Canadian Journal of Bioethics
Revue canadienne de bioéthique

Canadian Journal of Bioethics
Revue Canadienne de Bioéthique

Why Philosophers Aren't Better People

James Dwyer

Cite this document

Article abstract

I begin with an autobiographical account that explains the question: why
philosophers are not better people. Philosophy, as it is practiced in most
university departments, doesn't concern itself with how we inhabit and
perceive the world. It doesn't really concern itself with practices that aim to
form the kind of people we become. After I discuss why the question still
resonates today, I consider one answer, based on some work by John Dewey.
His work emphasizes the importance of habits. Since habits are formed in
social environments, the discussion of habits leads me to consider the practice
of politics: the idea that we could collectively shape social environments in
which habits are formed. Although I do not deny that the practice of politics
can be burdensome and dangerous, I try to show why this practice is
inevitable.

TÉMOIGNAGE / **PERSPECTIVE**

Why Philosophers Aren't Better People

James Dwyer[a]

Résumé

Je commence par un récit autobiographique qui explique la question suivante : pourquoi les philosophes ne sont-ils pas de meilleures personnes? La philosophie, telle qu'elle est pratiquée dans la plupart des départements universitaires, ne se préoccupe pas de la manière dont nous habitons et percevons le monde. Elle ne se préoccupe pas vraiment des pratiques qui visent à former le type de personnes que nous devenons. Après avoir discuté des raisons pour lesquelles la question résonne encore aujourd'hui, j'envisage une réponse, basée sur certains travaux de John Dewey. Ses travaux soulignent l'importance des habitudes. Étant donné que les habitudes se forment dans des environnements sociaux, la discussion sur les habitudes m'amène à envisager la pratique de la politique : l'idée que nous pourrions collectivement façonner des environnements sociaux dans lesquels les habitudes se forment. Bien que je ne nie pas que la pratique de la politique puisse être pesante et dangereuse, j'essaie de montrer pourquoi cette pratique est inévitable.

Abstract

I begin with an autobiographical account that explains the question: why philosophers are not better people. Philosophy, as it is practiced in most university departments, doesn't concern itself with how we inhabit and perceive the world. It doesn't really concern itself with practices that aim to form the kind of people we become. After I discuss why the question still resonates today, I consider one answer, based on some work by John Dewey. His work emphasizes the importance of habits. Since habits are formed in social environments, the discussion of habits leads me to consider the practice of politics: the idea that we could collectively shape social environments in which habits are formed. Although I do not deny that the practice of politics can be burdensome and dangerous, I try to show why this practice is inevitable.

Mots-clés

philosophes, philosophie, vertus, pratiques, habitudes, environnements sociaux, politique

Keywords

philosophers, philosophy, virtues, practices, habits, social environments, politics

Affiliations

[a] Center for Bioethics and Humanities, State University of New York Upstate Medical University, Syracuse, New York, USA

Correspondance / Correspondence: James Dwyer, dwyerja@upstate.edu

THE QUESTION

When I was in high school, I was interested in things that interest most boys of that age – girls, sports, and school life – but I was also interested in religion and mathematics. Outside of school, I made time to read about religion and talk to people about religious issues. In school, my favorite class was mathematics, and I tried to find creative ways to prove theorems. To my surprise, I won the mathematics award at graduation.

Given my interest in religion and my mathematical mind, it was almost inevitable that I studied philosophy at university. While studying philosophy, I came to understand what interested me about religion. I wasn't really interested in ultimate questions about the existence of God, the problem of evil, or the possibility of an afterlife. I was more interested in practical questions about how we should live in this world and how we should organize society. So, I focused my studies on ethics and political philosophy.

Although I never found in philosophy the definitive answers that I was seeking, I was not disappointed with philosophy. I was, however, a bit disappointed with the philosophers that I met. I was surprised to find that they were not better people. It's not that these philosophers were bad people; it's just that they were not any better (or worse) than the biologists and sociologists that I met. I guess I associated philosophy with a quest to live in a better way. That association may seem naive and quaint, but others have made similar associations. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) writes in the first chapter of Walden:

> There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. (1, p.12)

In this short passage, Thoreau contrasts professing and living, returns to the etymological origin of philosophy, and singles out four virtues: *simplicity*, *independence*, *magnanimity*, and *trust*. He also emphasizes the need to address problems of life in a practical way. In retrospect, I think this is one of the reasons I ended up in bioethics.

Let me tell a story to illustrate the problem that Thoreau brings up. I still remember the time I overheard two professors talking in the philosophy department. They were standing in the office, engaged in conversation, when I came in to get a form from

the secretary. They were discussing what income tax deductions they could claim without provoking an audit. I felt especially disappointed because I couldn't help but contrast their conversation with the discussion that some of my friends were having. They too were discussing income tax, but they were considering refusing to pay the portion of their income tax that was used to finance wars. I didn't expect everyone to agree with my friends, and I didn't expect everyone who did sympathize with their views to disobey the tax laws, but I expected philosophers to behave differently from narrow-minded businessmen.

Let me tell one more story, perhaps apocryphal, to illustrate the question. Most academic philosophers in the United States belong to a professional association called the American Philosophical Association (APA). Every year between Christmas and New Year's Day, the APA holds a three-day meeting in a large hotel in some eastern city. When the meeting was in New York, a newspaper sent a reporter to do a human-interest story. The reporter had a brilliant idea. To get a perspective on what philosophers were like he decided to interview the hotel staff: clerks, bellhops, maids, bartenders, and others. However, the idea didn't work out. The people the reporter talk to were puzzled by her questions. A waitress, who was somewhat exasperated by the questions, finally summed up the staffs view of these philosophers. "Look," she said, "we host all kinds of conventions: contractors, dentists, and philosophers. The philosophers aren't any different from the dentists, except that more philosophers have beards, and they don't tip as well."

Maybe we should just shrug our shoulders and dismiss the title question of this essay. After all, no one asks why biologists aren't better people. We know that some are good people, some okay, and a few bad, but in general they are just people who are good at biology. In a like manner, we could just accept the fact that philosophy is an academic discipline, and that philosophers are just people who are good at this discipline. But the title question has remained a deep and normative issue for me, and it remains relevant to bioethics.

The question also echoes in ancient Western philosophy. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus (circa 50-130 CE) distinguishes between discourse about philosophy and philosophy (2). In his view, philosophy is matter of embodying wisdom and reason in actions, conduct, attitudes, and dispositions. It is a matter of living in a certain way. We all need to respond to misfortunes and difficulties: illness, death, insults, criticisms, splashes of water, and whatever happens in daily and political life. Philosophy should train us to respond in better ways, whereas discourse about philosophy is merely a way of talking, thinking, and explaining texts. In *The Handbook*, Epictetus writes:

> But what do *I* want? To learn to understand nature and to follow it. So I try to find out who explains it. And I hear that Chrysippus does, and I go to him. But I do not understand the things that he has written, so I try to find the person who explains them. Up to this point there is nothing grand. But when I do find someone who explains them, what remains is to carry out what has been conveyed to me. This alone is grand. But if I am impressed by the explaining itself, what have I done but ended up a grammarian instead of a philosopher. – except that I am explaining Chrysippus instead of Homer. (Par. 49)

Epictetus reinforces the distinction between discoursing about philosophy and practicing philosophy with an analogy with sheep.

> Sheep do not show how much they have eaten by bringing the feed to the shepherds, but they digest the food inside themselves, and outside themselves they bear wool and milk. So in your case likewise do not display propositions to non-philosophers but instead the actions that come from the propositions when they are digested. (Par. 46)

The point is to act and conduct oneself in a way that embodies wisdom and reason.

To the question that I posed, I want to suggest an answer, borrowed from the work of Pierre Hadot (1922-2010). Hadot was a distinguished philosopher and historian of philosophy. He knew many languages, understood historical contexts, and read texts with the utmost care. He also championed a view of philosophy that connected it to exercises and practices. One of his books was even entitled *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (3). Another book, *What is Ancient Philosophy* (4), sums up the view that he developed and articulated:

> It would take a large volume to tell the entire history of the reception of ancient philosophy by medieval and modern philosophy. I have chosen to concentrate on a few major figures: Montaigne, Descartes, Kant. We might mention many other thinkers – as different as Rousseau, Shaftesbury, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, William James, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and still others. All, in one way or another, were influenced by the model of ancient philosophy, and conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world. (p.270)

Following Hadot, I tend to think of philosophy as a concrete and practical activity that tries to transform our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world. No wonder that I was disappointed with the professors of philosophy that I met.

Somewhere in its historical development, philosophy (at least in the West) became something else. Philosophy lost its original emphasis on concrete and practical activity, as well as its emphasis on exercises, practices, and ways of inhabiting and

perceiving the world. Hadot marks the transformation in the medieval period, when philosophy became a systematic rational account of articles of faith. Explicit articles of faith play a smaller role today, but philosophy remains devoted to rational arguments. Although the lure of a grand theory is still strong, philosophy is no longer so systematic. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard is critical of metanarratives that aim for universal scope (5). In part, Lyotard's view reflects the influence of Wittgenstein and mirrors the change from Wittgenstein's early work to his later work. By and large, philosophy today is a conceptual activity carried on in university departments.

DEWEY'S IDEA

If we are to recover ways of transforming how we perceive and inhabit the world, including the world of bioethics, then we need practices and exercises that work, in the current context, to form habits. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey (1859-1952) analyzes conduct in terms of impulses, habits, and intelligence (6). Although biological impulses may seem like the most basic, and creative intelligence may seem like the most important, Dewey begins his analysis with habits because they bring out the social and historical dimensions of human life. I suspect that he also begins with habits because they are connected to daily virtues: kindness, helpfulness, support, dedication, sympathy, awareness, foresight, imagination, humility, modesty, temperance, courage, resoluteness, engagement, and many more.

Dewey makes explicit why he uses the term habit:

> The word habit may seem twisted somewhat from its customary use when employed as we have been using it. But we need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. Habit even in its ordinary usage comes nearer to denoting these facts than any other word. (p.11)

He notes that habits are much more than tools waiting for us to use at will.

He notes how habits influence perception. He writes:

> The habit of walking is expressed in what a man sees when he keeps still, even in dreams. The recognition of distances and directions of things from his place of rest is the obvious proof of this statement. The habit of locomotion is latent in the sense that it is covered up, counteracted, by a habit of seeing that is definitely at the fore ... Everything that a man who has the habit of locomotion does and thinks he does and thinks differently on that account. (p.29)

Because of the power of habits, we inhabit and perceive the world in a different way. Indeed, Dewey claims, "Concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing, imagining, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done" (p.124).

Dewey also says, "Instruction in what to do next can never come from an infinite goal, which for us is bound to be empty. It can be derived only from the study of the deficiencies, irregularities and possibilities of the actual situation" (p.199). Here he hints at a problem with abstract goals or aims and shifts the focus onto concrete situations that need amelioration. He develops the contrast between abstract goals and concrete situations in his discussion of progress:

> There are plenty of negative elements, due to conflict, entanglement and obscurity, in most of the situations of life, and we do not require a revelation of some supreme perfection to inform us whether or no [sic] we are making headway in present rectification. We move from the worse and into, not just towards, the better, which is authenticated not by comparison with the foreign but in what is indigenous. Unless progress is a present reconstructing, it is nothing; if it cannot be told by qualities belonging to the movement of transition it can never be judged. (p.195)

Passages like this one suggest that problematic situations can work to guide and evaluate inquiries and responses. Other passages even suggest that each problematic situation is unique and that our task is to find out what that situation calls for.

Although Dewey's approach is situational and contextual, abstract thinking has an important role and value. Without some abstraction, thinking would not be possible. Concepts like chair, promise, friend, trust, care, and justice all involve some abstraction. The question isn't whether to use concepts that are somewhat general and abstract. The alternative to using abstract thinking is to rely on impulse, prejudice, entrenched habits, social customs, or authorities. The questions that concern me are which concepts to use, how to use them, and when to revise them. Dewey justly reminds us to:

- See thinking as an intermediate phase between more direct forms of interacting with physical and social environments;
- Recall that abstract thinking extracts meanings from prior interactions to use in new interactions;
- Be aware that new situations may demand new ways of thinking.

I need these reminders because I often forget.

In summary, Dewey thinks that we should look carefully at the defects, needs, and potentials of our current situation, and then emphasize what needs to change. He argues against making those statements of emphasis into universal theories, ahistorical ideas, and metaphysical entities. When the circumstances and conditions change, those universal theories, ahistorical ideas, and metaphysical entities block the changes that are called for in the new situation.

Of course, Dewey is not the first philosopher to stress the importance of habits. Aristotle emphasizes two ways that habits work in ethics and political philosophy (7). First, habits train us to perceive and respond to the good. Aristotle famously claims that habits are more important than thoughts and arguments. He writes, "the aim of our studies about action, as we say, is surely not to study and know about a given thing, but rather to act on our knowledge. Hence knowing about virtue is not enough, but we must also try to possess and exercise virtue, or become good in any other way" (1179b). Second, Aristotle emphasizes the importance that upbringing, practice, social environment, and laws have in the process of habit formation. That's why he turns from ethics to political philosophy (1179b-1181b).

Even more than Aristotle, Dewey emphasizes the importance of the social environment, or perhaps we should say that he has a more comprehensive view of the social environment. In discussing language acquisition, Dewey notes the bias that favours individualism, individual mind, and individual consciousness, and he tries to counteract that bias with an example:

> There is no miracle in the fact that if a child learns any language he learns the language that those about him speak and teach, especially since his ability to speak that language is a pre-condition of his entering into effective connection with them, making wants known and getting them satisfied. Fond parents and relatives frequently pick up a few of the child's spontaneous modes of speech and for a time at least they are portions of the speech of the group. But the ratio that such words bear to the total vocabulary in use gives a fair measure of the part played by purely individual habit in forming custom in comparison with the part played by custom in forming individual habits. (p.43)

The power of the social environment is daunting, especially when we need to change it.

Although Dewey recognizes the power of customs in forming individual habits, he also recognizes the stupidity and conflict that customs often involve. As he notes, "The inert, stupid quality of current customs perverts learning into a willingness to follow where others point the way, into conformity, constriction, surrender of skepticism and experiment" (p.47). Dewey never tires of emphasizing the need to re-organize customs so that they are more flexible, responsive, and experimental.

PRACTICE OF POLITICS

The social environment changes. After all, when we recognize how much we are all creatures of our time, we recognize how the social environment influences ways of thinking, ways of acting, even ways of dressing. Changes in the social environment are often brought about by new technologies, discoveries, migrations, and other happenstance events. Think about how the use of fossil fuels changed industry, heating, transportation, and contributed to climate change. Think about how technologies like cell phones have changed people's behaviour. Think about how discoveries in medicine have also changed the social environment – the structures in which we form habits and conduct. Think about how migrations to and from countries have had, and continue to have, a profound effect on the social environment. Indeed, climate migration has had and will have profound impacts on how people live and how they die. Deep changes like those I have mentioned have been largely unintentional and unplanned. Could we engage ourselves collectively to try to bring about helpful changes?

That question brings us to the practice of politics. Following Iris Marion Young (8), I think of politics as "public communicative engagement with others for the sake of organizing our relationships and coordinating our actions" (p.112) to make them less unjust. This form of engagement often takes place in public spaces. Indeed, it sometimes needs to defend or create public spaces. It also relies on various ways to communicate meaning: conversations, written materials, arguments, plays, humor, photographs, protests, strikes, etc. We should avoid the conceptual temptation to limit in advance the various modes that this communication will take.

Political action includes not only communicative action that tries directly to change governmental policies and programs, but also actions that citizens take in civil society. Civil society is the aspect of society that flourishes in spaces and develops norms that are relatively independent of the government and the economy. At its best, civil society helps to maintain and develop civic values and public spirit (9). It helps us to develop meaningful habits, even under difficult conditions. Many thinkers and actors in central and eastern Europe have shown us the power and importance of civil society (10).

In Young's view, and in my own view, political engagement aims to change relationships by changing how social structures position people with respect to one another. This broader view of politics comports with a view of human beings as relational (11). It recognizes our enmeshment in webs of relationships, how social structures shape those relationships, and how we depend on webs of care to survive and flourish. Political action is then an attempt to adjust these relationships and webs – it is an attempt to organize ourselves in new ways.

Following this broad view of political action, forms of political engagement are inevitable. Even when we think we are disengaging ourselves, we are taking a political stance, usually one that strengthens current positions and relationships. Disengaged stances leave more space and opportunity for the characters who currently influence political action and inaction. Disengaged stances shape what people do, what they don't even think of doing, and what they imagine as possibilities.

Although I view political engagement as inevitable, I don't mean to deny that some forms of engagement are burdensome and dangerous, especially in frameworks that don't respect democratic engagement and human rights. But by engaging ourselves in certain ways, we can try to overcome the dualism between abstract right and concrete good. Although the life of an active citizen involves duties and hard work, it can still be a good life. It includes the good of acting in public spaces. It includes the good of deliberating with others. It includes the good of participating with others to address concrete problems. It might even bring our conduct closer to the professions we make about living.

REFERENCES

1. Thoreau HD. Walden (an annotated edition). Harding W, editor. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company; 1995.
2. Epictetus. The Handbook. White N, translator. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company; 1983.
3. Hadot P. Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique. Nouvelle édition. Paris: Albin Michel; 2002.
4. Hadot P. What is Ancient Philosophy? Chase M, translation. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2002.
5. Dewey J. Human nature and conduct, 1922. In: The Middle Works 1899-1924, Volume 14. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press; 1983.
6. Lyotard, J-F. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; 1984.
7. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. 2nd edition. Irwin T, translation. Indianapolis, IL: Hackett Publishing Company; 1999.
8. Young IM. Responsibility for Justice. New York: Oxford University Press; 2011.
9. Putnam R. Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy. New edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1994.
10. Havel V. The Power of the Powerless. New York: Vintage Classics; 1983.
11. Held V. The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global. New York: Oxford University Press; 2007.