

John Dewey's Conception of Democracy as a Mode of Associated Living

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1 The need for rethinking democracy

Democratization is still a realistic challenge in many countries of the world today (such as economically developing countries and those under the military dictatorship), so democracy continues to be a sublime and difficult idea to achieve. But in contrast, in many developed countries, democracy has diminished its former innovative and progressive implications of resistance to old regimes and dominant powers, ideas and hopes for building new societies. Ostensibly, it has become a very familiar political system. In other words, in modern developed countries, democracy has no external hostile or competitive system ideologically and conceptually, and virtually, it has no political force that explicitly denies democracy within the country. However, the political system, which should be merely a means, has become an aim itself, and in the name of democracy, it is also true that there are struggles between political parties, offense and defense of vested interests, the behaviors of politicians who lack justice and honesty, and cunning voting activities. The development of democracy as a

political system does not mean the achievement of the democratic ideal. How should we reassess democracy and its potential today?

On the other hand, the issues related to democracy and education are relatively unchanging. In general, modern democracy is based on the idea of collective autonomy to make decisions about one's own problems, and the independence and certain qualities and abilities of the members who make up and participate in a democracy. It is premised on the recognition of the value of freedom and equality and the mutual protection of rights. In this sense, the education of the members who will lead the future society has always been one of the most important issues of the democratic society.

However, there are some aporia lurking there. For one thing, democracy as a form of politics today is a national system with a nation-state as a unit, and for most people, it is a given in that there is no choice of whether to participate, regardless of whether they have the qualifications and abilities to participate. It is different from sharing the experience and memory of winning "democracy" at some point in the past. In other

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words, there is no voluntary participation that the social contract theory envisions, as shown in political science textbooks, and people are granted their rights as citizens within the borders where they happened to be born and raised, while they are burdened to fulfill many obligations. In recent years, advocates of republican democracy or communitarianism have argued that humanity is most developed by the political participation in democracy, but this also remains to be an unproven premise.

The second aporia is well known in educational thought. The modern nation-state has enclosed children through its educational system. As suggested by Kant, modern education embraces the "paradox of freedom and coercion" of how to foster children's spontaneity in educational coercion. In addition, many modern educational ideas agreed to create a world in accordance with the children's scale, in keeping with the children's developmental pedagogical principles, isolated from the adult world. This allowed children to have an unrealistic environment unrelated to the adult world. In fact, for children, the contradiction with the real world should be the most important conflict, rather than the abstract and primitive environment. However, keeping the various conflicts away from the children ends up putting them at risk of encountering major conflicts later. The formidable challenge of modern education is how to develop human beings who can resolve the contradictions and conflicts of the real world in a homogeneous and conflict-free educational space.

John Dewey's idea of democracy, which was developed about a century ago, is still worthy of reconsideration as one of the approaches to the above problems (democracy and education aporia), despite the constraints of the times. The purpose of this paper is to trace the development of Dewey's idea of democracy and to reassess its peculiarity and inclusiveness while confirming some limitations of his idea. In the following, we will first take up the peculiarities of Dewey's idea of democracy, which is claimed as a way of life rather than as a form of politics, then analyze the concept of democracy and education as overcoming the aporia of modern education, and finally investigate the peculiarities of ethics of pragmatism.

2 Dewey's conception of democracy in his idealistic period

Dewey's early paper, "Ethics of Democracy" was an attempt to refute the claim in the book *Popular Government* by British scholar, Sir Henry Maine, the claim that "government is simply that which has to do with the relation of subject to sovereign, of political superior to inferior" and democracy as politics is nothing more than the rule of the majority (the mass). Democracy is nothing but a numerical aggregate. Accordingly, democracy is the most difficult form of government. "For while it is conceivable that one man or a few men should have a common will, in no intelligible sense can a multitude be said to exercise will." Maine says the only powers adequate to bring about this artificial unity (democracy) are party and corruption. Citizens in a democracy are fragments of political power and the growth of democracy is the "process of cutting up political power into petty fragments." In democracy a multitude is obliged to delegate his power to the so-called ruler, and the government is an external power formed by a process of delegation. The gist of matter in Maine's argument, according to Dewey, lies in the question whether democracy is adequately described as the rule of the many, whether the numerical attribute of democracy is primary and causal, or secondary and derived, and whether democracy is only a form of government.

Instead of starting with a definition of democracy as a numerical aggregate in which the ultimate reality is a non-social individual unit or isolated atom, Dewey starts from the conception of a social organism where human being is essentially a social being.

Human society represents a more organism. The whole lives truly in every member, and there is no longer the appearance of physical aggregation, or continuity. The organism manifests itself as what it truly is, an ideal or spiritual life, a unity of will. If then, society and individual are really organic to each other, then the individual is society concentrated. He is not merely its image or mirror. He is the localized manifestation of its life (EW 1: 237).

In this way, Dewey understands that, although individuals have an independent personality, they interact

equally with other members, and to that extent, society condenses the intellect and will of the organism within it. Every society has a common will and intellect as an organism, but if that society aims to be a more complete organism, democracy is the ideal of all social organizations in which an individual and society are organic to each other. He concludes that democracy is more than a political form. It is “an ethical idea, the idea of a personality, with truly infinite capacities, incorporate with every man” (EW 1: 248). In his idea, democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association. Dewey at that time was under the influence of T. H. Green and took the position of absolute idealism, such as considering society as an organism. On the other hand, he has already criticized the atomic individualism found in *Public and its problems* and others. He also made criticisms that economic disparities distorted democracy and prevented the poor from participating in public moral reflections.

Dewey wrote an essay entitled “Christianity and Democracy” in 1892. In this paper, he already argued the later claim in *Common Faith*, that is, true religion is “the religious” that is distinct from institutionalized religion, “a religion”. Any religion has its origins in the community, social and intellectual life, and religion is an expression of the social relationships of the community. Then, Christianity for Dewey is not an organized religion with doctrines and rituals, but a constant process of revelation, the process of self-fulfillment of life itself. “Christianity, if universal, if revelation, must be the continuously unfolding, never ceasing discovery of the meaning of life. Revelation is the ascertaining of life. ... God is truth; that as truth He is love and reveals Himself fully to man, keeping back nothing of Himself; that man is so one with the truth thus revealed that is not so much revealed to him as in him; he is its incarnation” (EW 4: 4–5). In this way, the revelation of truth should be constantly updated as a process of self-actualization of human life. In that case, the social and moral acts for human beings to receive and realize the truth must be free from any obstacles. And democracy is a social relationship and condition that guarantees the freedom and liberty of human life activities. For “Democracy as freedom, means the loosening of bonds, the wearing away of restrictions, the breaking down of barriers, of middle walls, of partitions” (EW 4: 8).

Thus, democracy for Dewey in the 1880s was a means to improve society as a social organism. In society, there were no barriers between individuals, and they were perceived as being free to interact with each other and working together towards the common purpose of revealing the truth (God). Democracy is an ethical idea which is also a personal idea with truly infinite possibilities in any person. Therefore, democracy and human nature are synonymous with the ultimate ethical ideal in Dewey’s conception. These are extremely idealistic views of democracy. However, such a “Hegelian and absolute idea” is eventually stripped away. For example, the human experience depicted as “interrelationship between consciousness, ego, and reason” is transformed into “interaction” between the agent and the environment in the present act or problematic situation. In particular, it was a major development of Dewey’s thought that “present actions” and “individual situations” became key concepts.

As detailed in the 1896 paper “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”, stimuli and behavioral responses (eg. when grasping emotions) are not separate units, but “variables” in “the concrete whole of experience.” They come to be treated as a process of “co-ordination of acts.” Eventually, this “co-ordination of acts” evolved as a “constant reconstruction of experience” and a matter of organized habits, and the mediation of impulses and experience was replaced by the concept of “growth” (dynamic equilibrium in the interaction between the organism and the environment). Thus emerged an experimental and functionalist idea of “democracy” in *Democracy and Education*.

3 Democracy and education

(1) Social life and communication as education

Democracy and Education in 1916 represents the completion of Dewey’s philosophy of education. According to Dewey, this work is based on two beliefs. One is that the idea of democracy has grown with the development of experimental methods of science, evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences, and the industrial reorganization, biology, etc., and the other is that subject matter and method of education need to be reorganized along with these developments. By doing this, a democratic society would be built and reconstructed.

Along with *School and Society*, *Child and Cur-*

riculum, and *Experience and Education*, *Democracy and Education* is often read as an introductory work on Dewey's philosophy of education. Although it is subtitled an "introduction", there are many phrases and sentences that are difficult to understand. For example, Chapter 1 begins with an ambiguous discussion of life, rather than education. Life is in the process of self-renewal through nutrition and reproduction. Dewey then likens society to life. Nutrition and reproduction are indispensable for the survival of life. Therefore, if society is life, education (education through communal living, community, and communication) is indispensable to society. These are simple frameworks, but are basic conceptions that are indispensable for understanding Dewey's idea on the relation between democracy and education. Although the early idea of "a social organism" has been withdrawn, the biological metaphor is heavily used throughout this book.

Dewey's "communication" is the process of sharing experiences until it becomes a shared property of people, and in that process the dispositions of the participants involved in communication are also forced to be corrected. In other words, participating in communication leads to the expansion and sharing of experience, but at that time, the sender and the receiver are not the same as they were, and inevitably there is a change in their attitudes. In this sense, all communication and social life are educative. In this conception, the continuity of society is more focused than the individual, and the subject of education is not individual human beings (adults, parents, teachers, etc.), but society, communal living, and communication. But it doesn't mean that individual growth is underestimated. Social improvement and growth are the consequences of individual growth. For example, the 1934 paper "The Need for Educational Philosophy" states that the purpose of democracy is for the growth of all individuals (Dewey 1940: 297).

(2) Democracy as a mode of associated living

In Chapter 7 of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey states two criteria for determining whether a particular society is a democratic society. "Two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups"(MW 9: 105). In Dewey's

idea, a society which makes provision for participants in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is democratic (MW 9: 105).

Then what kind of education does such a democratic community envision as an organized and systematic education? Dewey states a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. In order to realize democratic social life, such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits (dispositions) of mind which secures social changes. The shared experience, the expansion of the scope of interest, and the release of the abilities of more diverse individuals. These are the characteristics of democracy, and are the issues of effort (educational issues) that should be planned. Thus, for Dewey, democracy is not just a procedure or system (a method of expressing opinions or interests) such as the principle of majority voting, but a mode of living that fosters communication and discussion among community members and citizens. These discussions result in intellectual collective action directed towards "social intelligence" and "collaborative intelligence." The concept of democracy is so broadly interpreted since, for Dewey, democracy is a political expression of a scientific, experimental, pragmatic attitude towards the world.

(3) Ideal community

Where does Dewey's idea (democracy as a mode of living, ideal social life) come from? Dewey always has a practical and realistic view of the concept of society and community. In order for such an idea to be practicable for an ideal society, it has to be based on the society that actually exists (LW 5: 194). As is often pointed out, a democratic society (a model of an ideal society) for Dewey should have started from a "home," including its expansive meaning. Democratic orientation or propensity (sharing interests, liberating more diverse personal abilities, personality formation, habits of mind) is nurtured in the interest and care of others in the family and also in interaction with other families. In the famous passage of *School and Society*, he points out that "What the best and wisest parents want for their own children

is what the community must want for all of its children” (MW 1: 5). In this book, over several pages, examples of the educative power of the home and the surrounding community centered on the home are described in a fairly nostalgic and retrospective manner.

Back of the factory system lies the household and neighborhood system. Those of us who here today need go back only one, two, or at most three generations, to find a time when the household was practically the center in which were carried on, or about which were clustered, all the typical forms of industrial occupation. ... Instead of pressing a button and flooding the house with electric light, the whole process of getting illumination was followed in its toilsome length, from the killing of the animal and the trying of fat to the making of wicks and dipping of candles. ... The children, as they gained in strength and capacity, were gradually initiated into the mysteries of the several processes. ... We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and of character-building involved in this kind of life: training in habits of order and of industry, and in the idea of responsibility, of obligation to do something, to produce something, in the world (MW 1: 7-8).

In all this process, there was continual training of observation, of constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities. Such an ideal form of home or neighborhood community becomes an “ideal school when everything is organized and generalized.” It leads to the practice in the experimental school and the concept of the occupation.

Under the influence of recent educational theories and discourses, we tend to emphasize the idea of learning first and to understand the educational practice from the learner's point of view. However, the function of occupation should be viewed from the perspective of the (democratic) society which is the actor of education. Dewey's proposal was that if old American society wished for its survival, renewal, and growth, occupation should have been at the heart of the tools that made school a (more ideal) place of life and activity. In short, occupation educates, not anyone else. Through occupation, children learn how to live and learn, gain insight

and ingenuity, personality, and the development of democratic dispositions.

The materials (resources, materials, forces) themselves in the experimental school were all known in other schools. But according to Dewey, “what is needed is not any radical revolution, but rather an organization of agencies already found in the schools” (Dewey 1940: 70). The part of a catalogue of such agencies contained the following: Taking the child out of doors, widening and organizing his experience with reference to the world in which he lives; nature study when pursued as a vital observation of forces working under their natural conditions, plants and animals growing in their own homes; school gardens, the introduction of elementary agriculture; sewing, and weaving, including designing and the construction of simple apparatus for carrying on various processes of spinning. Many schools were already practicing innovative education using these materials at the time, but Dewey's emphasis was on the organization of such agencies. Through its organization, it was aimed that the mind was not subordinate to the external material, but that the dynamics of the mind were oriented toward the control and expansion of the subject matter. However, the practice at Dewey's experimental school seems to have been somewhat biased towards food, clothing and shelter, especially Dewey's own favorite geography and civilization history and the constructive activities associated with them. If we were to emphasize the continuity of experience between school and society, it would have been better to have “organized the subject matter” such as social issues in general at that time and social urban issues in Chicago.

In the final chapter of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey points out that two conditions are necessary for a school to have a permeating social spirit. One is that the school itself must be a community life. “Social perceptions and interests can be developed only in a genuinely social medium where there is give and take in the building up of a common experience” (MW 9: 368). The other is that the learning in school should be continuous with that out of school. There should be an interplay between the two. These are also in line with the two criteria of whether a particular community mentioned above is democratic. When an occupation is to educate, it should meet the two conditions that it is a social life for the child and that it is interacted with life outside of school.

School is a social institution. Dewey does not seem to simply state that schools should be a democratic society, but they remain one of the key institutions for fostering democratic habit of mind. School is a miniature of the current society and a community as a sprout oriented towards future society. It was perceived that it is essential for children who would become members of the future society to acquire the communication skills and free discussion skills necessary for a democratic society.

4 How is school education connected to reconstructing a democratic society?

(1) The decline and lonely crowds of the public

Who is the ideal society for? Who is the “best and wisest parent”? In what direction is ideal or better growth directed? As a matter of fact, the general citizens and voters of modern society cannot afford to be infused with the public spirit and public consciousness, and they are eager to protect their private interests rather than sharing and expanding their interests. They seem to be just consumers of goods. It's not a fuss about understanding and accepting what Dewey considered a democratic citizen's responsibility in an era when Locke's personal interests and individualism were overwhelming the public sphere and public life. They do not pay attention to matters that are not directly related to their personal life, whether they are general problems in society or individual special problems.

As Dewey argues, neither experience nor education occurs in a vacuum. But at the same time, it does not start at zero. We are already in the midst of something. Contrary to Dewey's assumption, school education is located between the private and public domains of pluralism. Schools are not a community of shared interests for a democratic social life, but a place of struggle for equal distribution of education, methods and goods by bringing in uncompromising political interests. How should we adjust for the differences in interests that arise from different circumstances? Dewey argues that by sharing more interest and recognizing more relationships and continuities of the activities in which they are engaged, the experience becomes more meaningful and reconstructed so that subsequent experiences should be oriented. Can we agree with this claim?

(2) Democracy without principles

According to pragmatism, the improvement of democracy will be brought about by further democratization. On the other hand, pragmatism is in a position to simultaneously allow the logic of participation in the war such as “the battle against terrorism” and the logic of anti-war (from Randolph S. Bourne to Noam Chomsky). Dewey himself had both sides of it. Why does pragmatism allow conflicting claims on serious issues such as whether to participate in war? It has been pointed out that it is because it is “unprincipled”. Pragmatism is in a position to actively take advantage of this “non-principle” and to challenge traditional philosophical doctrines. Hilary Putnam points out “anti-skepticism” and “fallibilism” as well as “fundamental anti-dualism” and “primacy of practice” as general characteristics of pragmatism (Putnam: 152). Extending Putnam's point, the position of ethics of pragmatism could be called “the ethical fallibilism of democracy”.

“The ethical fallibilism of democracy” literally presupposes “fallibilism.” It has the following advantages when no one has provisions about the essence of *summum bonum* and happiness or rational intuition about them. First, we can escape from the alternative logic of whether there is a solid foundation (principle) or not. Second, there is no need to ensure any particular intellectual, moral, or political infallibility (certainty) to avoid skepticism. Third, this position is an ethical position that puts any claim for validity on the table of critical appraisal, but at the same time avoids the absolute idea on differences. It is an attitude of trying to search for problem solving in a situation with the “spirit of generosity” while not assuming the absolute principle.

In Dewey's own words:

The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized. ... No form of life does or can stand still; it either goes forward or it goes backward, and the end of the backward road is death. Democracy as a form of life cannot stand still. It, too, if it is to live, must go forward to meet the changes that are here and that are coming. If it does not go forward, if it tries to stand still, it is already starting on the backward road that leads to extinction (LW 11: 182).

Dewey's "the ethical fallibilism of democracy" is that no one knows (is not in a position to know) the principle of absolute infallibility (the essence of *summum bonum* and happiness) in the ever-changing situation. Therefore, we should explore hypothetically and collaboratively on a trial basis to solve the immediate problem.

After understanding the democratic concept of pragmatism as described above, what can be done to nurture the democratic dispositions among children? For example, suppose you have Dewey ethics class in a high school. It does not deal with abstract issues such as what is human nature, what is justice, what is freedom, what is right, what is equality, what is virtue since they are metaphysical pseudo-problems that are separated from the context of actual problem. Instead, these concepts should function as tools in social inquiry. For example, "rights" are so often referred to as personal property. But like art and language, they have social origins and should be talked about in specific circumstances.

A right is never a claim to a wholesale, indefinite activity, but to a defined activity; to one carried on, that is, under certain conditions. This limitation constitutes the obligatory phases of every right. The individual is free; yes, that is his right. But he is free to act only according to certain regular and established conditions. That is the obligation imposed upon him (MW 5: 394).

Thus, Dewey situates such questions in the specific context in which there are factors such as historical, political and economic conditions, institutions, specific persons and groups.

In an address read by Horace M. Kallen at the dinner in honor of Dewey in New York City on 20 October 1939, Dewey states that "democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished. I have been accused more than once and from opposed quarters of an undue, a utopian, faith in the possibilities of intelligence and in education as a correlate of intelligence. At all events, I did not invent this faith. I acquired it from my surroundings as far as those surroundings were animated by the democratic spirit" (LW 14: 227). For Dewey, procedural democracy was

not enough, and a substantive democracy such as a way of life had to be aimed at. On the other hand, there are criticisms that it is difficult to justify substantive democracy. For example, Robert B. Talisse argues that Dewey's idea of democracy takes the most persuasive form when exploring the normative ideals of procedural democracy (Talisse: 27, Westbrook: 137–138).

While the characteristics of modern society require responsive decision-making, parliamentary democracy has a new issue of whether it emphasizes consensus or the procedure leading to consensus building. When people's ideas are disjointed and individual desires and preferences are diverse, it is almost impossible to reach consensus for everyone. In parliamentary democracy, the procedure of consensus building is important, in which political parties and political forces that appeal for different beliefs, preferences, and philosophies make a consensus while listening to other opinions. A compromised agreement is an equally unsatisfactory conclusion for everyone. Democracy as a coordinating system is a political system that emphasizes the process of debate leading to conclusions as a better solution, although no one is fully satisfied. In recent years, democracy as a coordinating system has been re-evaluated as a deliberative democracy aimed at "reasonably motivated consensus building." It would be possible to point out a "family resemblance" between Dewey's notion of democracy as a social inquiry and the concept of deliberative democracy. The premise of Dewey's claim is that we cannot help but favor democratic efforts and agreements because of the belief that such a democratic disposition should enhance the quality of human experience. However, this is more like faith than belief. The remaining issues in this paper are to logically justify Dewey's beliefs, and to reassess "non-principle pragmatism" and "the ethical fallibilism of democracy" in comparison with deliberative democracy. In addition, "democracy as a way of life" should be positioned between procedural democracy and substantive democracy. These tasks would be the subject of further discussions.

References

Citations of the works of Dewey are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953* published by Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale. Volume and pages number follow

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the initials of the series.

Abbreviations for the volumes used are:

EW *The Early Works* (1882–1898)

MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924)

LW *The Later Works* (1925–1953)

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Dewey's Conception of Democracy as a Mode of Associated Living

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This paper traces the development of Dewey's idea of democracy, reassesses its peculiar and inclusive qualities, and whilst it confirms the limitations of his idea, suggests its applicability to modern society in the 21st century.

First, I analyzed papers from the 1880s to examine the origin and development of Dewey's notion of democracy. Among the papers is one in which Dewey critiqued H. Maine's argument in *Popular Government* that democracy as politics is nothing more than the rule of the majority. Against this claim, Dewey insisted that democracy is not merely a political form, but also an entity of moral and spiritual association. Dewey envisioned society as an organism, and as such, could be used to improve society. In this democracy, individuals would perform without social barriers; they are both free from one other and yet work together for a common purpose.

Second, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey explains how problems addressed by a systematic and planned education system are not only better able to cope with challenges, but also help to contribute to a democratic, collaborative society. In Chapter 7, Dewey presents the following criteria for determining whether a particular society is democratic: shared experiences, the expansion of a scope of interests, and the freedom to exercise the abilities of a diverse population of individuals. Dewey believed these democratic characteristics are also related to educational issues important to address in schools.

Third, I examined where Dewey's peculiar idea of democracy originated and under what social circumstances it was conceived. In *School and Society*, Dewey emphasizes the significance of the educative power of home and the community. This very idea would influence the place that 'occupation' earns at the heart of the experimental school curriculum. Additionally, for the democratic spirit to permeate the educational environment, school must be a place of collaborative living. Finally, Dewey felt that learning at school needs to be continuous with learning within society.

Fourth, I discuss the question of how school should contribute to the construction of a democratic society. The position of pragmatism could be called "the ethical fallibilism of democracy." Democracy is not based on the principle of infallibility but rather on the premise that its meaning is constantly updated and explored. The notion of a democracy without principles questions a society's ideals. In conclusion, I posit that Dewey's democracy as a way of life finds a middle ground between procedural democracy and substantive democracy. Regarding the issue of education, this research suggests that a potential for educational practice based on pragmatism lies in the formation of habits with a democratic disposition directed both by social and collaborative intelligences.

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