

**Dewey, John, *Theory of the Moral Life*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1932.**

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.**

**Introduction §1: Definition and Methods.** Ethics deals with conduct. Ethical theory offers a systematic view of our choices in conduct with respect to their moral import—good, bad, right, wrong.

**Introduction, §2: The Moral as a Growth.** Human conduct has two broad aspects: the psychological (the inner meaning and purpose of life) and sociological (the outward social existence). Conduct has three levels: 1) impulse-driven, 2) group-imposed, and 3) individual reflection. Ethical progress consists in choosing more rational and social conduct because we value such behavior as good.

**Chapter 1: The Nature of Moral Theory.**

**Chapter 1, §1: Reflective Morality and Ethical Theory.** Moral acts begin when any one asks, “Why should I act this way, and not some other way? Why is this way right and that way wrong?” Moral theory arises only when certainty about the right and wrong has been equivocated by confronting paths that promise opposed goods and each course seems morally justified. Moral theory serves to 1) generalize the types of moral conflicts that exist, 2) state the leading answers to such conflicts, and 3) make reflection on these issues more organized.

**Chapter 1, §2: The Nature of the Moral Act.** The acts of a person who is morally reflective have traits, as Aristotle noted: 1) they are understood (known), 2) they are chosen, and 3) they express a formed and stable character. Summarily, moral acts are voluntary.

**Chapter 1, §3: Conduct and Character.** Moral development consists in learning that our acts are inter-connected; none is isolated. An ideal of conduct guides all. Potentially, all our acts might be conscious and judged an expression of our character. Each act leaves an impression on the actor, strengthening or weakening the actor’s tendencies to act. This is habit. Habit structures the self. A conscientious person reflects on his past acts to choose his future behavior. Customary morality says “Do this.” But action expresses character. It is more accurate to say that moral reflection says “Be this.”

**Chapter 1, §4: Motive and Consequence.** Conduct and character are morally the same thing. Habit and volition govern behavior. This identity disposes of the motive/consequences debate. Bentham’s concerns about people taking few precautions, then claiming they meant well, are countered. People are often quite ignorant of the emotion they are presently having. Motive is more than emotion. Motive entails a set disposition that moves a person to action. Attendant emotion poorly indicates motive. Unlike utilitarianism, motive emphasizes character.

**Chapter 1, §5: Present Need of Theory.** Old customs and beliefs are ill-equipped to cope with the many cultural changes that have transpired. We need systematic moral reflection.

**Chapter 1, §6: Sources of Moral Theory.** Existing moral codes are a possible source of moral data. Also, legal materials are a source, as is history and biography. And sciences, moral theorists (east and west) are other potential sources.

**Chapter 1, §7: Classification of Problems.** Moral theories fall into three large categories: 1) Teleological: primary value is The Good (recognizing the good); 2) Jural: primary value is duty or right (controlling desire); 3) Virtue: primary value is virtue/vice.

**Chapter 2: Ends, The Good and Wisdom.**

**Chapter 2, §1: Ends, the Good, and Wisdom.** Most people take their ends from what they see happening around them, or live in the exigency of “doing what must be done.” They do not reflect, and view reflection upon ends as a luxury they cannot afford. People reflect upon goals when they seriously ask how they should conduct themselves and why. They ask such

questions when cultural norms fail them, because changed circumstances make those institutions dysfunctional. When one's habits fail them, the only recourse is to reflection. To reflect upon one's aims, to make those aims inclusive and enduring, is to create a reflective morality. When that reflection, those aims, are incorporated into enduring habits, human "conduct" begins, with an individual's disparate acts unified into a whole by the overarching aim that guides them. An end combines a desire with reflection upon that desire. Thought looks to the future.

**Chapter 2, §2: Desire and Thought.** Moral reflection creates inherent psychological stress. A desire presses for satiation; reflection requires delayed gratification to achieve a more enduring and desirable end that incorporates the initial desire. At least so long as it takes to reflect, and perhaps much longer, the initial desire is frustrated. Such initial desire focuses one's attention wholly on its immediate object, and confines reflection to the means of acquiring its satiation. There lies its danger. Thinking inhibits desire, and suggests alternatives that modify the impulse-suggested action. Reticence to sacrifice immediate satiation indicates immaturity of character. The real task of reflective morality is to explain the Good as an end distinct from mere desire, and to explain what is true good as distinguished from apparent goods.

**Chapter 2, §3: Hedonism.** Hedonism posits pleasure as the common element among the things we seek as the good. Advocates argue this premise is self-evident and beyond proof. Criticisms of hedonism are: 1) It urges one to seek his desires without counting the long-term costs. This is the essence of folly and stupidity. 2) Evil people get pleasure from their evil deeds. Hedonism makes of their perversions "the good." 3) All "goods" bring pleasure, but we do not judge all pleasures equally. We evaluate our pleasures. Some are good upon review, others bad. Some pleasures are, then, better avoided. 4) Pleasure is not good unless we approve it upon reflection. 5) Happiness differs from pleasure in that it depends upon a disposition of character. A person of character bring her heart and mind to situations, and interprets those circumstances, which, if they meet her approval, creates happiness.

**Chapter 2, §4: Epicureanism.** Epicureanism is usually distorted to mean "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Rather, Epicureanism advises to seek assured present enjoyment. Such enjoyment is rendered less likely by involvement in matters outside personal control, and so such entanglements should be avoided. Simplicity creates pleasure more assuredly than complexity. So the Epicurean avoids public forays, and prefers private intimacies. The great weakness of Epicureanism is that it urges withdrawal from the world of activity of common people, and eschews consideration of the future.

**Chapter 2, §5: Success as the End.** This theory contends that achieving certain measurable results is the end to which human activity should strive. The ends tend to be quantifiable: money, power, reputation, social status. Its upside is that things get done, in a world overflowing with somnolent good intentions. Its downside is that what it gets done tends to be puerile and/or worldly, at the cost of more valuable, less quantifiable goals.

**Chapter 2, §6: Asceticism.** Asceticism relies heavily on habit, and is not confident of the potency of thinking. One must practice desired habits until they are firm. Asceticism teaches that wisdom is to subject and discipline desire by deliberate exercises, rather than by mere reflection. Our passions drive action, while thought dithers. Habits discipline passions, and exercises strengthen habits.

The weaknesses of asceticism are these: 1) Subjugating desire is not an end in itself. The purpose is to bring about a more inclusive and enduring good. 2) Asceticism's misdirection leads to over-reaction, leading its rejecters to the conclusion that all inhibition is suspect and every impulse or desire should be indulged. 3) Asceticism creates guilt obsession, with the attendant sour and morose disposition. The will to abstain creates failure. One must make a game out of impulse denial.

**Chapter 2, §7: Conclusion: Cultivation of Interests as the End.** Immediate impulse and desire crowd out more remote and comprehensive goods. The solution is, when desire is quiet, to foster habits favoring those goods we approve upon reflection. These habits help when impulse threatens. Habit-building makes moral discipline positive, rather than negative. Habit-building fosters enduring attachment to reflective goods. We learn from hedonism to value pleasure and to calculate the future. Its error is that it aims at pleasure alone, rather than chosen goods. We learn from expediency or success-orientation to act and achieve, which then avoids vacuous theorizing. Its error is to emphasize material success over ascetic values. We learn from

Epicureanism to enjoy present goods, and not to needlessly forestall enjoyment. Its error lies in the tendency to emphasize sensual over spiritual values and pleasures. Folly sacrifices the greater good for the lesser. Wisdom constructs foreseen results into mutually reinforcing complexes. Wisdom grows in people by education, the effect of well-conceived traditions, institutions, and habits of associates. That is, wisdom grows in people by good character, good example, and good government. Recognizing the good is repetitive, because conditions change and so the goods possible change. We must constantly reflect.

### **Chapter 3: Right, Duty, and Loyalty.**

**Chapter 3, §1: The Idea of the Right.** Contrary to the virtue theorists, the jural theorist conceives the good as right action consistent with law and duties. The bad is illicit action, action proscribed by law or social codes. Jural morality aims to induce obedience to rules, respect of authority, and loyalty to that which is right. Laws express the wisdom of the community, more comprehensive than the individual in both time and breadth. The good and the right differ; right introduces the element of demand into morality. What is “wrong” to the jural theorist is refusal to conform to a legitimate demand. If goodness attracts us, the right ought to attract us, whether we are attracted to it or not. Reason is reconceived by the jural theorist, becoming a power opposed to desire, restricting desire.

**Chapter 3, §2: The Origin of Moral Claims.** “Duty” derives from social interaction, and is natural because we are not isolated from one another. Living with others creates expectations, which are expressed as demands. Right, duty, and law derive impetus from our necessary relationship to one another. Roman moral theory emphasized duty. Their three maxims were: 1) Render to every man that which is his due, 2) use your powers and property without injuring others, and 3) live so as to deserve good reputation.

**Chapter 3, §3: The Kantian Theory.** Immanuel Kant advocated an extreme duty theory. The moral person replaces self-love with a desire to do his or her duty as their primary motive. Acts are good only insofar as they subordinate desire to duty. Even a mother’s love for her child is deficient unless that mother is acting on her obligation to care for her child, rather than her desire to do so. One guides conduct by asking whether the conduct contemplated could be made a universal demand without self-contradiction. Formulation #1: “Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature.” Formulation #2: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, as an end, never as a means only.” The demands of others become laws. They express the right, as distinguished from the good. The Right forces an individual to broaden his conception of the good. The Good prevents the right from being arbitrary or merely formal.

**Chapter 3, §4: The Justification of a Claim.** Social relations make law necessary; and law aims to promote the general good. The human individual exists out of and because of relations to others. The idea of the “right” expresses how a cohesive group believes it should order itself. How should the “right” of a community be evaluated for its “rightness?” A law is rightful when it in fact serves to augment the community’s good, and the act demanded by the law also benefits the person upon whom the law operates. “Wrongness” is acting contrary, with respect to the community, to the way one acts with respect to oneself. Nonconformists should be permitted their protests, upon suffering the consequences of their nonconformities. The rest of society should be tolerant toward such persons. For reflective morality to be reflective it must criticize, and so there will be dissent concerning the right and the law of any given community.

**Chapter 3, §5: The Sense of Duty.** Duty is the sense of being bound by the right merely because of its rightness. Jural morality offers an alternative to moral drift as well as legalistic dogmatism. Our present culture has sapped the vigor of jural thinking.

### **Chapter 4: Approbation, the Standard and Virtue.**

**Chapter 4, §1: Approval and Disapproval as Original Facts.** No attempt to bring conduct under a single principle has succeeded. Complexity bedevils all such attempts. Neither the good nor the right comprehends the scope of morality. A third option is customary morality. In customary morality theory, what counts first is approbation and disapprobation. The right and the good are secondary conclusions. Approval and condemnation are original, not derivative, facts. They are expressed directly and unreflectively by human society in rewards and sanctions,

in praise and blame. But what scheme should guide approbation? Before reflection, praise and blame are guided by community norms, leaving us with different standards for differing communities. Reflection seeks to create pressure to make community standards responsive to criticisms of customary moral expectations.

**Chapter 4, §2: The Nature of Standards and of Utilitarian Theory.** Utilitarians offer a standard to guide assessments of praise and blame. English philosophers (Hume, Adam Smith, Bentham, Mills) first made approbation and its effect on character central to their ethical theories. Bentham argued that the tendency of a deed to produce help or harm to the community was the standard of praise or blame.

**Chapter 4, §3: Confusion of Utilitarianism with Hedonism.** Bentham's theory was based in a hedonistic psychology, which created an internal contradiction for Bentham: individuals act for their own pleasure, but praiseworthy action created pleasure for the many. This paradox highlights the fundamental problem in all individualistic moral theory—how can one make the happiness of others guide one's conduct? Mill addressed this shortcoming in Bentham's moral theory by attenuating Bentham's reliance on hedonistic psychology. The internal "self-culture" of an individual has a structure of feeling that a person seeks to optimize, all apart from the external culture in which one is embedded. "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied." (Dewey citing Mill). Cultural institutions must not only be good for the majority, but must promote the good character of the individuals comprising the society.

**Chapter 4, §4: The Relation of Ends and Standards.** Approbation expands the concept of the Good. Approbation forces on the individual the reality of others' view of one's behaviors. A standard prescribes a means by which one should choose ends: one must choose ends that merit mass approval, and mass approval will only be granted to those ends that, while giving satisfaction to an individual, either promotes the group's well-being or, at a minimum, does not contradict that well-being. Approbation, as a moral theory, insists that ends sought by an individual actor must harmonize with the happiness of others.

**Chapter 4, §5: The Place of Justice and Benevolence in the Standard.** If benevolence toward the community generally is the standard by which behavior is to be judged, then what of justice? Some argue that justice must prevail, even if all other values fall by the wayside. Dewey objects. Justice without benevolence alongside creates harsh cruelties, which are themselves unjust. One needs a sense of humanity to temper adherence to rules. Others argue that the standard of social well-being unduly magnifies sentimentality. Some may give way to sentiment without regard to long term consequences. But for most, concern for social well-being creates the state of mind that criticizes law and social arrangements in a manner that leads to better social structures. Happiness proliferates. Roman justice sought to give every man what was properly his. Their view was too narrow. Men are owed a society in which they may become that of which they are capable.

**Chapter 4, §6: Praise and Blame as Moral Forces.** Unreflectively, good character is what is praised, bad character is what is blamed. Such conventional morality leads to conviction that respectability is virtue. Reflective morality discerns what should be virtuous, not merely what is praised or not censured. Praise and blame should be superceded in morality by consideration of results. One finds oneself praising and blaming praises and blames. Unreflective morality is as likely to be employed to ill-effect as to good.

**Chapter 4, §7: The Conception of Virtue in Reflective Morality.** Reflective morality abandons fixed views of virtue. It must do so, because circumstances differ among communities and change within each group over time. Certain traits emerge, upon reflection, as characteristic of human interests that deserve approbation. First, human interests should be *whole-hearted* (sincere). Our motives are mostly divided, which diminishes them. Whole-heartedness is a goal toward which one works. Second, human interests should be *persistent*. Desirable human interests persevere in the face of contrary conditions. Third, human interests should be *impartial*. One should treat those one loves and those one knows only distantly by the same measures. Iniquity is inequity. We cannot feel equally for those near and those afar. But our interests should press us toward equal treatment. Virtuous interests interpenetrate in individual character. They are not compartmentalized. The classical virtues (wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice) meld into a person's character, in one who is virtuous. Large human societies tend to fragment personal morality. Despite personal efforts at a whole-hearted, persistent, and impartial set of interests,

business teaches ruthlessness for personal gain, nations teach hatred and racism and readiness for war. The convictions of personal morality degrade under the onslaught of divergent value structures in great collectives.

#### **Chapter 5: Moral Judgment and Knowledge.**

**Chapter 5, §1: Moral Judgments as Intuitive or Developed.** Is moral reasoning separate from ordinary thought, or a species of it? Moral judgments rate value. The natural maturation of moral thinking proceeds from impulsive approbation to measured and reflective appraisals of situations and persons. From multiple acts of mature appraisal emerge standards for doing such moral appraisal generally.

**Chapter 5, §2: The Immediate Sense of Value and Its Limitations.** Intuition generates perceptions of approval or disapproval. One's intuitions are refined by experience. Intuition is habit of mind. Intuition is not a separate faculty born whole. Intuition is conditioned by childhood reinforcements, and so may be skewed by misguided education. Intuition tends to be conservative, disliking the new, which threatens established habits. Intuition must be constantly reappraised, and may entail shifts in what is deemed good or evil. Intuitional conviction without reflection is the root of persecution, and presents an acute social danger.

**Chapter 5, §3: Sensitivity and Thoughtfulness.** Intellectual concerns inform moral judgments. Without "sensitiveness," any moral appraisal is distorted. There is no moral "intuition" with the element of thought. We know others (and ourselves) emotionally, not as a mere matter of sense experience. Sympathy recommends humility in our self-perception and elevation of the experience of others. Sympathy creates relative objectivity, like that of an impartial sympathetic observer. The result of this equalization of viewpoint is a broad and objective view of matters, which expands the personality. Aristotle argued the mean in all actions defines good conduct. It is an aesthetic insight, to which most modern persons are insensitive, especially as it relates to the wholeness of conduct. The good man judges goodness well. But good men trust their intuitions only in common circumstances. In novel situations, the good person ruminates. And, ultimately there are no purely good men. All have distortions due to their rearing, education, prejudices, and resistance to change. The "good man" must constantly reassess himself and circumstance.

**Chapter 5, §4: Conscience and Deliberation.** Such a good man is scrupulous in his attention to deliberating the consequences of actions and intentions. Conscientious persons seek objectivity, with deliberate attention to the weal created by a contemplated act. Deliberation seeks improved circumstances. The good man knows that each situation has deep meaning and its implications reach far into the future. Moral deliberation is like all other human deliberations (governmental, business, military) except in its object. Moral deliberation addresses the value of qualities, seeking to determine what one should be (rather than have). Consequences define value. Deliberating, a person acts in imagination and projects likely outcomes. We then recur to the initial impulse imagined, and judge it good or bad by its consequences.

**Chapter 5, §5: The Nature and Office of Principles.** Principles aggregate experience about the similarities of moral situations. Transmitted, these principles grow stale; their origin in experience is lost. Stagnant principles become rules, which are practical and disconnected from actual circumstances. Rules morality leads inevitably to legalism and formality for its own sake. Rules morality loses the spirit of moral inquiry, reduces human action to a legal event, and robs moral living of its unfolding panoply of alternatives and opportunities. Once any set of principles is justified by its antiquity or divine origin, rather than by the likelihood of creating desirable outcomes, those principles will degenerate into rules. Rules encourage people to self-righteousness, arrogance, and radicalism. Principles offer a person facing a circumstance to think out what is good or evil in that circumstance. Rules record what absent persons decided about their situations. Principles offer guidance in analyzing circumstances in their entirety. The desire for moral knowledge, knowledge of what conduct is valuable in a particular circumstance and what aspects of character merit retention, depends on a will to acquire it, more than on details of birth, education, and social status. Facts may acquire moral significance if they are seen to bear upon social well-being. An important present need is that barriers between moral and scientific knowledge should be removed so that all knowledge can be used to human benefit. Each

generation must rework its inherited body of moral principle, determining their applicability to present conditions. Some principles will persevere; others will wane or be overthrown.

#### **Chapter 6: The Moral Self.**

**Chapter 6, §1: The Self and Choice.** Self and consequences are mutually interdependent ends. Choice characterizes the self. Preferences impel us to action. When they conflict, they drive us toward deliberation. Out of deliberation comes choice of the knowing sort, which reveals one to oneself and forms one's future self. Each deliberative possibility expresses different groups of impulses; choice settles the inner conflict. Acts emerge from the self and shape the self. The self and its acts are, ultimately, one.

**Chapter 6, §2: The Self and Motivation: Interests.** Humans engage activity as their natural state. Environmental stimuli change the course of actions underway; they do not initiate human action. We naturally explore. Our "motives" to capture this or that thing merely reveal our predispositions to action.

**Chapter 6, §3: Egoism and Altruism.** Impulses to selfish acts or benevolent ones are morally neutral, if undertaken without reflection. We want a thing and take it. We have a thing and give it. The impulses are natural. But reflection evaluates the impulses. It asks, "Who am I becoming by this act of selfishness or benevolence? Is that what I want, in the long run? What are the ultimate consequences of this or that action?" In balancing self and others, one must seek attitudes that do not warp his judgment by leading him to inequities with respect others or himself. This broadening of thought is the essence of reflective morality.

**Chapter 6, §4: The Inclusive Nature of Social Interest.** The self emerges in human relationships. In eras past, the individual was believed to be utterly independent, and his social arrangements seemed secondary and constructed. "Self" and "other" emerge from a single human drive—to protect and enrich the social collectives in which we participate. Family and business relations bring to mind concern that might otherwise escape consideration. In caring for one's community, one cares for oneself. Within the context of one's community, caring for oneself is a priority. Charity without reciprocity may become a social force of class dominion. Ultimate happiness for the individual lies on the path of helping the human community develop its full potential. This end is insulated from frustration because flexible and emerging. The moral life consists in forming habits in oneself that benefit the common life, and oneself within that common life.

**Chapter 6, §5: Responsibility and Freedom.** Responsibility concerns change of habits, not punishment. Acts become habits; habits change the future, for good or ill. This is the fundament of responsibility. We hold people responsible so that they may in the future become responsible. Freedom means the possibility that, in the future, one might become different, even better. One may change habits and become a different self. The self is never finished; it changes because it acts, establishing habits. Established habits have momentum, and resist emendation. They would be static. But new circumstances demand new habits, and the self adapts. "Goodness" is welcoming life's demand for growth. The growing self is dynamic. The moral law may be stated: Become the possible new self demanded by current circumstances. So, morality emerges from the conditions of human life: a) desire perceived leads to foresight, and the quest for wisdom and prudence in making life's purposes inclusive and persevering; b) mankind is social. Mutual demands lead to conceptions of right and obligation; c) approved habits are virtue. Over time, morals change. But morality itself is a human trait, built into the fabric of the human life of activity.