Collectivistic Individualism: Dewey and MacIntyre

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John Dewey and Alasdair MacIntyre are seldom considered philosophically compatible. Yet, both critique contemporary liberalism by focusing on the pervasiveness of atomistic, pecuniary, laissez-faire individualism. I argue that Dewey and MacIntyre have not abandoned individualism as much as reconstructed the concept. Dewey’s and MacIntyre’s conceptions of human flourishing rely on a nuanced conception of individualism, which I term “collectivistic individualism.”

John Dewey and Alasdair MacIntyre are very critical of contemporary liberalism. Interestingly, both provide genealogies of contemporary liberalism. Dewey’s critical genealogy focuses on the disparity between liberal ideals and the actual conditions produced by contemporary liberalism. MacIntyre’s critical genealogy focuses on the modern and postmodern rejection of the Thomist-Aristotelian teleological tradition, and the subsequent lack of a public rationale or justification for moral and political claims. While their accounts deviate, both Dewey and MacIntyre agree that the atomistic, pecuniary, laissez-faire individualism of contemporary liberalism is one of the chief problems.

Dewey and MacIntyre are not critiquing liberalism as such, but only that strain of liberalism that propagates laissez-faire individualism. In this article I provide an analysis of Dewey’s and MacIntyre’s nuanced notions of individualism. In the first two sections I examine their respective conceptions of human flourishing and the conditions necessary for flourishing. In the concluding section, I point out the overlap between these views. I argue that Dewey and MacIntyre advocate what I will call a collectivistic individualism. In short, each recognizes that social or communal flourishing relies upon reflective, self-determining individuals, and that particular social arrangements and institutions are needed to cultivate these individuals.

1. Dewey on Human Flourishing

As a post-Darwinian thinker, Dewey offers an account of human flourishing that is naturalistic and evolutionary. Dewey maintains that present-day human
beings are the evolutionary result of a long legacy of organic adaptation. Dewey thus recognizes that human beings are organic creatures, and that any adequate account of human flourishing must recognize this aspect of the human condition. And, so, Dewey begins his account at the organic level.

Dewey first points out that, at bottom, all living organisms are in constant interaction with an environment. An organism is always already located in an environment of some sort. Organic life takes place in and by means of an environment. Moreover, the interaction between organism and environment goes both ways; i.e., organisms act and are acted upon in the world. Dewey writes, “The world is full of things that are indifferent and even hostile to life.” Life is maintained through the overcoming of these factors of conflict and opposition – through adaptation. To prolong life, an organism must adjust itself, either by accommodation or by conquest (LW10:19). The avoidance of predatory animals and the consumption of food are just such adjustments. This ability to adjust and adjust to the environment is vital, for “if the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies” (LW10:19–20).

On this view, the world is a precarious place, where organisms are continually called upon to endure disruption and opposition. But successful adjustment affords organisms temporary bouts of stability or equilibrium. This stability is secured when an organism shares in the ordered relations of its environment (LW10:20). Even still, organisms recurrently lose and reestablish equilibrium with their surroundings (LW10:22). But, through successful adaptation, the life of the organism becomes higher powered and more significant. Dewey writes, “In the process of living, attainment of a period of equilibrium is at the same time the initiation of a new relation to the environment, one that brings with it potency of new adjustments to be made through struggle” (LW10:23). Each new adjustment contributes to the growth or enlarging of the adaptive capabilities of the living creature. Growth is achieved “when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives” (LW10:20).

Dewey acknowledges that a number of organisms are driven by instinctive or native impulses in reaction to immediate stimuli. When there is a heavy rain, the worm leaves the saturated soil. But, in those organisms that are more complex there is an ability to survey and respond to their environment on a broader scale. With heightened auditory, olfactory, and visual faculties, these organisms are able to scan more of their surroundings in greater detail. We also find that the actions of these higher organisms are conditioned by the consequences of their prior activities. In these more complex organisms there is the capacity for learning or habit-forming (LW1:213). Habit, on this account, is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response; a special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli (MW14:32).

As Dewey sees it, human beings are creatures of habit (MW14:88). Day after day human beings face countless situations bearing similar features. Take,