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John Dewey's Notion of Human Nature

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John Dewey's Notion of Human Nature

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(A) Historical Context

Dewey's conception of human nature should be understood within the historical context of 19th century philosophy and psychology. The two disciplines were trying to answer issues arising from the rise of science, the notion of progress and the changing social order. More specifically, these issues include the debate between science and religion, free will and instinct, rationality and morality, hereditary and environment.

It is in this context that Dewey formulated his "scientific" view of human nature. I call his view "scientific" in two senses. First, the reality of human nature is not for speculation but for scientific investigation. This investigation may start from the study of the reflex arc, which Dewey did in 1894, and went further into habits and conduct in 1918. Second, Dewey is a believer of science and progress. Therefore, his position is that morality should be based on scientific knowledge. However, Dewey is also critical of science, which makes weapons and wars (He wrote HNC just after 1st World War). So, how should we constrain science? Should morality constrain science or should science constrain morality? This is one of his main concerns.

(B) The Puzzle of Dewey's Notion of Habit

The book, *Human Nature and Conduct (HNC)*, starts with an introduction on human nature and morality. Then it was followed by three parts: habit and conduct, impulse and conduct and intelligence and conduct, ending with a conclusion. I seem to get in a puzzle box once I started reading Dewey's notion of habit.

In psychology, habit was defined then as a “fixed way of thinking, willing or feeling acquired through previous repetition of a mental experience” (*Journal of Psychology, 1903*). Afterwards, the concept was gradually replaced by overt behaviour and behaviourism in the 1920s and 30s. We now use it to mean learned and repeated physical stances such as tidiness, cleanliness, courtesy, nail-biting, smile, etc. Psychologists also study:

- Habitual behaviour
- Mental / thinking / learning habits
- Habit Formation
- Habit-directed vs goal-directed behaviour.

But Dewey used the word in an unusual way. Habits are arts – skills of sensory and motor organs (HNC, p.10). He uses “habit” to mean a lot of things: attitudes, ways of thinking, judgments: doing and their impact (HNC p.12). He is using habit to mean thinking habits, mental and physical skills, may be even feelings. It is like everything! (HNC, p.16).

Then there are well-formed habits, (p.16), incorrect habit (p.17) old habit (p.24), frustrated habit (p.25), bad habit (p.17). He jokingly talked about walking habit (p.17) and even used the habit of eating to illustrate the old question of objectivity and subjectivity (p.25). What is more, habit formation is based on the social / environing condition (p.11) and all virtues and vices are habits based on objective forces (p.11). What does he mean? And how is it related to the big picture of human nature?

(C) Clarifying Dewey's Concept of Human Nature Components

It takes a few rounds of reading, determinedly and deeply, for me to gain a vague understanding of Dewey's concept. Below is my own interpretation.

<p style="text-align: center;">p. 21 Habit (p. 10-11, 16)</p> <hr/> <p>(1) Acquired mental & physical skills (p.10)</p> <p>(2) They are learned attitudes</p> <p>(3) Ways of thinking & Judgment (p.12)</p> <p>(4) Habit formation is social (p.11)</p> <p>(5) All virtues / vices are results of habit (p.11)</p> <p>(6) Thinking habits (p.16)</p> <p>(7) Habit is attained by training</p> <p>(8) No pure reason / sensation (p.16)</p> <p>(9) There is bad habit; it cant yield good results (a defective machine cannot turn out good goods! p.17)</p> <p>(10) Habit is</p> <table style="margin-left: 40px;"> <tr> <td><i>character + conduct</i></td> <td rowspan="3" style="font-size: 3em; vertical-align: middle;">}</td> <td rowspan="3" style="vertical-align: middle;"><i>in union</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>motive + act</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>will + dead</i></td> </tr> </table> <p>(11) Will = concrete habit (p. 25)</p> <p>(12) Institutions embody habits, not easy to change (p. 44)</p>	<i>character + conduct</i>	}	<i>in union</i>	<i>motive + act</i>	<i>will + dead</i>	<p style="text-align: center;">Custom (p. 35,44)</p> <hr/> <p>(1) Habit (personal) Customs (social) (p.35)</p> <p>(2) Examples of custom (slavery, war, wage-system. p.44) I think custom means human institution</p> <p>(3) Custom provides machinery and design for war</p> <p>(4) Custom is working out morals (p. 35)</p> <p>(5)</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> <pre> graph TD Impulse([Impulse]) <--> conflict with Box[habit custom convention] Box --> Mod[Lead to modification] </pre> </div>	<p style="text-align: center;">Impulse (part II)</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Dewey means instincts</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Conduct (p. 109)</p> <hr/> <p>(1) Conduct = act = human action (p.109)</p> <p>(2) Subject to moral judgment</p> <p>(3) I think pure reflex ≠ conduct</p>
<i>character + conduct</i>	}			<i>in union</i>			
<i>motive + act</i>							
<i>will + dead</i>							

(D) The Deweyan Picture of Human Nature



I = Intelligence

H = Habit

Environment physical
social

HN = Human Nature

M = Morality

Conduct

Ips = Impulse

C = Custom

Conflict

In this Deweyan picture, the boy, a human being, is walking down the road. He is in an environment, with physical and social forces. He possesses human nature, of which the environment interacts to become his conduct. Human nature has three components: intelligence is in his head; his left hand signifies impulse, which conflicts with custom; his right hand signifies habit, which is passed onto him as customs from his parents who stands behind him. In other words, he will be in conflict or in unison with customs, depending on varying situations. Morality is a fetter that impedes his movement.

In this picture, habits are learned skills and attitudes; habits are personal whilst customs are social. Impulses are human instincts. Customs suppress impulses. Customs also work out morality to restrain and control human nature. When impulses conflict with habits, customs or convention, it will lead to change. Finally, intelligence is thinking, reflecting, serving as the go between of habit and impulse.

(E) The Significance of Habit

For Dewey, habit is regulated thought, absentmindedness, stimulus- response link. It confines the eyes of mind to the road ahead. (p.69). When things work out by habit, (without using conscious intelligence), we call it absentmindedness (p.69). When we bump into the unexpected, we need consciousness, breaking into a new road (p.69). When we achieve a goal (in a deed, such as brush our teeth), it is just mindless action (p.69).

Habits are conditions of intellectual efficiency. They operate in two ways upon intellect. Obviously, they restrict its reach, they fix its boundaries. They are blinders that confine the eyes of mind to the road ahead. They prevent thought from straying away from its imminent occupation to a landscape more varied and picturesque but irrelevant to practice.

Habit sets negative limits to thoughts. On the other hand, the more habits we have, the more observation, perception, imagination we are capable of (p.70).

Habit is however more than a restriction of thought. Habits become negative limits because they are first positive agencies. The more numerous our habits the wider the field of possible observation and foretelling. The more flexible they are, the more refined is perception in its discrimination and the more delicate the presentation evoked by imagination.

I think that according to Dewey, Habit interacts with environment and provokes thoughts: no need to assume the existence of mind / consciousness / soul / knower. "Habits are the means of knowledge and thought" (p.70). For Dewey, habits do all the cognitive functions of perceiving, recalling, judging, ... Consciousness is only functions of Habit (p.71). Habits and impulses work together in the real world by doing. Therefore, knowledge lives in the muscles, not consciousness (p.71).

Yet habit does not, of itself, know, for it does not of itself stop to think, observe or remember. Neither does impulse of itself engage in reflection or contemplation. It just lets go. Habits by themselves are too organized, too insistent and determinate to need to indulge in inquiry or imagination. And impulses are too chaotic, tumultuous and confused to be able to know even if they wanted to. Habit as such is too definitely adapted to an environment to survey or analyze it, and impulse is too indeterminately related to the environment to be capable of reporting anything about it. Habit incorporates, enacts or overrides objects, but it doesn't know them. Impulse scatters and obliterates them with its restless stir. A certain delicate combination of habit and impulse is requisite for observation, memory and judgment. Knowledge which is not projected against the black unknown lives in the muscles, not in consciousness.

(F) How does Dewey Treat Impulses

According to Dewey, there are clearly human instincts, manifested in acts of one to one correspondence. He listed nine of them (p.60):

- fear
- anger
- rivalry
- love of mastery of others
- Self-abasement
- maternal love
- sexual desire
- gregariousness
- envy

Here sex is seen as important as fear and anger.

Dewey studied psychology and is deeply influenced by the ideas of his time. Some terms are listed below (p.61):

- Psychological analysis
- Introspection
- Internal state
- Libido (p.62)
- Psychic elements
- Feelings / soul

Basically the discipline is moving away from speculation to observables but Dewey kept the sophisticated analysis in a metaphysical tone. Because of his philosophical background, Dewey criticizes mistaken classification of instincts by psychologists (p.63).

For any activity is original when it first occurs. As conditions are continually changing, new and *primitive* activities are continually occurring. The traditional psychology of instincts obscures recognition of this fact. It sets up a hard-and-fast preordained class under which specific acts are subsumed, so that their own quality and originality are lost from view.

Dewey illustrated his point with an example. He insisted there is no single instinct of fear. When fear acts in muscular contraction, withdrawals, evasions and concealments, it must be related to objects and environment. Dewey listed them: (fear of dentist, ghost, success, humiliation, bat, bear, cowardice, embarrassment, caution, reverence.) Then Dewey brings in fear of air-raid (bombs from sky) (P.62)

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.

For any activity is original when it first occurs. As conditions are continually changing, new and *primitive* activities are continually occurring. The traditional psychology of instincts obscures recognition of this fact. It sets up a hard-and-fast preordained class under which specific acts are subsumed, so that their own quality and originality are lost from view.

I think Dewey is right to point out different types of fear. The point is to distinguish / innate fear (dark) from learned/ conceptual fear (dentist, air-raid, gun). It really depends on experience. For example, an Afghanistan boy may fear aircraft sound while showing no fear to a dentist chair, and vice versa for a Hong Kong child. Of course the most important issue is to outline manifested mechanisms. Granted that some classification may be mistaken, but

scientific study needs generalization, reduction and systemizing and classification is the first step of any scientific investigation.

Dewey also outlines three possible outcomes of impulses:

1. Surging, explosive discharge
2. Sublimation – impulse operates as a pivot of re-organization of habit
3. Suppression – leading to reaction (p.63)

When it comes to sex impulse, Dewey acknowledges that we study so much because of its intensity and social taboo. (p.66)

Current clinical psychology has undoubtedly overworked the influence of sexual impulse in this connection, refusing at the hands of some writers to recognize the operation of any other modes of disturbance. There are explanations of this onesidedness. The intensity of the sexual instinct and its organic ramifications produce many of the cases that are so noticeable as to demand the attention of physicians. And social taboos and the tradition of secrecy have put this impulse under greater strain than has been imposed upon others.

Impulse has significant social consequences. When impulse is not handled properly, it will lead to repression, enslavement, corruption and perversion (p.66).

The significant thing is that the pathology arising from the sex instinct affords a striking case of a universal principle. Every impulse is, as far as it goes, force, urgency. It must either be used in some function, direct or sublimated, or be driven into a concealed, hidden activity. It has long been asserted on empirical grounds that repression and enslavement result in corruption and perversion. We have at last discovered the reason

They are all impulse in disguise, such as “a rebellious disposition (which) is also a form of romanticism.” (p.67). It will “view institutions as slaveries” (p.67). In other words, impulse may originate rebellion and revolution in social change.

(G) Thinking and Intelligence

For Dewey, deliberation is thinking, imagination and making choices. It is like scenario thinking, with a start from Habit and impulse into various imagined paths. (p.76-77)

Every object hit upon as the habit traverses its imaginary path has a direct effect upon existing activities. It reinforces, inhibits, redirects habits already working or stirs up others which had not previously actively entered in. In thought as well as in overt action, the objects experienced in following out a course of action attract, repel, satisfy, annoy, promote and retard. Thus deliberation proceeds. To say that at last it ceases is to say that choice, decision, takes place.

Deliberation includes choice, unifying, harmonizing competing tendencies, elimination and recombination, imagined circumstances, sensitiveness, feeling, and decision. Dewey argued that we did not do “calculation of courses of action on the basis of the profit and loss” (p.79). We deliberate by experiencing the present, not calculating the future (p.79). “Future pleasures and pains... are among the things most elusive of calculation” (p.80). Deliberation is to evaluate the present and envisage consequence (p.82).

Hence the problem of deliberation is not to calculate future happenings but to appraise present proposed actions. We judge present desires and habits by their tendency to produce certain consequences. It is our business to watch the course of our action so as to see what is the significance, the import of our habits and dispositions.

(H) The Whole Picture of Human Nature

Piecing together the above concepts, we can arrive at the vista of Dewey’s whole picture of Human Nature. Impulse are instincts and desires working in the human world without restraint. They are liken laws of nature. Borrowing ideas from science, Dewey stated the metaphors where motion is to progress as blind spontaneity is to freedom and atom is to individuality. Thus impulses and instincts are unalterable laws of nature.

Custom suppresses impulse but may have led to unrestrained expression, for example, war. When we break custom, we release impulse by doing old things in new ways. We can also construct new means and ends (p.88 – 90).

Impulse affects habit and conduct. Morality is to find ways to manage impulse in its manifestation to balance between custom, tradition, privileges vs present needs. Apparently, tradition, morality, customs, and habits belong to the same category of interwoven ideas. Morality are underlying guidelines for customs and habits. Here Dewey insists on the impact of social environment affecting habits and customs. Traditional morality (with a transcendental standard) creates tension. Impulses can help reorganize habits, leading to new morality. To work it out, we need intelligence (thought) (p.68).

Impulse is needed to arouse thought, incite reflection and enliven belief. But only thought notes obstructions, invents tools, conceives aims, directs technique, and thus converts impulse into an art which lives in objects. Thought is born as the twin of impulse in every moment of impeded habit (p.68).

Traditional morality calling upon do-gooders are basically customs. According to Dewey, Western morality from Plato to modern times is based on religion. The belief of religious and transcendental reality of goodness is rejected by Dewey. Consequently, morality (or code of conduct) is in crisis. Where can we anchor it? Dewey's answer is in pragmatism.

(I) Puzzle Solved: From Habit to Action

This has long been my puzzle: how can habit mean so many things and why. After reading a few times, I see that Habit and impulse are elaborated deeply. Especially in Part III, he talked about how Habit and impulse work together (p. 71) and Habit interacts with environment (p. 70), leading to his theory of perception and action (p. 72). Then I come across his criticism on utilitarianism with the following lines:

... this false psychology consist in two traits. The first, that knowledge originates from sensations (instead of from habits and impulses) and the second. ... (p. 75)

Sensation, sense data, Tubala Rasa are terms by Hume (empiricism); Pure reason, synthetic a priori, are terms used by Kant (rationalism). Dewey wants to go beyond and propose Habit and impulse (pragmatism) to anchor knowledge and also to ground morality!! Following the tradition of Hume's empiricism and sensation and avoiding the transcendental 'goodness' in morality, Dewey wants to avoid the complication of will, volition, intention, all subjective entities. He wants to use two words to cover all: habits and impulses.

James proposes stream of consciousness and Dewey rejects an abstract entity (soul) or a separate knower. Therefore he proposes functional psychology, where (p.70-71)

Concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing, imagining, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done. "Consciousness," whether as a stream or as special sensations and images, expresses functions of habits, phenomena of their formation, operation, their interruption and reorganization.

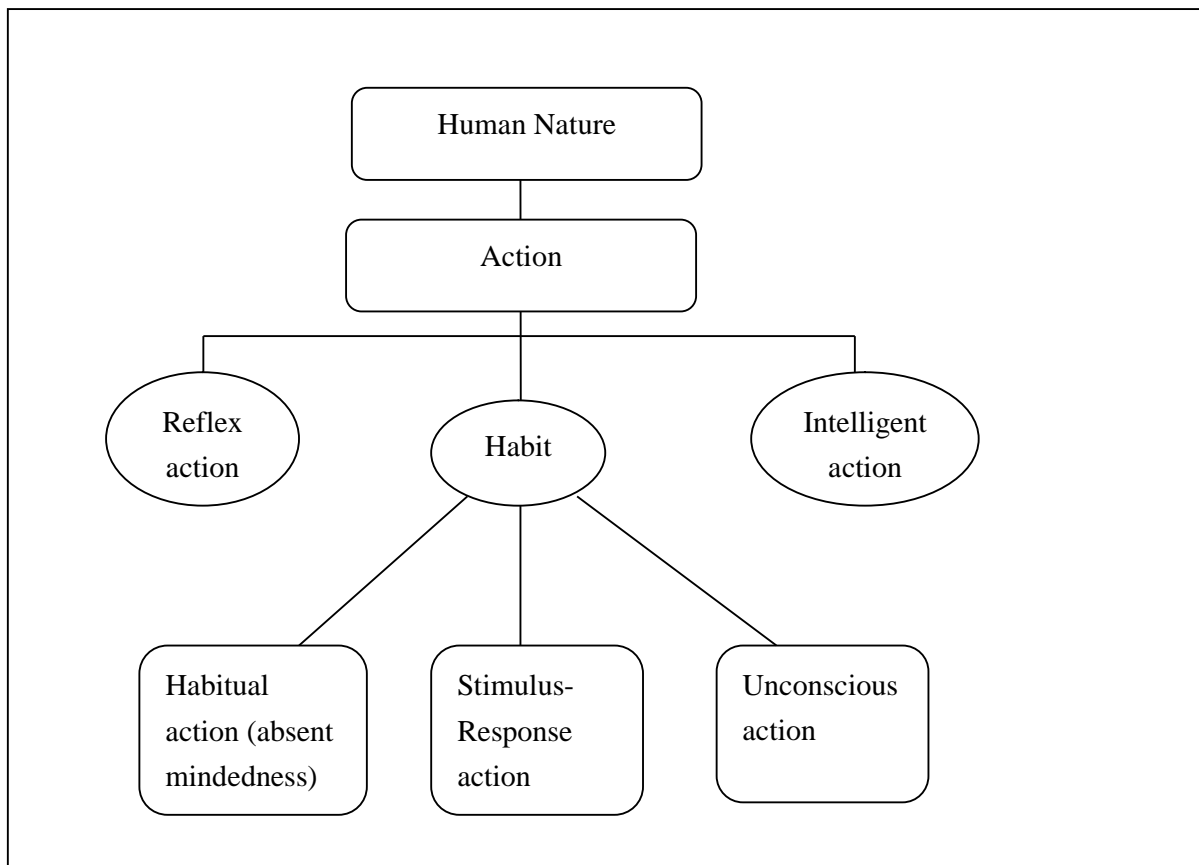
Here we see the obscure use of the terms:

- (a) Habits and impulses are terms Dewey used to denote unconscious thought and behaviour and instinctual responses respectively. They are practical to life and living.
- (b) 'Knowing how' is the practical function of knowledge and 'knowing that' (of, about things) is the reflection and conscious appreciation of the undescribed thing (reality).

Where habits and impulses fail, Dewey calls in intelligence. (p.71)

Yet habit does not, of itself, know, for it does not of itself stop to think, observe or remember. Neither does impulse of itself engage in reflection or contemplation. It just lets go. Habits by themselves are too organized, too insistent and determinate to need to indulge in inquiry or imagination. And impulses are too chaotic, tumultuous and confused to be able to know even if they wanted to. Habit as such is too definitely adapted to an environment to survey or analyze it, and impulse is too indeterminately related to the environment to be capable of reporting anything about it. Habit incorporates, enacts or overrides objects, but it doesn't know them. Impulse scatters and obliterates them with its restless stir. A certain delicate combination of habit and impulse is requisite for observation, memory and judgment. Knowledge which is not projected against the black unknown lives in the muscles, not in consciousness.

In this sense, Dewey's notion of Habit and Impulses are well- situated within the intellectual context of his time. He wants to find a term to express human action within a social environment. He wants to show how this action, constrained by our cultural convention and institution (custom), are driven by our underlying instincts (impulse), breaking into a new path with the help of intelligence. Action is central to Dewey's thought and the following diagram may be helpful.



(J) Dewey's View on the Moral Crisis and the need for Pragmatism

Dewey interpreted Western Moral Philosophy (p.8) by putting them in a dichotomy as two schools of social reform:

1. Spiritual Egotism (Christian Morality)

Morality is from within; man knows morality; man has free will and the way is to purify the heart and pursue transcendental goodness, grounded in good and Christianity. With a good heart, there will be position social and institutional change.

2. Romantic Morality (Social Determinism)

Man has no moral freedom. Man are made / product of environment: Human Nature is malleable. It is hopeless to change people. Left alone he will do whatever to satisfy his desires: greed, killing, fighting. Consequently, we need to change institution directly – by revolution. It is not evolution, but laws of history and violent change.

Then human nature can be changed (malleable) by institutions.

Dewey is critical of Christian or romantic morality. (p. 9-10) Human Nature can be studied scientifically, thus science and progress. He is against glorification of natural impulse. Morality should be based on scientific knowledge of human nature. Conduct is interaction between human and environment. Freedom can be attained if we take into account of human drive and human nature. Education is to help intelligence to attain and adjust to the environment, or to adjust and change the environment.

Dewey is critical of both science and morality, “Disregard of the moral potentialities of physical science” may lead to war. Taking morality as human conscience and ultimate goodness without regard to the scientific understanding of human nature may lead to slavery and human suffering (p.9).

For Dewey, the crisis is that morals become unreal and transcendental. Traditional morality presupposes a universe of goodness to measure the existing world. When the existing world and actual experience does not work according to this morality, traditional moralists still insist on a truer reality. Idealism is only an ideal and idea which is not realized. So are other abstract concepts such as justice, equality and liberty. Plato’s idealism (rationalism) is bankrupt.

It is in this philosophical background that Dewey proposes pragmatism to replace idealism, i.e. to ground morality in real life experience. This needs some clarification. To say what works constitutes goodness is naive and simplistic pragmatism. Dewey insists that in the real life experience we can reflect, analyse and argue to find out what is good and what works, not just to follow the tradition which he calls “customs”. Even goodness can change and make progress. So is truth. This is more practical and realistic than believing in the religious ultimate good.

Pragmatism goes beyond utilitarianism. It may mean that ‘good’ is to work out step-by-step, not utilitarian calculation or consequentialism. In a sense, working out, doing, step-by-step, reflecting and improving is human nature and good conduct.