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19.

DEWEYAN EXPERIMENTALISM
AND LEADERSHIP

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The society of which the child is to be a member is, in the United States, a democratic and progressive society. The child must be educated for leadership as well as for obedience. He [or she] must have power of self-direction and power of directing others, powers of administration, ability to assume positions of responsibility. This necessity of educating for leadership is as great on the industrial as on the political side.

—John Dewey, "Ethical Principles Underlying Education"¹

In this paper, I intend to lay out the various lessons that John Dewey has to offer to scholars and teachers of leadership. It is odd that so few philosophers today study the subject of leadership. It is even stranger for Pragmatists, who are concerned with the practical application of philosophical ideas. For in the study of leadership one finds necessarily the combined matters of intelligent judgment and of practical application in important contemporary matters. To begin, I will call attention to the place that the study of leadership held in past philosophical discourse in order to offer my hypothesis regarding the reasons leadership as a matter of study has receded from focus in philosophy. Next, I will describe the growing movement of institutions of higher learning in America that are increasingly desirous of intelligent theorizing about leadership, particularly from philosophers. Finally, I will describe the contributions that Dewey has to offer the field that answer frequently raised challenges to the possibility of democratic leadership theory, and I will present the positive content of the study which we may draw from his theories of intelligence, ethics, and education.

Socratic criticisms of the Sophists are familiar. Plato told the stories of famous persons who proclaimed wisdom in various areas of public life and who charged fees for the wisdom they imparted. Socrates would visit with these Sophists and would question them about their areas of expertise so that he might test or confirm the notion he learned from the Delphic Oracle, that he was wisest of the Greeks. Time and time again, he learned that the persons famed for their wisdom in fact knew not what they claimed to, and revealed him to be wiser due to his awareness of his own ignorance. In this context, we see that in the Sophists there was a tradition of training the young in the arts of successful living and the achievement of power, but it was empty of the knowledge and ethics that would produce good and beneficial citizen leaders. Rather than avoid thinking of leadership, Plato's most famous work, the *Republic*, addresses leadership and the education thereof as a crucial political consideration. Plato warned, "the greatest punishment for being unwilling to rule is being ruled by someone worse than oneself."² With such warnings, Plato laid out his ideas about how best to organize societies, which included a stratification that is well known. Many other figures could be listed among those who have written philosophically about leadership. A few of them include Confucius, Lao Tzu, Aristotle, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.

Scholars outside the field of philosophy have produced a significant literature on leadership in the last hundred years, but it has been dominated by authors who study business, the management of organizations, and education. The last of these is likely in some ways to have been influenced by Dewey, who spoke of leadership in the context of education in many writings. Also contributing to the scholarship on the subject of leadership are historians. Historians have long focused their studies on political power and dynasties. Today, historians have come to study leaders in a variety of areas, such as in the sciences. Still, few scholars focus on the philosophical demands of moral and democratic leadership, which I believe we can develop from a study of Dewey's work. I should mention a few scholars, however, who are philosophers of leadership. One example is Terry Price at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond. Price has authored several books on the general subject of ethical failures of leadership. He approaches the study from the Kantian perspective which criticizes the notion that as leaders, persons should have freedom to bend rules that ordinary citizens should not violate. Some of Price's colleagues study the subject of leadership from a philosophical perspective, but the very small number of such scholars in America is surprising at least.

Although I can only offer some initial conjecture here, I suspect there are a few reasons why philosophers have gotten away from studying leadership. The first and most fair reason is that traditional theories of leadership have in general *not* been democratic. That is, scholars historically have followed the sort of Machiavellian or Hobbesian reasoning that some associate with immorality. In times past, social stratification was taken for granted and went unchallenged, and thus the corresponding theories of leadership were considered outdated at best. In effect, scholars of leadership as recently as 2001 and 2003 titled papers such as Kathryn Riley's article, "Democratic Leadership'—A Contradiction in Terms?" and Robert J. Starrat's article, "Democratic Leadership Theory in Late Modernity: An Oxymoron or Ironic Possibility?"³ These and other articles are evidence of an apparent assumption that the theory of leadership must be considered elitist or undemocratic. Perhaps these scholars have been conditioned by authoritarian academic deans and department chairs, but more likely, they are revealing the baggage of theories of leadership that have yet to be sufficiently reconstructed in the contemporary world.

I have said that the philosophical study of leadership is a growth area for the future of philosophy. The following are some examples. In many states, private donors and retiring political leaders have been giving money to universities for the formation of institutes of public policy and leadership. The University of Mississippi, where I work and teach, has such an institute named after former Senator Trent Lott. Elsewhere, schools of leadership have been created, as at the Jepson School at the University of Richmond. More are in development, such as the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy at the University of Virginia. Still elsewhere, we find organizations growing, such as the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland. Growth abounds too in the development of centers for ethical leadership. In short, there is great and increasing demand for practical philosophy, especially that which connects to the various responsibilities of leadership and ethics. In this area, Dewey has much to offer.

The first point I wish to make was evidenced in the quote that opens the present paper. Dewey was perfectly clear that he saw a fundamental goal of education in a democratic society as the preparation of students for leadership. As such, his work on judgment, inquiry, experimentalism, and education all can contribute to a Deweyan theory of leadership.

The next point is programmatic. Most, if not all, of the schools of leadership in the United States are tied to a particular or at least a general area of study and

application. For instance, schools of public policy and leadership are growing, as are schools of ethics and leadership, business and leadership, etc. Although the Jepson School is called a school of leadership *tout court*, in fact the school has various trajectories of leadership studies, and thus does not fail at the point Dewey would make here. In "Individuality, Equality and Superiority," Dewey wrote, "The endeavor to discover abstract degrees of mental superiority which fit for 'leadership' in the abstract is evidence of the hold upon us still exercised by feudal arrangements." He continued to explain, "Our new feudalism of the industrial life which ranks from the great financier through the captain of industry down to the unskilled laborer, revives and reinforces the feudal disposition to ignore individual capacity displayed in free or individualized pursuits."⁴ Dewey believed this effect of the lingering feudalistic outlook is pernicious and in this light, we can see in reverse what he valued in a democratic society's approach to leadership, namely, respect for individual capacity.

Fundamentally, this second lesson tells us that, unlike in Plato's writings, for Dewey leadership is not a class of persons. It is not a stratified notion focused on elites. Now, as a scholar and teacher in a program of public policy leadership, I must address the matter of my program's education of particularly strong students in the skills of leadership with knowledge of a field of practical inquiry—namely, public policy. A possible challenge could be that it does not make sense from a Deweyan point of view to run a program that selects the strongest students for special training. In fact, I believe that Dewey would object only if the training we offered were somehow exclusive in the sense that others not be trained for leadership. Programs such as ours and others around the country are perfectly consistent with the effort in education more widely to prepare all students in the abilities of leadership of their own lives and of others. Specialization in an area of concentration, with attention to students interested in public policy in particular, for example, is acceptable from a Deweyan point of view, I believe, so long as it is open to all who wish to apply for the study.

Elsewhere, Dewey wrote about the need for leadership in educational endeavors, though not a strongly authoritative and consolidated type of leadership. While some federal support for schools and direction were things he called for, Dewey also recognized that scattered American efforts in education appeared to yield results that foreign states admired. In his essay, "The Direction of Education," Dewey commented on the lack of government guidance in education:

Exemption of political government and officials from responsibilities that are elsewhere incumbent upon them places corresponding responsibilities upon individuals and institutions. With all our drifting, there must be leadership somewhere, or absence of governmental system will signify lack of all unified and cooperative educational movement. But leadership that is not official can only be intellectual and moral leadership. It is not merely leadership in education but it is leadership by education rather than by law and governmental authority. Indeed, it is a kind of leadership that gives a new meaning to the word. It is a process of guidance. It takes effect through inspiration, stimulation, communication of ideas, discovery and report of facts, rather than by decree. It is compelled to trust for the most part to the power of facts and ideas and to the willingness of the community at large to receive and act upon them.⁵

In this passage we see a number of concepts that help us to conceive of leadership in education, but in organizations generally as well. First among these is the commonly made distinction between authority and leadership. Dewey alludes to such a distinction when he differentiates the *de jure* leadership of government which is lacking. Government by definition is an authoritative body, but clearly in some circumstances it need not serve as a source of leadership in affairs that can be well advanced by other means. Even if government ought to take the lead in some matters, furthermore, groups of citizens can band together to fill leadership needs without the official or nominal titles of leadership which the government holds. Such forms of leadership he calls intellectual or moral. While he would hold these categories to be overlapping, he could mean by the idea of intellectual leadership the sort which is involved in laboratory work, versus the kind which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. represented, or Gandhi before him, while holding no official, governmental offices in their movements.

Second, when there is leadership, either in the way of government or of groups of citizens acting in concert, Dewey explains that what that leadership offers is "unified and cooperative . . . movement" with regard to the problem in question. In combining these two developments in Dewey's thought about leadership we see first the attention to public inquiry as fundamental to intellectual leadership. Plus we see the component that leadership offers in inquiry, namely, the creative force of synthesis which takes place when an inquirer establishes order in an otherwise chaotic or inchoate problematic situation.

Finally, while Dewey understands leadership of the *de jure* sort to include the public decrees that governments issue, he fleshes out also the elements of

intellectual and moral leadership that individual citizens or groups can exhibit in the form of “a process of guidance,” which “takes effect through inspiration, stimulation, communication of ideas, discovery and report of facts.” Each of these elements is worth examining in considering the dimensions of intellectual and moral leadership.

Dewey’s psychological and educational theories center on the idea of interest. As early as in his essay, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” Dewey explained that a fundamental trait of human personality is its inclination to attend to particular things in their environment as stimuli. With this insight, Dewey overturned the still popular idea that stimuli come first in the “stimulus-response” model of behavioral psychology. What Dewey called selectivity underlies human attention and interest. In the case of the study of leadership, Dewey’s insights about individuals’ selectivity or interests can be seen to play a role in the clarification of those elements of a problematic situation to which a leader or group of leaders can draw a community’s attention—the step Dewey called *inspiration*. We can understand the importance of selectivity in inspiration when we examine a particular case in which leadership is needed. Is a Mississippi community’s problem to do with educational resources, economic development, racial relations, poor roads, lack of sidewalks, obesity, or illiteracy? Any leader who hopes to solve all problems at once will solve none. Some elements of a problematic situation can, if resolved, contribute to the resolution of other problems, but where to start is a matter that will depend both on the context in question and on the varied and ranked interests of the community.

Once leaders find inspiration with regard to a problematic situation, they must work on *stimulation*. Stimulation can take place in the form of raising awareness among fellow citizens of shared problems with a community that might wish to address them. Exercises in awareness raising can take the form of peaceful marches, the mailing of informational documents, advertisements on television, the reporting of stories in news outlets, and much more. Leadership must involve the process of public relations in whatever forms would be the most effective for the context involved. We can see clearly so far how students can be taught these skills of leadership—inasmuch as their interests can be made the forefront of their research projects in public policy, and they can be taught to communicate and transfer messages that they have learned to craft clearly and with strong moral arguments.

Once inspiration and stimulation have occurred, leaders may experience

push-back from their communities. Leaders’ efforts will nearly always be imperfect public experiments. Thus, the *communication of ideas* is crucial for communities to have a say in recasting the problems which leaders initially lay out for debate. At least one common cause of failure in leadership concerns those situations in which leaders formulate inspiration and stimulation for projects without the proper experimentalist attitudes that leave one open to adjusting one’s conceptions of the community’s problems. Thus, the unstated lesson we can learn from Dewey’s experimentalism and the step of the communication of ideas is that leaders must be open to revising their conceptions when better ways of conceiving of problems arise. This fallibilist attitude and process of open communication and criticism is crucial in the public inquiry into refining the understanding of problems.

Finally, while communities can frame problems together and suggest avenues for addressing their problems, at some point concrete research about existential conditions and possible costs of carrying out plans and solutions must be collected and reported to community members. Whereas in traditional notions of leadership, these tasks might be labeled grunt work, we see in Dewey the identification of these elements of leadership with the democratic ideals of public inquiry. For, if research and reporting is done poorly or is falsified, the strongest of authorities might fail in the demands of leadership. In this sense, then, we can see that those who perform data entry or other collection in large industries play a crucial role in the tasks of leadership, even though they tend to feel inferior and disconnected from the chain of authority. Understood properly, however, and if properly valued by those in positions of official authority, the persons who serve as interns or assistants can see their roles as vital in this important task of leadership.

It would be disingenuous for me to end here on these positive notes about leadership in America, given Dewey’s several instances of critiquing American culture for failures in intelligent thinking and democratic leadership. Two circumstances worried Dewey on separate occasions with regard to leadership in America. He puts several problems in a simple statement when he addresses deference to authority and the feeling of powerlessness in his book, *Construction and Criticism*. He writes that

we in this country are too submissive to what are termed authorities in different fields, and too little given to questioning their right to speak with authority. It is a common complaint that we are too credulous a people and are only too ready to swallow any bunk if it is offered with the prestige of apparent authority.⁶

In a later essay from 1932, "The Economic Situation," Dewey writes scathingly:

I cannot remember a time when collective thinking—the ideas that are organic to large numbers—was so stupid, so incredibly incompetent as it is today. It is a common remark that we have a surprising absence of effective leadership in this crisis, domestic and international, economic and political. Now leadership, like a bargain, has two sides. There can be leadership as there can be following only when human beings think together about a common theme with a shared purpose to a common result. Leadership is absent because this power of collective thinking in connection with solidarity of emotion and desire is lacking today. We have in its stead attempts to whip up a seeming unity of idea and sentiment by means of catch-words, slogans, and advertising devices.⁷

I am sad to say that if Dewey thought people were capable of limited thinking and of overadherence to marketing terms and devices for persuasion, he might at times in the last few years have been quite a bit more disappointed today than he was in 1932.

Despite the great dearth of public intelligence that the United States exhibits at times, Dewey was able to see the positive element in the mass of individuals who "may not be very wise. But there is one thing they are wiser about than anybody else can be, and that is where the shoe pinches, the troubles they suffer from." He continues, in an essay titled "Democracy and Educational Administration," with his faith in democracy, despite the limits brought by the forces of unreason, writing, "The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence, and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience. It is not belief that these things are complete," he qualifies, "but that if given a show they will grow and be able to generate progressively the knowledge and wisdom needed to guide collective action," the public and communal process of leadership.⁹

Now, one could ask me whether the present paper constitutes just the kind of abstraction of the principles of leadership that Dewey warned against. If my goal were to divine the abstract content of leadership regardless of democratic context and for no application besides seeking the mind-independent truth of the matter, the challenge would in fact be problematic for me. In my current work, however, I am charged with the education of students in matters of public policy and leadership, in particular with students' ethical and communicative training. In writing and in speech I undertake this charge in a democratic society.

Thus, the answers I find in Dewey inform my plans for educating and developing my students' leadership abilities. As an example of one of the efforts that I undertake given my Deweyan influences, consider my course in public speaking. Like Plato, I would not find a course in speech sufficient on its own. For as Sophocles has said, "It is terrible to speak well and be wrong."¹⁰ Instead, my course is a combination, titled "Critical Thinking, Communication, and Public Policy." In it, students are trained in a variety of forms of communication, including a rarely practiced one—where students in class offer impromptu yet formal feedback to one another on the previous student's prepared presentations. I work with students on the ways in which feedback can be optimally constructive, which is quite different from feedback that is only critical in the negative sense. Students are expected to offer each other ways to consider enhancing the strengths of each others' speeches, something which inevitably consists in noting the positive elements of presentations. All along, too, students cannot get away with poor or unclear arguments, as those are the first areas of critique for improvement. In ways such as these and in possible future projects of civic engagement and moral leadership, I hope to work with my students on these many elements of democratic leadership, which we can find examined in germ in Dewey's writings.

CHAPTER 18: DEWEY'S ETHICAL-POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS A PRESENT RESOURCE

1. I agree with Michael Eldridge when he writes, "It is not necessary that Obama knows this intellectual movement and considers himself to be a part of it. It is sufficient that he practices what they recommended. He exemplifies the pragmatism they articulated and defended. By placing Obama in this context we are able to make use of the resources of this tradition to explain and justify his practice. Some of these charges are that his pragmatism is a matter of mere expediency or that he is anti-ideological and thus devoid of principle." Online at <http://www.obamaspragmatism.info/MEonOP.htm>

2. LW 2: 361.
3. John Gray, "Utopia Falls" *Harpers Magazine* (December 2008): 17.
4. Richard W. Stevenson "Obamanomics: Capitalism after the Fall" *New York Times* (April 19, 2009).
5. MW 12: 137.
6. LW 7: 336.
7. John Gray, "Utopia Falls," p. 17.
8. See <http://www.obamaspragmatism.info/LandS.htm> for links to the online contributions of Mitchel Aboufalia and others in blogs.
9. Richard Posner *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 50.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
12. Jacob Bronsther "The Emptiness of Obama's Pragmatism" from the May 26, 2009 edition, online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0526/p09s02-coop.html>.
13. Chris Hayes, "The Pragmatist" in December 29, 2008 edition of *The Nation*, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20081229/hayes/single>.
14. See Robert B. Talisse, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007) and Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, and Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
15. Chris Hayes, "The Pragmatist."
16. See, for example, Robert Reich, "Obama and Pragmatism: Thinking Through Values" (5 May 2009), online at <http://robertreich.org/post/257310346/>.
17. Jacob Bronsther, "The Emptiness of Obama's Pragmatism."
18. In ethical theory, consequentialism is a view about the ultimate or universal criterion of correct judgment.
19. Jacob Bronsther, "The Emptiness of Obama's Pragmatism."
20. See Gregory Pappas, "Openmindedness and Courage: The Virtues of the Prag-

matist Ideal Believer," *Transactions of the Charles Peirce Society* 32. 2 (Spring 1996): 316–35.

21. LW 6: 14–15, emphasis added.
22. LW 6: 14–15, my emphasis.
23. LW 7: 187.
24. MW 14: 144.
25. LW 7: 270.
26. MW 5: 303.
27. LW 7: 270, emphasis added.
28. LW 7: 251.
29. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/weekinreview/09stolberg.html?hpw>.

CHAPTER 19: DEWEYAN EXPERIMENTALISM AND LEADERSHIP

1. EW 5: 59, emphasis added.
2. Plato's *Republic*, 347c.
3. Kathryn Riley, "Democratic Leadership'—A Contradiction in Terms?" *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 2 (2003): 125–40; Robert J. Starrat, "Democratic Leadership Theory in Late Modernity: An Oxymoron or Ironic Possibility?" *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 4 (2001): 333–52.
4. MW 13: 296–97.
5. LW 3: 252–53.
6. LW 5: 135.
7. LW 6: 128.
9. LW 11: 219.
10. In Sophocles' *Electra* (written 410 BCE). The passage translated by R. C. Jebb reads, "Sad, that one who speaks so well should speak amiss!" This version is available on The Internet Classics Archive, Daniel C. Stevenson (Web Atomics 1994–2009), at <http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/electra.html>.

CHAPTER 20: DEWEY'S IMPACT ON EDUCATION

1. For historical and sympathetic accounts of Dewey's theory of education, see Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* (New York: Vintage, 1964), and Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 93–113. For a highly negative assessment of Dewey, one that is rep-

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