

John Dewey and the Progressive Conception of Freedom

1908

INTRODUCTION

The great chasm that divides Progressives from proponents of the Founding ultimately comes down to two radically different understandings of liberty. Nowhere is this difference made clearer than in the following short excerpt from a 1908 textbook on ethics written by John Dewey and James Tufts. Dewey, one of the leading lights of the Progressive movement, and his former University of Chicago colleague James Tufts transform the Founders' meaning of freedom, making it thoroughly social in its origin and purpose. Redefining freedom in this way completely alters American political institutions, which assume at all levels free men and women who will be zealous about defending their individual rights.

In modern society, Dewey and Tufts argue, individuals enjoy more freedom but incur more responsibility as well. The individual "is under obligation to use his rights in social ways." Property, for example, must be used in a socially desirable way. Therefore, the wealthy and productive owe society, which has claims on their property and activity. A community should use fear of disapproval to mold individuals so

that they habitually (and with pleasure) make decisions in light of their "social consequences." This sense of social responsibility is "the sole *ultimate* guarantee of social order" (emphasis in the original). Dewey and Tufts shift from natural rights (which they dismiss as anarchic) to social consequences as the measure of right and wrong, from the manliness of assertions of right to the stigma of social disapproval as means of enforcing justice.

Their argument hinges on the distinction they introduce between formal and effective freedom. What the Founders understood to be liberty, they dismiss as mere formal freedom. A "clear road, cleared of impediments, for action" is not sufficient. True freedom—what they call effective freedom—requires (1) possession of the means to achieve what one desires and (2) the mental skills to choose wisely. Simply put, the freedom to drive a car doesn't mean much if you can't afford to buy a car and aren't smart enough to not simply drive wherever your baser desires lead you.

As should be clear from this example, this redefinition of freedom opens the door for not only unlimited

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government but unlimited social and psychological control of individuals—all for their own good. “Until there is secured to *and imposed upon* all members of society the right and the duty of work in socially serviceable occupations, with due return in social goods, rights to life and free movement will hardly advance much beyond their present largely nominal state”

(emphasis added). Men must be forced to be free, free for society’s good. Dewey and Tufts suppose there will be little if any debate about their ideas—a trait that endures in modern liberalism, for the major spiritedness in their society would be directed against spiritedness, the assertion of individual pride.

“Responsibility and Freedom” & “Rights and Obligations”

John Dewey and James Tufts

Excerpts from Chapter XX “Social Organization and the Individual” in Ethics
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§ 2. RESPONSIBILITY AND FREEDOM

The more comprehensive and diversified the social order, the greater the responsibility and the freedom of the individual. His freedom is the greater, because the more numerous are the effective stimuli to action, and the more varied and the more certain the ways in which he may fulfill his powers. His responsibility is greater because there are more demands for considering the consequences of his acts; and more agencies for bringing home to him the recognition of consequences which affect not merely more persons individually, but which also influence the more remote and hidden social ties.

Liability.—Freedom and responsibility have a relatively superficial and negative meaning and a relatively positive central meaning. In its external aspect, responsibility is *liability*. An agent is free to act; yes, but— He must stand the consequences, the disagreeable as well as the pleasant, the social as well as the physical. He may do a given act, but if so, let him look out. His act is a matter that concerns others as well as himself, and they will prove their concern by calling him to account; and if he cannot give a satisfactory and credible account of his intention, subject him to correction. Each community and organization informs its members what it regards as obnoxious, and serves notice upon them that they have to answer if they offend. The individual then is (1) likely or liable

to have to explain and justify his behavior, and is (2) liable or open to suffering consequent upon inability to make his explanation acceptable.

Positive Responsibility.—In this way the individual is made aware of the stake the community has in his behavior; and is afforded an opportunity to take that interest into account in directing his desires and making his plans. If he does so, he is a responsible person. The agent who does not take to heart the concern which others show that they have in his conduct, will note his liability only as an evil to which he is exposed, and will take it into consideration only to see how to escape or evade it. But one whose point of view is sympathetic and reasonable will recognize the justice of the community interest in his performances; and will recognize the value to him of the instruction contained in its assertions of its interest. Such an one responds, answers, to the social demands made; he is not merely called to answer. He holds himself responsible for the consequences of his acts; he does not wait to be held liable by others. When society looks for responsible workmen, teachers, doctors, it does not mean merely those whom it may call to account; it can do that in any case. It wants men and women who habitually form their purpose after consideration of the social consequences of their execution. Dislike of disapprobation, fear of penalty, play a part in generating this responsive habit; but fear, operating directly, occasions only cunning or servility. Fused, through reflection, with other

motives which prompt to action, it helps bring about that apprehensiveness, or susceptibility to the rights of others, which is the essence of responsibility, which in turn is the sole *ultimate* guarantee of social order.

The Two Senses of Freedom.—In its external aspect, freedom is negative and formal. It signifies freedom *from* subjection to the will and control of others; exemption from bondage; release from servitude; capacity to act without being exposed to direct obstructions or interferences from others. It means a clear road, cleared of impediments, for action. It contrasts with the limitations of prisoner, slave, and serf, who have to carry out the will of others.

Effective Freedom.—Exemption from restraint and from interference with overt action is only a condition, though an absolutely indispensable one, of effective freedom. The latter requires (1) positive control of the resources necessary to carry purposes into effect, possession of the means to satisfy desires; and (2) mental equipment with the trained powers of initiative and reflection requisite for free preference and for circum-spect and far-seeing desires. The freedom of an agent who is merely released from direct external obstruction is formal and empty. If he is without resources of personal skill, without control of the tools of achievement, he must inevitably lend himself to carrying out the directions and ideas of others. If he has not powers of deliberation and invention, he must pick up his ideas casually and superficially from the suggestions of his environment and appropriate the notions which the interests of some class insinuate into his mind. If he had not powers of intelligent self-control, he will be in bondage to appetite, enslaved to routine, imprisoned within the monotonous round of an imagery flowing from illiberal interests, broken only by wild forays into the illicit.

Legal and Moral.—Positive responsibility and freedom may be regarded as moral, while liability and

exemption are legal and political. A particular individual at a given time is possessed of certain secured resources in execution and certain formal habits of desire and reflection. In so far, he is positively free. Legally, his sphere of activity may be very much wider. The laws, the prevailing body of rules which define existing institutions, would protect him in exercising claims and powers far beyond those which he can actually put forth. He is exempt from interference in travel, in reading, in hearing music, in pursuing scientific research. But if he has neither material means nor mental cultivation to enjoy these legal possibilities, mere exemption means little or nothing. It does, however, create a moral demand that the practical limitations which hem him in should be removed; that practical conditions should be afforded which will enable him effectively to take advantage of the opportunities formally open. Similarly, at any given time, the liabilities to which an individual is actually held come far short of the accountability to which the more conscientious members of society hold themselves. The morale of the individual is in advance of the formulated morality, or legality, of the community.

Regulation of Legal to Moral.—It is, however, absurd to separate the legal and the ideal aspects of freedom from one another. It is only as men are held liable that they become responsible; even the conscientious man, however much in some respects his demands upon himself exceed those which would be enforced against him by others, still needs in other respects to have his unconscious partiality and presumption steadied by the requirements of others. He needs to have his judgment balanced against crankiness, narrowness, or fanaticism, by reference to the sanity of the common standard of his times. It is only as men are exempt from external obstruction that they become aware of the possibilities, and are awakened to the demand and strive to obtain more positive freedom. Or, again, it is the possession by the more favored individuals in society of an effectual freedom

to do and to enjoy things with respect to which the masses have only a formal and legal freedom, that arouses a sense of inequity, and that stirs the social judgment and will to such reforms of law, of administration and economic conditions as will transform the empty freedom of the less favored individuals into constructive realities.

§ 3. RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

The Individual and Social in Rights and Obligations.—That which, taken at large or in a lump, is called freedom breaks up in detail into a number of specific, concrete abilities to act in particular ways. These are termed *rights*. Any right includes within itself in intimate unity the individual and social aspects of activity upon which we have been insisting. As a capacity for exercise of power, it resides in and proceeds from some special agent, some individual. As exemption from restraint, a secured release from obstruction, it indicates at least the permission and sufferance of society, a tacit social assent and confirmation; while any more positive and energetic effort on the part of the community to guarantee and safeguard it, indicates an active acknowledgment on the part of society that the free exercise by individuals of the power in question is positively on its own interest. Thus a right, individual in residence, is social in origin and intent. The social factor in rights is made explicit in the demand that the power in question be exercised in certain ways. A right is never a claim to a wholesale, indefinite activity, but to a *defined* activity; *to one carried on, that is, under certain conditions*. This limitation constitutes the *obligatory* phases of every right. But he is free to act only according to certain regular and established conditions. That is the obligation imposed upon him. He has a right to use public roads, but he is obliged to turn in a certain way. He has a right to use his property, but he is obliged to pay taxes, to pay debts, not to harm others in its use, and so on.

Correspondence of Rights and Obligations.—Rights and obligations are thus strictly correlative. This is true both in their external employment and in their intrinsic natures. Externally the individual is under obligation to use his right in a way which does not interfere with the rights of others. He is free to drive on the public highways, but not to exceed a certain speed, and on condition that he turns to right or left as the public order requires. He is entitled to the land which he has bought, but this possession is subject to the conditions of public registration and taxation. He may use his property, but not so that it menaces others or becomes a nuisance. Absolute rights, if we mean by absolute those not relative to any social order and hence exempt from any social restriction, there are none. But rights correspond even more intrinsically to obligations. The right is itself a social outcome: it is the individual's only so far as he is himself a social member not merely physically, but in his habits of thought and feeling. He is under obligation to use his rights in social ways. The more we emphasize the free right of an individual to his property, the more we emphasize what society has done for him: the avenues it has opened to him for acquiring; the safeguards it has put about him for keeping; the wealth achieved by others which he may acquire by exchanges themselves socially buttressed. So far as an individual's own merits are concerned these opportunities and protections are "unearned increments," no matter what credit he may deserve for initiative and industry and foresight in using them. The only fundamental anarchy is that which regards rights as private monopolies, ignoring their social origin and intent.

Classes of Rights and Obligations.—We may discuss freedom and responsibility with respect to the social organization which secures and enforces them; or from the standpoint of the individual who exercises and acknowledges them. From the latter standpoint, rights are conveniently treated as physical and mental: not that the physical and mental can be separated,

but that emphasis may fall primarily on control of the conditions required to execute ideas and intentions, or upon the control of the conditions involved in their personal formation and choice. From the standpoint of the public order, rights and duties are civil and political. We shall consider them in the next chapter in connection with the organization of society in the state. Here we consider rights as inhering in an individual in virtue of his membership in society.

I. Physical Rights.—These are the rights to the free unharmed possession of the body (the rights to life and limb), exemptions from homicidal attack, from assault and battery, and from conditions that threaten health in more obscure ways; and positively, the right to free movement of the body, to use its members for any legitimate purpose, and the right to unhindered locomotion. Without the exemption, there is no security in life, no assurance; only a life of constant fear and uncertainty, of loss of limb, of injury from others, and of death. Without some positive assurance, there is no chance of carrying ideas into effect. Even if sound and healthy and extremely protected, a man lives a slave or prisoner. Right to the control and use of physical conditions of life takes effect then in property rights, command of the natural tools and materials which are requisite to the maintenance of the body in a due state of health and to an effective and competent use of the person's powers. These physical rights to life, limb, and property are so basic to all achievement and capability that they have frequently been termed "natural rights." They are so fundamental to the existence of personality that their insecurity or infringement is a direct menace to the social welfare. The struggle for human liberty and human responsibility has accordingly been more acute at this than at any other point. Roughly speaking, the history of personal liberty is the history of the efforts which have safeguarded the security of life and property and which have emancipated bodily movement from subjection to the will of others.

Unsolved Problems: War and Punishment.—While history marks great advance, especially in the last four or five centuries, as to the negative aspect of freedom or release from direct and overt tyranny, much remains undone in the positive side. It is at this point of free physical control that all conflicts of rights concentrate themselves. While the limitation by war of the right to life may be cited as evidence for the fact that even this right is not absolute but is socially conditioned, yet that kind of correspondence between individual activity and the social well-being which exacts exposure to destruction as its measure, is too suggestive of the tribal morality in which the savage shows his social nature by participation in a blood feud, to be satisfactory. Social organization is clearly defective when its constituent portions are so set at odds with one another as to demand from individuals their death as their best service to the community. While one may cite capital punishment to enforce, as if in large type, the fact that the individual holds even his right to life subject to the social welfare, the moral works the other way to underline the failure of society to socialize its members, and its tendency to put undesirable results out of sight and mind rather than to face responsibility for causes. The same limitation is seen in methods of imprisonment, which, while supposed to be protective rather than vindictive, recognize only in a few and sporadic cases that the sole sure protection of society is through education and correction of individual character, not by mere physical isolation under harsh conditions.

Security of Life.—In civilized countries the blood feud, infanticide, putting to death the economically useless and aged, have been abolished. Legalized slavery, serfdom, the subjection of the rights of wife and child to the will of husband and father, have been done away with. But many modern industries are conducted with more reference to financial gain than to life, and the annual roll of killed, injured, and diseased in

factory and railway practically equals the list of dead and wounded in a modern war.¹ Most of these acci-

¹ It is stated, upon good authority, that a street railway system in a large American city declined to adopt an improved fender, which made it practically impossible to kill persons, because the annual cost would be \$5,000 more than the existing expense for damages. This same system declined to adopt improved brakes which would reduce accidents to life and limb; and it was discovered that one of its directors was largely interested in the manufacture of the old brakes.

dents are preventable. The willingness of parents on one side and of employers on the other, conjoined with the indifference of the general public, makes child-labor an effective substitute for exposure of children and other methods of infanticide practiced by savage tribes. Agitation for old-age pensions shows that faithful service to society for a lifetime is still inadequate to secure a prosperous old age.

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