

What is the Status of Questioning in John Dewey's Philosophy?

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Contemporary political theorists have used Dewey's thought to revitalise practical reason (Bernstein 1966, 1986), and the policy sciences tradition has drawn upon and extended Dewey's ideas (Lasswell 1971, Lerner and Lasswell 1951, Torgerson 1995). Central to Dewey's philosophy is the concept of questioning, in both his theory of 'inquiry' and his attention to practical 'problem solving'. Dewey's attention to problems arose from his desire for philosophy to be relevant to human concerns and to improve society and democratic deliberation, so his theory of inquiry is important because he was concerned with deliberative process as much as the solution of problems. Although the idea that politics and policy is concerned with problems and seeks solutions is not particular to Dewey, he developed an explicit formulation of logic in these terms, which makes it especially interesting because rarely have we questioned what it is to pose a question and to find a solution.

The point of examining Dewey's theory of inquiry is to ask whether his pragmatism describes political questioning, or scientific questioning. I argue that despite his extensive use of the concepts inquiry, problem, and solution, the way he treats questioning presents fundamental difficulties for understanding policy and politics. Dewey did not allocate a constitutive role to questioning but saw it only as a tool, a cognitive device, supposing instead that only the solution counts as knowledge, and that all problems could be solved by recourse to experience. Thus inquiry takes a scientific form. Dewey's philosophy is less than compatible with democratic deliberation not just because he defined knowledge in terms of experience, but because, more fundamentally, he asserted that dissolving questions was the only valid way of answering them. This restricts knowledge to problem

solving over questioning and, by emphasising the outcomes of politics in his logic, prevented him establishing political reasoning as an open, deliberative process over rule by expert scientists. I use Michel Meyer's philosophy of questioning, *problematology*, to reflect upon Dewey's theory and illustrate the source of his conceptual difficulties in differentiating democratic pragmatism from science. I make an alternative reading of Dewey's ideas using Meyer's philosophy, which points to a new conception of inquiry that moves beyond scientific problem solving and establishes a place for questioning as a positive and constitutive quality of reason. I do not apply Meyer's philosophy to particular political problems. Rather, my concern is to examine how we might think about knowledge – and therefore politics – in terms of a new version of questioning.

First I discuss Dewey's idea that all inquiry should be directed towards, and evaluated by, experience. Secondly, I show that notwithstanding the difference between Dewey's inquiry and positivism, both share the common theme of answering as the dissolution of questions. Then I draw a parallel between practical reason and science, showing that the two concepts cannot be entirely disentangled. Finally, I use Michel Meyer's *problematology* to find the underlying limitations of Dewey's theory of inquiry, and to suggest that we might arrive at quite a different depiction of reason that accords a new, positive value to questioning and that defines politics by the problematic.

1. Dewey's theory of inquiry

Dewey's ideas on democracy derived from his more fundamental ideas on knowledge. How we think was, for Dewey, a questioning process. He argued that encountering problems impels us to reflective thought, the essential characteristic of which is *inquiry* (1971, 7-9). He equates inquiry with *questioning*; 'We inquire when we question; and we inquire when we seek for whatever will provide an answer to a question asked' (1938, 105). And elsewhere, 'Thinking is inquiry, investigation, turning over, probing or delving into, so as to find something new or to see what is already known in a different light. In short, it is *questioning*' (1971, 265). Questioning is reflective thinking, which he distinguished from other forms of thought, for example the stream of consciousness, daydreams, or beliefs unreflected upon (1971, 3-7). Reflective thinking is the best form of thought because it forms an ordered chain of thoughts, it aims at a conclusion, and it impels one to inquire as to the grounds of one's beliefs (1971, 4-9). Dewey felt that reflective thinking would help solve public problems through better social planning.

But what does he mean by 'problem'? A problem is 'a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty' that prompts us to give pause for reflection (1971, 12). It is 'an entanglement to be straightened out, something obscure to be cleared up' by thinking (1971, 6). At another point he defines problems in terms of an alternative; 'Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a *forked-road* situation, a situation that is ambiguous, that presents a dilemma, that proposes alternatives' (1971, 14). By alternative, he means that the situation poses a question for us. Reflective inquiry searches for a solution that will solve the difficulty by

eliminating it: it is 'searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity' (1971, 12). The purpose of inquiry, then, is to make an indeterminate situation into a *problematic*, thus transforming the situation into an intelligible object of study (1938, 107). Without understanding thinking as the inquiry into problems, reflective thinking is 'blind groping in the dark' (1938, 108). Rational thought is inquiry into problems in order to find a solution that eliminates the problem.

Dewey defined inquiry itself as within the realm of experience, which contains subject and object in a totality (1958, 8). Knower and known are mutually constituted within the field of experience, they are both aspects of the *fact* of knowing (Moore 1961, 191). The view of inquiry as problem solving within experience was not just Dewey's but characterises American pragmatism in general, despite differences between the individual thinkers (Depew 1995, 13; Moore 1961, 202). Although Dewey distinguished knowledge from experience as what arises from interrogating experience, he also stated that the objects of reflection are secondary representations of primary experience, which 'sets the problems' (1958, 4-5). The problems of experience are mediated through questioning, but are not constituted by it. Rather, it is the other way around. Indeed, he argued that language is unintelligible apart from a thing to which it refers (1971, 236). Because he held the idea that experience is a totality in its own right, then problems arise only from obstructions to experience. Questioning is not required for situations that are by nature unproblematic, for which unreflective thinking suffices since there is no disruption to the pattern of

thought (1971, 14). More specifically, no problem exists when no inhibition to *action* exists (1971, 108-9).

It is important to note that while Dewey allocated a central role to questioning, it does not have a constitutive value in knowledge. Even though questions are his criteria of intelligibility, what transforms an unintelligible situation into an intelligible problematic, Dewey is clear that it is the *situation* itself that has indeterminate traits;

...it is of the very nature of the indeterminate situation which evokes inquiry to be *questionable*; or, in terms of actuality instead of potentiality, to be uncertain, unsettled, disturbed...*We* are doubtful because the situation is already doubtful (1938, 105).

So, even though we need to question a situation to make meaning of experience (1958:1), this is only possible because the situation itself holds an indeterminate quality independent of our inquiry into it. This also applies to social problems, which exist independently of questions we might ask about them, the latter being 'intellectualizations in inquiry of these "practical" troubles and difficulties' (1938, 498). A question is a discursive abstraction from a problematic situation. In fact, Dewey rejected the idea that problems could arise from subjective experience as pathological (1938, 106, 499). Questioning gives us access to knowledge, but it is a secondary process; the problem into which we inquire is primary and independent of the questions we ask of it.

Dewey stated that experience 'recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an

unanalyzed totality' (1958, 8). The primacy of experience remains out of the question, it is 'unanalysable', and hence reflection upon experience has only a secondary quality. That experience is primary indicates Dewey's and the other pragmatists' naturalist ontology (Brandom 2004, 3). Because experience presents a unity, Dewey thought only empirical method was adequate for philosophy: 'It alone takes this integrated unity as the starting point for philosophic thought' (1958, 9). He was at pains to reject the idea that experience itself could be subjective, and so asserted that it was beyond all questioning because it defined what was problematic and what a solution. Thus experience is primary and ultimate, 'primary as it is given in an uncontrolled form, ultimate as it is given in a more regulated and significant form' (1958, 15). Experience is both the starting point and the end point of knowledge.

As I noted above, Dewey said that to solve a problem is to eliminate it. So, because experience is a totality, we must look for solutions, as well, in experience. The purpose of questioning is to bring about a solution that transforms the doubtful situation into a unified whole (1938, 104-5; 1971, 100). All inquiry, therefore, has practical intent. This definition of problem solving has been taken for granted, appealing as it does to common sense, and in this Dewey makes explicit what is often presumed: we find meaning in the answer that dissolves the question, so the goal of knowledge is to eliminate questions by transforming situations in practice.

Dewey's problem solving rationale produces the distinctive characteristic of pragmatism, its practical orientation. Dewey wanted to establish a practical role for philosophy, which he felt previously had few practical implications (Moore 1961, 206). He believed this would restore its value by directing it towards problems

relevant to the public at large, and not just to the small community of philosophers. Judgement itself, he said, resides in modifying (or at least the possibility of modifying) a pre-cognitive unsettled situation (1938, 118). Thus judgement involves more than an abstract proposition about reality, but it proscribes an action to effect a change upon it (1938, 120-1). For Dewey, *meaning* itself lies in the practical resolution of problems, in *action* upon the world: observed problems are 'capable of being *understood* only in terms of projected consequences of activities' (1938, 499). So, not only do problems arise only from experience, but solutions are only *intelligible* in terms of an actual change to social conditions. As in science, the meaning of problems derives from the method of resolving them. Dewey's version of pragmatism is *instrumentalism*: 'For the pragmatist, ideas are controlled by facts. The idea starts from facts and returns to facts, and it is the differences that it makes to the world of fact that indicate its meaning' (Moore 1961, 206). This definition applies for inquiry into public problems, which he defines in utilitarian fashion; 'In short, all propositions about policies to be pursued, ends to be striven for, consequences to be reached are propositions about subject-matters having the formal relation *means-consequences*, and are, in the sense defined, causal propositions' (1938, 461).

The practical orientation distinguishes pragmatism from other forms of empiricism. Dewey believed that we could establish logical causality, but his version of cause was specifically practical (1938, 462). Both pragmatism and other versions of science operate according to the scientific method of formulating hypotheses and verifying them by experimentation. The difference between positivism and Dewey's pragmatist empiricism is that for Dewey judgement does not end by confirming a

hypothesis, but the hypothesis itself directs future action. Reason only terminates by acting correctly upon existence, rather than seeking knowledge for its own sake, which distinguishes practical reason and scientific inquiry (Putnam and Putnam 1992, 44). Practical inquiry has the distinguishing characteristic of the pragmatic criterion, knowledge as practical problem solving. In social inquiry, policy making is a rational plan for action to solve practical problems (Dewey 1938, 499).

For Dewey, this epistemological distinction had important implications for politics. He felt that positivist science denigrated practical matters in favour of theory (Moore 1961, 266). When science is 'pure', detached from human affairs, it becomes 'another class-interest, that of intellectualists and aloof specialists', who might also use research for private profit (Dewey 1958, 162-5). Pragmatism, in contrast, which makes public problems the object of inquiry, was concerned with determining social values. This conception of inquiry was democratic because it was oriented towards solving the practical problems of the public rather than the abstract problems of philosophy (Dewey 1927). Applying knowledge to public problems establishes the democratic quality of Dewey's thought, and this is what people see of most value in pragmatism today.

To understand Dewey's emphasis on experience, we should consider the historical context in which he worked. Wilson points out that pragmatism grew out of a revival of empiricism and a cultural climate that held scientific values and methods in high regard (1995, 138). Both positivism and pragmatism shared a thoroughgoing empiricism that viewed the only true knowledge as residing in experience (Brandom 2004, 4). Indeed, the two were so similar that pragmatism

paved the way for logical positivism in the United States, effectively creating the condition of its own demise (Wilson 1995, 139). Dewey explicitly rejected metaphysics, which he considered irrelevant and sterile, criticising non-empirical philosophy for failing to verify its conclusions in experience and for remaining aloof and overly abstract in tone (1958, 6). He felt that neglecting primary experience resulted in knowledge 'indifferent to human interests' (1958, 11). So, he attempted to reconstruct philosophy away from metaphysics, giving it a new, positive role as applicable to public affairs (Bernstein 1966, 75). His rejection of metaphysics thus had a democratic intent, and it is here that some contemporary thinkers find in pragmatism a systematic opponent to positivist science (Wilson 1995, 128; see for example Rorty 1991). However, the question is whether he really did reconstruct philosophy on positive lines, or whether he transformed it into another version of science. If it was the latter, then this would not preclude a view of politics as best conducted by scientists, which would not, in turn, provide the grounds for democratic problem solving. This tension between reading Dewey's reason as technocratic or as supporting a contrary desire for open, democratic deliberation is the main conflict within Dewey's thought that impacts upon the applicability of pragmatism to political theory today. Richardson points out that Dewey in fact rejected the narrow version of instrumentalism of which he is often accused, seeing his theory of inquiry as supporting collective, democratic deliberation (1999:111, 145). Although, this is not consistent with his emphasis on experimental method as a mode of inquiry and his faith in public policy experts (1999:111-2).

Despite this scientific orientation, pragmatism had a different criterion of resolution because it was oriented towards solving problems in their context. The pragmatists responded to Darwin who showed that the world is not static, but defined by adaptation rather than permanent logical structures (Depew 1995, 3). Hence a solution was only temporary, a 'demi-cadence' awaiting further inquiry in the light of a world in flux (Depew 1995, 3). Inquiry never ceases because new problems arise as nature, and society, changes. Ignoring this shifting context, as in traditional epistemology, produces abstract and sterile knowledge (Bernstein 1966, 110-1). The organic nature of social life requires that we cooperate to deal with new problems, and hence requires an ongoing process of practical and productive reason (Depew 1995, 7). Dewey felt that cooperative problem solving experience could replace religion as a social bond (Depew 1995, 7). This reflects Peirce's idea that the pragmatic criterion of practical problem solving served as a Kantian regulative ideal (Depew 1995, 4). Ongoing inquiry was thus linked, by Dewey, to an anti-elitist vision of public life in which modern individuals would be both more autonomous and more cooperative through forming associations oriented towards instrumental problem solving (Depew 1995, 8).

To sum up, Dewey allocated a central place to questioning. But, importantly, he situated questioning within an overall picture where experience determined what counts as knowledge, since it gives rise to both problems and solutions. Inquiry gives us access to the totality of experience but does not contribute any meaning in itself. So, while Dewey stressed that we think by questioning it was not, for him, what made knowledge.

2. Answering as the dissolution of questions: positivism and pragmatism

Looking more closely at this idea of rejecting philosophical problems in favour of inquiring into public problems, we see that both positivists and pragmatists constructed rationality as the dissolution of questions. Michel Meyer notes that the conception of answering as the dissolution of questions applies to many philosophies, and not just positivism, which was not alone in its anti-philosophical attitude (1995, 40). With positivism, for example, Meyer points out that despite many references to questioning, Wittgenstein and the other members of the Vienna Circle did not conceive of questioning in its own right, but instead construed the meaning of questions as the possibility of their dissolution (1995, 38-41). Moreover, they argued that philosophy had mixed false problems with real ones, and that a proper logical language would allow us to distinguish them, so false problems could then be eliminated by declaring them unsolvable and, therefore, senseless (1995, 40). The problems of philosophy, which continually recur, have no apodictic solution and are therefore meaningless pseudoproblems (1995, 39). Meyer describes the task of positivism as dissolving problems for which it could not account through a 'reducer', thereby producing univocal knowledge (1995, 41). The reducer eliminates questions as meaningless where no solution can be found; '...solving a problem consists of making it disappear, once resolved. Failure to do this implies that the problem doesn't exist' (1995, 41). That is, since meaning arises from solutions, declaring a solution impossible eliminates the problem, and thus has the same effect as finding a solution that responds directly to the problem. For Wittgenstein, for example, the

reducer was language, such that 'he considered as self-evident that when "there is then no question left...just this is the answer" (*Tractatus* 6.52)' (Wittgenstein, in Meyer 1995, 42).

Meyer argues that the paradoxical requirement upon which positivism stands stems from its limited conception of resolution as the dissolution of problems (1995, 43). Why? While empiricist science can and does solve some problems, all anti-positivist philosophies have pointed out that positivism cannot justify its validity on its own logico-experimental terms (1995, 44). Positivism can only assert this resolutive model *a priori* without justification because it cannot account for its own necessity; 'When we are told that meaning is verification, we must concede the self-refutational character of such an assertion because it is unverifiable on its own grounds' (1995, 44). It excludes problems that cannot be verified as pseudo-problems, but this includes the question of its own foundation. Indeed, 'There is an inevitable paradox [in positivism]: how to prove that one is answering a question by showing that one cannot answer it?' (1995, 47). Such an answer cannot be verified on positivist grounds, because 'no proposition can be verified as an answer to a meaningless question' (1995, 47). Indeed it is possible to answer a question by rejecting the question, but this lies outside the principle of meaning as empirical verification. By reflecting upon the foundations of positivism as a mode of inquiry, we see that positivism is but one modality of the question-answer difference, and its ambition to monopolise knowledge collapses because the notion of resolution must be enlarged beyond the criterion of dissolution (1995, 44-5).

Why should the dissolution of questions be the model for *all* answering? If we reflect upon knowledge without seeking an *a priori* reduction of questioning, then the paradox disappears; 'By contrast, if one *begins* with this difference, as applied to philosophical questioning, it can be better understood that there can be an answer to a question which rejects the question as a question, even as it resolves it' (Meyer 1995, 48). Dissolving a question in the answer establishes a *difference* between question and answer, and it is this primary difference that gives such a solution meaning; positivism can make it the *only* model of resolution by force alone (1995, 43). Science and commonsense operate upon the taken for granted idea that solutions eliminate problems, but this does not adequately describe all forms of answering. In philosophy, for example, solutions are in fact problematisations; 'To answer a question, in philosophy, is equivalent to unfolding the question in the answer' (1995, 43). In politics, my concern here, problem posing is also fundamental, since productive political cultures produce problems, thematising the concerns of the public so we might deliberate over them. The nature of the problem, in politics, is as important as the search for solutions, the usual sense by which we understand policy making.

If positivists rejected anything they could not observe, then pragmatists rejected anything that could not be done. In Dewey's pragmatism we find a similar resolution of questions by their dissolution. Dewey also rejected traditional philosophy on the grounds that it failed to solve its problems, casting metaphysical questions as meaningless abstractions, as obstructions to knowledge, because meaning derives entirely from solutions. Therefore unsolvable philosophical

problems – problems that could not be dissolved through experience – were non-problems and could be dismissed. For logical empiricism, experience acts as the ‘reductor’ of questioning, imposed as the sole criterion as to what counts as knowledge (Meyer 1995, 58). Similarly for Dewey, non-empirical problems were not true problems, but ‘blind alleys’ or irrelevant intellectual ‘puzzles’ (1958, 7). Certainly Dewey did not share Wittgenstein’s nihilistic ambition to dissolve all questions, because he believed that some questions could be solved (Bernstein 1966, 174). Nonetheless, the mode of resolution as dissolution is similar.

Dewey adopts a similar strategy of asserting the dissolution of problems as the only valid model of resolution. The pragmatic criterion of *relevance* to experience eliminates non-empirical philosophy from the realm of knowledge. If a question cannot be eliminated by transforming a situation in practice then it is an irrelevant question, and is thereby dissolved. If philosophy could not solve its problems, then asserting the pragmatic criterion would enable us to see which problems were important and which ones not. This practical requirement is different from positivism, but in the end experience acts as Dewey’s reductor of questioning, so Dewey’s problem solving logic and recourse to experience follows positivism.

But on what grounds does he justify this answer? Certainly not on empirical grounds, nor by reference to its practical consequences, for making such a resolution has no meaning as practice. But he must maintain that the dissolution of problems is the only model of resolution. What he does is substitute the pragmatic criterion for the absent first principle of knowledge, rejecting questioning and asserting that all problems can be brought back to experience alone. But this is not itself an empirical

conclusion, and is therefore contradictory. Dewey cannot consistently argue that answering has meaning only in experience and then assert the validity of an answer that dissolves the question because it doesn't refer to experience. He assumes the primary answer, experience, has already been established when in fact it has never been questioned. Practical problem solving is certainly possible, but this does not suffice for a philosophical view, nor for an understanding of the question-answer link, which is more fundamental.

Pragmatism was different from positivism in proposing inquiry as cooperative human action within an environment, and the extent of fallibilism was greater in pragmatism than in positivism (Putnam 1995:70). Furthermore, good scientific problem solving, for Dewey, could not be achieved by isolated scientists but required the "*democratization of inquiry*" (Putnam 1995:73). And Bernstein argues an interpretative reading of Dewey, commenting that Dewey long ago recognised that facts depend on the questions we ask of them (1966, 110). But doesn't this suggest that questioning is primary, and not experience or some other reductor that secures a propositional starting point?

But even if we concede these points and acknowledge Dewey's democratic sentiments, the question we must ask is this: Is the conception of knowledge as the dissolution of questions adequate to understand politics and policy making? Policy solutions do not, in most cases, resolve political problems by making them disappear. Even the most minor policy measures can attract vehement and sustained dispute. Far from solving problems, continuous disagreement characterises policy and politics. If policy failed to change experience would it then be meaningless? This

would render most political activity senseless, and even though we might afford a wry grin at this depiction it does not help us understand what goes on in political rationality.

3. Inquiry and practical reason

What of Dewey's pragmatic criterion, the general solution that grounds answering as the practical dissolution of questions? Doesn't this serve as a useful substitute for thought that lacks a first principle, something that enables us to answer practical questions even if we cannot confine all resolution to this mode of answering?

Because of its practical orientation, pragmatism has been associated with Aristotelian practical reason (see for example Bernstein 1986). As I noted above, the pragmatists were reacting to the influence of Darwin, who revealed the importance of continuous contextual adaptation in an ever-changing world. Because experience itself changes, and because knowledge derives from experience, then all knowledge is partial in some respect. Since the mind is adaptive it must be tied to environmental conditions, and therefore philosophy should assimilate theoretical to practical reason (Depew 1995, 7). Hence pragmatism was oriented towards finding solutions in *context* rather than universal truths. Practical reason (*phronesis*) is not only relevant and useful, but also democratic and anti-elitist. The restoration of *phronesis* (Torgerson 1995) is thus the restoration of a more positive, Aristotelian politics against an ontological view that cannot stomach contingency.

But is practical reason truly different from science? Jaako Hintikka (1974) makes a strong critique of the idea of practical reason, finding that Aristotle's

conception of practical reason is indistinguishable from theoretical science, and relies on an oversimplified conception of human decision making. First, he notes that Aristotle drew a direct comparison between the practical syllogism and science (1974, 90). He quotes Aristotle, who stated that the difference between the two forms of reason is that for science the end is the truth seen, whereas for practical reason the end result is an action (1974, 90). But despite this difference, he points out that practical reasoning proceeds in exactly the same manner as geometry, describing practical deliberation as 'not about ends but about means...They assume the end and consider how and by what means it is to be attained...what is last in the order of analysis seems to be first in the order of becoming' (1974, 89-90). He then notes that this analysis was an identical methodological process to that of Newton, Galileo, and Descartes (1974, 90). Practical reason and science may be different in consequence, but are no different in logic; 'It is thus instructive to find precisely the same conceptual model at the bottom of both the most typical operation of practical reason and one of the first and foremost methodological ideas of modern natural science' (1974, 90-91). Practical reason cannot, Hintikka concludes, be disentangled from theoretical science.

We find the same model of reason in Dewey's problem solving. The solution is not only the end of thought, but also the starting point; '*The nature of the problem fixes the end of thought, and the end controls the process of thinking* [original emphasis]' (1971, 15). Thinking proceeds from the end and deliberates over the *means* to achieve the end, so meaning becomes the (practical) method for reaching a solution that is known in advance. To think is to deliberate over practical ends, the conclusions of

which must be justified, in turn, by recourse to experience. Dewey was clear that his logic of inquiry was scientific, but Hintikka's assessment points out how similar practical reason and science really are.

Science can substitute for practical reason because of their similar logic in which the method of problem solving is of utmost value. And, because science has the most rigorous methodology and its reductionist approach is so efficient, pragmatism cannot foreclose a participatory version of politics as practical problem solving from a scientific view. We can see the consequences of this not only in the success of positivism over pragmatism in the United States (see above), but also in other, related fields. For example, Harold Lasswell, a follower of Dewey, incorporated a strong methodological emphasis in his idea of a 'problem orientation' for the 'policy sciences' (see Lerner and Lasswell 1951). The similarity in logic of practical reasoning and science meant that Dewey's desire to establish a participatory democracy along problem solving lines did not support his aim to establish a non-elitist form of decision making.

Hintikka makes a second major criticism of practical reason, pointing out that Aristotle's account of deliberation is 'wildly oversimplified' because he supposes that deliberation proceeds by a linear sequence of ends and means (1974, 91). First, it is frequently possible to propose 'different equally practicable means to the same end', as Aristotle himself was forced to admit (1974, 91-2). This indicates that there need be no necessary correspondence between a solution and its practical end (1974, 92). Hintikka notes that some contemporary thinkers attempt to bypass this objection by arguing that practical reasoning is not supposed to be apodictic (1974, 93). However,

he counters by arguing that his critique is truly damaging because Aristotle has overlooked 'an important feature of human decision making' (1974, 93). Even in geometry there are multiple dependencies between more than two terms, excluding the possibility of dealing with linear sequences of dependent relationships (1974, 94). If we consider political deliberation, it should be obvious that decision making involving multiple individuals and agencies in deliberation over complex problems renders linear procedures towards a single end highly improbable. Accounting for all the interdependent relationships in a linear system would be difficult in even the smallest organisations, let alone in a complex community of many participants. In fact, pervasive uncertainty characterises all but the most trivial instances of problem solving, even if we know all the laws that govern the relationships among the objects concerned (1974, 94-5). Ultimately, therefore, Aristotle's conception of practical reason rests on an oversimplified model of decision making (1974, 95).

Dewey's model of inquiry into public problems, which is goal oriented, also seems overly optimistic about decision making in practice. Policy making and policy implementation are far more uncertain in reality, both politically and epistemologically. Dewey pointed to the limitations of problem solving himself; since deciding what is to be done relates to unknown future events, differences of opinion over policy actions may well arise from knowledge of the same facts (1927, 178). Nonetheless, what is important is the difficulty of the conceptual model of practical reason as problem solving, and whether we can impose it on top of human action, even as an ideal type. This is not to say that we can't act intentionally towards some end, but only that the conception of practical reason as instrumental action to achieve

an end known in advance does not depict the whole of human decision making.¹ If we are to establish a legitimate place for political reasoning, which takes place under conditions of pervasive uncertainty and disagreement, then we need to thematise questioning in positive terms rather than as something to be eliminated *a priori* by some reductor that itself remains out of the question.

4. Recovering the value of questioning

Now that we understand a little more about Dewey's Aristotelian influences arising from the latter's 'practical reason', we can see that the pragmatic theory of inquiry shares its logic of resolution with scientific logic, so other than accounting for restrictions upon decision making power in context and greater uncertainty about the future, there is nothing inherent in practical problem solving that distinguishes it from a scientific conception of policy and politics. But can we correct the mistake at the origin of Dewey's theory of inquiry? Dewey's own attention to questioning gives us a clue if, instead of assuming that the dissolution of questions is the only model of resolution, we follow Michel Meyer and consider questioning in its own right.

Dewey's practice reflects the value of inquiry, but inquiry is even more important to his own processes than he acknowledges. Putnam and Putnam make the important point that Dewey's 'Logic as the theory of inquiry is itself the result of an inquiry' (1992, 41). They then go on to describe his theory of inquiry 'as a product of the very sort of inquiry that it describes: *epistemology is hypothesis*' (1992, 56). Maybe so, but it would not be correct to conclude that Dewey's philosophy is

¹ See Markus (1986) on the problems of Aristotle's distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*.

internally consistent. Dewey's philosophy of inquiry is certainly the result of an inquiry, but it is not the result of an empirical inquiry. Putnam and Putnam correctly point out Dewey's consistent use of questioning, but this does not square with Dewey's answer that all questioning pertains to experience. Like positivism, the answer comprising Dewey's rejection of philosophical problems is not verifiable by its own model of resolution, and is therefore contradictory. Inquiry is reduced to experience only after the fact, when in reality the theoretical is primary, despite Dewey's assertions that philosophical answers must be verified empirically. The inquiry into experience is therefore only a particular instance of answering, one possibility of a more general relationship between question and answer, which Meyer argues is a fundamental logical difference. Dewey's inquiry into inquiry is not an inquiry into experience, but an inquiry into inquiry itself.

Since the theory of inquiry is itself the result of an inquiry, an important conclusion follows: the *answer* to the question of knowledge is *questioning* itself. Dewey's answer to the question of knowledge is itself a theory of questioning, from which he should have confirmed that inquiry, or questioning, is the primary element of thought. In other words, the affirmation of questioning is itself an answer to the question of how we think. This is not circular reasoning because the solution that confirms questioning is different to the question to which it responds. This solution establishes a particular type of logical *difference*, such that the first answer is a partial solution that makes the constitutive implicit role of questioning explicit.² Meyer terms this a *problematological answer*, a question that is also a result (1995:11). This

² See Meyer (1995:201-9).

partial answer does not depend on a final solution that eliminates it for its meaning, but rather the answer has meaning in its status as a question. Such an answer is reflexively secured by the practice of questioning which gave birth to it, and is in this sense superior to any other answer that pretends to be an unquestionable foundation, which is in fact contradictory because all answers must result from, and refer to, questions.

Dewey might have accorded such a positive status to a problem, as an 'answer' in its own right. Indeed, he suggests as much: 'A problem represents the partial transformation by inquiry of a problematic situation into a determinate situation. It is a familiar and significant saying that a problem well-put is half-solved' (1938, 108). Here he describes a *difference* between indeterminacy and discourse that gives explicit form to that indeterminacy (as a problem), a stage on the way to an ultimate resolution. He also puts this view later in the *Logic*, when he says that judgement does figure in intermediate propositions, and that this is a necessary condition for an eventual solution: '*something* is settled. It is through a series of such intervening settlements that the final settlement is constructed. Judgement as final settlement is dependent upon a series of partial settlements' (1938, 122). His five stage conception of thinking that moves from the intuition of a problem, through its discovery, the formulation of a hypothesis, and the corroborative justification of the hypothesis by action, indicates the importance of partial stages in the process of inquiry (1971, 107-115).³ The partial answers of the intermediate stages make an

³ Bernstein points to this aspect of Dewey's theory of inquiry, which emphasises discovery rather than the *a posteriori* reconstruction of logical relationships, making it distinct from the problem solving conception of science (1966:106-7).

advance on the initial doubtful situation, while not going all the way to a solution that dissolves the problem.

But, ultimately, Dewey accords no logical status to partial answers, which have no meaning on their own. Partial answers are important only insofar as they refer to their potential *dissolution* in the final answer. This final answer is certainly contingent upon the context, and therefore 'fallible' (Richardson 1999:120, Putnam 1995:21). Indeed, Richardson reminds us that Dewey did not see any end as 'final' but always potentially subject to revision, and therefore he argued that Dewey's philosophy could be extended to 'allow robust enough deliberation about ends so that the possible existence even of an ultimate end could at least be a live question' (1999:121). Nonetheless, even though Dewey saw answers as somewhat problematic in practice, what is important in his logic is that ends are not thematised in terms of questioning, because they are still framed as solutions that dissolve questions altogether. Dewey's logic does not express problematicity as such, instead locating this in experience itself, in as much as experience evolves. We can better see this where he asserts that the goal, the answer or solution, structures the thinking process itself; 'There is a goal to be reached, and this end sets a task that controls the sequence of ideas' (1971, 6). So, even if partial results count for something, the process of inquiry has meaning only insofar as it reveals a final solution (even if that solution is only a possibility): 'Statement of a problematic situation in terms of a problem has no meaning save as the problem instituted has, in the very terms of its statement, reference to a possible solution' (1938, 108). Rather than seeing the question-answer complex as providing meaning, including the partial stage that

establishes the difference between implicit worries and explicit problems, Dewey resolves questions into hypothetical propositions that, just as in science, make no reference to questioning. Meyer points out that although a hypothesis is indifferent to questioning, it is undeniably the result of an inquiry, and therefore also an 'answer' (1995, 102).

Dewey denied the primary importance of questioning by declaring that the locus of all meaning resides in problem *solving* via experience, not in questioning. Michel Meyer describes this process as measuring the worth of philosophy by borrowing a resolutive model from outside philosophy, from science (1995, 7-9). So, instead of concluding that questioning is constitutive of knowledge, of which the questioning of experience is one element, experience acts as the *reducer* of questioning in Dewey's theory, resolving all non-empirical questions by *a priori* dissolution when an answer cannot be found. Questioning gives us access to experience but contains no meaning in itself because it is born of, and returns to, experience, which is the unanalysable first principle. Experience is the out-of-the-question that resolves all questions, even though, were we to think about it, we might then wonder why it was necessary for Dewey to conduct his philosophical inquiry at all, since we already use this reasoning in practice.

Dewey's depiction of inquiry as practical problem solving appeals to our common sense, and is certainly applicable to politics. What could be more natural than to solve the pollution problem by eliminating pollution? This is not at issue, but only the idea that such a resolution is sufficient for understanding the process of policy making about the pollution problem. We can only pose the problem of

pollution by already having a partial answer in the formation of the problem, in deciding that pollution is something we care about, that has meaning for us, and that we might want to take action to redress the situation. It is obviously sensible to use the consequences of a policy solution to evaluate its worth, but questions of evaluation are not the same as questions of understanding. Problem solving reasoning can only operate because of the more fundamental difference between question and answer upon which Dewey's thought operates but which he does not thematise. There is a paradox at the heart of his philosophy because his own reasoning cannot be verified reflexively by the pragmatic criterion. Hence he could not make philosophy into science without denying the theoretical aspect of his own reasoning, the constitutive role of questioning, and the question-answer difference as the primary difference of thought. In short, by reflecting upon Dewey's logic using Meyer's ideas on questioning, we see that there is no necessity to refer to experience, but all answers must refer to questions, even answers that resolve questions by rejecting them.

So, although Dewey states that problems and solutions refer to one another, it is solutions which bear the meaning, and not questions. He defines knowledge as the elimination of questions, making science the ideal model of reason. Although I have only discussed this procedure in Dewey, Meyer argues this is a feature of propositional reason in general (Meyer 1995). Hence Dewey describes questioning as an 'art' (1971, 266), a useful technique to elucidate problems from elsewhere, for example in education (1971). The centrality of the problem solving mode of resolution applies even if we acknowledge that Dewey made room for some

contingency when he insisted that, since experience changes, all knowledge is only temporary. Problematicity gives us access to knowledge by prompting us to think, but actual knowledge resides in eliminating problematicity and restoring the totality of experience.

5. Conclusion: questioning and democracy

Although defining solutions as the elimination of questions seems uncontroversial, it does have significant consequences for philosophy in general, and for our understanding of policy and politics in particular. Meyer argues that the *a priori* elimination of questioning makes problematicity a *residual* aspect of reason, an addition to knowledge that is necessary for it to be complete but also, by definition, inferior to problem solving (1995). In particular, this relegates rhetoric to a subordinate status in comparison with logic (1994). For our purposes, this makes it exceptionally difficult to theorise about politics, for which uncertainty, contingency, persistent problems, and deliberative rhetoric to deal with them are central. Dewey wanted thinking to find solutions to public problems, but we know that this is only one possibility. He attempted to make philosophy more relevant by moving away from abstract metaphysics and asserting the value of practical reason, which we use in politics. But because he held a problem solving view of rationality, it is difficult to use his thought to distinguish science from politics, and the latter seems like a weak version of thought that produces imperfect or wrong answers and, like philosophy, cannot point to a catalogue of dissolved problems, as science can. This suggests that imposing a scientific framework upon policy and politics might be a better solution,

and so pragmatism is not inconsistent with an elite, scientific conception of the policy process. But the rhetoric of political inquiry in practice is more complex, and the maintenance of a question can be a positive result because of the questioning itself. Human decision making might be complex and less than consensual, but we should not tacitly accept that it is somehow imperfect or irrational because it does not follow scientific method. Partial answers are also important, and in this Meyer shows that the solutions of philosophy, its problematisations, are also valuable. By affirming the constitutive role of questioning, Meyer better establishes the grounds for democratic inquiry where everyone is potentially a questioner, compared with a process in which only a few experts are needed to solve problems, defined by experience, more or less efficiently.

Dewey is important for us because he linked the problems of reason and democracy together. But he could not reconcile his problem solving epistemology with his preferred conception of democracy as an active community of inquirers. By questioning Dewey's philosophy anew, we see he deduced his own philosophy through philosophical, not scientific, questioning; therefore it is a product of, and should reflect, questioning as a fundamental property. Meyer's problematology is very different, and we can appreciate his fundamental insight by recovering and extending what is positive in Dewey. It is not only situations that are fundamentally indeterminate (Bernstein 1966, 104), but thought and action alike are constructed upon indeterminacy, which we can give positive logical form by starting from questions rather than propositions. If I disagree with Dewey about his epistemology, I support his emphasis on democracy, and it is much for this latter reason that

pragmatism resonates with contemporary political theory. If pragmatism is relevant to our present circumstances it is because questioning, or problematization, has come to the fore in knowledge generally, as well as in politics, and the twin problems of epistemology and democracy combine today to form a single, intertwined problem, just as they did for Dewey. So, rather than rejecting philosophical questioning in favour of problem solving, Meyer suggests we return to the foundations of philosophy and reconsider questioning in a new light. Only then might we ask what the fundamental value of questioning means for inquiry into public problems in contemporary democracy, a value which has been central to the practice of democracy and philosophy since Socrates.

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