DEWEY’S ETHICAL-POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS RESOURCE IN TODAY’S GLOBAL CRISSES AND AS A GUIDE TO A POST-IDEOLOGICAL POLITICS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Gregory Fernando Pappas

“Better it is for philosophy to err in active participation in the living struggles and issues of its own age and times, than to maintain an immune monastic impeccability.”


Infrequently, the term ‘Pragmatism’ is both popular and in circulation. In political discourse currently (on the web and in newspapers), ‘Pragmatism’ is both in use and in fashion. For this we need to thank the recent debates surrounding the “pragmatism” of President Obama as well as the fact that ‘Pragmatism’ is often assumed to be the alternative to ideological ways of thinking in the political arena. Hence, today may be a unique opportunity for scholars on pragmatism to contribute to public dialogue, and at the very least to rectify some common misconceptions. More importantly, now is a unique opportunity to show that Dewey’s particular form of Pragmatism is worth reconsidering. Dewey’s ethical-political philosophy is a present resource to reflect about the possibility of post-ideological politics. Dewey made two important contributions that I wish to highlight because they bear directly on today’s problems. First, in Dewey’s philosophy, we find tools of diagnosis and understanding of how ideological oppositions may have contributed to our present economic-political crisis. Secondly, there is in Dewey a positive proposal in regard to what sort of politician is needed if we are ever to transcend how opposing ideologies have dominated politics. Whether Obama may be a Pragmatist is not my concern here. Instead, I want to consider what could Obama’s alleged pragmatism mean and address the critics of Pragmatism, i.e., those that worry that Obama is a Pragmatist or exemplifies the practices recommended by Pragmatism.¹
1. Ideological Oppositions in Socio-Political Discourse

For Dewey, ideological oppositions in socio-political matters have had a long history. The oppositions are based on untenable dualism that, in practice, has led to a dogmatic and narrow-minded approach to problems. Ideological oppositions are an obstacle to the sort of intelligent and context-sensitive deliberation/communication that Dewey thought was needed in a democracy. He thought that, throughout history, one of the most common ideological oppositions has been between forms of individualism versus collectivism. The opposition between these types of political theories is of consequence because they each prescribe a particular form of inquiry about social problems.

Political theories that center on individual natural rights and the notion of negative freedom are suspicious of all collective action because such collective action tends towards regimentation, mechanical and mass uniformity, censorship, and suppression. Collectivism, for its part, considers organized action as the source of all that is good and civil in nature. Both views assume an untenable dualism between the individual and the social but, more importantly, they share the same dogmatic approach to problems. For the individualist, social organization (government) is at best a necessary evil, and it tends to be oppressive. Therefore, social problems are analyzed in terms of how individual initiative, freedom, incentives, and independence have been suppressed by some collective action or organization. The collectivist, on the other hand, tends to analyze problems in terms of the disintegration and instability created by a rampant individualism that has undermined social order or communal bonds. Depending on who represents the status quo in this debate, one accuses the other of the present problems, but neither one cares to examine situations on their own merits. Hence, Dewey referred to them as dangerous opposing doctrines that seem to exempt us from the responsibility and the hard work of ameliorating social problems in light of their contextual uniqueness. “The person who holds the doctrine of ‘individualism’ or ‘collectivism’ has his program determined for him in advance.”

The existence of these opposed schools of thought would be inconsequential if it were only a historical artifact. Unfortunately, the Libertarians and Communitarians hold sway in our society, and continue to apply their peculiar way analyzing to try to solve our current problems. This is not the place to go in depth about this ongoing debate, but I trust that what has been said already is sufficient to make anyone suspicious of any efforts to interpret Dewey as belonging to either camp. Instead, Dewey was simply a “contextualist” who, however much he cherished community avoided prejudicing the communal over the individual good.

It seems plausible to believe that recently (since the second half of the 20th century), parts of the world have been living under the assumption of a related but more significant opposition. Here is some recent