: Impulse and Conflict of Habits.** The human fundament is habit, not reason or innate drives. Dewey’s program is to ameliorate society’s evils by educating youth out of the society’s dysfunctional habits. The reform is self-directive. Its program of change evolves from its own process. Progress derives from the intelligent resolution of conflicting habits.

**Chapter 2, §5: Classification of Instincts.** Human classifications do not define nature, but only human conceptualization of nature. Classification does not equal nature. Social sciences are in their infancy, captive to their own classification systems. Reductionism pervades social sciences. Dewey analyzes prior scientific reductionisms: Hobbes – fear, Comte – altruism, Plato—tripartite structure of the human soul and society, self-love, will to power. We should abandon reductionisms. We need a science of society. Then we can embark upon a course of social engineering.

**Chapter 2, §6: No Separate Instincts.** Instincts are not readily classified. The whole human acts and reacts to circumstances. Classification obscures the fine differences. Responses may be discharged explosively, intelligently sublimated, or suppressed. Dewey examines suppression. Suppression is the cause of much intellectual and moral pathology. License, drug and alcohol additions, intellectual monomania, and hedonism: all evidence suppression. Art and play are essential to moral life; they provide variety, flexibility, and sensitivity. Revolutions are the result of rigid conventions and unintelligent immobilities.

**Chapter 2, §7: Impulse and Thought.** The moral act is one that directs impulse to renew and reorganize habit.

**Chapter 3, §1: Habit and Intelligence.** Thought arises when habit is interrupted and an impulse asserts itself, but neither predominates. Thought aims to restore equilibrium after disturbance. Consciousness is not a disease.

**Chapter 3, §2: The Psychology of Thinking.** Dewey considers the fundamental psychology of thought. Thought arises when a habit is interrupted by some experience or event. Disturbed, one reflects on what has previously been, notes what is, then prognosticates afresh. There is no independent organ of knowledge. Knowing happens as the human organism interacts with its natural environment. Mind is contiguous with nature. No second-order faculty of knowing or judging exists. Conscience is not different. Man does not make moral judgments by immediate intuitional insight. Ethics must be ordinary and empirical, not metaphysical and intuitional.

**Chapter 3, §3: The Nature of Deliberation.** The nature of ethical judgments can be illuminated by critiquing the errors of utilitarianism (another ethical system that insists ethical judgments are empirical.) Deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal in imagination of various competing possible lines of action. We deliberate when an obstacle prevents the action we anticipated. Action disintegrates into several possible, competing courses of action imagined. By imagining each in turn, eventually one possibility appears preferable to others, action re-integrates, and resumes. Dewey describes reasonable and unreasonable choices. In deliberation, a possibility may predominate by emotionally overwhelming the alternatives. This is arbitrary and unreasonable. Reasonable choice unifies competing possibilities by incorporating each (transformed) into a new course of action. Reason does not compete with desire, is not opposed to desire, even “bad” desires. “Bad habits” are subdued by reconceiving them in anew, broader scheme of action, not by suppressing them. Strong emotion artificially magnifies one possible

course of action, and discommends all others possible courses of action. Emotions and passions are desirable and should be sought in multiplicity. Reason harmonizes conflicting passions. Mental vices are fear of acting, pointless curiosity, and love of aimless truths. Men of pointless thought are often thoughtless in intimate relationships. Reasoning requires compassion and empathy.

**Chapter 3, §4: Deliberation and Calculation.** Dewey criticizes utilitarianism for misconstruing the purpose of thinking. In thought, the stimuli are presented by imagination, not the senses. Reason modifies action, but does not generate it. Dewey believe that utilitarianism is weak because it fails to answer the “utility” of a psychotic or callous person, who takes joy in the misery of others. Utilitarianism also fails because it must calculate unworthy pleasures with worthy ones. If a utilitarian introduces into his calculation a way to distinguish between these desirable and vile behaviors, he has secretly introduced a non-utilitarian calculus. Any estimate of future consequences is determined by the character of the person estimating. Dewey compares Epicureanism and utilitarianism. Foresight aims to secure unified meaning for present activity. Dewey advocates nurturing in oneself habits and desires that lead toward an expansive, fair, and compassionate overview of one’s circumstances. Forethought imports meaning into simple acts.

**Chapter 3, §5: The Uniqueness of Good.** “Good” is the meaning a person experiences when conflicting habits or impulses are unified in fresh action. Some “goods” are false: superficial compromise or suppression of impulses by another more intense and overweening. True conscience relieves misery and promotes happiness. Utilitarian thought analogizes human conduct to the money economy after the industrial revolution. One’s moral choices determine the sort of person one becomes. This is their import. The error of utilitarianism lies in its misconception of deliberation, thinking it is a quantitative rather than qualitative enterprise.

**Chapter 3, §6: The Nature of Aims.** Ends (or purposes, objectives) are foreseen consequences that suffice to cause action to overwhelm deliberation. Ends are turning points in activity. Most moral theories wrongly place ends outside human activity, as fixed places to which that activity should be directed. By this setting apart of ends, moral theory and method is divided wrongly from scientific theory and method. Moral ends are as subject to investigation as physical processes. Any end, considered as an end-in-itself, beyond moral evaluation, leads to narrowness and other vices. No one end is all important. Whenever a person wants anything intensely, he tends to lapse into a non-moral state of mind. Some argue another error avoiding this one. These persons say motives only, not ends, justify acts. But this is only to set up “meaning well” as an end-in-itself. There are no ends-in-themselves. Ends are useful devices in guiding activity. Accepting an end-in-itself entails viewing change as evil. Means and ends both concern human decisional action. Dewey provides a description of the path of ethical compromise. An aim, purpose, end is formed when a wish for something better is conjoined to analysis of exactly how to make it better. Most moral ends stop at the wish, and so are not ends at all. Truth requires experimentation, explorations of uncertainty.

**Chapter 3, §7: The Nature of Principles.** Principles guide the mind, as habits guide action. When principles are treated as fixed rules, they deter men from investigating their experiences, and are thus unhelpful. Moral theorists have gotten side-tracked by seeking all-purpose principles. Some principles have long been tested and have earned prestige. But their operation should be observed and the principles adjusted to make their predictions conform to experience. The notion of fixed antecedent truth impedes progress in morals. Since life changes, principles must adapt to address this moving target. Dewey considers the errors of those thinkers who over-generalize in their principles: atomism, rival goods, Kant’s errors. Reason surveys consequences broadly. Reason is a disposition that leads to impartial and consistent foresight of consequences.

**Chapter 3, §8: Desire and Intelligence.** Some critics argue that Dewey’s theory is too intellectual. They argue one must change desire, not the mind, and then better acts will naturally flow. “Desire” is defined as wanting what reunifies disparate activities into an organized, meaningful whole. Alternative theories abound: 1) the point of desire is the pleasure one finds in acquiring the object of desire (Epicureanism), 2) quiescence is the goal of desire (Buddhism), 3) self-deception is the result of desire (psychoanalysis). Dewey believes that intelligence is the ability to construct plans from desires. Outbursts of emotional idealism fall prey to worldly self-seeking manipulations. Impulse must be impeded for thought to occur. Emotion without thought

is unstable. Dewey criticizes American transcendentalism for its misconstruction of the whole that sustains a person of action when he or she feels feeble or failure.

**Chapter 3, §9: Present and Future.** Human activity is not a means to an end: happiness, pleasure, salvation, virtue. Happiness occurs when we recognize our connections to nature and others. The goal of planning (attempting to control the future) is to enrich the meaning, the content, the intrinsic significance of present living. For example, Dewey considers house-building, education, and industry. Dewey criticizes industrial working conditions: workers produce without fulfillment, consumers consume ostentatiously with concern only for further consumption. Dewey considers Marxism. The problem of class struggle indicates that present activity has been divorced from future ends. Christian morality evacuates meaning from present activity. “Practical” man (that is, man consumed with aggregating pointless wealth) empties the present of meaning by making it an instrument of future wealth. We need a technique by which human global enterprise is informed by intelligence as it unfolds, rather than only after the fact.

**Chapter 4, §1: The Good of Activity.** Conduct is a whole, and is artificially shredded when broken into habit, impulse and intelligence. Morality addresses activities in which humans make choices. The “good” is the better choice. The “evil” is a competing good choice that is subsequently rejected. Dewey rejects competing moral theories (Buddhism, Christianity, Stoicism, and *ad hoc* homiletics) because they distract from observation, and they exclude large shares of human activity from the realm of the moral. The morally good is intrinsically meaningful present activity. Morality is action that causes growth in meaning. Present activity is complex, including within itself past, future, and concurrent observation. Progress reconstructs present meaning, adding fullness and distinctness. A sterile categorical imperative may be derived from this insight: Act to increase present meaning. Evolutionary theory has been perverted to support an untenable theory of progress toward an ultimate, fixed goal. Belief in ultimate, fixed goals leads to final pessimism. Man enjoys activity innately, not because reflection recommends it. Dewey criticizes idealist philosophies (Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Christianity), as well as utilitarianism and Epicureanism. Critics say that Dewey’s view is self-centered, not other-centered. Dewey answers that to depreciate one’s self is to depreciate all others, who are also selves. We cannot give happiness to others. Our social aims must widen horizons for others and give them command of their own powers so they can find happiness in their own way.

**Chapter 4, §2: Morals are Human.** Morals grow out of empirical specifics. All branches of knowledge bear upon morals insofar as they illuminate human action in its environment. Some argue that the laws of nature are moral laws: Stoicism, deism, laissez-faire social philosophy, Spencer’s evolutionary philosophy. Morals use knowledge to condition human action and moral uses of knowledge, but are not determined by it. The problem of morals is the problem of desire and intelligence. Conflict moves humans to think, and thinking can replace brute force with intelligent arbitration.

**Chapter 4, §3: What is Freedom?** Freedom has three elements: 1) efficiency in action without thwarting obstacles, 2) capacity to change plans and entertain novelties, and 3) allowing human desire and choice to be factors in events. Intelligence is key to freedom in action. Luck bad and good, favors the intelligent and shows its back to the stupid. Organization hinders freedom, but is also required for freedom. Natural freedom precedes and is a condition for political freedom. Dewey offers an “insurance contract” theory of the state. Freedom is using foresight to guide present activity.

**Chapter 4, §4: Morality is Social.** Intelligence derives its content from the communal life, as does conscience. We act on what we are told and are held accountable for the outcome regardless whether we acted deliberately or not. Because our moral judgments and moral responsibility are social, all of morality is social. Morality is socially saturated. Moral judgment addresses all of human activity. But there is a tendency to view moral judgment as consisting in praise and blame, which tendency is the chief reason that actual moralities develop blindly and unsatisfactorily. Fault-finding creates resentment, defensiveness, and apologetics, instead of an impersonal impartial habit of observation of conduct. We need a science of human nature. The ancient concept of right, obligation grasped by individual conscience, leads to the abstract sort of moralism that is problematical. Right is a name for a multitude of concrete social demands. The unaided, sub-scientific mind cannot perceive the moral field as it is. We must develop a scientific inquiry into the social psychology of morals. Religion has lost itself. It should help us celebrate

our community of life, but has instead petrified into a slavery of thought and sentiment. Individuals are dignified by the community life in which we live and have our being. Its religious rites are the acts by which we express our perception of the ties that bind us.