Constructing a Deweyan Theory of Moral Cultivation

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This article constructs a theory of moral cultivation from the writings of John Dewey. Examining his early work in ethics, I argue that the goal of moral cultivation for such a Deweyan scheme is an individual who is attentive and engaged with the particulars of her situation. I then sketch an account of art’s moral value and its connection to attentiveness, intimating a way to dissolve longstanding problems in the philosophy of art.

At first glance, attempting to extract a notion of moral cultivation from the thought of the American pragmatist John Dewey would seem an impossible task. Such an endeavor presumably requires a substantialized self to change, and would also necessitate some sort of fixed ideal toward which one’s moral capacities would “grow.” For those familiar with Dewey’s moral thought, both of these requirements are held by him to be anathema to a useful conception of human moral activity. The constant theme of meliorism and improvement that one sees in pragmatists such as Dewey, however, causes one to expect that a usable notion of moral cultivation can be found. Can a Deweyan ethics be constructed that is based on a reasonable account of moral cultivation of the self?

I will argue for such a notion of moral cultivation in Dewey’s thought that holds a place of importance for attentiveness to situations and relationships. Attentiveness denotes a first-person sense of experience, so I will largely base my account in Dewey’s early works in ethics from the 1890s, differentiated from his later works not so much in terms of content but in terms of perspective – the former tend to emphasize a personal psychological approach, and the latter develop a social psychological approach. A key theme in his early works is that of moral development being integrally tied to attention to one’s situation and impulses to activity, and the development of capability and character through the realization of self via attention.

In the last section of this article, I will argue that this reading of moral cultivation is useful in that it entails that aesthetic experience is morally valuable and cultivating by virtue of being an instantiation of attentiveness to the details
of the present, as well as an instance of preparation for future cultivated attentiveness. I cannot fully explicate this idea of the moral value of aesthetic experience that my account of Deweyan cultivation reveals, but I will outline the next step of my project in regard to the implications of cultivation in Dewey’s moral thought.

1. Dewey and Moral Cultivation

I begin with the important task of enunciating a notion of moral cultivation within Dewey’s thought. In doing so, I will be elucidating what is of moral value, or what conduces to the type of personal development that ought to be desired. “Moral cultivation” is not a concept employed in many Western ethical theories largely because their authors often overlook or undervalue the developmental aspects of moral activity, instead favoring criterial matters of moral judgment. One often sees this concept employed in discussions of ethical systems of China, India, and Japan. For instance, Philip Ivanhoe examines the early Confucian tradition and finds three types of cultivation models – the acquisition, development, and reformation models of moral cultivation. These correspond to the approaches of Confucius, Mengzi (Mencius), and Xunzi, respectively. All of these assume some sort of subject (viz., the person or agent), and assume that there is some sort of goal of moral development. This is the point to which cultivation contributes, and is the reason why the theories are often called self-cultivation theories. The “self” portion refers less to the agent of cultivation and more immediately to the object of cultivation, although self-initiative and individual activity has a role to play in such cultivation approaches. In the developmental model, the key point is the encouragement of latent tendencies within the self to fully flower, whereas in the reformation model, potentially harmful forces in the agent are re-formed in such a way that they are conducive to moral self-hood. The acquisition model shies away from a commitment to the existence of original inclinations to good or bad in the agent, but it does insist on certain formations as the endpoint of self-development. In all of these accounts it seems as if the self is “going somewhere,” namely, to a state which it does not currently occupy.

This presents an immediate problem to any sort of Deweyan notion of moral cultivation. Dewey was strongly against any separation between ideal and real, especially in the moral realm. First, he argued that such a separation would presume a separation between means and ends. A paradigm example of such a worry comes in Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* (1925), where he describes an end-in-view as a “constant and cumulative reenactment at each stage of forward movement. It is no longer a terminal point, external to the conditions that have led up to it; it is the continual developing meaning of present tendencies – the very thing as directed we call ‘means’.” Means and ends are integrally connected in the present, and any removal of ends qua ideals is unwarranted. If one were to insist on such a removal, Dewey would counter by pointing out that