

DEWEY'S THEORY OF JUDGMENT

It is, of course, impossible to consider Dewey's theory of judgment without first considering his whole approach to logic as the theory of inquiry. What Dewey calls "the principle of the continuum of inquiry" enables him to give an empirical account of logical terms as opposed to traditional logical theories. He conceives of inquiry as the determination of an indeterminate situation. Within this framework, judgment is conceived of as the settled outcome of inquiry.

Logic, to Dewey, is a discipline which admits of no ultimate final formulation—logical theory is determined by those methods of inquiry which experience has proved most adequate. By a two-way development the subject-matter of inquiry is shaped by operational conceptions at the same time that conceptual structures are developed or reconstructed so as to be applicable to present conditions. Logical forms are conceived of as statements of the conditions (disclosed within the process of inquiry) which must exist if future inquiries are to

provide “warranted assertibility” as a consequence. In other words, logical forms are generalized statements of the means which necessarily must be utilized if the end of warranted assertibility is desired. They are developed out of the relationship between means and ends and are subject to modification whenever the results of inquiry demonstrate the need—they are not, therefore, as is the case with many other systems of logic, arbitrary or *a priori*. Strengthening the above is the further insistence that logic is naturalistic in that the activities of inquiry are observable and are continuous with the biological and the physical. This does not deny, in fact it emphasizes, the social aspect of inquiry—inquiry is conditioned by the social and it has influence upon the social in return—it is impossible for inquiry (or for any system of logic) to exist apart from its cultural matrix. Dewey calls logic “autonomous.” By this he means that nothing apart from inquiry can determine inquiry—logic is actually “inquiry into inquiry.” This precludes the basing of logic upon *a priori* intuition, metaphysical or epistemological assumptions, or psychological foundations. Dewey insists that “inquiry” and “thought” are synonymous and that within the process of inquiry we arrive at the meaning of inquiry.

Dewey has defined his conception of inquiry in the following words:

Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.¹

This transition of the situation from indeterminate to determinate takes place by means of two kinds of functionally related operations. The first has to do with conceptual subject-matter standing for possibilities in resolving the situation—anticipating a solution it provides incentive for investigation of relevant

¹ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), pp. 104-105.

factual material. The second kind has to do with activities using methods and instruments of observation. These activities or operations, by emphasis, choice and arrangement of existing material, delimit the problem so that the most appropriate material can be used in a way best suited to examine those ideas which are proposed as possible solutions. When inquiry ends in a positive way we can then say that "judgment may be identified as the settled outcome of inquiry."²

Judgments are compared with propositions by showing that propositions are representative, intermediate and composed of symbols—judgments, on the other hand, have "*direct* existential import." This conception of judgment is compared with the judgment of a law court. A trial represents a problematic situation which, in the light of inquiry conducted during the hearings, settles an issue by making a decision which bears upon future activities. The final decision results in the resolution of the problematic situation and the judgment takes effect in definite overt actions which in turn set up new situations.

Dewey points out that within a situation the subject-matter used in making a judgment is individual. By this is meant that there is a uniqueness and a wholeness which form a qualitative unity. This does not mean that there are no diverse elements within the situation—it does mean that the elements of subject-matter are taken or selected on the bases of relevance to the particular inquiry under way. Traditional logical theory regards subject, predicate and copula as the distinct parts of the logical process. Further, it regards the subject as given and the predicate as something to be made out of the subject. In opposition to this viewpoint Dewey regards the subject-matter of both subject and predicate as determined together in relation to each other in and through the process of inquiry. The predicational content of judgments is the sum total of those meanings which are suggested as possible solutions of problems. The copula is held to be the operations which functionally relate the subject to the predicate. Final judgment is never immediate.

² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

It is attained through a series of partial judgments which Dewey calls estimates or appraisals. Since judgment is the result of inquiry it cannot be immediate and yet remain inquiry. Dewey, in outlining his theory of judgment, refuses to consider the traditional essences, properties and accidents as having ontological meaning today. He insists that that which is needed in a specific inquiry is "essential" and that which is not needed is "accidental."

We can summarize by stating that judgment is a continuing process used as a means of resolving indeterminate situations into unified determinate situations—it operates by the transformation of given (or, rather, taken) subject-matter. Propositions are used as universal instruments for reaching final warranted determination. Propositions are intermediate steps leading to intelligent final judgment or overt action.

Dewey's theory of judgment is relevant to many if not all, phases of life. In dealing with the subject of art and criticism, Dewey states:

Criticism is judgment, ideally as well as etymologically. Understanding of judgment is therefore the first condition for theory about the nature of criticism.³

He then emphasizes the primary place of the subject-matter of perception in judgments and asserts that this subject-matter is the only thing that makes any difference. The quality of judgment, or criticism, then, is determined primarily by the quality of first-hand perception. In art, as well as in other fields, judgment is not final—the harm done by assuming that final rules exist is difficult to overestimate—the placing of ancient art on a permanent pedestal as perfect and ultimate was and is the cause of much that is artificial and inferior in many fields of art. The primary harm done in judging on the basis of supposed authoritative, eternal rules and standards is not that in specific cases injustice is done but, rather, the chief ill effects

³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1934), p. 298.

are seen in the development of the notion that such things as unchanging criteria are available to guide future judgment.

Here, as in all of Dewey's work, the emphasis is on the future rather than the past. His theory of judgment is forward-looking, seeking to rebuild and reconstruct on the basis of experience whenever such reconstruction is shown to be necessary. At the same time, past judgments can be used, not as eternal and unchanging, but as the best criteria yet devised for proceeding toward other judgments, always admitting that testing may show their inadequacy. In art as in other phases of life, change is real and change is persistent. Hence the judging of a work of art or some other work that is new in human experience cannot be done on the basis of predetermined rules; rather, the rules by which judgment may be made must be developed within the very process of inquiry which results in the judgment. Dewey does not hold with the critics who revel in mere personal impressionism. Nor does he hold with those who set up standards by which all art must be judged. The absence of uniform standards does not, in his opinion, however, render objective criticism of art impossible. The material which the critic uses in making his judgments includes the art object of necessity—but it is not just the object, it is the object as it enters and reacts to the past and present experiences of the critic. Judgments, then, will vary with the material upon which they are based—they will vary, therefore, to some extent, from critic to critic. In spite of this difference Dewey feels that judgments will have a common form due to their having certain definite functions to perform. These functions he gives as discrimination and unification.

Judgment has to evoke a clearer consciousness of constituent parts and to discover how consistently these parts are related to form a whole. Theory gives the names of analysis and synthesis to the execution of these functions.⁴

These two functions of judgment are, of course, intimately re-

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

lated—analysis is not merely analysis of parts but rather it is analysis of parts as parts of wholes. The critic is always concerned with a total situation. A “consuming informed interest” is the safeguard of the critic concerned with making adequate judgments.

Dewey also relates his idea of judgment to the field of values. To those who assert that enjoyment and value are equivalent Dewey would reply that although value is connected with enjoying it is not connected with *all* enjoying, rather it is connected with those enjoyments which judgment approves after examination of the relation of the enjoyment with antecedent causes and the effects it has on other enjoyments. Dewey says, in defining the role of judgment in value:

Judgments about values are judgments about the conditions and the results of experienced objects; judgments about that which should regulate the formation of our desires, affections and enjoyments.⁵

It seems incredible to Dewey that one could possibly agree that natural objects may be judged only on the basis of carefully directed operations while value may be decided on the mere basis of enjoyment. Yet this is the position of many in the field of value. Values can only be adequately judged when we know the conditions under which the thing valued takes place. We can then proceed to determine consequences and thereby make an intelligent valuation.

Dewey's theory of judgment, if consistently carried into the field of values, would result in many great changes—all dogmatic creeds pertaining to goods, and especially to *the* good, would have to be recognized as hypotheses—they would then be subject to testing, verification or reconstruction depending upon the consequences of acting upon them. They would lose all pretense of finality and thereby would do away with much of the fanaticism and intolerance which develops when men

⁵ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1930), p. 265.

with differing goods feel that theirs and theirs alone have eternal and authoritative sanction. Dewey looks forward (and I assume that he realizes how far forward he is looking) to the day when men will be as ashamed to accept moral valuations without experimental verification as they are today, for the most part, to accept scientific beliefs except on the basis of evidence. To Dewey, this emphasis would place method and means on the same level of importance as that occupied exclusively for the most part by ends. Judgments of values would then be made on the basis of those conditions and operations by which values can be achieved.

Throughout Dewey's writings on the subject of logic he uses again and again examples from judicial procedure. He compares judicial decisions with judgment—he shows how in either case fixed rules or standards handicap the administration of justice or the intelligence of judgment. There finally comes a point in many legislative situations when circumstances cry out so loudly for a reconstruction of the old fixed rules that judgment becomes legislative. Judgment in this sense is destructive—destructive of the older fixed rules; it is also constructive—constructive in that it works toward the reconstruction of the old fixed ideas or rules to the end that they may be rendered more adequate in the light of the existing situation.

We could sum up Dewey's theory of judgment by saying that it is one more of his many contributions which tend to remove logic from the exclusive possession of logicians—philosophy from the exclusive possession of philosophers—and judgment from the exclusive possession of judges. And it places all of these techniques or disciplines in the hands of any and all intelligent beings who have an urge to inquire—to find out—and, finally, to act on the basis of intelligence rather than tradition.