

A Discussion of Postmodern Issues Based on Dewey's Ethics: The Example of Female Moral Education

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Abstract: The focus on female moral education issues allows us to reexamine the contributions of John Dewey, an American educational philosopher. Dewey's ethics are built upon a rebellion against the universalism and rationalism that were predominant in the traditional ethics based on intrinsic manifestation and external rules. This ethical approach is primarily characterized by Dewey's pursuit of a democratic society, as well as the emphasis he places on emotional and moral imagination. Dewey's ethics can be seen as a means to address postmodern problems, integrating the traditional emphasis on "knowledge" with the postmodern focus on "discourse," based on experience. However, it is worth contemplating whether this solution is effective or if it overly magnifies the power of "understanding" in its ethical system. In the dialogue with postmodern theory, perhaps what is more crucial for the myriad of postmodern issues, exemplified by female morality, is inclusion rather than understanding, as well as questioning knowledge and reconstructing its elements.

1. Introduction

Discussions on female empowerment and women's education have entered the public eye since the 19th century, becoming a topic of widespread public discourse. By the end of the 20th century, two prominent female scholars, Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, revealed from psychological and educational perspectives the moral development patterns of women that had long been oppressed. They elevated the significance of non-rational, emotional, and relational factors in social life, educational settings, and the developmental processes of women's lives, proposing a new educational model based on these considerations. Although their works have been controversial, they have become indispensable classics in contemporary discussions on female issues. The focus on these scholars' writings also provides us with a reason to pay attention to the ethical perspectives of the renowned American pragmatist philosopher and educator John Dewey. As an early advocate for women's higher education, Dewey's ethics also significantly defended the public image of women. In reviewing his ethical discourse, I believe that his thoughts straddle modernity and post-modernity, challenging the universalism and rationalism within modernity.

Efforts to classify Dewey's pragmatic philosophy within the postmodern category have been attempted. Larry A. Hickman of Southern Illinois University goes further, suggesting that Dewey is not only a pragmatist philosopher with postmodern traits when seen from his critique of grand narratives and systematic metaphysics but also contends that by emphasizing the theory of

experimental inquiry and the context of inquiry, and by considering the role of philosophy with a moderate constructivist attitude, Dewey has transcended post-modernity, becoming a post-postmodernist. In this paper, I will re-examine Dewey's transcendence of post-modernity from an ethical standpoint, especially his rebellion against rationality and universality within modernity. By drawing on the readings of Dewey's works, I will delve into the "postmodern" implications in Dewey's ethical viewpoints. On one hand, I will explore how Dewey's ethics rebel against modernity; on the other, Dewey's concern for democracy offers postmodern scholars a valuable prescription. Finally, I will combine Dewey's philosophy with some postmodernist arguments to discuss the challenges and potentially viable approaches to female moral education.

2. Two Types of "Universalism" in Ethics

To demonstrate the modernist rebellion in Dewey's ethics, it is necessary to review the development of ethics based on Dewey's texts. Dewey categorized the theories emerging in the historical development of ethics into two types: "One is abstract because it seeks the good in the realm of pure consequences of actions, detached from character... Depending on whether it considers the happiness of the individual or the happiness of the collective as the good, it is either individualistic or universalistic. The second type of theory attempts to find the good in the motives of actions and behaviors,

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detached from their desired consequences, and reduces the good to the following of abstract moral laws." [1]

2.1. Ethics Valuing "Intrinsic Manifestation"

Dewey's critique of the first type of ethics draws our focus to the ethics of Plato and Aristotle. Plato's philosophy posits that all things in the world must have an underlying substance that cannot be directly perceived by people, who can only passively accept all external qualities. Things become what they are due to the dominance of the ideas, which serve as the prototypes of things. For Plato, everything has its own "itself," that is, the idea of the thing. There are ideas of things, and there are relations between things, not only the ideas of natural objects but also the ideas of things of value. Ideas form a self-existent, hierarchically structured system of the world, with the highest idea being that of the good. Plato's ideal will be criticized by Dewey as a typical image, The Platonic ideal subjects the individual to the city-state. In fact, this ideal believes that the individual can only become his proper state, his ideal state, by becoming part of some spiritual organism. Only by abandoning his own individual will can he achieve this greater authenticity. However, the result of doing so is not only the loss of self-nature and individuality but also the loss of the possibility of its realization. The individual is not to be sacrificed but to realize authenticity within the city-state. This criticism is equally applicable to the philosophers mentioned later.

Aristotle shared the view that moral action is an imitation of the universal good. The universalistic tendency in Platonic ethics was inherited by Aristotle's ethics. Aristotle saw virtue as the successful realization of a type recognized naturally by the species, not through understanding the specificity of moral actions in oneself, but rather, understanding the universality embodied in the individual. Both Socrates and Aristotle believed that moral reason is the means to organize the entire soul to perform its designated tasks well, an activity to perfect or improve the individual as much as possible, revealing the perfection of the personality from which it originated. [2] The same attitude was absorbed and packaged by later philosophers, with Jeremy Bentham, representative of utilitarianism, proposing the "greatest happiness theory" as the best example. At the beginning of his "Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation," he mentions, "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. The standard of right and wrong, the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne." [3] This argument is somewhat similar to Aristotle's emphasis on happiness. If Aristotle thought that the purpose of action is happiness, success, welfare, and a contented life, then Bentham transformed it into an ethics based on happiness, with ethical actions of humans revolving around the play between pleasure and pain.

2.2. Ethics Based on "External Rules"

The appreciation of modern science led to the disregard of ethics as understood by Plato and Aristotle, with ethics now being discussed on the basis of scientific principles rather than inner ideals. Francis Bacon criticized Aristotle's contemplative life as having an empty shell without real substance, or rather, that Aristotle had failed to grasp the essence of ethics, which should be cultivated through experience and practice to foster goodness or virtue, not through logos-style thinking. The practical aspect of morality should be established on the basis of natural laws, and practical reasoning must not contradict these laws. Thomas Hobbes, influenced by Bacon's discourse on natural laws, developed a modern rule-based ethics grounded in natural law. Hobbes disagreed with Aristotle's claim that reason is a human characteristic, or that the cultivation of reason is natural. He believed that humans are not naturally suited for political life, unlike Aristotle's view that humans are political by nature. Tom Sorrell of the University of Warwick in the UK points out that With science continually impacting the world and shaping events related to individual behavior, the foundation of human ethics shifted from inner rationality and the manifestation of goodness to obedience to external laws and natural principles. For scholars establishing ethical theories on natural laws and scientific discoveries, "there is no fundamental difference between humans and the natural world, hence there is no real difference in method and concept between ethical science and natural science; therefore, to define the fundamental laws of human behavior, we can only seek to discover the basic laws of the world." [4]

Ethics based on "external rules" also includes the ethics represented by Kant, who shifted the search for reliable rules from physical and other natural laws to some kind of absolute moral law. Kant believed that only actions that follow moral laws have intrinsic value, and moral laws as a positive force exist as an authoritative presence, just as the free will respects moral laws as pure rational laws and restricts preferences under moral laws. However, this authoritative presence acts as a criterion for legislating the rules for specific moral behaviors, which is difficult to articulate in detail. Without delving into this too much, one can simply look at Adolf Eichmann as described by Hannah Arendt to see how the authority in Kantian philosophy can be easily replaced by the will of the German state or leader. If Bacon, Hobbes, and Kant merely emphasized natural laws, natural rights, or moral commands, allowing for ample free will and autonomy, Hegel was more extreme. Like Kant, Hegel absorbed the spirit of natural law, proposing that "reason" rules the world, and that "spirit" by nature is not at the mercy of chance incidents but is rather the absolute decider of all things. The value of individual life becomes negligible, and human practical actions become exemplifications of spiritual rules.

From Plato to Hegel, their ethics exhibited ample universalism and rationalism, implying a general acknowledgment of science and progress. Dewey believed that especially after the development of science,

ethics always showed that people had discovered evolutionary laws and suggested that the universe was developing in a certain direction, and human actions must conform to all real laws to be ethical. He expressed profound aversion to this viewpoint in his essay "Physics and Ethics," stating, "We must deny this claim." First, morality deals with a goal, and the natural world bound by space and time does not have goals; second, even if there were such a goal in the universe, it could not become the ideal for human behavior; lastly, science cannot construct the essential characteristics of ethical ideals, nor can it provide support for the human collective within its relationship with the universe.[4]

3. The Postmodern Nature of Dewey's Ethics and Women's Education

Dewey negated both forms of ethics, viewing ethics as emerging from the emotional moments of human life. Sensation and the accompanying psychological feelings are sources of both pleasure and the desire to inquire. In ethical terms, there are no fixed standards of truth, nor does unanalyzed experience offer any justification for moral claims. In other words, there are no absolute standards defining any type of good. [5]Dewey advocated focusing on the concrete processes of life rather than on abstract principles, providing us with two pathways to understand the postmodern nature of his ethics, and how his ethics defend women.

3.1. Ethics Aimed at Democratic Goals

The purpose of Dewey's ethics is directed toward democracy. For him, Democracy is not just a form of government, but a mode of living together and a common experience. In his article titled "The Ethics of Democracy," he noted that the democratic way of life is a form of public participation in political life. In a true democratic system, the political society is made up of every member of the society, which is both a social and a moral idea, with its moral significance existing as the meaning of government. Here, "every member" replaces the "male" in the political philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, or Hegel, with women included in the functioning of social and political life and providing decision-making. In public life, the distinction between the status of men and women is eliminated, and each person's individuality and potential are unleashed. However, this does not mean that Dewey agrees with the anarchistic dangers that indulgent individualism might bring. Instead, Dewey cleverly avoids this by defining the meaning of society. "Society consists of individuals who are enacting along common lines, with a common spirit, and with reference to common objectives. The common needs and purposes demand an increasingly rich exchange of thoughts and a harmonious unity of feelings." [6] Regardless, each person as an independent individual, with their own experiences and talents, comes together to participate in democratic life and solve practical problems through discussion. This also incorporates class, race, gender, and other differences into his ethics, calling for everyone within

small groups or larger nations, states, or the world to fully exert their abilities and participate in the democratic process, striving for a common goal, which is to work for a democratic life. The exclusion of women from civic life in traditional ethics is harmful to a democratic society, which cannot become a truly democratic society. At the same time, the idea hidden behind this ethics is the abolition of a universal validity, where no specific viewpoint is universal and suitable for everyone. All there is an abstract common spirit that will guide people to unite and work together towards the goal of a democratic life.

In addition to incorporating different people into his social system, Dewey's concept of democracy also requires them to grow their abilities through cooperation rather than competition. He saw the relationship between individuals as extremely important, which also makes Dewey's exchanges with feminist theory closer. Gilligan's research highlights this point; she found that in previous studies by Freud or Kohlberg, women were not treated as legitimate individuals in the writing of research results. Gilligan pointed out that past research has left women in a blank state in the literature, and her research included women, revealing another moral pattern. This moral pattern is often separated from the main Western thought because its center is the interconnection and interdependence between the self and others. [7] Moulton even pointed out that this traditional Western thought has made traditional philosophical debates very aggressive, a kind of confrontation method, reflecting conflict and opposition. Dewey's views, on the other hand, start from experience; people play an interactive role in moral experience, rather than an isolated moral cognition related only to the individual. Everyone is in a relationship with others, a constitution of others, such that there is no morality detached from others. The democracy built on this is a community-based, relationship-focused democracy, not the kind of democracy that Henry Maine said would lead to different failures. This undoubtedly challenges the binary opposition brought by traditional philosophy, especially the opposition between rational and non-rational—that rationality is exclusively male, invisible or scarce in women. This view was clearly exhibited in Hegel's opposition to women's participation in political life, or Aristotle's assertion that Women are women because their bodies lack certain qualities, they have birth defects.

3.2. Emotion and Moral Imagination

Another aspect that challenges rationality and universalism is Dewey's emphasis on emotions. In most traditional ethics, rationality has always been ranked at the top of the hierarchy, while emotions, seen as impediments to rational development, were relegated to the periphery. In contrast, in Dewey's ethics, emotion is central to fully explaining moral inquiry and good character. Dewey's model of moral cognition has three continuous stages, and we can focus on his elaboration of emotions in the first stage. When individuals face moral dilemmas, spontaneous emotional reactions occur, which

are indispensable to the process of moral inquiry, what Dewey calls "valuing." This process attempts to explain the intuitive process of making moral judgments, which determines our qualitative assessment of situations and actions. For instance, upon seeing a child who has fallen and is crying, one naturally feels a desire to help; this is one manifestation of emotion. "Unless there is a direct, primarily non-reflective appreciation of persons and actions, the material for later reflection will be insufficient or distorted. Before one is led to reflect or has material for reflection, one must feel the nature of an action, just as one feels the roughness or smoothness of an object with one's hands." [8] For Dewey, the relationship between humans and the world is no longer seen as two separate relations of subject and object, nor is man controlled by the world or standing outside it, merely applying his rationality to study the world; rather, emotional experiences always arise through the interaction between people and others and the world. To Dewey, cognition is just one function that occurs within our relationships with others and not the entirety. Direct "valuing" may be more important than the general rules mentioned by Kant, Kohlberg, and others. But this doesn't mean Dewey was blind to the limitations of emotional judgment. On the contrary, emotional judgments often lead to unexpected or contrary outcomes. Moral quality is the result of an interplay between different dimensions of experience, a product of the interaction between moral emotions and moral reflection.

Therefore, to ensure the establishment of a democratic society and to foster understanding and cooperation, Dewey pointed out that education is the path to nurturing a common spirit. He especially emphasized the cultivation of children's moral imagination, which is related to experience, life, wisdom, and particularly to action and practice. Action holds an important place in Dewey's pragmatic philosophy; he understands it as a complex event in time, a juncture where the reality of the past and the potential future intertwine in the present, showing the successful integration of theory and practice in the process of existence. [2] Imagination, then, is a rehearsal before the drama of action, where people creatively explore and rehearse different courses of action. The potential outcomes of different plans will influence moral decisions about others, including processes of dialogue and feedback. Moral imagination includes not only the ability to generate useful ideas but also the capacity to form ideas about what is good and evil, and the ability to assist the best ideas in serving others through action, requiring sensitivity to the people and events around us. The role of imagination helps people choose better and more ethical ways of acting and also serves as a process of exchanging personal information, enabling understanding through the communication of ideas between individuals.

The traditional emphasis on rationality becomes, in Dewey's view, the source of discrimination, exclusion, and difference, itself a product of a particular biased emotion. True rationality, in contrast, focuses more on tolerance and inclusion, seeking cooperative relationships between various needs and experiences. As a noun, rationality "refers to the enjoyable cooperation

among many tendencies, such as sympathy, curiosity, exploration, experimentation, candor, pursuit — the power to investigate things — and the careful comprehensive consideration of the origins and consequences of things." [9] Regardless, the shift in Dewey's ethics ensures that women are no longer in a position or situation of neglect, men are no longer the sole spokespersons for rationality, and the idea that "rationality is a collection of irrationalities" dethrones rationalism.

3.3. The "Postmodern" Transcendence in Dewey's Ethics

In Dewey's attempt to include everyone in a democratic society, he maintained an optimistic attitude, "It is precisely because of these differences that the entire social structure must be differentiated into various necessary subordinate and service hierarchies. The only stable or progressive society is one in which various unequal forces, whether political or productive, compete fairly," and "Equality means that everyone has an opportunity, ..., it is an opportunity that is truly unlimited to become human, without any potential being left idle." [4] At first glance, this may seem like Dewey's optimistic idealism, and postmodern studies on discourse and symbols might challenge Dewey's ideals. In practice, postmodernism's emphasis on social discourse creates unsettling assumptions that Dewey's ideals may not lead to a democratic, classless society but might further entrench a society inherently characterized by class divisions. Clues to this concern might be found in the studies of Pierre Bourdieu and Thomas S. Popkewitz. Bourdieu used capital, field, and habitus to describe individual actions. People neither act entirely according to their own wishes nor follow social rules and norms mechanically. Habitus represents the interpenetration of individual subjectivity and social structure objectivity, linking the chains and the dances people dance, while also distinguishing social classes and genders. In "Distinction" and "Reproduction," Bourdieu noted why actors from the middle class were more inclined to enter universities than those from the working class. The humbly born social classes recognize their place outside this system, viewing the university as a space "not for someone like me." Conversely, the middle class tends to see university education as a natural step. [10] He saw social rules and power as being transformed into capital, presented as knowledge through symbols and discourse, then internalized into habitus for implementation and consolidation, and this discussion could similarly be shifted to considerations of gender issues. Following Bourdieu, Thomas S. Popkewitz of the University of Wisconsin-Madison further introduced Foucault's notions of power and Bourdieu's theory into educational research, pointing out how education as a systematic operation disciplines individuals. Education not only provides appropriate knowledge to those who need to be educated but also through various means limits the way people think, setting boundaries for what people can become. This causes different classes and genders to fix their

thinking and behavior patterns. In this model, women, who are in a disadvantaged position, cannot truly recognize themselves and are bound by moral patterns not their own, often the rational order models criticized by Gilligan that classify things hierarchically and ignore the relationship between people and their external world. When we look for traces in postmodern scholars' literature, we often see their extreme emphasis on the social function of discourse. As Michel Foucault described in "Les Anormaux" psychiatry's history of birth was not described because it existed, but rather, it existed because it was first described, shifting the "worship" from "rationality" and "knowledge" to "social discourse," and basing it on this. In fact, here we can see Dewey's wisdom; Dewey did not abandon or ignore both, but based on experience, linked them together. Recognizing both the influence of language on knowledge and experience and the influence of knowledge and experience on language.[11] It can be said that modernity theories and postmodern theories resonate in their pursuit of different certainties, while Dewey proclaims to us that uncertainty is the norm. What's most important is the growth and exchange of experience, the emphasis on knowledge and language may either fall into opposition or go to extremes, but experience includes them and grows in an environment full of uncertainty, fostering the establishment of a democratic society. This ultimately returns to the viewpoint of Hickman. But it is also worth asking, while Dewey's ethics may provide a pathway to solve post-modernity, the effectiveness of this solution should be questioned, and this issue will be briefly discussed in the following text along with considerations of women's moral education.

4. Discussion on Dewey's Ethics and Postmodern Issues in Moral Education

4.1. Inclusion of "Different Voices"

We concur with Dewey's view that each individual possesses a unique personality, where no form of comparison exists within personalities, and there is no universal standard to judge the nobility or superiority between different personal traits. Moreover, each personality harbors infinite and universal possibilities. However, we must question whether relying on Dewey's moral imagination can truly exhaust all possibilities. Can it achieve genuine mutual understanding and democratic cooperation? I believe this is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Dewey thought that the purpose of communication is to reach a consensus, and people may be willing to cooperate and understand each other. In the process of seeking common ground while preserving differences, "commonality" always takes precedence over "difference". German thinker Jürgen Habermas developed this communicative ethic of consensus-seeking into a mechanism, believing that our fundamental inclination in communication is to reach a universal agreement, with the perpetual possibility of successfully achieving consensus.

On this point, we need to fully consider the objections raised by Jacques Derrida, that misunderstanding is an ever-present possibility in any communication, an inevitability that comes with the act of communicating. Communication means the clash of two subjects with their own thoughts; no one's thoughts, intentions, reasoning, or context are entirely identical. Even if some consensus is reached, misunderstanding is always in tow. Relying on moral imagination and sensitivity may be asking too much. Perhaps, rather than an aspiration for understanding, a more important value is that of inclusiveness. This means that even if people cannot understand each other, it is more important to have a relationship of mutual recognition, respect, and care. This is perhaps what Carol Gilligan wanted to convey. She never acknowledged that the moral patterns of men or women were singular, but merely suggested an additional possibility, granting different selves the ability to take different actions in public and private life.[12] Mutual understanding between the two modes of thought may never be fully achievable, but perhaps we can realize mutual inclusiveness and care between women and men, abandoning the worship and pursuit of universality and rational order. A moral education model based on care and inclusion would exist not only for women but for many different people.

4.2. Reconstruction of Moral "Knowledge"

Another way to address conflicts arising from different modes of thought may still revert to the reconstruction of "discourse" and "knowledge." Although Dewey's ethics, based on experience, incorporated "knowledge" and "discourse," it does not mean that the components of knowledge are appropriate and error-free, or that ideal results can be achieved solely through exchange and cooperation. At this point, reconstructing the composition of individual knowledge becomes crucial in mitigating the strife caused by fragmentation. Knowledge here is no longer a passive entity waiting to be accepted; rather, it is an active presence, pervasive in the capillaries of society, constructing and limiting the ways people think and act, defining the possible range of action and thought, and setting boundaries. It is distributed in schools, families, or even in bathrooms - corners often overlooked - constructing behavior and thoughts, constantly shaping women or men into copies of the "ideal" model. While being sensitive to discourse, we must explore what constitutes the knowledge of "women's morality" and consider what makes it what it is, leading us to Thomas S. Popkewitz's effective history. Popkewitz developed the annales school's view that the history of a "knowledge" development is neither a gradual development in chronological order nor a continuous process. Instead, over a period, it "goes at a thousand different paces, swift and slow, which bear almost no relation to the day-to-day rhythm of a chronicle or of traditional history." [13] From this perspective, "knowledge" can be seen as the overlap of the development of different fields at specific historical moments, containing continuity and fracture, the introduction of certain elements, and the

disappearance of others. For instance, his exploration of the concept of professionalism among teachers in 20th-century America reveals how Christian ethics, enlightenment rationality, cosmopolitanism, and the operation of capital have jointly shaped the requirements for teachers, dividing normal/abnormal within teachers or students, producing different values, thought, and action patterns.

5. Conclusion

Today, we still pursue universality, certainty, and rationality, which has led to a series of problems. Regarding gender issues, we may discriminate against women, deeming their rational capacities inferior to men's, or we may veer to another extreme, setting a standard for "new era ideal women" as a universal truth to measure women's awakening. Women who do not meet these standards are labeled as "radical," "irrational," or "conservative," "foolish," overlooking the unique experiences of individuals and the breakthroughs of women in modern society, even challenging the attributes inherent to humans as biological beings. Any standard of feminism undoubtedly has the potential to be exploited; it will no longer seek inclusion or listen to other voices but become a new shackle binding women and everyone because feminism not only advocates for women's voices but also speaks for every vulnerable person in society. Consequently, we should perhaps look back at the problems and methods proposed by Dewey, feminism, and postmodernism, continually contemplate their legacies, and create a society that is inclusive, communicative, and as understanding as possible

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