Pragmatism's Democratic Ideal

John Ryder
The State University of New York

Introduction

It is often difficult to speak about the moral aspects of pragmatism, and even more difficult to speak about its religious dimension. Pragmatist morality or pragmatist ethics often has a ring of opportunism, in that it can easily suggest to people an ethics or morality without principle. If one is a pragmatist, according to this idea, one is inclined or at least willing to respond to each situation in whichever way is most advantageous, regardless of what duty, obligation or principle require. If this is the sense one has of pragmatist morality, then it is easy to understand how a pragmatist religious sensibility might appear incomprehensible. One significant aspect of the religious life is that one subordinates oneself to or subsumes oneself in the divine. But if one's sense of moral duty is practically oriented, or opportunist, as some critics would have it, then religious subordination or subsumtion makes little sense. For these reasons pragmatism has seemed to many people at best too thin as a working foundation for one's life, and at worst distinctly perverse.

The situation is made even trickier when we introduce naturalism into the equation. Not all pragmatists have been naturalists. James, I would argue, was not, nor I think was Peirce. Royce, to the extent that he thought pragmatically, was certainly not a naturalist. But by the latter half of the 20th century the most influential strain of pragmatism, stemming from John Dewey, was overtly naturalistic. Many philosophers believe that a naturalistic ethics, whether pragmatist or not, is impossible, being committed in the end to deriving "ought" from "is."

Similarly, there is something on the face of it strange about a naturalistic religion. Naturalism by definition excludes from reality the supernatural, in the strict sense of something outside nature. Therefore, if there is any sense to be given to the notion of God or the divine within a naturalist framework, it must be something that is itself wholly natural. Spinoza accomplished this by equating God and nature. Some American

naturalists of the 20th century, and I have in mind George Santayana, John Herman Randall, Jr., Justus Buchler and, more recently Robert S. Corrington, have handled the concept of God in various ways, in some cases abandoning it altogether, though following Spinoza they maintain a sense of what we can reasonably call "natural piety." The most well known attempt within the pragmatic naturalist framework to address the notion of God or the divine is John Dewey's *A Common Faith*, in which, rather like Feuerbach, God is reinterpreted as a symbol or ideal expression of the fulfillment of our highest ideals – love, knowledge, truth, justice, power and, ultimately, redemption. Dewey's redefinition of God, however, has failed to satisfy many people who have a feeling for the religious. It does not capture, we might say, the sense of being part of a greater whole which is itself the source of meaning and value, and it does not capture what Freud described in *Civilization and its Discontents* as the "oceanic feeling" that is reported by many people as a form of religious experience.

So there are many people who have serious misgivings about the capacity of pragmatism, or more specifically pragmatic naturalism, to achieve a satisfying ethics or philosophical theology. How can we respond to this kind of criticism of pragmatism? First, at least some of these criticisms are based on misunderstandings. Pragmatism is not opportunism, as even a cursory glance at the many pragmatist philosophical works will indicate. It is not a morality without principles. Rather, it is an effort to derive moral principles and determine ethical behavior in a way that is grounded in human experience, and that identifies its goals and methods in a way that stays close to what we actually do, what we actually want, and what we actually profess to be our working ideals. Ethical ideas and principles, and the actions based on them, are as much "working hypotheses" and "experiments" as are any other ideas and actions.

Second, it is difficult to say much about what may or may not be satisfying to people, if only because there are so many factors, psychological as well as philosophical, that contribute to one's sense of satisfaction with any particular conceptual framework. In other words, the fact that people may find pragmatism unsatisfying with respect to ethics or religion may imply very little about the potential philosophical strengths of pragmatism's contributions in these areas.

Third, and ultimately this is the more important point, many of the critics of pragmatism miss or simply do not accept the most fundamental characteristic of pragmatism as a philosophical perspective. Pragmatism is not one more way to provide an overarching philosophical or theological description of how things are, or of the way the world works. This is what Dewey meant when he said in 1917 that philosophy becomes useful when it no longer tries to solve the problems of philosophers, but becomes instead an attempt to provide intellectual guidance in the solution of the problems of men.[1] It is, rather, a way of moving through the world, a way of living, that would have us approach all problems, including the ethical and religious, with an eye toward the development of working solutions. With this point in mind, morality in a pragmatist context is a matter of addressing moral problems, individually or socially, by bringing to bear the general traits of the pragmatist point of view: reliance on experience, experimentalism, fallibilism, and a consistency of means and ends. The same applies to religion and theology. If there is a sensible and workable pragmatist approach to religion, it must, if it is to be pragmatist in fact and not just in name, follow on the same basic traits. How satisfying either ethics or religion of this sort might be is something that can not be determined theoretically. There is no doubt, though, that pragmatism is capable of providing satisfying, and satisfactory, ethical and religious perspectives, which we know simply because there are so many people who have come to see the wisdom of the pragmatist point of view.

The Democratic Ideal

I would like to devote the heart of these remarks to the issue of values within a social context. Specifically, my interest is in thinking about the implications of underlying pragmatist principles for the development of social and international relations.

As anyone who thinks about questions in social and political philosophy is aware, one of the more sustained debates in recent decades has been between liberalism and communitarianism. It is fair to say that both have important contributions to make, and that both have built-in disadvantages. Liberalism contributes its long standing emphasis on the moral, social and political importance of the individual, of individual rights, and of

individual freedom. Critics, however, tend to feel that liberalism too easily and often over emphasizes the individual, thereby theoretically pulling him out of social and historical context and distorting his nature. In the process our understanding of rights and freedom is similarly distorted.

For its part communitarianism has the advantage of focusing on the fuller social and historical contexts in which we all live, and in so doing provides a rich sense of human individuality and of the relevant issues of freedom and rights. The difficulty with communitarianism stems from the shortcoming of communities themselves. While community is often the source of individuals' self-identification, as well as a source of value, meaning, and comfort, community is, or too easily can be, inward looking to a fault. It is too easy for many people to make the assumption that other communities and the individuals in them are in some way flawed or inferior. In its (usually but not necessarily) innocent forms this sense of the superiority of one's own community gives rise to rivalries of localities in sports and other pastimes. In its virulent forms it gives rise to nationalism, xenophobia, racism, fascism and other violent expressions of a sense of one's own community's superiority.

Pragmatism, or so I shall argue, cuts across the debate between liberalism and communitarianism, and in the end points to a cosmopolitanism that has a good deal to contribute to contemporary social and political issues. The principles I would emphasize come from John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916. In that book, specifically in Chapter 7, Dewey offers a definition of democracy. In a wonderful example of the pragmatist method of conceptual development, Dewey derives a description of democracy's most fundamental traits by examining the characteristics of any community or group of people. "We cannot," he says, "set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist…" However, he quickly points out that in constructing an ideal, it is not enough simply to describe what exists because that will only tell us what is, not what is worth striving for. "The problem," he points out, "is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvements."

With that method in mind, Dewey points to two characteristics that appear in "any social group whatever, even in a gang of thieves…" The first of them is that within any social group there is some interest held in common, as well as "a certain amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard," he says. Through a process of conceptual development that we shall skip over for the sake of efficiency, Dewey argues that a healthy community is one that fosters a proliferation of interests held in common, and that promotes ever expanding and freer communication and interaction among groups or communities. A society characterized by these two traits is the ideal toward which we should strive. It is, Dewey says, the "democratic ideal." It is significant to see why he thinks these two traits are so important. The first of them, a proliferation of common interests, "signifies not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control." The second, expanding interaction among groups, communities, societies and, we should add, nations, "means not only freer interaction between social groups…but change in social habit – its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse."[2]

The two traits that define for Dewey the democratic ideal are also the two principles that we shall develop to describe desirable social and international relations. The same principles also express the sense in which pragmatism, or Dewey's naturalistic pragmatism at any rate, cuts across the liberalism and communitarianism dichotomy. In so far as the human individual is in fundamental respects a social creature, a fact indicated if nothing else by the centrality of language to human experience, then the liberal conception of the person is to that extent suspicious. At the same time, one avoids the pitfalls of a potential communitarian overemphasis on a single community, which in practice is one's own community, by an emphasis on the importance of shared interests across community and social boundaries. It is in fact the combination of the two principles, which is to say an emphasis on shared interests across boundaries, that provides both the pragmatist alternative to liberalism and communitarianism, and at the same time the basic principle on which to develop social and international relations.

The Domestic Dimension

One can fairly say that not long ago the great international divide among peoples was ideological. The primary split was between those who ascribed to some form of socialist principles and those who ascribed to some form of liberalism. The strength of those ideological disputes has dissipated in recent years, even if the source of them, the socialist and liberal ideologies, have not. A longer standing source of division has been religion. Though religious wars are for the most part not nearly as vicious as they once were, religion remains a point of contestation among peoples, as well as a point of great sensitivity. Pope Benedict's recent quotation from a 14th century Byzantine emperor about the violence that attended the early spread of Islam is a case in point, as is the consequent strong reaction to his remarks in the Muslim world.

Though ideology and religion remain a problem from the point of view of the value of human understanding and cooperation, it may well be the case that today even stronger causes of social disunity are nationalism and ethnocentrism. It is not difficult to list examples of both. The problems in the former Yugoslavia had and continue to have these causes, as do many of the tensions throughout Europe. The genocidal wars in Rwanda and Sudan are examples, as are many of the tensions today in Russia. Romania is no stranger to ethnic and national tensions, especially in Transylvania as people of Hungarian and Romanian ethnicities deal with the residue of their respective histories. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe societies deal with the vexing question of the relation between the majority populations and the Roma. And in the US today the most pressing social problem has to do with the strong reaction by many people, including local and national leaders, to Mexican immigration. By most counts, there are now between 11 and 12 million people of Mexican descent in the US, and those who are concerned about this suspect that one consequence of this massive immigration is that whole regions of the country will become increasingly Latino and less Anglo, thus changing the country in significant ways. Most of our societies, in other words, are struggling with the disuniting effects of nationalism and ethnocentrism.

Nationalists and ethnocentrists themselves see the problem as one of disunity, though from their point of view the problem is caused by the very existence of diverse

nations and ethnicities. If that is the case, then the solution is to separate nations and ethnicities from one another, or in more extreme cases to eliminate one or the other. Leaving aside the point that the consequences of such activities have been and will continue to be disastrous even when not deadly, the fundamental problem with the nationalist and ethnocentric approach is that it serves to separate people, which in turn impoverishes the experience of all involved. Such a situation can never stand as an adequate social condition. We can organize democratic political systems as carefully as possible, but they will amount to very little if our societies continue to be plagued by disharmony based on national and ethnic variety.

Thus, following Dewey, the "democratic ideal" pushes us in precisely the opposite direction. Notice, however, that the pragmatist, democratic response is not, as some traditional approaches have advocated, to work to absorb minority ethnic, racial and national groups into the identity of the majority. This approach has been common in American history, in part because American history is replete with waves of immigration – first from Northern Europe, then from China, then from Southern and Eastern Europe, more recently from throughout South and East Asia, and now from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. There is a strong tradition in the US of attempts to "Americanize" immigrant populations, to absorb them into the mainstream, dominant culture.

The principle we have articulated as central to a healthy, democratic society, however, holds that we are to look for, and when necessary create, common interests among groups and communities within a society. The democratic response to the existence of diverse national, ethnic, racial and religious groups is not separation, absorption, or even tolerance. The democratic response is to interact with one another in the pursuit of shared, common interests.

This is, to be sure, easier said than done. Dewey understood that it requires very careful attention to education, primarily because we are suggesting that a healthy, democratic society requires different habits from those that are now common in all our societies. These habits do not develop automatically, nor of course do they come into being simply because some number of social philosophers point to their necessity. They will not come into being automatically even if a majority of leaders and policy makers

come to see their necessity. The habits of mind and the inclinations necessary for people to pursue common interests rather than disharmony and disunity must be developed in people from an early age.

A reliance on education to advance social ends is nothing new. We need only to remind ourselves that identity with the nation, i.e. nationalism, was itself something that had to be purposefully instilled in our populations. For most of us the nation state with which we identify is not more than a couple hundred years old. In all our cases it required something of a struggle before the population as a whole began to think of itself in national, rather than local, racial, ethnic or religious terms. In the US, for example, before the Civil War in the mid-19th century people tended to identify with their state before the nation. That is why when some states seceded from the nation in 1861, many people who were at the time serving in positions of political and military leadership of the nation resigned their positions and joined with the forces of the newly established Confederacy. Robert E. Lee, for example, who became the Commander of the Confederate military forces during the war, had been an officer in the Army of the United States before his native state of Virginia seceded from the Union. When Virginia left the Union so did Lee, and the reason was that he was a Virginian before he was an American.

All of us have analogous histories, and in all our cases a sense of national identification had to be developed and the schools were one of the places in which that occurred. The military was another. If we have been able to utilize education and other national institutions to develop nationalist inclinations and habits, it is not unreasonable to look to the same institutions now to do the same in the interests of the habits and inclinations we have identified as central to a healthy, democratic society.

The analogy with the development of nationalism is apt in another way as well. If we are right that our current social problems require something like Dewey's principle of the pursuit of common interests among groups and communities, then one of the implications is that nationalism has outlived its usefulness. And I mean this is both senses of the word "nation," i.e. as an ethnic identifier and as the nation state. Many of our nations, in the latter sense, are multi-national in the former sense. While national identity in the former sense is understandable and even valuable, we have been arguing that the current needs of our societies are such that we must look beyond nations and ethnicities,

and we must use available social institutions to make that possible. We can turn now to the implications of the democratic ideal for nationalism in the second sense.

The International Dimension

The modern nation state was created in the mid-17th century in the aftermath of the 30 Years war in central Europe. The agreement that ended that war, the Treaty of Westphalia, is generally regarded as the historical point at which the nation state as we know it came into existence. At roughly the same time Thomas Hobbes and others were articulating the metaphors and conceptual categories that would frame our conception of the state, and inter-state relations, for the next several hundred years. As we all know, Hobbes described the state as the sphere of legal authority of a given ruler. In the absence of such legal authority, people are in a state of nature, which he famously described as a condition in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." In this general picture, a state of nature exists in two general conditions: in a given land where there is no state authority, and in the "space" between spheres of legal authority, which is to say in the space between nations.

This picture, this metaphor, has framed our conception of the nation state and our understanding of international relations. The point at which nations interact is a state of nature which, we may assume, is rather like a land without proper state authority, which is to say that it too is nasty and brutish. To this sense of the realm in which nations interact we should add a second metaphor, one common to the Baroque period in general. In this metaphor, any and all phenomena are understood as ultimately atomistic, as constituted by discrete entities that interact with one another according to describable "laws." This is the picture Newtonian science gave to the physical world, it is the picture Locke gave to the social and political world, and it is the picture Adam Smith gave to the economic world. To see just how pervasive this Baroque metaphor was one can simply note that the same picture described even music of the period. Baroque music is basically contrapuntal, which is to say that it is characterized by discrete entities, in this case melodic lines, which interact or harmonize with one another according to explicitly articulated laws or rules of counterpoint. Similarly, physical laws describe how the

atomic elements of the physical universe interact harmoniously, social law makes possible the harmonic interaction of atomistically understood human individuals, and the laws of economics, Adam Smith's "invisible hand," describe the harmonious interaction of economic actors. Common to all of these expressions of the Baroque picture of the world is the assumption that the ultimate entities in any given sphere are essentially unrelated to one another. Each material atom, each human individual, each economic actor, and each melodic line, has its nature, its character, its traits, independently of the others.

The same set of assumptions has been taken for granted in the area of international relations. Thus three central concepts have been used to frame our understanding of how nation states interact with one another: 1) the sphere of their interaction is a lawless state of nature; 2) nations are discrete entities that interact with one another harmoniously or chaotically, as the case may be, rather like billiard balls bouncing off one another; and 3) each discrete entity, each nation state, has its character independently of the others, or more to the point, has its own set of interests that are determined independently of one another. Given these three basic assumptions, international relations has been understood as the exercise in which each nation seeks to meet its "national interests" in competition with all the others. Each nation's foreign policy is therefore the framework or set of policies developed for and applied in the pursuit of national interest.

The dominant theoretical approaches to international relations have also tended to make these assumptions. Realism is an overtly Hobbesian theory of international relations, in which it is assumed that each nation crafts its own set of interests and then competes with all other nations in a basically lawless environment to fulfill those interests. Liberalism in international relations theory plays the role of Locke to realism's Hobbes, which is to say that for liberalism the general picture is rather kinder and gentler, but still one in which each nation defines its interests independently of the others and pursues them as best it can. Currently in American foreign policy neoconservative theory has come to the fore. It differs from the others in that it is less trustful of international agencies and agreements and more inclined to use power, hard and soft, to force nations to bend to the will of the powerful. But underneath such differences, neoconservatism

makes the same Baroque assumptions about nation states, national interests and international relations as do the others.

None of the prevailing theories of international relations, or applied programs of foreign policy, is consistent with what following Dewey we have called the democratic ideal, the basic principle of a healthy, democratic society. We have argued that the pursuit or development of common interests among diverse national, ethnic and religious groups is a necessary condition of a strong democratic society. We have also suggested that the pursuit or development of common interests is equally important, even critically necessary, across the boundaries of nation states. Given the prevailing approaches to international relations theory and foreign policy, however, this is a somewhat radical proposal, or so it appears. To pursue it further we should look first at its theoretical background in the pragmatist tradition, and then to some current thinking in international relations circles.

In the same chapter of *Democracy and Education* in which we saw Dewey develop his definition of democracy and the "democratic ideal," he also considers the international context. His general concern at this point is with education, so he places his remarks in that context:

> Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?...Externally, the question is concerned with the reconciliation of national loyalty, or patriotism, with superior devotion to the things which unite men in common ends, irrespective of national political boundaries.[3]

This is of course a rhetorical question for Dewey in that he asks it in order to give an affirmative answer. The important point for our purposes is that he makes it clear that the democratic ideal makes common interests more important than national loyalty and, by implication, independently determined national interests. Whatever value national loyalty and patriotism may have, the democratic ideal requires "superior devotion" to common interests across national boundaries.

If this is the case, then the traditional theories of international relations and approaches to foreign policy are no longer adequate, at least not if we wish to pursue a genuinely democratic international environment. On the contrary, the democratic ideal

requires that nation states pursue, and when necessary construct, common interests, and that they coordinate their foreign policies to bring those common interests to fruition. In order to make this conceptual and policy shift it is necessary for nations first to give up the traditional, Baroque metaphor according to which each nation is an independent entity that defines itself without recourse to the nature and interests of others, and second to overcome the traditional assumption of national sovereignty that has been with us since the 17th century.

Is this as radical a suggestion as it sounds? First, we should note that the traditional Baroque assumptions about the nation state and the international arena are not the only possible assumptions. We have too readily mistaken a metaphor for the reality in the sense that we have allowed the metaphor to serve as the only possible description of reality. But, as one might expect from a pragmatist approach, it is important for us to realize that we live in a world that is in many important respects of our own making. In the 17th century we made the Hobbesian, Baroque world. In the 21st century it is time for us to make a different one.

Second, even some influential and very mainstream figures in international relations have quite independently come to the conclusion that the traditional assumptions of the preeminence of national sovereignty are too dangerous in the contemporary world to prevail, and that only international collaboration will bring us back from the brink we currently see before us. One such figure is Francis Fukuyama, a onetime champion of neoconservative foreign policy in the US. Though he does not go as far as we do in that he does not yet recognize the need to determine collaboratively the very interests that drive foreign policy, he does realize that nations, including and perhaps especially the most powerful, must be willing to sacrifice some degree of sovereignty in an effort to address the most pressing international problems.[4]

And third, the fact is that in some places in the world, Europe in particular, the effort to recast international relations is already in process. The European Union, whatever its flaws and difficulties, is I would submit an example of a process in which nations have sacrificed some degree of sovereignty in the construction and pursuit of common interests and the resolution of common problems. The Deweyan process, in other words, is not only possible, but already underway.

Conclusion

To summarize, our argument has led us to the following claims:

1) Two traits of societies or communities, that they are characterized by interests held in common and that they invariably have dealings with other societies or communities, define the democratic ideal. That ideal, to put it succinctly, is that a healthy, democratic situation requires the identification, construction and pursuit of common interests;

2) In a domestic context, the application of the democratic ideal means that a healthy democracy is one in which the interests among the members of various groups or communities – racial, ethnic, national, religious – are less important than the interests that those groups and communities have in common with one another. National policy must make an effort to encourage people to develop the habits of mind necessary to search for and where necessary construct such common interests;

3) In the international context, the application of the democratic ideal means that nation states must give up the traditional assumptions about distinct spheres of national interest, and recast foreign policy to identify and where necessary construct common interests among nations. This shift in emphasis requires the sacrifice of some amount of national sovereignty, but it offers the only current path to the resolution of our most serious international problems.

In so far as these claims are reasonable and defensible, they offer, as we suggested earlier, an alternative, and a distinctly pragmatist alternative, to the prevalent liberal and communitarian approaches to social and political theory. They avoid the inappropriately abstract character of the liberal understanding of the individual, and they avoid the undesirable overemphasis on the importance of one's own community. In their place the principle we have developed points to a kind of cosmopolitanism in which the richness and variety of individuals and communities flourishes only in so far as they interact with one another toward common ends. In practice, this pragmatist principle, the democratic

ideal, offers us a way, I would argue the necessary way, to address our most pressing domestic and international problems.

NOTES

1. John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," *Middle Works*, Vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL, 1985, pp 3-48.

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, *Middle Works*, Vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL, 1985, Chapter 7, pp 88-92.

3. ibid., p. 104.

4. Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2006. See especially Chapter 6, Rethinking Institutions for World Order