Is the Democratic Ideal Conceivable Without the Notion of Human Nature? On John Dewey's Democratic Humanism

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Does the existing order have any better justification than the argument that it is 'natural'? In most of its guises the 'nature' argument in fact arises more often than not from an argument whose authority is questionable, since it has been used to back up many forms of tyranny, oppression and exclusion. In this sense we are quite rightly wary of this notion of human nature as used to explore the democratic ideal. If the democratic ideal is associated with the modern experience of the indeterminate and the 'dissolution of fixed markers of certainty' (Lefort), it seems to imply the idea of the plasticity of human nature rather more than the hypothesis of an objective human essence. As the feminist and ecology movements have taught us, the question of nature has to remain open in democracy, and open above all for democratic debate. An insistence that there are characteristics intrinsic to human nature that make humans inclined to a democratic way of life reminds us too much of Plato's ideal city or Hobbes's Leviathan. And if we criticize this type of reasoning in those who seem to us to be democracy's enemies, we can scarcely have the face to use it to justify that kind of regime.

Nevertheless, can we brush aside the very idea of human nature so dismissively? If we were to reject it out of hand, how could we call a society or regime inhumane and conceive of the dehumanization of the world? In any case is it not in the name of human nature that we defend human rights, for example, and condemn totalitarian regimes that we label unnatural or pathological because they have violated those rights? And just as sickness is the opposite of health, does this not assume that we consider democracy to be the natural regime for humanity? If the totalitarian manufacture of the new man repels us, is this not because it is based on the premise of the extreme plasticity of human nature, conceived as a sort of ideological precipitate? In short, do we not prize democracy because we think it is the only system that allows human nature to develop its full potential?

Here we come up against a paradox. If we have to beware of any fixed immutable definition of human nature in the name of the democratic ideal itself, and suspect that it is nothing but a cunning way of justifying certain types of social and political organization by naturalizing them, at the same time democracy appears to be the only specifically human mode of political association, whose distinctive feature, compared with all other types of regime, is to give free rein to human nature.

Diogenes, No. 195, Vol. 49/3, 2002 © ICPHS 2002
Published by Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210204919515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Can democracy be resolved by reference to calculation?

There is one method of resolving this paradox. Rather than wandering off in the endless – and questionable – search for a human nature that cannot be found, is it not more realistic to justify the democratic order, as many contemporary liberals suggest we should, by comparing it to the calculation made by rational self-interested individuals? After all the psychological bases – which are arguably rather sketchy – of theories of rational choice and, through them, a quite minimal conception of human nature could very well serve our purpose. If democracy simply means that form of regime where the power of constraint does not depend on either violence or authority but rational consent influenced by considerations of self-interest, that type of regime really would be the natural system for humanity, since the naturalness of democracy, just like the market economy in fact, could be deduced from the naturalness of the calculating subject.

Nevertheless, can we be satisfied with such a utilitarian and cynical idea of democracy and at the same time such an unsubtle idea of human nature? Suggesting by this that democracy could be resolved as part of the calculation, stressing that voters try to maximize their well-being and candidates their chance of being elected and bureaucrats their power, does this all give us grounds for preferring this system to any other? Of course, if we look at things that way, we can always value democracy because of the comparative advantages it brings us, particularly as regards material wellbeing, individual freedom or even social stability. Indeed this is the criterion suggested, for example, by the *summa politica* of our liberal democracies, John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. Still, defending democratic participation simply as a means likely to maximize our individual freedoms or justifying the principle of tolerance because it would mean above all guaranteeing the stability of our liberal societies, which are notable for their 'pluralism', is that not an invitation to value democracy not for itself but for purely instrumental or functional reasons? It is very much to be feared that adopting such a calculating stance, whether it is based on the theory of rational choice or ethical liberalism, is the sign that the democratic ideal and the humanist tradition that gave it life have run out of steam.

So today can we rediscover democratic humanism by rejecting both the minimal instrumental democracy of contemporary liberals and the authoritarians' argument in favour of an immutable human nature? That is the sense of the humanism defended by John Dewey more than half a century ago.[1] Although in Dewey's view democracy has always been humanism's ally, that does not mean it must be based on or deduced from an empirical notion and knowledge of human nature. The 'intimate vital connection between democracy and human nature' implies belief and confidence in the common people, in short a *faith* in human nature and its potential. It is this theme of faith in human nature that I should like to pursue in order to interrogate what has become today of Dewey's unique brand of democratic humanism, a 'naturalist humanism' based on a representation of human nature emptied of all empirical content and on a notion of democracy conceived as an experience or experiment, as Jefferson saw it.

John Dewey's naturalist humanism

According to the American pragmatist neither democracy nor any feature of human association more generally can be deduced from the characteristics inherent in human

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210204919515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nature, whether its biological or psychological determinants are being considered. He ironically points to this in the following words from *Freedom and Culture*:

> It is significant that human nature was taken to be strongly moved by an inherent love of freedom at the time when there was a struggle for representative government, that the motive of self-interest appeared when conditions in England enlarged the role of money because of new methods of industrial production (. . .) and that events today [in 1939] are readily converted into love of power as the mainspring of human action.

Thus the 'favourite ideological psychological candidate' for imparting content to the idea of human nature depends on the predominant trends of the time and the prevailing power relations. Does this mean that the democratic ideal must be separated from any reference to human nature? Indeed this is what one might think. Confronted with the upsurge of totalitarianism and surveying the record of the various forms of democracy in modern capitalist societies, Dewey continually reiterates that we must put behind us the illusion that holds that, once human nature is freed of all arbitrary external restriction, it will lead to the creation of successfully functioning democratic institutions. But at the same time he instantly adds that democracy is the type of regime that, more than any other, should give free play to human nature.

Rather than seizing on a contradiction here, we would do better to see it as the tension running through Dewey's paradoxical – his naturalist – humanism. I say paradoxical humanism since, according to the author, man's humanity does not imply any distancing from nature. The human spirit and its moral values are not transcendental implants but products derived from interactions and transactions between the human organism and its natural and social environment. In Dewey's view, human nature is fundamentally plastic and open. It is made up first of all of a multiplicity of undirected, malleable impulses. Thus individuation is continuous self-realization, taking place in an environment that human beings are dependent on but keep modifying through their actions. Dewey believes that nature is above all a model of creativity, not mechanical adaptation. Therefore, if what is primary is experience, that is, creative interaction between men and their natural and human environment, then the objective of politics cannot be to promote this or that innate characteristic of human nature. Rather it is to create a social environment that tends to enrich the experience of all, and to bring into being institutions that continually foster the development of each person's individuality.

With this viewpoint in mind, democracy cannot be considered as a dogma. It is above all else experiment and experience. The basic question is thus how the constituent elements of human nature are stimulated and inhibited, strengthened and weakened in their interaction with their environment, to what extent a society's institutions but also its culture allow individuals and the relationships they form to enrich each other. It is in this sense that democracy, because it is an experience and an experiment, implies, more than any other system does, that human nature should be given free rein. So what this experiment or experience presupposes is not a knowledge of human nature but a *faith* in its creative potential as it is manifested in every human being. Democracy requires therefore a 'confidence' in this potential. This is the meaning of Dewey's democratic humanism. Democracy does not assume that humanist values are true or that they conform to an objective essence of humanity. It 'is belief that humanistic culture *should* prevail'. It is

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based on a wager, an act of faith, a moral assessment of human nature, giving rise to the obligation we all have to create conditions favourable to the development of human nature's capabilities.

The example of tolerance and intolerance may help us to grasp this argument better and contrast Dewey's 'radical liberalism' with Rawls's 'minimal liberalism' (Sandel). According to Dewey the argument that holds that tolerance[2] has no true value in itself, but is necessary, functional in order to ensure the stability of a pluralist society, is indeed a rather simple one: it must be treasured for itself and not for derived or instrumental reasons, precisely because it expresses that faith in the potential of human nature, for instance the faith in the innate ability of human nature to possess religious quality in the widest variety of forms. On the other hand, we should oppose intolerance, not principally because it would threaten to shatter the representative consensus that is essential for a well-ordered liberal society, but because it shows not only lack of trust in human nature's qualities but, worse still, a blasphemous hatred of it. A hatred that could indeed result in a refusal to recognize that a particular group had any human qualities.

Faith in human nature and faith in experience

We may wonder whether Dewey is not in fact suggesting a secular version of the Christian notion of the infinite value of the human soul in order to defend democracy. But this would serve first of all to concede the argument to the contemporary proponents of a cynical or utilitarian democracy, since now that belief in the soul has been discredited, by science in particular, we would have no grounds for preferring democracy other than the advantages external to experience itself that this type of system would bring by comparison with other systems. But if the religious aspect is prominent in Dewey's work, this is because democratic experience is not unconnected with religious experience.

As he demonstrates in his most important book devoted to religion, *A Common Faith*, approaching the world from a religious standpoint does not mean believing that it was created by a God or some supernatural entity, or that it is subject to supernatural control, but first of all recognizing that human destiny is dependent on forces we cannot fully master, forces on which we depend. This dependency is evident in the relationships we form with our natural and social environment, which sometimes support our aspirations and sometimes cause them to fail. The religious attitude is one which makes manifest this sense of the interdependence of men and the world around them and nourishes the feeling that we are involved in a larger whole in which our fate involves the cooperation of nature and others. Thus, as far as Dewey is concerned, religious experience implies a feeling of piety and confidence towards the world, nature and hence human nature itself. However, this 'natural piety' is neither a passive fatalistic acquiescence in what is, nor a romantic idealization of the world. Though it is based on an accurate assessment of nature as a whole of which we are merely a part, it assumes that nature is hospitable and friendly towards our ideals and that, in the course of their experience, humans can, through the abilities inherent in their own nature, harmonize their living conditions with what they judge to be humanly desirable. Having confidence in the world and faith in human nature leads us to consider that what is can reveal unrealized possibilities, that the contradiction between the actual and ideal is not insurmountable. Religious experience,

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because of this feeling of piety it fosters, helps human beings to recognize opportunities that are offered in the world to open up a way, through creative imagination, to attain these ideals and help to realize them. In *Quest for Certainty* Dewey emphasizes this in the following passage:

> Religious faith which attaches itself to the possibilities of nature and associated living would, with its devotion to the ideal, manifest piety towards the actual. It would not be querulous with respect to the defects and hardships of the latter (. . .) Nature and society include within themselves projection of ideal possibilities and contain the operation by which they are actualized. Nature may not be worshipped as divine even in the sense of the intellectual love of Spinoza. But nature, including humanity, with all his defects and imperfections, may evoke heartfelt piety as the source of ideals, of possibilities, of aspiration in their behalf, and as the eventual abode of all attained goods and excellences.

Dewey's humanism is 'religious' because this faith in human nature seemed to him, in the 1930s and 1940s, to be essential in order to save democracy. It is asking us to rediscover the intensity and fervour that were once evoked by religious ideals, but without taking refuge in any of the dogma that helped to pervert and stultify the very quality of religious experience. As religious experience must liberate itself from religion, democratic experience must be freed from its institutional straitjacket, in particular the 'worship of the Constitution', so that it may generate new ideals, new democratic modalities and so influence and enrich all human modes of association (the family, schools, industry, etc.). Though democracy implies this faith in human nature, in its goodness or at least in its perfectibility, it cannot in fact be reduced to a simple moral exhortation. According to Dewey the democratic ideal is not utopian, it rests on a vision of the possibilities offered by experience. It projects the strengths inherent in human nature to their logical and practical limits. In this regard it is above all the basis for a critique of existing institutions and the inspiration for innumerable projects for reform. Indeed Dewey does not hold back from making deliberate use of a still stronger and more religious form of words: 'In the long run democracy will stand or fall with the possibility of maintaining the faith and justifying it by works.' What he is stressing here is that there is no proof of the value of democracy other than through evaluating the results that this faith and the institutional mechanisms it creates produce throughout history in the lives of human beings. It is in terms of its works, the continual reconstruction and enrichment of the whole of human experience (its influence on politics, industry, art, science, morality, religion, etc.), that we accept or reject the democratic ideal. Dewey was thus able to formulate his categorical imperative in these words:

> Find out how all the constituents of our existing culture are operating and then see to it that whenever and wherever needed they be modified in order that their workings may release and fulfil the possibilities of human nature.

Naturally the content of this faith in human nature is difficult to define, but it is precisely this indeterminacy that is crucial in Dewey's view. Like individuality, democracy is a becoming, a continuous experience. It does not assume any prior criterion of a good life. The good, naturally human life can only be discovered – and in various ways – in the very continuity of experience. According to Dewey faith in human nature is in fact

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identical to faith in experience. In a democracy experience is its own end – an endless end, one might say. Indeed this is what distinguishes democratic faith from other kinds of faith. Whereas with them experience must at some point be subject to external verification by an authority that is supposed to exist outside the process of experience, here the very process of experience is more important than this or that particular result. As he emphasizes in one of his very last works, *Creative Democracy*, the task of democracy is to create perpetually a freer and more human experience that everyone has a share in and contributes to. Nevertheless, democratic experience is not against conflict. Though democracy should welcome and even encourage the expression of disagreement, this is not only because everyone has the individual right of free expression, in accordance with the negative freedom model defended by minimal liberalism, but because the expression of differences and disputes serves as a way of enriching and widening everyone's experience of life.

In this respect this humanistic notion of democracy is inextricably religious, moral and political. Religious and moral because it implies an act of faith, gambling with confidence on the potential of human nature. Political because in Dewey's eyes this continuous experience of a shared freedom and a shared humanity is more than anything experience of *self-government*, mutual cooperation through which individuals and the relationships they form enrich each other.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. This article is based in particular on the following works by Dewey: *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922); *The Quest for Certainty* (1929); *A Common Faith* (1934); *Liberty and Culture* (1939); Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us (1939), as well as the excellent synthesis by J. Zacks, *L'opinion publique et son double II. John Dewey, philosophe du public* (L'Harmattan, 1999).
2. See *Diogenes* No. 176, edited by Paul Ricoeur, *La tolérance entre l'intolérance et l'intolérable* (Paris, Gallimard, October-December 1996).

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