

Can Dewey's Moral Philosophy Address the Problem of Inconsequentialism in Environmental Ethics?

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This essay makes two important assumptions about environmental ethics. Firstly, it accepts that climate change is taking place and that human activity is a major contributor to this problem — as well as other environmental issues. The second assumption is that the environment is worth saving; it is a moral good to conserve the environment for future generations. While some might contest either or both of these assumptions, I will not be addressing those objections in this essay.

Many environmental problems can be categorised as longitudinal collective action problems (LCAPs). By 'longitudinal', it is meant that these problems are generated and exacerbated over a sustained period of time. The 'collective action' aspect refers to the fact that these problems are caused by the actions of large groups of people and, as a result, will require a collective effort to address. No individual person is responsible for an environmental problem and no single individual can solve that problem. To reverse or offset some of the damage we have done to the environment will take a global effort.

These two factors combine to create the problem of inconsequentialism that makes environmental issues so difficult to address ethically. We all contribute to these issues but in such a minute, immeasurable and drawn out way that no individual can be held accountable. As a result, many of our environmental decisions hardly strike us as ethical decisions at all. One person changing their behaviour will not alter the end result but it may require a significant sacrifice from that individual. The problem of inconsequentialism is a problem of motivating moral action: why should we be good? Specifically, why should we act to address LCAPs, especially when such an action might represent a significant cost for no tangible reward?

In his essay *'Ethical Theory and the Problem of Inconsequentialism: Why Environmental Ethicists Should be Virtue-Oriented Ethicists'*, Ronald Sandler summarises the problem of inconsequentialism thus:

'given that a person's contribution, although needed (albeit not necessary), is nearly inconsequential to addressing the problem and may require some cost from the standpoint of the person's own life, why should the person make the effort, particularly when it is uncertain (or even unlikely) whether others will do so?'¹

To illustrate the problem of inconsequentialism, consider the following example. Most of us

¹ R. Sandler, 'Ethical Theory and the Problem of Inconsequentialism: Why Environmental Ethicists Should be Virtue-Oriented Ethicists' in 'Virtue Ethics and the Environment', p.168

drive a car but, compared to other modes of transport, cars are environmentally destructive. However, we don't consider driving a car to be an immoral action: everybody else does it and the difference in impact on the environment is so small. Each of our individual contributions to the problem is a proverbial drop in the ocean but, collectively, we have created a global crisis.

According to Sandler, the traditional ethical systems cannot effectively address the problem of inconsequentialism and thus we must pursue a different mode of ethics, at least regarding environmental issues. Consequentialist theories, such as utilitarianism, fail because they judge each action individually. The scope for judging the morality of an action is too focused. Simply put, an action is right to the extent that it promotes a good outcome (such as, but not limited to, happiness) and wrong to the extent that it causes harm. Judged as standalone actions, many of our environmentally-conscious efforts seem to cause more harm than good. For example, let us consider the decision to sort one's recyclable materials from the general waste. Assuming we derive no pleasure from the activity, it is simply a sacrifice of a significant amount of time for an infinitesimally small impact on the planet's landfill problem. Our impact on these problems is always so small that it can never justify the costs or harms of the actions that we would need to undertake to address them. Thus, consequentialist theories can never incite environmentally responsible behaviour.

Deontological ethical theories are also insufficient to address the problem of inconsequentialism. Kantian ethics judges the morality of an action based on the purity of its intentions, ignoring consequences entirely. Therefore, the potential futility of our acting is not a problem as it is for consequentialist theories. Rather, the problem for deontic ethics stems from the fact that environmental LCAPs are unintended consequences of our actions and thus irrelevant in the deontologist's moral deliberations. If the agent causes some environmental damage while obeying another maxim, he has still acted morally. As long as environmental damage is not the intended end of an agent's action, there is no basis upon which to condemn their action.

It might be argued that we have a duty to conserve the environment. Nonetheless, such an argument is also problematic. Kant's duties depend on logical contradictions arising from universalising the given behaviour. For example, we have a duty not to break promises because, if everybody were to do so, the concept of promises would cease to exist. However, if everybody acted carelessly towards the environment, it would not entail that no-one would be able to do so. There is no logical contradiction so it seems we do not have a duty towards the environment.

Given the failure of the traditional ethical approaches, I will now consider Dewey's moral philosophy as a potential alternative to solving the problem of inconsequentialism. Dewey believed that the predominant ethical systems at the time were unable to address the problems of the modern age. America was rapidly transforming from a pre-industrial nation into an industrial superpower. According to Dewey, ethical theory needed to move on from dogmatically prescribing objective moral goals. In a sense, Dewey's qualm still exists today. The ethical heavyweights of consequentialism and deontology still dominate the field. Only the problems have changed and, once again, we are faced with a situation these stalwarts seem unable to address.

I have identified what I take to be the five central features of Dewey's moral pragmatism. Dewey's ethics, along with most of pragmatic thought, can be described as taking a highly

scientific approach. A pragmatist foundation commits him to a form of instrumentalism - the notion that the value of an idea is in its practical application. For pragmatists, truth is a property of an idea, determined by how well it corresponds to reality. If an idea seems to cohere with our perceived reality - and is thus practically applicable - then we can deem it to be true. Utility plays an important role in truth for pragmatists. If a belief in something serves us well, that proposition should be considered true until a more effective one can be found. As it is at the forefront of science, we work with our current best guess.

This instrumentalist aspect is the first significant feature of Dewey's ethical system. However, a commitment to instrumentalism begs the following question: towards what ends should our beliefs be instrumental? For something to be practically useful, it has to be practically useful towards some purpose. In answering this question, Dewey is forced to admit that there is at least one objective moral end that human action should strive towards. That end is human survival. The value of an idea is tied up in its expediency at enabling us to interact with the physical world. The best idea is the one that coheres most with our perception of reality. However, in addition to this one admitted purpose of human action, some of Dewey's writings betray a belief in an additional objective moral good. That is the following: we should always strive to develop worthwhile moral habits, such as the habit of considering the needs of other people in our ethical deliberations.

Dewey's pragmatism also entails a commitment to fallibilism. Nothing is objectively true and anything can be revised. An idea that is currently held to be true might later cease to be true if it holds no further instrumental value or has been proven false. With regards to ethics, this means that something can be temporarily and subjectively moral. One of the most famous examples of this attitude comes from Dewey himself. Echoing Jefferson, he asserted that slavery was moral in the early years of the American state because it was a means to building a foundation for the country. Since that time, slavery has ceased to be morally justifiable. Likewise, some of today's ethical customs may one day be thought of as reprehensible.

This focus on progression forms the basis of another of the central features of Dewey's moral philosophy. Dewey and other pragmatists believe that societies - and their dominant modes of thinking - progress through rational inquiry. This means that a society's morality is constantly evolving. We cannot condemn more primitive societies as lacking ethics. We must take a more relativist position and accept that their morality may be less developed than ours and - though barbaric or wrong from our point of view - it is right for them at that moment in time. As with scientific inquiry, we are constantly improving upon our ethical apparatus. This enables us to get an increasingly complete picture of the truth. However, due to the fallibilist nature of pragmatist theories, there are doubts that we can ever reach a point of objective certainty about any proposition.

Related to this is Dewey's belief that morality ought to be judged primarily on a societal level. This is a significant point of departure from the other traditional theories in which individuals are judged to be moral or immoral based on specific actions. Dewey proposes that it is actually societies that achieve morality and they are to be judged on their current, prevailing ethical traditions and customs.

Lastly, Dewey's philosophy of ethics stresses that morality is a habit-based phenomenon.

Habits are distinguished from impulses, which have no intended purpose. Habits, on the other hand, are ‘socially shaped dispositions’² towards certain actions or courses of action. These dispositions are largely unconscious. Our habits are shaped by our experiences and largely inherited from the habits of those around us. These group habits are referred to as ‘customs’ and are the unit upon which Dewey claims we should judge the morality of a society. For Dewey, an individual's character is simply the collection of his habits and a society's character is embodied in its customs.

As mentioned, our habits are influenced by the customs of the society in which we were raised. But this connection also works the other way: our habits can influence the customs of the society we are in. When a marginal habit gains momentum, it can eventually achieve widespread approval and become part of that society's customs. To change a habit, and in turn a custom, requires deliberation. Deliberation refers to rationally reflecting on our habits and considering alternative methods. Actions following deliberation are said to be ‘self-aware’ and are termed ‘intelligent conduct’. Through practice, deliberation and intelligent conduct can themselves become habits.³ For Dewey, developing these habits is a significant and objective ethical goal because they encourage rational inquiry and therefore progression.

Having outlined Dewey's position, I will now consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of his position regarding the problem of inconsequentialism. Firstly, Dewey's emphasis on morality as a social phenomenon represents a significant advantage over the competing theories. As the problem of inconsequentialism points out, environmental problems are simply too big to be addressed by the efforts of one individual. These are problems that will require a national, if not international, response. By placing the moral responsibility at this level, Dewey's position seems to have a vital advantage. However, the problem of inconsequentialism is a problem of motivating moral action. Treating morality as a societal phenomenon puts Dewey's focus in the right place but does not provide a reason for why we ought to address environmental issues.

Similarly, Dewey's ideas about morality being a matter of progression and development represent a strength for his position, especially when applied to environmental ethics. The reality of the current global situation is, in a magnified version of the problem of inconsequentialism, that less developed nations see no reason to curb their own pollution when world leaders continue to pollute on a massive scale. The belief in ethical progression, combined with the relativism afforded by fallibilism, allows the pragmatic approach to set different moral standards for different societies, according to their current stage of development. This means that the moral responsibility can be laid most heavily on the shoulders of those most able to act. The first world nations are the best-equipped to handle the economic sacrifice that a response to the global environmental problems would demand. Again, the pragmatic approach correctly identifies where the required action must originate from. Unfortunately, this situation has created a real-life prisoners' dilemma among the world's major powers. If they work together to solve the environmental problems, everyone will benefit. If one nation chooses to continue consuming at the same rate as

² Section 1.2, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-moral/>, accessed: 10/01/13

³ Section 1.3, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-moral/>, accessed: 10/01/13

before, it will benefit at the expense of the other nations. As a result, no-one is willing to take the risk of being exploited and losing standing.

Dewey's habit-based approach represents a third advantage for his position over that of the traditional ethical theories. Many of our current environmental problems are borne from destructive habits. To address the current environmental issues will require a radical shift in our customs. Dewey's position - rightly in my opinion - identifies a change in customs as the most viable method for solving the LCAPs and even provides a method for breaking and altering habits (through deliberation and psychological reflection). However, again, Dewey's answer is unfit for purpose. His ethical pragmatism might tell us how to solve the problem but it does not tell us why we should do so and that is the crux of our issue.

The pragmatism aspect to Dewey's philosophy prevents him from accepting objective moral facts. The truth value of all propositions is revisable; there are no logically prior moral ends. Despite this, the very essence of pragmatism gives way to one objective moral truth. The pragmatist maxim encourages us to consider the value of a truth according to its practicability - the extent to which it allows us to make sense of, and survive in, the external world. From this, it logically follows that human survival is a moral good that we should strive towards.

Given the issue we are trying to address, a system that ultimately values human survival seems like a good place to start. As a proposed moral good, it is uncontroversial and certainly seems to be a valid and cogent reason for taking action. However, it is essentially unsuccessful as an incentive because the survival of the species is not actually threatened by climate change, at least not for the moment. We can continue to work around the problem, or even outright ignore it, because the human race will survive regardless. Even in the worst of all conceivable scenarios, it is unlikely that human race will ever be threatened by environmental damage. Given that it is possible to strive towards the propagation of the human race without addressing environmental issues, this argument is insufficient to address the problem of inconsequentialism. The value of human survival is not enough.

The second of Dewey's accepted moral goods, as briefly mentioned earlier, is respect for the needs of others. According to Dewey's ethical theory, 'the aim of moral education [...] is to make us habitually sensitive to the needs and interests of others'⁴. For Dewey, respecting other peoples' interests - and fostering habits that make us disposed to do so - is an objective moral good. Whatever the current moral customs might happen to be, a pragmatist moral education values open-mindedness, fallibility and relativity.

The objective value of respect for others initially seems like a promising place to ground our motivation for taking action. However, like the value of human survival, it proves to be an unsatisfactory solution to the problem. Firstly, we can question the suggestion that anyone's needs are seriously threatened by current environmental problems. At the most pressing, we are at a slight risk of losing the Maldives to rising sea levels. The homes and livelihoods of its citizens may be under some threat but, ultimately, they will be relocated. Human nature will find a way to protect their interests without addressing the greater problem. Secondly, we can question the suggestion that our current environmental behaviour indicates a lack of respect for others' needs. To return to the pitfalls of the Kantian approach to the problem of

⁴ <http://www.hughlafollette.com/papers/pragmati.htm>, accessed: 10/01/13

inconsequentialism: environmental damage is an unintended consequence of our actions.

I have rejected Dewey's two strongest incentives for action on account of there being a reasonable doubt as to the actual size of the threat currently posed by environmental problems. The obvious counter-point to this rejection is that today's environmental problems might present a very credible threat to future generations. Thus we now have the argument that we should take action addressing environmental problems because it is morally good to respect the interests of future generations.

Normative arguments based on the well-being of future generations are notoriously problematic. In *Reasons and Persons* (1984), Derek Parfit outlines what has come to be known as the non-identity problem. This problem demonstrates that we cannot actually harm people that do not yet exist (future generations). Our day-to-day actions in the present, even the most seemingly trivial ones, directly determine who will exist in the future due to what is popularly called the ripple effect. This means that a future person could not exist in anything other than the conditions they were born in. Cleaning up our act environmentally does not benefit future generations because it was a pre-condition of their existence. Likewise, if we continue down the road to ruin, we have not actually harmed the future generations that will be facing major environmental crises because they would not have been born had we followed a slightly different path. Popular discourse on the topic of environmental ethics often likes to draw the false dichotomy that we act now and leave our grandchildren a responsibly-managed environment or else condemn them to a planet of poisonous fumes and toxic landfills. This is not the choice. In reality, we are choosing between different sets of grandchildren, none of whom will be harmed by our decision, whatever it happens to be.

The most significant problem with Dewey's ethical pragmatism as a response to the problem of inconsequentialism is that it is simply not a normative ethical system. As has been pointed out above, Dewey's position does not address the issue of *why* we should act ethically. It offers an explanation for how ethical decisions are made and how a society's ethics develops over time but his philosophy never tells us why we should act in one way instead of another. His ethical theory is a purely descriptive one. Compared to the rival positions, Dewey is more on target with the *who* and the *how* but utterly fails to answer the question of *why*, which is the issue at the heart of the matter. The problem of inconsequentialism raises the issue of why we, as individuals, should act to save the environment when our individual contributions towards doing so are essentially negligible. Dewey provides a methodology but not a reason. As a result of this, it can not be considered to be a superior theory to either consequentialism or deontology when addressing the problem of inconsequentialism.

Some defence has been offered for the normative aspect of Dewey's position. He identifies certain goals to be worth pursuing such as human development and respect for the needs of others. If these are moral goods, they can be said to motivate action, or at least provide a reason for why we should act in a certain way. They are concrete claims about what is morally desirable. With these ends established as moral targets, we should pursue the course of action which best achieves them or fosters a habit that is directed towards their achievement.

However, accepting these as goals, as Dewey might happily have us do, reveals an inconsistency in his position. The attempt to balance instrumentalism with fallibilism is

precarious from the very start. To judge the value of an idea based on its expediency towards a certain end (instrumentalism) while at the same time accepting that any given idea, including the things we value as ends, are open to revision at any time (fallibilism) always runs the risk of a contradiction. Ultimately it seems that Dewey's position may have to abandon one of these central tenets.

By holding onto the instrumentalism aspect, Dewey preserves his objective moral truths and can claim to provide a normative approach. They provide a reason for why we should act morally and a definition for what moral behaviour is or consists of. However, these worthwhile moral ends are the same fixed moral goals Dewey was fighting against. This normative aspect is gained at the expense of the fallibilist aspect. Without which, the approach can hardly be said to be a pragmatic one at all. Rather, Dewey's position has essentially become that of the virtue ethicists.

Conversely, if Dewey were to choose to maintain the fallibilist aspect and concede his moral ends, the position loses its claim to normativity and becomes a purely descriptive theory. Philosophically, this would appear to be the wiser decision and I suspect it is the one Dewey would have pursued, given his commitment to pragmatism was probably stronger than his desire for a normative ethical theory. As a descriptive theory of ethics, the theory faces an entirely different line of scrutiny, one that I suspect it is better-equipped to withstand. However, as a descriptive theory, it cannot assist us with the problem of inconsequentialism or, for that matter, any other ethical dilemma. Rather ironically, Dewey's strongest, most charitably interpreted position has a minimised practical application and thus sees its value as an idea drastically reduced. Despite being the stronger of the two positions, it has less value in the pragmatist sense of the word.

To conclude, Dewey's moral philosophy cannot address the problem of inconsequentialism. At face value, Dewey's pragmatic naturalism seems to be a promising alternative to the traditional ethical systems. By treating morality as a societal phenomenon, it hurdles one of the most significant barriers to the success of consequentialist positions - namely that judging actions individually is too small a scope to encourage productive changes in our behaviours. To have a real shot at addressing today's environmental issues, there needs to be a change on the societal level, to the customs and traditions that inform all of our behaviour. The habit-based approach espoused by the Deweyan position seems to me to be more conducive to responsible environmental behaviour than any ethical system that judges morality from one action to the next.

Despite seemingly providing all the answers for how we should respond to our environmental crises, Dewey's moral philosophy ultimately fails to address the problem of inconsequentialism - the question of why we should get involved in an issue we can't affect. Dewey's theory of ethics contains a critical contradiction that results in some confusion over what kind of ethical theory it purports to be. Under one interpretation, it is a descriptive theory of ethics, merely designed to illustrate how a society's ethics is created and develops. Under a second interpretation, we can salvage a normative theory.

Taken in its fallibilist, pragmatist form, Dewey's philosophy of ethics is simply not a normative theory. It cannot act as a guide to action because it cannot provide a concrete answer to the question of why we should act morally. Necessarily, there are no objective moral ends to drive towards. If we accept this interpretation of Dewey's thought, we must accept that it cannot address the problem of inconsequentialism because it provides no

incentive for action.

The normative interpretation of Dewey's ethics does provide a guide for moral action: we should pursue the actions which either encourage the survival of the species or respect the needs of other human beings. These are treated as worthwhile moral ends. However, even with these ends to guide our action, the Deweyan approach cannot address the problem of inconsequentialism. Placing moral value in these ends does not necessitate, or even encourage, a change in our behaviour because they can be pursued, and satisfied, without having to address the environmental problems in their current state. Even the most environmentally irresponsible actions available to us do not pose a threat to the survival of the species; nor do they indicate a lack of respect towards our fellow man.

It seems the most compelling reason a pragmatist system of ethics can provide for changing our environmental behaviours comes from an appeal to the well-being of future generations. However, such appeals are fundamentally flawed due to the non-identity problem pointed out by Parfit.

Ultimately, Dewey's moral philosophy cannot address the problem of inconsequentialism. Placing moral value in humanity's needs, desires or development means that the well-being of the environment will always come second. I believe that a satisfactory response to the problem of inconsequentialism must instead assign moral significance to the ecosystem itself. If we consider ourselves to have a responsibility towards the environment itself, destructive actions can be condemned outright on this basis, regardless of the cost or sacrifice their alternatives might cause us.

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