

# THE PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS BY JOHN DEWEY

People don't agree about things, and they can't always be brought to consensus on important issues. But we have to do something; we can't just let problems fester. [1] In *The Public And Its Problems* John Dewey discusses his ideas for the operation of democratic government. The first posts in this series focus on Chapter One, which you can read here. There are two themes, the method Dewey will follow, and the definition of "public" for his purposes. In this post I look at method.

The basis of Dewey's method is Pragmatism. [2] He starts with the observation that facts do not carry meanings on their face. That is just as true of scientific facts as it is of social facts. We believe in gravity because we experience it. We believe in Newton's Law Of Gravity because of the method by which it was developed: careful observation, measurement, the repeatability of the measurement and observation, the trustworthiness of the observer/measurer, and more. In general, it is the method that establishes the law, not any one fact. This is true of social science too.

Dewey writes:

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No one is ever forced by just the collection of facts to accept a particular theory of their meaning, so long as one retains intact some other doctrine by which he can marshal them. Only when the facts are allowed free play for the suggestion of new points of view is any significant conversion of conviction as to meaning possible. P. 59. [3]

The first sentence refers us back to Charles

Peirce's idea that we only have a reason to change our minds if we have some conflict. As long as we don't sense a conflict between two of our beliefs, we feel no necessity to doubt our views or to change our minds.

The second sentence offers another reason to change our mind. When facts are allowed free play, when they are brought into the widest context possible, when we can freely put them together in different ways, we can create new constellations that might give us a wholly new understanding.

This is a step one person can take. Einstein, for example, allowed facts to float free in his own mind, and came up with radically new ideas. But most of us aren't Einstein. We can do some of this in our own mind, but we can do much more if we interact with other people all looking at the same problem with their own personal points of view. That only works, though, if we are not committed to a doctrinal understanding which we refuse to yield. [1]

Dewey says we can all look at the actions of elected officials, bureaucrats, and other organs of the government and agree on the facts of what they are doing. That isn't enough, though, because facts don't carry meanings. He then describes a number of theories of the state, including those more or less attributable to Aristotle, Hume, Rousseau and Marx. [4] These theories conflict in fundamental ways. The societies they produce differ also, in ways large and small. Dewey recognizes that the theories are actually used in the formation of governments, along with the facts on the ground.

Here's my example. The Founders of the US government inherited many institutions from England, and a few from other countries, including legal structures and general ideas about governance, some of which they accepted, and others they dismissed. Colonial governments had created some institutions and theories. There was a heavy dose of Enlightenment thinkers. There were power/money issues, slavery

chief among them, but also the different sizes of the original thirteen colonies. These and many others interact in the formation of our state.

Trying to come up with a causal theory of a real state like the US is useless, according to Dewey.

One way out of the impasse is to consign the whole matter of meaning and interpretation to political philosophy as distinguished from political science. Then it can be pointed out that futile speculation is a companion of all philosophy. The moral is to drop all doctrines of this kind overboard, and stick to facts verifiably ascertained. P. 61.

He defines two different kinds of facts.

But the difference between facts which are what they are independent of human desire and endeavor and facts which are to some extent what they are because of human interest and purpose, and which alter with alteration in the latter, cannot be got rid of by any methodology. P 62.

Gravity is a fact which is utterly independent of human desire, interest or purpose. We can study its effects, and think about it in different ways, but we cannot reject it or affect it. The office of County Assessor is a fact, but it is strictly a fact for human purposes, and can be changed or eliminated. We have to consider this in any effort to understand the state .

The first step in is to find a starting point, a set of facts that will enable us to proceed. I'll take that up in my next post.

Discussion. One alternative method Dewey sees is something like coming up with explanations that

seem to fit one's intuitive understanding of the way things work. This is how we decided the sun goes around the earth. It might explain Aristotle's idea that people are political animals. Maybe further explanation didn't seem useful or necessary. But, as Dewey points out, saying that we have politics because we are political animals is circular reasoning.

Dewey's method focuses on allowing a broad range of facts free play in our minds. That allows us to form new associations among them and draw new conclusions from them. It allows a collaborative effort to make sure we are considering all of the relevant facts. If we record our assumptions, our facts and our discussions reasonably carefully others can inspect them and offer their own insights; and we will be able to check later to see what mistake we made if it turns out badly. [5]

This method of thinking about social matters is common. We see it very clearly in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt writes entire histories of European anti-Semitism and Imperialism on the way to her examination of the rise of Nazism. It's at the root of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, and other books I've written about here. Without these roots, it is difficult to understand our society, or, indeed, ourselves.

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[1] Of course we can do nothing. Just ask any Republican.

[2] The word pragmatism refers to the American philosophy. I give a short primer on Pragmatism in three posts, here, here, and here. Also this, which is a sort of introduction to this series.

[3] Page references are to the Kindle edition, Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems*. Ohio University Press.

[4] I'm just guessing at the latter three as Dewey doesn't attribute them to anyone.

[5] Compare this to the method of Modern

Monetary Theory, which I discuss here. The starting place for MMT is the question How does money work in this society? It deals with facts, not assumptions about human nature or philosophies.