

The Changing World

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THE EMERGING CONCEPTION OF MORALITY: A QUALITY OF DEMOCRATIC INTERDEPENDENCE

THE FOLLOWING INCIDENT was related by one of my economics professors when I was an undergraduate. John Spargo, the noted English socialist, was visiting in New York City. One day as he was walking down Seventh Avenue he saw a group of people peering intently into a shop window. Coming closer, he saw that they were watching a family of puppies huddled together in a large basket. Their mother was missing. An elderly lady was heard to remark, "Aren't they sweet; see how they huddle together to keep each other warm." Whereupon Mr. Spargo commented, "I beg your pardon, madam, they're not huddled together to keep each other warm; they're huddled together to keep themselves warm."

Here was stated in succinct form the age-old controversy over the nature of *human nature*: that man is essentially altruistic or that he is essentially selfish.

It has only been in recent years that I have come to see the possibility of resolving this controversy. In the first place, I see now that it is non-scientific to equate human nature with puppy nature. For man, unlike the puppy, is able to anticipate, more or less, and to note the consequence of his acts. Accordingly, we see now that men may "huddle together" to keep both themselves and others "warm" in one and the same act.

This long-time dualism as between altruism and selfishness, the *ideal* and the *practical*, has apparently been a factor in producing much confusion. Idealists have pleaded for a change in men's hearts. Realists have operated "business as usual." Both have relied upon "thou-shalt" and "thou-halt-not" moral codes and fear of

punishment or hope of reward after death to keep their fellows in line. Both agreed, by implication, that man's intelligence could not be trusted in meeting the new situation on its merits.

However, recent developments in such related sciences as social psychology, educational psychology, child guidance, and mental hygiene have provided a scientific grounding for a new trend in respect to a reconstructed meaning of *moral* or *morality*. Briefly stated, this emerging conception of morality means: *acting deliberately, thoughtfully, in the light of the possible consequences of one's acts in the lives of all persons affected, including one's self.*

This emerging conception of *what it means to be moral* is based upon several crucial considerations:

► It is a recognition of the fact that *mind*, as a quality or factor of human behavior, is a product of communication. This distinctively human mode of communication involves the use of *language* or *symbols*.¹

► Closely allied to the foregoing is the principle that *social intelligence*² is a product of genuinely cooperative enterprises.

► It is based on the emerging insight that in such aspects of experience as the economic and psychological, our people are

¹ Mead, George H., *Mind, Self and Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1934. pp. 132-133

² Dewey, John, *Democracy and Education*, Macmillan Company, 1920. p. 414

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"Look at those children over there in the reading corner," I said. "They wouldn't be showing such an interest and independence in reading if there hadn't been some good teaching of reading in this room."

"To be perfectly honest," she said, "even here I can't see that I do very much 'teaching' of reading. I supply the books they beg for and, with relatively little help from me, they read and read. It's the same in writing; we have no 'writing lessons,' but they ask for opportunities to write stories, letters, and the recipes of the things we cook each week."

At first I couldn't believe that she was serious in thinking she might not be a good teacher. I kept wishing the learning experiences of more classrooms could provide fun for the children and the teacher. Where there is fun and acceptance of individuals, children have a chance to work through problems of social relationships and to become better adjusted persons. I thought of the Jimmies who could develop interests and confidence, the Sallys who could find legitimate ways to become acceptable members of their groups, and the Ronnys who would learn to make their own decisions.

Everything the young teacher said to confirm her stand convinced me more and more that she is the kind of teacher I wish for all children. Although she is as yet unable to generalize on what she has accomplished in this first year, it seems to me she has given children *freedom to grow*. What seems so natural to her, what she thinks "anyone can do"—the creation of a flexible, informal classroom atmosphere in which meaningful, concept-building experiences are in abundance, and in which individuality and personalities are respected—are the very things that make her a *teacher*. Doesn't it seem to you that the true guider of children is there when they need her but dares to get out of the way to give children room to grow?

Tell me how I can let this young teacher know what a good job she's doing and to inspire more teachers like her. It seems to me the future of our democratic society depends on our helping the true teachers feel a sense of accomplishment for having provided opportunities for each child to become a confident and competent citizen, and then to have given that child freedom to grow.

And so again, goodbye for this time.

Dorothy

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intimately and pervasively *interdependent*. Another way to put this is to point out that *security*, as a quality of experience, is coming to be seen as a product of deliberately worked for and relied upon interdependencies.

► It is based upon the active, *operationally* developed meanings of the Golden Rule—the twin principles of *interaction*

and *continuity*³: that the way we behave in respect to others tends to call out in them similar ways of behaving in respect to us.

In this emerging conception of morality we see a closure of the long-time dichotomy between the ideal and the practical: that through and in democratic-cooperative relations men are coming to see that they may "huddle together" to keep both themselves and others "warm."

³ Dewey, John, *Experience and Education*, Macmillan Company, 1938. pp. 43-48

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