The Reconstructionistic Tendencies in Dewey: Towards Reviving Philosophy from Hegemonic Redundancy Complex

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Abstract

This paper takes its departure from the seeming condemnation and relegation of philosophy into the dustbin of irrelevance in some quarters. This mood gains credence from the activities of philosophers themselves who seem contended in hiding themselves in their philosophical cubicles while they are detached from issues of practical concern to non-spatio-temporal realities. In Dewey, however, there is a paradigm shift from the status quo. Dewey emphasizes the need to hijack philosophy from redundancy back to the realm of functionality where it actually belongs. The paper thus concludes that the tendency towards reconstruction is ultimately needed in philosophy in order to return it to a centre stage of relevance.

Keywords: Philosophy, Reconstruction, Experience, Knowledge, Dualism and Relevance.

Introduction

John Dewey, born in Burlington, Vermont, was regarded as a genius because his revolutionary works dominated philosophy and education throughout the first part of the twentieth century. He was and remains America’s most famous philosopher. Before his death, he had written over forty books and seven hundred articles. Some of these books are: Reconstruction in Philosophy (1920); The School and the Society (1899). My Pedagogic Creed (1897); How we Think (1933); Moral Principles in Education (1909); Democracy and Education (1916); Experience and Education (1938); Schools of Tomorrow (1915) and several other books which cut across politics, ethics, psychology, biology, theology, and virtually, all aspects of life. He was simply a colossus! Dewey’s efforts were principally geared towards revamping philosophy from the shackles of irrelevance. His entire philosophy centers around reconstructionism. He preoccupied himself with reconstructing the meaning of philosophy, of experience, of knowledge, of education, of the society, and even of meaning itself. Without much ado, let us begin to consider Dewey in his act of reconstruction.

Reconstructing Philosophy

Dewey was dissatisfied with the notion and mode of philosophizing from the ancient period down to the modern period. He classified this form of philosophy traditional, as it stands
antithetical to a new kind of philosophy he was trying to introduce alongside other pragmatists. To justify and substantiate the difference, Dewey got involved in philosophizing about philosophy itself – metaphilosophy. One could paraphrase him posing such questions as: What does it really mean to philosophies? what makes philosophy a philosophy?. How do philosophers philosophies? What should be the ideal concern of philosophy? et cetera. These questions, bordering on metaphilosophy, became necessary given the influences and orientation from Darwinism and pragmatism as introduced by Pierce and Williams. Dewey observed that philosophy, from the time of Plato, had assumed an utter detachment from the world around. This detachment is traceable to the dualism deeply entrenched in the writings of ancient scholars. Beginning with Plato, one finds a bifurcation of two separate worlds which have nothing in common. The first world is the spatio-temporal world which is replete with frivolities and decay, and thus, corrupt and unintelligible (Talisse, 2000:25). The second is a non-spatio-temporal world, technically tagged the ‘world of ideas,’ which is populated by abstract entities called ‘forms’. These forms are comprehended only by reason which bequeaths true knowledge on a thinker through a total withdrawal from the world of physical existence (the first world). This kind of dualism is reincarnated in Aristotle’s Form and Matter; Augustine’s City of God and City of Man; Descartes’ Mind and Body distinction; Kant’s Noumena and Phenomena; and others. These scholars have been involved in theorizing around one form of dualism or the other.

These efforts, however, have resulted in several problems that were not solved and remain unsolved. Basic among the problem was how to foster a relationship or a connection between the dualisms created. These seeming problems, as it were, are not problems in the first instance. The desire to create problems where there are no problems, have been the reason for the perceived redundancy of philosophy by people. Another problem associated with this philosophy of dualism is its tendency to get philosophers detached from the physical world. If the ‘world of forms’ or the ‘city of God’ is eternal, ideal, unchanging and perfect world, while the physical world is the world of shadows, mundane and temporal, then it makes sense to get detached from the later, in order to focus on the former. Thus, philosophy became a form of detached thinking from the physical realm, with utmost focus on the metaphysical realm. In doing this, it arrogates itself above all other disciplines, for the reason that while the latter concerns itself with realities of the physical world, philosophy studies a ‘higher’ kind of reality which by their very nature, are superior to the supposed reality in the spatio-temporal world. In Dewey’s words;

“Philosophy has arrogated to itself the office of demonstrating the existence of a transcendent, absolute or inner reality and of revealing to man the nature and features of this higher reality. It has therefore claimed that it was in possession of a higher organ of knowledge than is employed by positive science and ordinary practical experience, and that it is marked by a superior dignity” (Dewey, 1920:92).

He further states that;

“Philosophical doctrines which disagreed about virtually everything else were at one in the assumption that their distinctive concern as
philosophy was to search for the immutable and ultimate, that which is, without respect to the temporal or spatial” (Dewey, 1920:260).

From these conceptions, philosophy hence earned the name: ‘mother of all disciplines’. As the mother, philosophy is thus expected to monitor the preoccupations of all other disciplines. But here comes the irony. How can philosophy pose as the mother when her preoccupations are totally divergent to the preoccupations of other disciplines? Where and how does the monitoring come into place? To put it in a more relevant religious manner – How can the man whose interest is nowhere but heavens, legislate over what is been done on earth? There is certainly no convergence. The former will remain ignorant and irrelevant to the happenings in the latter, and vice-versa. Perhaps, this explains the seeming irrelevance presently attached to philosophy. Talisse captures this submission when he writes;

“Because philosophers have traditionally taken themselves to be concerned with ultimate truths of the sort that could be found only in a transcendent, changeless realm, they have withdrawn from the world. Fixing their attention upon a supposedly superior realm, they have abandoned ordinary life, rendering philosophy irrelevant” (Talisse, 2000:28).

and so,

“convinced that they alone have been pursuing Truth, philosophers have come to comprise an elite intellectual class of thinkers who work on exotic and unusual problems, more correctly, they are puzzles, in isolation from every other intellectual endeavor (Talisse, 2000:28).

The attitude described in the above quotation dates to antiquity and remains endemic among philosophers. Dewey characterizes the attitude in the following words;

“The creeds that have prevailed have been founded upon the supposed necessity of escape from the confusion and uncertainties of experience. Life has been thought to be evil and hopeless unless it could be shown to bear within itself the assured promise of a higher reality. Philosophies of escape have also been philosophies of compensation for the ills and sufferings of the experienced world (Dewey, 1930:268).

If this is what philosophy is all about, it then becomes hard to resist, in line with Talisse, the conclusion and the chorus that philosophy is a means of escape from the physical world in which we live (Talisse, 2000:28). But should philosophy be an escape route from the world around? This is the puzzle Dewey finds too tempting to avoid. For him, philosophy cannot remain aloof of the happening of the physical world. He seems to say that if the knowledge of the metaphysical world is possible, then such knowledge should proceed from the knowledge of the things we see around – {from known to unknown; from familiar to unfamiliar}. Philosophy must be made relevant to the world. It must make a u-turn or a paradigm shift from the traditional relegation to uselessness, irrelevance and redundancy. Philosophy must recover itself by ceasing to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men. One remembers the
famous quote of that ancient Roman philosopher, Epictetus; he said – “in vain are the words of the philosopher that do not heal some human wound” (Akinpelu, 2005:207). Philosophers, according to Dewey, must henceforth turn their back to their supposed problems {problems which are not problems in the first instance}, and begin to turn their attention to problems facing the society or humanity. This paradigm shift will, thus, make philosophy relevant to us; other men; our environment; our world; education and all other things around us.

Reconstructing Experience

Another idea that is of great consequence to the whole of Dewey’s thought-pattern, especially as it affects education, is experience. Understanding the notion of experience, according to Talisse, “provides the basis for the rest of Dewey’s philosophy” (Talisse, 2000:49). It is perhaps the reason why experience is featured in some of the book-titles of the scholar; there are Experience and Education, Experience and Nature, Art and Experience, et cetera.

It is, however, not an accident to have ‘experience’ preoccupying the entire gamut of Dewey’s philosophy; the whole of philosophical history, as a matter of fact, is preponderant of disparate attempts at refuting or supporting arguments around the import of experience in knowledge derivation. The modern epoch in philosophy gains more notoriety than any other epoch in this endemic debate. Epistemology reached its crescendo at this period as hot debates arose concerning the meaning; the nature; the forms; the sources; the possibility and the validity for our knowledge claims. As such, there appeared questions like: What is knowledge? Is knowledge the same thing as belief? How is knowledge derived? What are the sources for knowledge claims? Can man know anything with certainty? What criteria are used to justify or validate man’s claim to knowledge? Expectedly, several answers to these questions came on board. The skeptics led the debate by out rightly denying the possibility of knowledge-derivation. Man, for them, constantly and consistently faces challenges of deception about existing things which drag him into perpetual doubt, to the extent that it becomes problematic to lay claims to knowledge for the fear of been disillusioned. It did not take long, however, before the Skeptic’s position was temporarily debunked. The skeptic was made to realize the internal contradiction in his seeming argument. For the skeptic to convince us that he was not sure he knew anything with certainty, he would need to convince us if he was really sure of his statement or position. If he was to be sure of the statement, then he would have contradicted himself for saying man cannot be sure of anything. If otherwise (that is, if he was not sure of the statement), then, he would have made no sense at all, which is even worse than the first case.

Based on the foregoing, two major schools which have dominated the whole of philosophy emerged: rationalism and empiricism. The rationalists affirmed the possibility of knowledge derivation, and they sought to locate its source within the mind’s faculty of reason. Rene Descartes, for instance, opined that experience is systematically deceptive and the source of illusions and errors; it is only through reason that man achieves a knowledge that is indubitable. Empiricists were, however, quick to debunk the position of rationalists on experience. While they agree with the latter that knowledge-derivation is possible, they reject reason as its source. For them, reason is an abstract faculty bearing no connection with the physical world,
and could only supply the most trivial kind of knowledge (Talisse, 2000:33). Experience, for the empiricists, makes available the necessary connection between the mind and the world and is therefore, the source of all knowledge. John Locke, for instance, presents his case thus;

“Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any idea; how come it to be furnished?.... To this I answer, in one word, Experience: In that, all our knowledge is founded and from that it ultimately derives itself” (Locke, 1975:104).

Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Russell and other protagonists of empiricism seem to have the same conception of what experience is, but they differ in their association of external objects with man’s mental representation of such objects; that is, how to relate man’s perception, or ‘sensation’, or ‘feeling’ or ‘idea’ with objects existing outside there. This is the kind of dualism that has generated unending controversies in modern philosophy. It is the source of various epistemological problems. These problems, however, have thrown some empiricists, such as Hume, back to embrace skepticism.

For Dewey, the attempt to create a dualism and thereafter, explaining the interactions between the dualistic concepts always instigates problems that do not worth the name - problems, and whose solution may never be found, as witnessed in modern epistemology. While creating a dualism between an inner world of sensations and an outer world of objects and then trying to fathom how these two supposedly separate realms are connected, certain supposed questions have been generated like: does my experience relate with the outside world?; are my senses not prone to deception?; is there any real world outside there?; can I have a representation of such world?, et cetera. These are some of the questions that epistemology have had to battle with for ages without any hope of resolution. These, for Dewey, are not problems in the first instance. To justify his position, Dewey starts by reconstructing the term ‘experience’ from the old conception. He realizes that the traditional view of experience is not empirical enough; it is a theory of experience that is not derived from experience itself. To understand what experience is we must turn to experience itself, regires ad vones (going back to the root). It is this turn that made scholars to label Dewey a radical empiricist. Talisse, for instance, describes Dewey’s empiricism as a “radical empirical theory of experience. It is radically empirical in that it derives its conception of experience from experience itself” (Talisse, 2000:44). There are basically five points of contrast between the traditional conception of experience and Dewey’s reconstruction of the term. These points have been marshaled out by Dewey in The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy. They are as follow;

1. In the orthodox view, experience is regarded primarily as a knowledge-affair. But to the eyes not looking through ancient spectacles, it assuredly appears as an affair of the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment.

2. According to tradition, experience as it is, is {at least primarily} a psychical thing, infected throughout with ‘subjectivity’. What experience suggests about itself is a genuinely objective world which enters into the actions and sufferings of men and undergoes modifications through their responses.
3. So far as anything beyond a bare present is recognized by the established doctrine, the past exclusively counts. Registration of what has taken place, references to precedent, is believed to be the essence of experience. Empiricism is conceived of as tied up to what has been, or is ‘given’. But experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with the future is its salient trait.

4. The empirical tradition is committed to particularism. Connections and continuities are supposed to be foreign to experience, to be by-products of dubious validity. An experience that is an undergoing of an environment and a striving for its control in new directions is pregnant with connections.

5. In the traditional notion, experience and thought are antithetical terms. Inference, so far as it is other than a revival of what has been given in the past, goes beyond experience; hence it is either invalid or else a measure of desperation by which, using experience as a spring-board, we jump out to a world of stable things and other selves. But experience, taken free of the restrictions imposed by the older concept, is full of inference. There is, apparently, no conscious experience without inference; reflection is native and constant (Talisse, 2000: 46-48).

Implicitly contained in the above comparison, is Dewey’s theory of experience. This theory states that experience arises from the interaction of two principles: continuity and interaction. The former means that all experiences are carried forward and subsequently influence future experiences. This means that an experience a person has will influence his/her future experiences, for better or for worse. Interaction on the other hand, connotes that the present experiences arise out of the relationship between the situation and individual’s stored past. It refers to the situational influence on one’s experience. Put differently, one’s present experience is a function of the interaction between one’s past experiences and the present situation. Dewey thus insists that if one accepts this reconstruction of experience, one would then realize that the problems which the traditionalists sought to grapple with are not problems, and through their fixations with such problems, unfortunately, epistemology has found itself alienated from the concerns of ordinary life and thus ill-equipped to deal with the actual problems that inevitably arise.

Evaluation

Reconstruction is a name which fits the entire gamut of Dewey’s philosophical odyssey. He reconstructed anything reconstructible; even the society receives special attention in Dewey’s philosophy of reconstruction. At least, three of his books were devoted to this; they are: The School and Society; Democracy and Education; and Experience and Education. In these works, Dewey turns to philosophy as a mode of social criticism through which communities could revert from their entrenchment in dogmatism and authoritarianism, into a mode of associated life which paves way for diversity, freedom and cooperative inquiries. This is what he calls democracy.
By and large, we painted Dewey as a philosopher of reconstruction; as a man who continually reconstructed even his own thinking several times in the course of his life. He was a man who would prefer his audience or readers to approach his work with a reconstructive mind because he did not believe in fixation of ideas. This approach, thus, allows Dewey’s reader to reconstruct his philosophy into an edifice that satisfies the needs, the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of the reader’s place, situation, condition and time. This is indeed needed to get philosophy back to the stage of relevance.

References


