
WHO GETS TO BE A PHILOSOPHER?
DEWEY, DEMOCRACY & PHILOSOPHICAL IDENTITY

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Whom do you mean, then, by the true philosophers?
—Plato¹

INTRODUCTION

John Dewey provided philosophical accounts on an enormity of issues and ideas within the corpus of his work. Given his incredible productivity, it is especially difficult to locate any singular focus without almost immediately falling into oversimplification. There is, however, a concern that reoccurs with reliable frequency in his work. Dewey's commitment to democracy is, perhaps, the hallmark of his academic project that expresses, albeit implicitly at times, the spirit of his work.

This is not an original claim, to be sure. Nonetheless, while many have considered the social, political, educational, and pragmatic elements of Dewey's commitment to democracy, there has yet to be extended reflection upon whether Dewey's democratic commitment opens the gates—even the floodgates—to the realm of philosophy. Therefore, my interest is to explore the potential within a Deweyan democratic vision for sketching, and expanding, some ideas on philosophical identity. At the core of this investigation is the foundational question: Who *is* a philosopher? That is, who exactly can “legitimately” claim to philosophize?

These questions should be of particular interest within education, as we (philosophers of education) insist on the need for philosophy in (professional) education, yet, at the same time, we seem hesitant to entertain the idea that, perhaps, schoolteachers are philosophers. In other words, while we generally agree that philosophy is essential for schoolteachers, there seems to be much less consensus among philosophers of education on whether schoolteachers are philosophers. Unlike Socrates, who denied having any special kind of wisdom and claimed to know nothing, we seem to prefer the posture of the sophist, marketing and selling our specific brands of wisdom and knowledge (i.e., classes) to the “unwise and unknowing” profession of education, whose practitioners, even after purchasing (i.e., enrolling in) what we have to offer, will have “only dabbled” in philosophy.

¹ Plato, *Republic* 475e.

Conflicts like the one just described seem to be at odds with philosophy. After all, it was Whitehead who said: “Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains.”² We seem, however, to want to require that people wonder in certain prescriptive ways. By ‘wonder’ we usually mean using a certain literary and/or logical method with a certain portion of presumptive knowledge.³ Is there room, I wonder, for normal, everyday wondering in philosophy? Is there any space for simple and ordinary wonder, fascination, and curiosity? Or, we might ask, as Whitehead seems to suggest: Is there anything other than that in the first, and last, place?

Assuming, of course, that ‘philosophy proper’ includes philosophy of education. This assumption, on its own, would be a contentious point with many traditional, ‘academic’ philosophers. The very tension that exists within the identity of the philosopher of education or educational philosopher reveals the incredible irony of this paper’s thesis: namely, that the distance we tend to desire between what we do and what the everyday teacher does is a carbon copy of the frequent rejection of philosophy of education by academic philosophy. For the most part we (philosophers of education) resent and regret this identity crisis in our own relations with philosophy, yet nonetheless we continue to withhold whatever portion of philosophy we can from teachers in an ironic cycle of exclusivity.

These complexities raise the guiding concern of this paper, namely: Should Dewey’s commitment to democracy kindle any serious consideration of the expansion—or, to put it another way, democratization—of philosophical identity to the everyday, and, in this case, the schoolteacher? I think it should. Making an argument to that effect is the intent of this paper.

DEWEY’S CRITERIA OF DEMOCRACY

What is meant by democracy can, many times, vary by degrees of almost complete obscurity. So, briefly, we might begin by considering the criteria for democracy provided in chapter seven of *Democracy and Education* where Dewey suggests asking the following two questions to measure the worth of a form of social life:⁴ One, “How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared?” and two, “How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?” Dewey ends the chapter with a clear summary of the two criteria in which he writes: “The two points selected by

² Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (1938; repr., New York: Free Press, 1968), 168.

³ In educational research, the prescriptive and acceptable ways of wondering are especially narrow. For the most part, theory-into-practice-via-quantitative/qualitative-research is a sacred and unquestioned paradigm.

⁴ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; repr., New York: Free Press, 1944), 83.

which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups.”⁵ Dewey also asserts that: “The two elements in our criterion both point to democracy.”⁶ That is, Dewey’s criteria for assessing social life do not flow from democracy as if it were some kind of prerequisite. Instead, for Dewey, the criteria of shared interest and freedom of interaction point—from themselves—towards democracy.

Dewey’s affection for democracy is frequently criticized⁷ as a justification for American-style business, capitalism, consumerism, and excess. Yet, at least in this instance, his criteria seem transparent enough. This makes an important point regarding his democratic sense. While it might seem odd, even suspicious, to endorse a form of government, especially one as philosophically and historically troubled as democracy, Dewey does not rest his sympathy on democracy itself. His sense of democracy, in this regard, seems closer to the Derridian notion of “democracy-to-come.”⁸ Yet where it might differ from Derrida’s non-empiricist formulation (which is entirely another matter) is that, for Dewey, ‘democracy’ must be a form of social life we can locate in actual experience. This concrete form offers a landing point for the previously established criteria. Nonetheless, this is not a political, economic, or nationalistic endorsement. In fact, it is not so different than what many others have said regarding the needs for commonality and freedom within a just society. It is true, however, that many who have said these kinds of things⁹ did not find it necessary to turn so strongly and repeatedly to democracy.

So we must raise the question of why. Why go beyond the criteria given? Why complicate things with democracy? Dewey gives us a compelling answer. He writes: “We cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually

⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁷ Most notably by Bertrand Russell in regard to the tenets of pragmatism and Dewey’s support for World War I, which Russell opposed. For a thoughtful and fair treatment of this criticism of Dewey’s pragmatism, which addresses the notion of social identity, see Alan Ryan, “Pragmatism, Social Identity, Patriotism, and Self-Criticism,” *Social Research* 63, no.4 (1996): 1041-1064.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997).

⁹ Most notable, I think, would be John Stuart Mill. It is interesting to consider his insightful, and too often misunderstood, views expressed in *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism* as they strike a similar balance between a consequential view and pluralism. After all, James’s *Pragmatism* was dedicated to Mill, and Dewey’s philosophy bears, in many ways, the same spirit as Mill’s project and the direct influence of James’s. See *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, the Subjection of Women and Utilitarianism* (New York: Random House, 2002).

exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practicable one.”¹⁰ Right or wrong, Dewey answers clearly that his commitment to democracy flows directly from his commitment to philosophy that has roots in actual social life. Some like to call this pragmatism, although Dewey never cared much for that title. From this view, democracy is doubly measured by the criteria of commonality and freedom and by his rooted understanding of philosophy in general.

Considering these points, we might be inclined to abandon democracy altogether and focus exclusively on the criteria offered. However it seems just as well to understand that when Dewey touts the virtues of democracy, he is not referring to *a* democracy, American or otherwise. So, instead of a nationalistic endorsement, Dewey refers to the criteria that point to democracy as a feasible or practical aim. This should disarm any criticisms of implicit capitalism, nationalism, or other similar things in his project or my own. Furthermore, it should bring us to consider the foundational characteristics of democracy as they pertain to philosophical identity: namely that the criteria of shared interest that originates from varied points of view and freedom of interaction might serve as a foundation for considering what constitutes philosophical identity, as they have in this section for framing what Dewey will later call the “democratic criterion.”¹¹

DEWEY’S DEMOCRATIC CRITERION AS CRITERION OF PHILOSOPHY

Dewey is very clear that his criteria for judging social forms of life point to democracy. However, he is not as explicit that they also point to a formulation of philosophical identity. So we must now see whether the principles foundational to democracy are of equal import to philosophy.

In chapter twenty-four of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey breaches the issue of defining philosophy. Prior to that discussion he comments on the democratic criterion, in which he groups the criteria of democracy noted previously in chapter seven. He writes: “This analysis (concerning the social group), based upon the democratic criterion, was seen to imply the ideal of continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience.”¹² This broadens the criteria given in chapter seven to undertake an implicit statement on experience reminiscent of the lectures he would give three years later that produced his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.¹³ By ‘experience’ Dewey does not refer to the limited meaning found in classical empiricism.

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey writes:

¹⁰ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1948).

We begin by noting that “experience” is what James called a double-barreled word. . . . “Experience” denotes the planted field, the sowed seeds, the reaped harvests, the changes of night and day, spring and autumn, wet and dry, heat and cold, that are observed, feared, longed for; it denotes the one who plants and reaps, who works and rejoices, hopes, fears, plans, invokes magic or chemistry to aid him, who is downcast or triumphant. It is “double-barreled” in that it recognizes in its primary integrity *no division* between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed *totality*.¹⁴

This rich, Jamesian description is not only consistent with Dewey’s democratic criterion condensed from chapter seven; it also provides a glimpse into the description of philosophy he offers in chapter twenty-four of *Democracy and Education*, where he writes:

As we might expect, then, philosophy has generally been defined in ways which imply a certain *totality*, generality, and ultimateness of both subject matter and method... philosophy is an attempt to gather together the varied details of the world and of life into a *single inclusive whole*.¹⁵

This glimpse into the connection between his description of experience and philosophy is clear enough, but he is even more explicit in its relationship to the criterion of democracy when he continues: “On the side of the attitude of the philosopher and of those who accept his conclusions, there is the endeavor to attain as *unified*, consistent, and *complete* an outlook upon experience as possible.”¹⁶

From this we can gather that the criterion of democracy in its commitment to building consensus, or unity, from an environment of free interaction and its implied “continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience”¹⁷ is intimately intertwined with the philosopher and those who pay her some attention. Dewey confirms the looming thesis best when he goes on to write: “*Any person* who is open-minded and sensitive to new perception, and who has concentration and responsibility in connecting them has, in so far, a philosophic disposition.”¹⁸

¹⁴ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925; repr., New York: Dover Press, 1958), 8, emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 324, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 325.

As I have hopefully made clear, this statement stands in harmony with Dewey's multi-layered project located firmly in his commitment to democracy and subsequently expands traditional notions of philosophical identity.

THE PHILOSOPHICALLY DISPOSED
AS THE PHILOSOPHER

A critic might justly object and note that having a "philosophic(al) disposition"¹⁹ is not the same as being a philosopher. She might rebut my interpretation by claiming that it amounts to saying that insofar as anyone has functional legs she can dance, or insofar as anyone has nimble fingers she can braid rope. This says nothing, the critic might say, about being a dancer or an artisan. It might seem ridiculous to make such simple associations. Can we truly say that a tree is a wooden chair? Certainly not. We can only speculate that it *could be* a wooden chair. This critic might go on to say that investigating Dewey's claim about philosophical disposition only reveals that anyone is a potential philosopher, not an actual one, and that for me to argue in this way is nothing other than a sloppy, even desperate, interpretation. Such interpretive weakness, you could say, shows the inherent weakness of my argument to begin with.

Another rebuttal to add would be to point out that not everyone is "open minded and sensitive to new perception," as Dewey puts it.²⁰ Not only is claiming that everyone is a philosopher misguided; asserting that everyone has a philosophical disposition seems off the mark too. So not only does my argument rely on a confusion of potentiality and actuality, but even worse, it also fails to see that even the required virtues of potentiality are not universal on their own.

On the surface, it seems I have been exposed. But, clearly, if I thought I had I would have revised or abandoned this paper. These arguments against my paper assume a chasm between a certain disposition and the thing itself, and between the potential and the actual. However, what this critic has not considered is whether philosophy is anything but a disposition. In other words, we might take time to set aside mechanistic arguments that take for granted that all there is to dancing or art is having the limbs to execute it with—this includes the assumption that philosophy is just thinking, or, under these terms, having a brain—and ask ourselves if Dewey's description of philosophy and experience, flowing from his democratic criterion and moving towards "unanalyzed totality," can be mechanized so easily.

A critic might respond by quoting Dewey's statement from the same chapter that seems to clearly reveal that philosophy is, in fact, thinking and just that. Indeed Dewey does write: "Philosophy is thinking what the known

¹⁹ Ibid., enclosure mine.

²⁰ Ibid.

demands of us...” But he goes on to say: “Philosophy might also be described as thinking which has become conscious of itself—which has generalized its place, function, and value in experience.”²¹ In other words, philosophy is not just thought. It is thought that bears a certain awareness, attitude, or, we might say, disposition. So, in having that disposition, anyone is not only rightly said to be philosophically disposed; she is nothing less than a philosopher. And, I might add, who is the arbiter over who has and who lacks this disposition? Who can point to someone who goes through her life without the ordinary need to wonder, to be curious and open to new things?

THE EVERYDAY, THE UNCERTAIN, AND PHILOSOPHY

If it is true that we are changing and always in flux and if there is any truth in Dewey’s characterization of experience as a continuum, then change and novelty are the water we swim in. Being a philosopher is as ordinary and natural as the abundance of these experiential—one might even say, existential—phenomena in our everyday life. No one’s life is certain. Indeed, this very uncertainty makes the ordinary life aboundingly philosophical. When writing of these homemade goods, in the same very same chapter (twenty-four) where he addresses the issue of defining philosophy, Dewey affirms this notion of the ordinary nature of philosophy when he asserts that these goods ultimately melt into perennial themes of human nature.

He writes, “Such homespun philosophies are genuine and often adequate. But they do not arise in systems of philosophy. They arise when the discrepant claims of different ideals of conduct affect the community as a whole, and the need for readjustment is general.”²² Here he notes the authenticity of everyday philosophy without digressing into a qualitative generalization. He also notes the difference between a systemic construal of philosophy from that which is ordinary and generative from social life. He goes on to say:

These traits explain some things which are often brought as objections against philosophies, such as the part played in them by individual speculation, and their controversial diversity, as well as the fact that philosophy seems to be repeatedly occupied with much the same questions differently stated. Without doubt, all these things characterize historic philosophies more or less. But they are not objections to philosophy so much as they are to human nature, and even to the world in which human nature is set.²³

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 327.

²³ Ibid.

Here, again, he distinguishes historic philosophy from the general sense that becomes nothing other than questions about ourselves and the world we live in. In this sense's unavoidable relation to this *self* and this *world*, Dewey notes the importance for philosophy of being selfly and worldly—that is, uncertain—not the other way around. He goes on to write:

If there are genuine uncertainties in life, philosophies must reflect that uncertainty. If there are different diagnoses of the cause of a difficulty, and different proposals for dealing with it; if, that is, the conflict of interests is more or less embodied in different sets of persons, there must be competing and divergent philosophies.²⁴

This reveals a consistent use of the democratic criterion in characterizing philosophical identity firmly rooted in the everyday and the uncertain. It also assigns a subservient role to systematic and historic philosophies and points to the general identity of the philosopher as the wonderer, the lover, and so on; that is, the ordinary person.

This is a compelling account, I think, when confronting the philosophical identity of many other things, two of which I will mention here briefly. For one, we might consider literature. As sophisticated as certain systematic philosophical texts might be, they are often indistinguishable from literature. Can anyone object to the philosophical identity of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Sartre's *Nausea*, Dante's *Comedia*, or Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*? And, furthermore, if the literature is justifiably philosophical, what about its authors? Do we only allow Sartre to "be a philosopher" because he wrote *Being and Nothingness* in addition to his plays?

And, secondly, what about occupational identity? Does one have to be affiliated with a philosophy department—or a certain kind of philosophy department—in order to be identified as a philosopher? If so, then what do we make of Richard Rorty? Did his transition to literature departments change his identity as philosopher? Along that line of thought, why give the title so freely to Noam Chomsky and other linguists or other popular nondescripts like Michel Foucault?

If our everyday lives boil down to the very stuff that philosophy serves and is, then why separate our lives from ourselves? Why parse out philosophy in that way? It seems, even while facing such radical uncertainty, that we can say that the answer to "Who gets to be a philosopher?" is anyone and everyone. Insofar as we are human we are philosophically disposed and, therefore, are philosophers. Schoolteachers, plumbers, dentists—even philosophers of education—included.

²⁴ Ibid.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EVENT OF TEACHING:
QUESTIONS AND A REPLY

If we accept, or are willing to entertain, this premise, there are sure to be many questions. These questions will likely ask something to the effect of: If everyone really is a philosopher, then what does this mean for philosophy, education, and our lives in general? For philosophers of education the most poignant concern will most likely orbit around more specific questions, such as: If this is true, then how will it affect us? In other words, how would admitting that Gramsci²⁵ was right, everyone *is* a philosopher, change or impact the practice of teaching philosophy to pre-service or current schoolteachers, administrators, higher education professionals, and other educators? Furthermore, what would this do to the educational practice of a schoolteacher, for instance, if indeed they are philosophers, as you say? Does the math, science, or social studies teacher suddenly transform into something new and different? And if they are philosophers to begin with, then are we left with no one to teach? What are we to do then?

I am hesitant to include this section precisely because these kinds of questions seem to miss my point entirely. Depending on one's ontological taste, realist or idealist, all those questions could be answered in two separate kinds of ways: For the realist, on the one hand, nothing *actually* changes. 'Becoming' a philosopher, in this sense, is about as radical a change as 'becoming' human. It is better described as an awakening or awareness of some kind. To use another Wittgenstienian expression, this formulation "leaves everything as it is."²⁶ For the idealist, on the other hand, *becoming* aware of something is to create its reality, so everything changes. We do not simply realize, or remember in some Platonic way, that we have been philosophers all along. We create that reality and are left to do with it as we wish. In both cases, however, we are told very little about the event of teaching. Instead, we are mired in petty, albeit fascinating, metaphysics and their consequences. In the meantime, the actual moment—the event—when we step in front of those human persons and commence to do the thing we call teaching is sadly forgotten.

So what I mean by "implications for the event of teaching" is not intended to offer a realist or idealist—or some hybrid of the two—interpretation of what the democratization of philosophical identity would mean for the so called 'practice' of teaching in this way. Instead, I would like to ask questions about what it might be like to enter into a classroom of philosophers and teach. Whether one's fancy is for that to be a realist sense of a

²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922; repr., London: Routledge, 1968), 124.

recovery or recollection of the real or an idealist sense of a socially and/or self-constructed transformation is very interesting, to be sure, but it misses the point I am making here.

To be specific, I am thinking of the actual, physical approach—the phenomenological event. The gathering of books and papers and other teaching materials and walking down the hall. The adjusting of a waistline, necktie, or collar and running a hand through the hair or checking the make-up, wondering who will be inside that room, who will those names on the roster be, who will I see and meet and, of course, teach? That curiosity before one enters a classroom for the first time is not so different—I say this from firsthand experience—from the “first day of school” feeling a student has, and is likely felt by the students on this day too, especially if they do not personally know the teacher beforehand. This particular event seems to be a poignant time and place to consider the implications for a democratization of philosophical identity. And, because of our interests, it seems of unique importance for the teacher, instructor, or professor; whatever we like to be called.

To re-frame the question a bit, we might now ask ourselves: What does it mean to enter the room and see philosophers seated in front of us? And how does that sight challenge our usual gaze? Afterwards, what does that vision make us do? Does it require a response of some kind? Does a room full of philosophers—as opposed to a room full of non-philosophers—require that we act in some different or more appropriate kind of way?

Answering these kinds questions from this encounter with students will require many things from us, but there is something that seems to be wholly indispensable: Socratic humility. Whether one actually reads Socrates as humble or not in Plato’s dialogues—and many people do not—the point here is to reject the hubris of the sophist: that is, the conceit of wisdom and knowing in some kind of extraordinary way, in some manner elevated from ordinary human experience. It is precisely that arrogance that stands in the way of democracy and, I would argue, *good* philosophy. And it seems to be a stance that Dewey was particularly apt at avoiding. So, to begin answering the question of what seeing and treating students as philosophers means for the philosopher of education, we might be best advised to begin with humility. There is much more than that, I am sure, but this on its own is a tremendously daunting task for myself and, I suspect, the field in general.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me be clear: it is my contention that if we accept the idea of the democratization of philosophy—or, to put it another way, the expansion of philosophical identity into the ordinary and the everyday—then it ought to yield an urgent need to be humble. I have tried to show this in three ways. First, by attempting to practice some humility in the writing of this text by emphasizing several limitations of this essay. Second, by interpreting

Dewey's understanding of democracy as a conceptualization towards an ordinary construal of philosophical identity and defending that hermeneutic against the idea that philosophy is something more than that. And, third, by offering some questions about the phenomenological event of teaching that generate a simple, yet still unfinished, response: humility.

One of the many things that has been left untouched in this paper is the potential for the democratization of philosophical identity, situated in humble practice, to confront the growing pomposity and concerning lack of democratic sensibility in other teaching events, in particular the schooling of young children. But, for my purposes here, it seems appropriate to pause and inspect our own events first—democratically, philosophically, and humbly, which seem to be intimately close to each other, if not the same thing at the level of “unanalyzed totality.”²⁷

²⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 8.
