

## **Abstract of “Autonomy, the Democratic Attitude and Social Change”**

We have at hand various theories of collective intentionality and action. We also have various historical, sociological, economic and political accounts of social change. But there are two unaccomplished tasks that should draw philosophers further into this mix. The first, which parallels progress in the physical sciences, is to develop a philosophical theory of social dynamics to push social philosophy beyond its more or less static mode. The second, which parallels the work of moral psychology, is to lay out the normative dimensions of social dynamics. We want to know not only how society develops but also how it might be improved. Here I propose an account of some key aspects of social change drawing on my earlier analysis of social intentions, which includes the factual dimension by way of an account of collective intentionality and the normative dimension by way of an account of autonomy in social contexts.

I begin by considering Adam Smith's invisible hand, which is supposed to drive effortless material progress, and John Dewey's theory of inquiry, which, without being directive is supposed to produce moral and political improvement, even if by fits and starts. By apparent contrast rationalists like Plato, Kant and Rawls gauge social changes by their power to effect certain central moral ideals that cannot be realized without prior understanding, conscious effort and focused intent. So the pragmatist approach emphasizes process and the rationalist approach emphasizes stable norms.

Here I suggest how the rationalist tradition can deepen the pragmatist insight into what I call the “democratic attitude.” First, I argue that the Platonic good and the Kantian good will throw significant light on both the constitution and the moral deontology of dynamic communal life. I suggest that the philosopher king and the kingdom of ends, far from being intolerant of democratic ideals, are thinly disguised metaphors for the attitude that is essential to the development of Deweyan democratic institutions and healthy communal practices and, despite the protests of Dewey himself and some of his followers, should be unobjectionable from the pragmatist perspective. Drawing on Dewey’s own definition of the democratic attitude, I point to the contrast between Dewey’s more characteristic belief in the spontaneous development of democracy and Peirce’s account of the goal-directed development of science. Indeed, Dewey succeeds admirably in formulating the democratic attitude as an ideal that guides and illuminates the development of individual autonomy in the social context.

Next, I develop further the meaning of autonomy. Alone of all creatures, we seem able to determine and to transform our own nature. As autonomous but social beings, we are able to determine over a very wide range what properties we possess, how we relate to each other and to the rest of the world, and most importantly what laws govern our activities. As authors of our own nature, we subsume ourselves, both individually and collectively, under laws, rules and norms. As Kant has it, if we are to justify either individual or collective actions, we are rationally constrained to justify the laws under which

we place ourselves and that define our modes of conduct, i.e. we must test the maxims of our action by reference to an underlying norm that itself is implicit in the concept of law-governed action of autonomous, rational agents. How do we pull off that seemingly magic feat? I suggest that the act of subsuming ourselves under universally applicable law—which alone justifies our claim to being autonomous—comes down to holding ourselves accountable to common and consistent norms of action and attitude. I call this “bootstrapping autonomy” and the attitude that makes it possible I am calling the “democratic attitude.” Our consciousness of being subject to social norms of our own (usually collective) making, but which hold and are seen to hold objectively is as definitive of our nature as anything. Nor are such norms limited to morality. Normativity cuts right across language, knowledge, natural science, formal science, indeed just about any activity in which we engage, a crucial point I trace back to what becomes evident from the so-called private language argument.

This structure holds of each collective no less than of each individual intentional action, the main complication in the former case being the need for individuals to communicate among themselves so they can act on common as well as idiosyncratic knowledge, in order to coordinate what they do in pursuit of common goals. But it also holds of *transformations* of practices. For in both the individual case and in the social case, intentional action changes the character of the agent, the individual in the one case and the collective in the other. Such change is justified only by maintaining autonomy while adopting

new and different intentions and is effected on the social level by the same kind of intentionality as on the level of the individual. Neither is reductive since both require justifiable maxims formulated to include and respect everyone, i.e., ones that are universalizable, to invoke Kantian language. Social change is change of social intentions and is justified only if the imbedded collective intention is justified. Like any intention, collective intentions belong to individuals but they are collective by virtue of their content (Searle).

In general, I hold with Dewey that action is motivated by problems. But the justification of action is not merely that it solves our problems. Rather justification comes with intentional conformity to the demands of autonomy-sustaining, autonomously self-imposed norms. It is the conditions of autonomy—freedom from coercion or other external determination, understanding of the normative necessity of common standards, diachronically, interpersonally and collectively—that provide the content of dynamic moral law. What do we do about global warming or the epidemic of obesity? We do something new only by socializing and temporalizing individual intentions. Common means are forming contracts, formulating and enforcing new statutes, or enactment of common, informal but normatively acceptable practices. Thus, we return to the democratic attitude as the central condition of justifiable individual and social change. Not only are there no *sui generis* moral principles for collectives (French), the solution to the statics problem of collective responsibility is *eo ipso* a solution to the dynamics

problem as well. One of the beauties of the theory of social intentions is its simplicity.