

VALUES IN DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM

Enricomaria Corbi

The focus of Dewey's conception of democracy lies in its coincidence with the experimental method. As Putnam has repeatedly noted, the democratic method coincides - in Dewey's thought - with the logic of enquiry and this in turn provides an 'epistemological justification' for democracy. Democracy is the most favourable condition for the development of science and at the same time, it takes advantage of the potential of liberation contained in the scientific method.

Democracy and the experimental method allow to consider with confidence the possibility of satisfying the need for objectivity of ethical values without being forced to entrust them to absolute concepts, deceptively excluded from the relativity of socio-cultural contexts and, more generally, from the problematicity of experiences. From the model of science and democratic life comes an idea of objectivity that passes through the open-minded examination of problematic situations, of freedom of enquiry and comparison of different hypotheses of solution, of collaborative and conscious research on exposure to error.

Dewey's position on *fallibilism* as an essential feature of scientific thought and democracy is of maximum interest for the link between epistemological and ethical aspects. The exercise of fallibilism, in fact, largely involves the ethical level. It is an indispensable virtue in our relationships with others and it is the mainstay for the attitude to dialogue and tolerance. The conviction of the possibility of making a mistake, the admission that one's arguments, though they seem to appear 'true' or at least provided with a sufficient degree of warranted assertibility, may be, however, totally or partially incorrect leads to set aside the arrogance of knowledge and to assume an attitude of openness towards discussion and self-criticism, as a way to audit the validity of a thesis, in terms both of its internal coherence and of its objective referentiality. The principle of fallibilism is fundamental in scientific enquiry and research in general, and it has both a heuristic and ethical value. That facts and values must be subjected to criticism and to the possibility of correction, does not mean that at each new step democratic life and scientific research have to proceed to a sort of reset of experiences to zero. Pragmatism, on the line that goes from Dewey to Putnam, even before being a position of ethical thought, is a constructive attitude that recognizes the objectivity of problematic situations and engages in finding solutions, with the awareness of their transient and local nature.

There is an influential tradition of thought that neatly separates the sphere of facts from values, the world of experience from the one of morality. This separation, both if the values are assigned an objective and absolute ontological foundation, or if one limits him/herself to the recognition of a categorical normativity, is a means to protect values from uncertainty and relativity that grieves what belongs to the phenomenological order. The separation of facts from values has been seen as a firm point also by an opposite perspective, the one that has assumed, in different ways, experience as a starting point and a testing ground for cognitive processes. Without going over the historical path of empirism, we can limit ourselves to emphasize how the appeal to experience has been often valued against the absolutist pretensions of reason in the fields of knowledge and morality, except to conclude - on a line of thought which goes from Hume to Carnap and that marks the entire neo-positivist horizon without significant exceptions, - that judgments are neither analytic a priori, such as those of logic and maths, nor synthetic a posteriori, such as the factual ones; they are simply meaningless and the least we can say about moral judgments is that they evade any rational inquiry.

Ethical values do not inhabit a separate sphere from experience. Closely intertwined with facts, they impose themselves on our attention every time we face a problematic situation, especially when the range of its possible solutions, revealing itself as an alternative between our interests and those of others, urges us to question ourselves as to the rightness and sense of the decision to be taken. But the answer to this question cannot be directly descended from philosophical reflection. Dewey noted that as philosophy has no private reserve of knowledge or methods to obtain the truth, so it has no private access to the good. As it accepts knowledge and principles from who are said to have skills in science and research, so it accepts the goods diffused in human experience. It does not have Moses or St. Paul's authority, that of a revelation that has been presented to it. But it has the authority of intelligence, of criticism on these shared and natural goods.¹

Ethical values do not need philosophical justification. Their reference ground is experience, not in the sense of a short-sighted pragmatism for which it is success that decrees their validity, but in the sense that ethical virtues - and the behaviours that derive from them – have to be considered, regardless of their immediate effects, in relation to the problematic situations in which they are applied. The support they need belongs to common sense, to the realm of those beliefs and behavioural rules that normally guide our daily activities. Putnam has noted, referring to Dewey once again, that the objectivity of ethical theses is not of a transcendent and a priori type with respect to our engagement in life and ethical reflection, but it is the kind of objectivity that is required to a sailor to repair his ship in navigation.

This consideration does not contradict the argument according to which when we speak of values we implicitly assume as true the belief of common sense that takes for granted the objective existence of a reality outside us, and in particular the notion of solidarity requires admitting the objective existence of the people with whom one shows solidarity. But the beliefs of common sense are not the same as a philosophical system that claims to establish what is good and what is bad and to teach how to apply these notions to our concrete cases of experience.

There is a close relationship between pedagogical reflection and the sphere of ethical problems, but this does not entail a state of subjection of pedagogy to ethics, of subordination to the values that this would transmit to educational activities. Values are not something overarching educational activities. On the contrary, as they are related to problems of choice that may decide over the life projects of individuals, they emerge with particular evidence exactly in the reflection on educational problems. On the other side, in this imaginary but not arbitrary map of knowledge, the osmosis between pedagogy and training culture is even more evident, so evident as to legitimize the claim that pedagogy in its substance is nothing else than the moment of theoretical reflection on the problems of educational practice. But it would not be correct to think of education as an activity which arises from the outside to give critical awareness to learning experiences. The unity of the theory-practice circle, on which Dewey has insisted so much, is not reconstructed in this way, thanks to the intervention of pedagogy from above. Learning processes, although emerging from the entirety of human personality and rooted in the darkest depths of this, already contain a moment of openness to critical reflection, revealing a constitutive tension to conquer the transparency of the upper layers of consciousness. This basis enables the interaction between educational practice and pedagogical thought. It also allows that the effectiveness of educational activity – both the one carried out by the several agencies present in the context and the one carried out by schools – is not an illusion of the experts.

¹ J. Dewey, *Esperienza e natura*, Paravia, Torino, 1949.