JOHN DEWEY AND THE GRAMMAR OF DEMOCRACY

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1. The construction of an anti-dichotomic philosophy

The battle against the pervasive dichotomy between ideas and concrete life is the focal point of the vast work of Dewey. As is known, it unfolded in a period coinciding with the significant socio-economic changes in the United States of America by which it became a world power, emblematic—for better or for worse—of advanced capitalism. In the course of these events, Dewey became the spokesman of a real passion for democratic ideals, a passion that was both theoretical, moral and aesthetic, in fact corresponding to his effort to show that, in the concreteness of human reality, there are no sharp lines separating living from thinking. This effort was initially pursued in the wake of the concept of the living organism taken from the work of Huxley and later through his studies of Hegel, but it certainly is a commitment that also reflects the influence of William James and Peirce, the latter recovered especially on the epistemological side.

The construction of a mentality adverse to the “false antitheses”—to use his own words—that traditionally govern western culture is a primary goal of Dewey’s ‘instrumentalist’ translation of Peircean and Jamesian pragmatism to dismantle a series of contrapositions which are well rooted in common language, as well as in traditional philosophical discourse, such as that between reason and feeling, between logic and empirics, between facts and values, between individuality and sociality, and finally between what is usually ascribed to the realm of the ideal and what instead is considered ‘real’. All this is an integral part of the project of a “radical democracy” that Dewey pursued with continuous confidence since the early years of his philosophical work.

From an overall point of view, one can say that this project, certainly so complex and fascinating although in some ways inevitably incomplete, reflects the ambitious attempt to convey some central issues of Christianity, Hegelianism, and of Darwinism.

The first steps of Dewey in ethical and political research are markedly aimed at a recovery of Christianity as a form of life in which everyone is called upon to realize himself or herself within the historical community to which it belongs. This is a firm aspect of further developments of Dewey’s commitment in favor of a radical democracy, and it is still acknowledged as a point of reference to supporting a conception of liberalism based on the formation and development of individual personality. On the other hand, the anti-dogmatic intent that has always animated his contributions to the Christian religion should be noted, in fact he took up a quite clear stance in the debate about the relation between science and religion within which he was strongly against ecclesiastical extremism.

For instance, Ethics and Physical Research is emblematic of a defense of Darwinism carried out in the name of the battle against the anti-scientific forces of religious apparatus, and thus it appears—also because of the language used- as an interesting document of the interweaving between Hegelian teleologism and Darwinian evolutionism. Along with Christianity and Democracy, an 1893 article where religion is defined as “an expression of the mental attitude and habit of a people”, the essay just mentioned also presents the basic lines of Dewey's more mature and very famous approach to religion, which he provided in The Common Faith, usually considered as the manifesto of his secularism.

For the sake of clarity, it is useful to consider briefly the central point of the arguments of Christianity and Democracy, which consists in refusing the argument that there are
religious truths which can be determined once and for all. According to Dewey, this is especially true with regard to Christianity, since this religion aims explicitly at a “revelation of truth” that “is in human beings” and, therefore, the revelation must be extended “as long as life has new meanings to unfold, new action to propose”. More precisely, “revelation means effective discovery, the actual ascertaining or guaranteeing to man of the truth of his life and the reality of the Universe”, so it can only consist in intelligence, in thought and in human reason, as well as “in man’s own action”. That is to say, “Man interprets the Universe in which he lives in terms of his own action at the given time”, and “man’s action is found in his social relationships—the way in which he connects with his fellows”. Thus, for the first time the statement—typically pragmatist—of the social nature of human intelligence and actions was clearly worded, and it is in this light that Dewey identifies democracy as a prerequisite for the implementation of the search for truth implied in Christianity, supporting the interweaving of truth, freedom and sociality that he always continued to keep at the center of his thought:

I assume that democracy is a spiritual fact and not a mere piece of governmental machinery […]. If God is, as Christ taught, at the root of life, incarnate in man, then democracy has a spiritual meaning which it behooves us not to pass by. Democracy is freedom. If truth is at the bottom of things, freedom means giving this truth a chance to show itself, a chance to well up from the depths. […] Democracy is, as freedom, the freeing of truth. […] Truth makes free, but it has been the work of history to free truth—to break down the walls of isolation and of class interest which held it in and under. […] The truth is not fully freed when it gets into some individual's consciousness, for him to delectate himself with. It is freed only when it moves in and through this favored individual to his fellows […].

Within a few years, Dewey put aside the argument of a deep similarity between Christianity and democracy. However, he was not to abandon the core concept on which he had tried to build a fertile combination between one and the other, that is to say the idea that the democratic organization of society can exist only as and to the extent that it exceeds the merely technical and formal level, and instead constitutes a "form or style of life" in which individual autonomy and social responsibility can combine fruitfully. More generally, much of what Dewey had said about a reconstruction of the concept of religion in view of a theory of democracy was to remain basically unchanged.

2. Democracy as a way of life and regulative idea.
In Dewey’s continual questioning about the meaning of democracy, about the possibility of its realization, about its difficulties of surviving in the contemporary world, it is obviously inevitable that gaps and discrepancies emerge. These are both conceptual and operational, due first of all to the profound historical changes that affected American society during his intellectual career. At the same time, however, it is clear that Dewey’s commitment in favor of a democratic policy took place in the light of some basic and permanent criteria or features of the Western political and philosophical debate. Principally, in this regard, one should mention Thomas Jefferson (1674-1826), for whom democracy is an uninterrupted “experiment”, a socio-political ideal which necessarily exceeds its own implementation. But no less important is the similarity between Dewey’s position and the line of thought that extends from Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) to William E. B. du Bois (1868-1963), to Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), a line according to which a democratic society consists

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2 Ivi, p. 8.
first of all in the ability of its members to constantly re-describe their criteria for behavior and values. Moreover, there is a profound correspondence between Dewey’s pluralism and the suggestion by Richard Rorty that democracy consists in “the ability to see more and more traditional differences (tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant” and “the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’”.\(^3\)

In The Public and Its Problems (1927) Dewey asks himself what democracy exactly implies, both from the theoretical point of view and from that one of the socio-political practices that are inherent to it, that is to say, whether it should be considered a moral ideal or whether democracy should be treated as a specific political system, based on a particular type of rules and criteria of legitimation of power. Dewey’s answer is clear: democracy is not reducible to a form of government among others, but is above all a “way of life”, the implementation of which requires a constant and unconditional commitment, in many ways analogous to the commitment usually reserved to the followers of a religious faith.\(^4\) Therefore, he can be rightly counted among the continuators of the American philosophical-political tradition that goes back to Emerson and Whitman and is characterized precisely by the conception of democracy as a “quasi-religion.” What must not be underestimated in any case, is the fact that for Dewey democracy is first of all a regulative ideal that is rooted in the propensity to organize and develop, in a creative way, the best possibilities inherent in individual and social reality. This is the point of view from which one should read the statement that “Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed.”\(^5\) A famous passage of The Public and Its Problems illustrates this perspective clearly:

> Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. It is an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of something which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected.\(^6\)

To say that democracy acts as a principle that is not constitutive but is rather regulative of human action means to highlight its problematic and uncertain nature, its characteristic as a project which is neither realized nor perfectly realizable, but which is, on the contrary, always subject to the risk of annihilation. Precisely for this reason it is in need of a “moral spur” which is able to support individuals in their effort to make the democratic ideal real and effective, notwithstanding the difficulties that continue to arise and to block its implementation. In this fundamental tension lies the theoretical core of Dewey’s philosophical proposal. On the one hand, democracy is thought of as the only form of life that is able to allow the full expression of human capabilities; on the other hand, its realization is assigned entirely to the realm of the possible and, consequently, subordinated to the will and to the ability to find the right tools for its implementation in the forms permitted by the political, economic and social conditions of the time. The element that mediates and settles the contrast between the two theses in apparent contradiction is given by the concept of faith. From Dewey’s point of view, in fact, democracy takes shape as a faith whose particular conceptual content centers on the conviction that it is only in democracy that the soundest possibilities


can improve both associated life and individual existence. Like any other faith, also the faith in democracy must be brought into existence through behavior, and this means striving to strengthen the constant dialectic between individuality and sociality. This dialectic establishes human reality and its fundamental nature as “shared experience” in which are rooted and developed the various factors of humanity, theoretical and practical knowledge, ideal purposes, and even the various forms of feeling.

It was precisely within this theoretical framework that Dewey posed the problem of the use of science and of technology and their role in the society, distancing both from those who gave indiscriminate praise to scientific knowledge and from those who insisted only on its limits. There is, in his view, a sort of epistemic primacy of the society over the individual; however, the defense of the value and potential, both cognitive and ethical, of individuals remains an inescapable fixed point.

Embracing a “historicist” perspective, Dewey maintained in Reconstruction of Philosophy—the well-known work published in 1920 and reprinted in 1948 with a new and very important introduction which reasserts the moral responsibilities of the rich and scientifically advanced American society—that there is a mobile boundary between “individual” and “social”, namely the meaning of these words has been changing continually through the course of the political and cultural Western history. In this regard, the function of the interactional and communicative processes is emphasized, and eventually he traces the very concept of society back to the:

Society is the process of associating in such ways that experiences, ideas, emotions, values are transmitted and made common. To this active process, both the individual and the institutionally organized may truly be said to be subordinate. The individual is subordinate because except in and through communication of experience from and to others, he remains dumb, merely sentient, a brute animal. Only in association with fellows does he become a conscious centre of experience. Organization, which is what traditional theory has generally meant by the term Society or State, is also subordinate because it becomes static, rigid, institutionalized whenever it is not employed to facilitate and enrich the contacts of human beings with one another.7

But it is in Individualism Old and New (1930) that Dewey’s perspective on the relation between individuality and society reached the highest degree of awareness and originality, connecting to the crucial point of his theory of democracy: that is, the statement that democratic organization constitutes the only social scenario in which a truly human life is made possible.8

In this work, as in many other Deweyan texts, the defense of the value of the individual, of his or her autonomy, was linked to the emphasis on his or her social responsibility and developed into an incisive and quite topical comment on the conformism of the ideas put into effect by the new media of mass communication.

7 J. Dewey, Reconstruction of Philosophy (1920/48), in MW: 12 (1920), p. 198. The essential factors of this line of thought are already well delineated in one of the first Deweyan writings, Ethics of Democracy (1888), in which Dewey rejects «the idea that men are mere individuals, without any social relations until they form a contract». Instead, he argued, human individuals are always constituted within a process of a social nature. These expressions are very close to the theory of the social genesis of the self offered by George Herbert Mead, Dewey’s friend and close collaborator during his years in Chicago. But it also important noticing the influence of Hegel on Dewey’s conception of society as an organism or Sittlichkeit, ethos in that it is a complex combination of customs, norms, attitudes, feelings and aspirations, which characterizes the life of a people. This is an influence that is accompanied by that of Christian Congregationalism, and, more precisely, the interpretation of Christianity offered by Coleridge, for whom it should be understood primarily as a guide for human behavior rather than only as a theological system.

8 J. Dewey, Individualism, Old and New (1930), in LW: 5, p. 41-123.
Dewey certainly never agreed with forms of violent rupture of the social equilibriums in effect, but that does not mean that he underestimated the emancipatory potential of the conflicts that inevitably occur in the life of democratic societies. It is safe to affirm that he acknowledged the richness and value of conflict following the teachings of the Hegelian dialectic as well as the evolutionary biology of Darwin. In particular, it is possible to see an appreciation of Hegel’s concept of negation, that is, of his ability to show that negation is the original source of all positivity because, according to the Hegelian dialectic, every new pattern of concrete universality is the result of the action of alienation and the particularization of pre-existing models: an action which always occurs when objective impediments arise to their operativity, and which, therefore, in many cases takes place with the tragic intimation of annihilation.

It is this danger that Dewey apparently keeps constantly in mind when he speaks of the democratic ideals that have taken shape in modern Western civilization, which often, however, appear heavily compromised in so many historical periods. And it is for this reason that his philosophy goes hand in hand with his pedagogy, namely with a theory of education crucially devoted to accomplish democracy as a social and personal way of life.