Much moral speculation has been devoted to the problem, of equating personal happiness and regard for the general good, note John Dewey and Tufts. If I do what is morally right for justice and benevolence, will I necessarily be happy or rewarded with happiness? In fact, some very bad people are happy, and some very good people suffer terribly. The problem thus put seems insoluble in this life and soluble only in the next life in which the bad will be punished and the good will be rewarded. However, Dewey and Tufts argue: ‘‘the problem is insoluble because it is artificial.’ It assumes a ready-made self and hence a ready-made type of satisfaction of happiness. It is not the business of moral theory to demonstrate the existence of mathematical equations, in this life or the next, between goodness and virtue. It is the business of people to develop such capacities and desires, such selves as render them capable of finding their own satisfaction, their invaluable value, in fulfilling the demands which grow out of their associated life.’’ Dewey’s argument can be well supported by Socrates. For the dying of Socrates for the central moral value of his life, the examined way of life, is not unique as a moral decision. On the contrary, it is a moral decision that exemplifies what should be going on in moral decisions all the time, that is, precisely the subordination of earlier felt desires and impulses and social roles from babyhood and childhood to the highest moral ideals of the examined way of life and the life of the virtues. Socrates has always subordinated his life of sensation and emotion to the lasting values of morality, and he is more deeply happy in finding his self-realization in striving to realize something greater than himself, the moral community of self-examination and of virtue than in merely continuing to live.

Dewey on Moral Development as a Process

In developing his six stages of moral development, Lawrence Kolhberg has made use of John Dewey’s analysis of three levels of moral development. Kolhberg writes:

Dewey postulated three levels of moral development: (1) the pre-moral or pre-conventional level of “behavior motivated by biological and social impulses with results for morals,” (2) the conventional level of behavior in which the individual accepts with little critical reflection the standards of his group,” and (3) the autonomous level of behavior in which “conduct is guided by the individual thinking and judging by himself whether a purpose is good, and does not accept the standard of his group without reflection [Carlin Jr., p. 251].
Kohlberg’s analysis is correct as we can see in *Ethics*, written by Dewey and Tufts:

We may distinguish then three levels of conduct.

1. Conduct arising from instincts and fundamental needs. To satisfy these needs certain conduct is necessary, and this in itself involves ways of acting which are more or less rational and social.

2. Conduct regulated by standards of society, for some more or less conscious end involving the social welfare. [This is the level of custom.]

3. Conduct regulated by a standard which is both social and rational, which is examined and criticized. [This is the level of conscience [DeweyTufts, p. 38].]

(1) The Pre-Moral or Pre-Conventional Stage

Reflecting upon the pre-moral or pre-conventional stage of development, we may say that it is Dewey’s view that the human nature of an individual is not found in isolated instincts that could only be focused upon achieving only the respective goals of the instincts. Except for the sucking reflex and the fright reaction in the new born infant, the baby’s activities are not the direct result of instincual impulses or emotional need to suck and do not seek well-defined goals or conscious ends, and even then the baby does not know what to suck or whether the fright reaction has discerned something truly frightening.

As Dewey argues about fear:

There is no one fear having diverse manifestations; there are as many qualitatively different fears as there are objects responded to and different consequences sensed and observed.

Fear of the dark is different from fear of publicity, fear of the dentist from fear of ghosts, fear of conspicuous success from fear of humiliation, fear of a bat from fear of a bear. Cowardice, embarrassment, caution and reverence may all be regarded as forms of fear. They all have certain physical organic acts in common—those of organic shrinkage, gestures of hesitation and retreat. But each is qualitatively unique. Each is what it is in virtue of its total interactions or correlations with other acts and with the environing medium, with consequences. High explosives and the aeroplane have brought into being something new in conduct. There is no error in calling it fear.

But there is error, even from a limited clinical standpoint, in permitting the classifying name to blot from view the difference between fear of bombs dropped from the sky and the fears which previously existed. The new fear is just as much and just as little original and native as a child's fear of a stranger [Dewey, pp. 154-155].

Dewey insists upon what he describes as the plasticity of instincual impulses being able to be formed in many different social habits:

In the case of the young it is patent that impulses are highly flexible starting points for activities which are diversified according to the ways in which they are used. Any impulse may become organized into almost any disposition according
to the way it interacts with surroundings. Fear may become abject cowardice,
prudent caution, reverence for superiors or respect for equals; an agency for
credulous swallowing of absurd superstitions or for wary scepticism. A man may
be chiefly afraid of the spirits of his ancestors, of officials, of arousing the
disapproval of his associates, of being deceived, of fresh air, or of Bolshevism.
The actual outcome depends upon how the impulse of fear is interwoven with
other impulses. This depends in turn upon the outlets and inhibitions supplied by
the social environment [Dewey, p. 95].

Psychologists have given up the attempt to explain human behavior and habits
as the direct result of instinctual impulses. See, for example, Maslow, Abraham H.
any human instinctual impulse can be overridden or greatly modified though
human learning. Our instinctual impulses are not instincts as contemporary biology
defines them: they are not complex patterns of unlearned behavior adapting
individuals in a species to survival and reproduction.

So, Dewey anticipated very well that contemporary scientific study of human
behavior would find it almost impossible to explain human behavior or to identify
human nature through the impulses of the individual alone. Consequently, when the
baby’s inchoate impulses are organized by parents and other significant adult
others in the baby’s life, the baby’s behavior is structured into socially approved
habits and roles, at first, with little or no self-control by the baby. These plastic
impulses of the child give rise to desires and the end goals desired by the baby
only insofar as the baby’s cries are shaped by how the parents respond to the
impulses of the child [Anderson, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*].

(2) Conventional Morality

Consequently, in conventional morality, when the developing child can
understand the socially approved roles and standards of one’s group, that child is
more or less locked into those roles and standards and can hardly subject those
ideals to a sustained criticism that carefully evaluates those ideals with the socially
approved roles and standards of another culture. For example, if the child in one
culture learns the socially approved role of being cruel to people of other ethnic
groups, that child will have difficulty in understanding and evaluating another
culture where people of different ethnic groups are treated with respect.

(3) The Examined, Autonomous Stage of Morality

Consequently, when the individual becomes more fully capable of critiquing
the conventional social roles by seeing those roles from the viewpoint of other
cultures and conventional groups, then the adolescent growing into a critical
adulthood moves towards the autonomous level of morality. Such an individual
can evaluate both one’s own culture and the cultures of others in an ongoing
process that constitutes the moral community of critical thinkers seeking better
social roles and standards growing towards a universal community that can
embrace all of these cultures insofar a wise integration can be accomplished.

These three levels of morality, the pre-conventional, the conventional, and the
examined, autonomous, reveal that our human nature is found only partially in the
product of instinctual impulses and only partially in socially developed habits and
roles, but most especially in and through acritical self-consciousness capable of
evaluating in an ongoing process our pre-conventional, instinctual impulses and
our earlier conventional social roles.

The Focus of Moral Development as a Process: Individual or Community?

If we grant Dewey’s thesis that human nature is not a fixed, unchanging
reality but rather something that can be changed and developed through the
creation of new social habits and new social roles, what should the focus of the
development of the self, the individual or the community? Dewey’s answer is that
our focus should not be on a conscious emphasis upon our self-development and
our self-realization, that is, upon how we feel when we have attained our goal, but
upon our involvement in something greater than the self, that is, upon the ongoing
moral community of self-realizing persons who are striving continuously to
evaluate our pre-conventional and conventional selves.

Here is Dewey’s argument. Whenever we consciously act, we are acting to
achieve a goal or end. Either the word “end” can mean the end, final results of an
action whether intended or not, or the word “end” can mean conscious aim of an
agent. There is no doubt for Dewey that this conscious aim of an action necessarily
includes the consciousness of some realization for the self who is the agent.
However, Dewey argues that the focus upon one’s own self-realization actually
frustrates proper moral action. Proper moral action requires that an agent be
focused upon some intended state of affairs in which the self is acting for
something greater than the self. As Dewey writes: ‘For there is no way of
discovering the nature of the self except in terms of objective ends which fulfill its
capacities, and there is no way of realizing the self except as it is forgotten in
devotion to these objective ends [Dewey and Tufts, p. 390.]’ For example, if a
child were to fall into a well, proper moral action requires that the focus of the
agent acting to save the child be precisely that of acting to save the child rather
than upon the agent’s own greater realization of one’s own moral self in the eyes
of others. Precisely because the agent who is risking one’s life to save another may
not survive in the rescue attempt, to focus directly upon one’s own self-realization
is to make it difficult to act for the aim of saving the life of the child. As Dewey
writes in another example:

For example, the patriot who dies for his country may find in that devotion his
own supreme self-realization, but none the less the aim of his act is precisely
that for which he performs it: the conservation of his nation. He dies for his
country, not for himself. He is what he would be in dying for his country, not
in dying for himself. To say that his conscious aim is self-realization is to put
the cart before the horse. That his willingness to die for his country proves
that his country’s good is true; but his aim is his country’s good as constituting his self-realization,
not the self-realization. It is impossible that genuine artistic creation should
not be accompanied with the joy of expanding selfhood, but the artist who
thinks of himself and allows a view of himself to intervene between his
performance and its result, has the embarrassment and awkwardness of “self-
consciousness,” which affects for the worse his artistic product. In any case,
there is loss to the work, and loss in the very thing taken as an end, namely,
development of his own powers. The problem of morality, upon the
intellectual side, is the discovery of the self, in the objective end to be striven
for, and then upon the overt practical side, it is the losing of the self in the
endeavor for the objective realization. This is the lasting truth in the
conception of self-abnegation, self-forgetfulness, disinterested [impartial]
interest. [Dewey Tufts, pp. 393-394]

We have all had the experience of how emphasis upon oneself in a public
action disturbs and upsets the very accomplishment of one’s action. If we are
dancing, emphasis upon oneself in the dancing disturbs and ruins the very
coordination of one’s dancing with another. If we are shooting a free-throw in a
basketball game, emphasis upon oneself in the shooting upsets the very nature of a
good free throw shot. The best dancers and the best free-throw shooters have gone
through the steps of learning the proper mechanics of the specific action, but in
their best performances of their actions they forget themselves and concentrate
upon dancing with one’s partner or putting the basketball in the hoop. So also in
moral action, a morally good self is better realized when one concentrates not upon
one’s own self-realization but when one focuses upon the realization of the
communal good such as the survival of one’s moral nation. Yes, it is true that we
have to study and practice the mechanics of moral self-realization in learning to do
what is morally right and good, but the best moral agents are those who forget
themselves in the realization of something greater than themselves just as the
greatest dancers and the greatest basketball players are those who forget
themselves in the realization of great dance performance with others or a great
basketball game with others.

**Dewey on Self-Realization Confronting Death**

Much moral speculation has been devoted to the problem, of equating
personal happiness and regard for the general good. [Dewey Tufts, pp. 395 ff.] If I
do what is morally right for justice and benevolence, will I necessarily be happy or
rewarded with happiness? Some very bad people are happy, and some very good
people suffer terribly. The problem thus put seems insoluble in this life and soluble
only in the next life in which the bad will be punished and the good will be
rewarded. However, Dewey and Tufts argue:
‘the problem is insoluble because it is artificial. It assumes a ready-made self and hence a ready-made type of satisfaction of happiness. It is not the business of moral theory to demonstrate the existence of mathematical equations, in this life or the next, between goodness and virtue. It is the business of people to develop such capacities and desires, such selves as render them capable of finding their own satisfaction, their invaluable value, in fulfilling the demands which grow out of their associated life. To demand in advance of voluntary desire and deliberate choice that it be demonstrated that an individual shall get happiness in the measure of the rightness of his act, is to demand the obliteration of the essential factor in morality: the constant discovery, formation, and reformation of the self in the ends which an individual is called upon to sustain and develop in virtue of his membership in a social whole [DeweyTufts, p. 395].

In reflecting upon this important quotation, we can note that all moral reflection and action involves an evaluation of impulses, feelings, and social roles. If a person does not reorder one’s impulses towards revenge and hatred in subordination to the social order in which fair and impartial justice is to be sought through a fair trial, judged by one’s peers, that person has failed the moral task of elevating justice to its more proper role in a democracy. If a person does not reorder one’s impulses to selfishness in subordination to generous action that advances both self and others, then that person has failed the moral task of affirming the value of humanity, both in the self and others, as an end in itself and never only as a means. Moral evaluation and action need to revolve around the central value of humanity in all persons and to subordinate impulses, feelings, and actions that either detract from or even fail to advance the precious value of humanity.

Socrates on Self-Realization Confronting Death

Having concluded with Dewey that moral evaluation and action generally involve reordering and subordination of impulses, feelings and action to the highest value of humanity as an end in itself, we may now reflect on the moral quandary of Socrates. Like most human beings, he desires to live and he desires to care for his family, however he does not merely wish to live and to care for his family. He has reformulated the desires of his life so that at the center of his desires is precisely the desire to live the examined way of life and the life of virtue. His happiness and his self-realization are precisely to be found in his ongoing commitment to the examined way of life and the life of virtue. If need be, he will give up his mere physical life and his own personal care of his children for a greater good, the good of the moral community of self-examination and the life of virtue. He will ask his friends who live for the very same moral community of the examined way of life that they will care for his children and guide them
towards the realization of that very same moral community. If there is a life after
death, it can only be found in precisely that moral community of self-examination
and of virtue. Socrates does not need a life after death for him to find self-
realization and happiness in that moral community for which he has lived in his
adult commitment to the examined way of life. He is happy even though he dies.
Yes, of course, there is some regret that he is dying; he would rather continue to
live the examined way of life in community with others. The project of the
examined way of life is never fully completed. Nevertheless, Socrates is as
fulfilled as he can be in an ongoing process of the self-actualizing with others of
the examined way of life and the life of virtue even though he dies in his attempt
to realize that way of life.

Socrates in *The Apology* does reflect on whether death is an endless sleep from
which we never awake or whether there is an afterlife which he envisions as a life
in which he would pursue the highest value of the examined way of life. His
understanding of such a life after death is precisely that life for which he is willing
to die now since he cannot abandon that highest value in his mortal life now and at
the same time regard the examined way of life as the
defining choice of his life[http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html].

To confirm this point in a thought experiment, we may try to imagine that the
life after death focused upon the examined way of life could face such a great
obstacle that Socrates would either have to be faithful to the examined life or have
to give up such a great value in order to continue the life after death, it is clear that
Socrates would stay committed to the examined way of life and the life of virtue
and let go of the life after death. So, the key point is not that there is a life after
death that supports and rewards the examined way of life but that living the
examined way of life is its own reward. Furthermore, if Socrates is not personally
immortal because of his faithfulness to his great commitment, nevertheless he is
objectively immortal in the memories of those who continue to live their lives with
their central value being the very examined way of life for which he perished. The
examined way of life and the life of virtue should be the most precious values and
the source of our deepest happiness and satisfaction in our lives now even as they
were in the life of Socrates.

Although, contrary to his doubt about life after death in *The Apology*, Socrates
in *The Phaedo* affirms that he is as certain as he can be that after death that he will
be with the gods who are wise and good, it is worth our while to point out the
connection in his attitude toward being a philosopher and being unafraid of death,
Socrates affirms that the philosopher should not be afraid of death since the
philosopher is ever pursuing death and dying since the philosopher is living the
examined way of life. He is always abstracting his thought away from the sensible
and pursuing the lasting definition of the essences of things sensed
[http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedo.html]. So also, we may point out that the
philosopher in making wise moral decisions does not base decision merely upon
what is desirable or merely what is approved of by one’s fellow citizens but upon
the lasting and unchanging moral values. The dying of Socrates for the central
moral value of his life, the examined way of life, is not unique as a moral decision.
On the contrary, it is a moral decision that exemplifies what should be going on in moral decisions all the time, that is, precisely the subordination of earlier felt desires and impulses and social roles from babyhood and childhood to the highest moral ideals of the examined way of life and the life of the virtues. Socrates has always subordinated his life of sensation and emotion to the lasting values of morality, and he is more deeply happy in finding his self-realization in striving to realize something greater than himself, the moral community of self-examination and of virtue than in merely continuing to live. As Dewey has written:

it is the business of people to develop such capacities and desires, such selves as render them capable of finding their own satisfaction, their invaluable value, in fulfilling the [highest moral] demands which grow out of their associated life. . . .

Our final word about the place of the self in the moral life is, then, that the problem of morality [and happiness] is the formation out of the body of original instinctive impulses which compose the natural self of a voluntary self in which socialized desires and affections are dominant, and in which the last and controlling deliberation is the love of the objects [most especially, namely, the community of self-examination and moral virtue] which make this transformation possible [Dewey Tufts, pp. 396-397].

Bibliography


