

# John Dewey and democracy as regulative ideal

## *John Dewey e democracia como ideal regulativo*

**Rosa M. Calcaterra**

Dipartimento di Filosofia, Comunicazione e Spettacolo  
Università degli Studi Roma Tre - Italia  
rosamaria.calcaterra@uniroma3.it

**Abstract:** The religious background of John Dewey's thought strongly affects his conception of democracy, which nevertheless explicitly claims the independence from supernatural beliefs. The 'quasi-religious' feature that he assigns to democratic ideals is a peculiar expression of his 'naturalistic humanism', which enhances imaginative capacity and scientific knowledge as basic instruments for better developing human possibilities, aside from individualism and from any form of dogmatism. The complexity of Dewey's thought, of its sources of inspiration as well as of its most original issues, offers solid reasons for contrasting the risk of an incautious scientism and at the same time leaves room for further reflections about current problems of democratic societies.

**Keywords:** Anti-dogmatism. Continuism. Faith. Humanistic naturalism. Radical democracy. Individualism.

**Resumo:** *O contexto religioso do pensamento de John Dewey afeta fortemente sua concepção de democracia, o que, não obstante, assevera explicitamente sua independência de crenças sobrenaturais. A característica 'quase-religiosa' que ele atribui aos ideais religiosos é uma expressão peculiar do seu 'humanismo naturalístico', o que acentua a capacidade imaginativa e o conhecimento científico como instrumentos fundamentais para um melhor desenvolvimento das possibilidades humanas, além do individualismo e de qualquer forma de dogmatismo. A complexidade do pensamento de Dewey, de suas fontes de inspiração, assim como de suas questões mais originais, oferece sólidas razões para se contrastar o risco de um cientificismo incauto e, ao mesmo tempo, abre espaço para maiores reflexões sobre os problemas atuais das sociedades democráticas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Anti-dogmatismo. Continuismo. Fé. Naturalismo humanístico. Democracia radical. Individualismo.*

## 1 The construction of an anti-dichotomic philosophy

The battle against the pervasive dichotomy between ideas and concrete life is the focal point of the vast work of Dewey. As is known, it unfolded in a period coinciding with the significant socio-economic changes in the United States of America by which it became a world power, emblematic—for better or for worse—of advanced capitalism. In the course of these events, Dewey became the spokesman of a

real passion for democratic ideals, a passion that was both theoretical, moral and aesthetic, in fact corresponding to his effort to show that, in the concreteness of human reality, there are no sharp lines separating living from thinking. This effort was initially pursued in the wake of the concept of the living organism put forward by Thomas H. Huxley and later through his studies of Hegel, but it certainly is a commitment that also reflects the influence of William James and Peirce, the latter appreciated especially on the epistemological side.

The construction of a mentality adverse to the “false antitheses”—to use his own words—that traditionally govern western culture is a primary goal of Dewey’s ‘instrumentalist’ translation of Peircean and Jamesian pragmatism to dismantle a series of contrapositions which are well rooted in common language, as well as in traditional philosophical discourse, such as that between reason and feeling, between logic and empirics, between facts and values, between individuality and sociality, and finally between what is usually ascribed to the realm of the ideal and what instead is considered ‘real’. All this is an integral part of the project of a “radical democracy” that Dewey pursued with continuous confidence since the early years of his philosophical work.

Dewey’s anti-dichotomic battle is a thorough endeavor to deconstruct the dichotomist mentality that governs the western philosophical tradition and also our ordinary way of thinking and talking, namely all the conceptual contraposition that are deeply rooted in our culture. I do not agree with interpreters as Kaplan who asserts that “Dewey showed that the duality can be reduced to something unitary or that he wanted to move from dualism to monism.”<sup>1</sup> In my opinion, his approach to dualisms is instead characterized by the theoretical intention to show the pervasive importance of the category of continuity and not so much of that one of unity, and in fact this intention is an integral part of the so called “Hegelian deposit” in Dewey’s thought. More precisely, he intends continuity as an ontological and, at the same time, an epistemological as well as a practical category, and it is according to such threefold meaning that the idea of continuity is put in place within his “cultural or humanistic naturalism,” as he himself labeled his own philosophy. If we would talk of unity instead of continuity, we consequently would have to consider him as a reductionist philosopher, namely a philosopher who maintains an exclusive perspective on human reality or the possibility to reduce all human capabilities, potentialities and practices to a unique ontological principle, such as the ‘material’ forces otherwise the ‘spiritual’ ones. Accordingly, we would have to consider him as a philosopher who definitely relies on science rather than on philosophical reflection or criticism and *vice-versa*. More importantly, if one thinks of him as a theorist of ‘unity’ instead of ‘continuity,’ there is a serious risk to miss the very core of Dewey’s thought, that is his effort to grasp the *concrete complexity* of human life, and this simply means paying attention to the actual, effective impossibility to disentangle the vital intertwining of the various dimensions, functions and factors that make human experience. In particular, it is worth noticing that, while the study of brain and body are essential for understanding Dewey’s notion of concrete experience, one should consider his emphasis on the social meaning of scientific knowledge as well as on the social environment in which human organism operates.

---

1 KAPLAN, A., in LW 10: XII; see also GOOD, J. 2008.

To put it briefly, Dewey's continuism helps to consider our traditional conceptual oppositions as expressions of the philosophical anxiety to provide a unified conception of science and knowledge, which is in fact tainted by metaphysical attitudes of exclusion and denial. Just because of such stances, a number of important and illuminating distinctions—as that between individual and social, rational and affective, logical and empirical, natural and cultural—are transformed into paradigms of division and opposition, so pervasive as to become almost invisible and, ironically, even canonical.<sup>2</sup> From an overall point of view, one can say that the contemporary relevance of Dewey's battle against dichotomies finally consists in a strong call to recognize the distinctions as representative of the diversity and dynamism of the real and yet not to fix them in preconceived formulas that stifle their concrete dialectic, in a nutshell: to develop a philosophical stance basically hospitable to the acknowledgment of continuity-within-differences that can be observed in the ontological, epistemological and practical realms.

## 2 The “Christian deposit” in the project of a Radical Democracy

Dewey's project of a “radical democracy” is complex and fascinating, although inevitably problematical in a few specific aspects. It mirrors the ambitious attempt to convey some central issues of Christianity, Hegelianism, and of Darwinism but it also includes the most relevant features of his own ‘instrumentalist’ version of pragmatism. The first steps of Dewey in ethical and political research are markedly aimed at recovering Christianity as a form of life in which everyone is called upon to realize himself or herself within the historical community to which it belongs.<sup>3</sup> This is a safe aspect of further developments of his commitment in favor of a radical democracy, and it is also acknowledged nowadays as a point of reference to supporting a conception of liberalism based on the formation and development of individual personality.

Moreover, the anti-dogmatic intent that has always animated his contributions to the Christian religion should be noted, in fact he took up a quite clear stance in the debate about the relation between science and religion within which he was strongly against ecclesiastical extremism. For instance, *Ethics and Physical Science* is emblematic of a defense of Darwinism carried out in the name of the battle against the anti-scientific forces of religious apparatus, and represents—also because of the philosophical language used—an interesting document of the interweaving between Hegelian teleologism and Darwinian evolutionism. Along with *Christianity and Democracy*, an 1893 article where religion is defined as “an expression of the mental attitude and habit of a people,” the essay just mentioned also provides the basic lines of Dewey's more mature approach to religion, which he offered in the very famous essay *A Common Faith*, usually considered as the manifesto of his secularism.

---

2 The psychological and existential implication of this datum are carefully analyzed in CORRADI FIUMARA, G., 1995.

3 On such perspective, it is commonly remarked the influence of Christian Congregationalism, more precisely of the interpretation of Christianity offered by Coleridge, for whom Christianity should be understood primarily as a guide for human behavior rather than only as a theological system.

For the sake of clarity, it is useful to consider briefly the central point of the arguments of *Christianity and Democracy*, which consists in refusing the argument that there are religious truths which can be determined once and for all. According to Dewey, this is especially true with regard to Christianity, since this religion aims explicitly at a “revelation of truth” that “is *in* human beings” and, therefore, the revelation must be extended “as long as life has new meanings to unfold, new action to propose.” More precisely, “revelation means effective discovery, the actual ascertaining or guaranteeing to man of the truth of his life and the reality of the Universe,” so it can only consist in intelligence, in thought and in human reason, as well as “in man’s own action.” That is to say, “Man interprets the Universe in which he lives in terms of his own action at the given time,” and “man’s action is found in his social relationships—the way in which he connects with his fellows”.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for the first time the statement—typically pragmatist—of the social nature of human intelligence and actions was clearly worded, and it is in this light that Dewey identifies democracy as a prerequisite for the implementation of the search for truth implied in Christianity, supporting the interweaving of truth, freedom and sociality that he always continued to keep at the center of his thought:

I assume that democracy is a spiritual fact and not a mere piece of governmental machinery [...]. If God is, as Christ taught, at the root of life, incarnate in man, then democracy has a spiritual meaning which it behooves us not to pass by. Democracy is freedom. If truth is at the bottom of things, freedom means giving this truth a chance to show itself, a chance to well up from the depths. [...] Democracy is, as freedom, the freeing of truth. [...] Truth makes free, but it has been the work of history to free truth—to break down the walls of isolation and of class interest which held it in and under. [...] The truth is not fully freed when it gets into some individual’s consciousness, for him to delectate himself with. It is freed only when it moves in and through this favored individual to his fellows [...]. (DEWEY, 1972, v. 4, p. 8).

Within a few years, Dewey put aside the argument of a deep similarity between Christianity and democracy. However, he was not to abandon the core concept on which he had tried to build a fertile combination between one and the other, that is to say the idea that the democratic organization of society can exist only as and to the extent that it exceeds the merely technical and formal level, and instead constitutes a “form or style of life” in which individual autonomy and social responsibility can combine fruitfully. More generally, much of what Dewey had said about a reconstruction of the concept of religion in view of a theory of democracy was to remain basically unchanged.

### 3 Democracy as a regulative ideal

In Dewey’s continual questioning about the meaning of democracy, the possibility of its realization, and its difficulties of surviving in the contemporary world, it is

---

4 EW 4:7.

obviously inevitable that gaps and discrepancies emerge. These are both conceptual and operational, some of which are due also to the profound historical changes that affected American society during his intellectual life. At the same time, however, it is clear that Dewey's commitment in favor of a democratic policy took place in the light of some basic and permanent criteria or features of the Western political and philosophical debate. Principally, in this regard, one should mention Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), for whom democracy is an uninterrupted "experiment", a socio-political ideal which necessarily exceeds its own implementation. But no less important is the similarity between Dewey's position and the line of thought that extends from Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) to William E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), to Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), a line according to which a democratic society consists first of all in the ability of its members to constantly re-describe their criteria for behavior and values. Moreover, there is a profound correspondence between Dewey's pluralistic meliorism and the suggestion by Richard Rorty that democracy consists in "the ability to see more and more traditional differences (tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant" and "the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'." (RORTY, 1989, p. 192).<sup>5</sup>

In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) Dewey asks himself what democracy exactly implies, both from the theoretical point of view and from that one of the socio-political practices that are inherent to it, that is to say, whether it should be considered a moral ideal or whether democracy should be treated as a specific political system, based on a particular type of rules and criteria of legitimation of power. Dewey's answer is clear: democracy is not reducible to a form of government among others, but is above all a "way of life," the implementation of which requires a constant and unconditional commitment, in many ways analogous to the commitment usually reserved to the followers of a religious faith.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, he can be rightly counted among the continuators of the American philosophical-political tradition that goes back to Emerson and Whitman and is characterized precisely by the conception of democracy as a "quasi-religion." What must not be underestimated in any case is the fact that for Dewey democracy is first of all a regulative ideal that is rooted in the propensity to organize and develop, in a creative way, the best possibilities inherent in individual and social reality. Two famous passages illustrate this perspective clearly:

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. (DEWEY, 1985, v. 14, p. 226).

Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. It is an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of something which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected. (DEWEY, 1985, v. 2, p. 328).

---

5 On Rorty's meliorism, let me mention CALCATERRA, R.M., 2014.

6 See ROCKEFELLER, S.C., 1991; WESTBROOK, R., 1991; ROGERS, M.L., 2008.

To say that democracy acts as a principle that is not constitutive but is rather regulative of human action means to highlight its problematic and uncertain nature, its very being a project which is neither adequately realized nor perfectly realizable, but which is, on the contrary, always subject to the risk of annihilation. Precisely for this reason it is in need of a “moral spur” for supporting individuals in their effort to make the democratic ideal real and effective, notwithstanding the difficulties that continue to arise and to block its implementation. The theoretical core of Dewey’s philosophical proposal lies in this fundamental tension: on the one hand, democracy is thought of as the only form of life that is able to allow the full expression of human capabilities; on the other hand, its realization is assigned entirely to the realm of the possible and, consequently, subordinated to the will and to the ability to find the right tools for its implementation in the forms permitted by the political, economic and social conditions of the time. The element that mediates and settles the contrast between the two theses in apparent contradiction is the concept of faith.

From Dewey’s point of view, indeed, democracy takes shape as a faith whose particular conceptual content centers on the conviction that it is only in democracy that the soundest possibilities can improve both associated life and individual existence. Like any other faith, also the faith in democracy must be brought into existence through behavior, and this mostly means striving to strengthen the constant dialectic between individuality and sociality. It is a dialectic that establishes human reality’s fundamental nature as “shared experience” in which the various factors of humanity are rooted and develop: theoretical and practical knowledge, ideal purposes, and even the various forms of feeling. Precisely within this theoretical framework, Dewey addressed the problem of the use or role of science and technology in the planning of a democratic society, distancing both from those who gave indiscriminate praise to scientific knowledge and from those who insisted only on its limits.

#### **4 The individual and the polis**

There is a sort of epistemic primacy of the society over the individual, however the defense of the value and potential, both cognitive and ethical, of individuals remains an inescapable fixed point: this is, in a nutshell, Dewey’s overall socio-political perspective, to which important qualifications are offered in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*—the well-known work published in 1920 and reprinted in 1948 with a new introduction that stresses the moral responsibilities of the rich and scientifically advanced American society. Embracing a “historicist” perspective, he maintained in such text that there is a mobile boundary between “individual” and “social”, namely the meaning of these words has been changing continually within the course of the political and cultural Western history. In this regard, the function of the interactional and communicative processes is emphasized and eventually presented as constitutive of the very concept of society:

Society is the process of associating in such ways that experiences, ideas, emotions, values are transmitted and made common. To this active process, both the individual and the institutionally organized may truly be said to be subordinate. The individual is subordinate because except in and through communication of experience from and to others, he remains dumb, merely

sentient, a brute animal. Only in association with fellows does he become a conscious centre of experience. Organization, which is what traditional theory has generally meant by the term Society or State, is also subordinate because it becomes static, rigid, institutionalized whenever it is not employed to facilitate and enrich the contacts of human beings with one another. (DEWEY, 1978, v. 12, p. 198).<sup>7</sup>

Yet, it is in *Individualism, Old and New* (1930) that Dewey's perspective on the relation between individuality and society reached the highest degree of awareness and originality, connecting to a further crucial point of his theory of democracy: the statement that democratic organization constitutes the only social scenario in which a truly human life is made possible. In this work, as in many others, the defense of the value of the individual's autonomy is linked to the emphasis on his/her social responsibility. The problematic aspect of such connection is foregrounded *via* incisive and quite topical comments on the conformism of the ideas put into effect by the new media of mass communication, implicitly suggesting the importance of active resistance to dominant socio-political patterns of thinking and living. This is an interesting point, since certainly Dewey never agreed with forms of violent rupture of the social equilibriums in effect, although this does not mean that he underestimated the emancipatory potential of the conflicts that inevitably occur in the life of democratic societies. It is safe to affirm that he acknowledged the richness and value of conflict following the teachings of the Hegelian dialectic as well as the evolutionary biology of Darwin. In particular, it is possible to grasp an appreciation of Hegel's concept of negation, that is, of the consideration of negation as the original source of all positivity since, according to the Hegelian dialectic, every new pattern of concrete universality is the outcome of the alienation and the particularization of pre-existing models. Most importantly, such dialectical process is conceived as occurring when objective impediments arise to the operability of existing patterns of universality and, therefore, as a process that in many cases takes place at the tragic risk of annihilation.

Moreover, Dewey's distancing from violent forms of social change is actually coherent with his anti-dichotomist battle, which consists—as suggested above—in showing the continuity-within-differences that embraces all relevant ontological and practical traits of human world. The standard opposition between conservatism and revolution should be considered just in this light. Indeed, from an anti-dichotomist perspective, such an opposition could be endorsed only as representative of two

---

7 The essential factors of this line of thought are already well delineated in one of the first Deweyan writings, *Ethics of Democracy* (1888), in which Dewey rejects "the idea that men are mere individuals, without any social relations *until* they form a contract". On the contrary, he argued, human individuals are always constituted within a process of social nature. These expressions are very close to the theory of the social genesis of the self-offered by George Herbert Mead, Dewey's friend and close research partner during his years at University of Chicago. It is also important noticing the influence of Hegel on Dewey's conception of society as an organism or *Sittlichkeit*, *ethos*, in that it is a complex combination of customs, norms, attitudes, feelings and aspirations, which characterizes the life of a people.

different features of political vocabulary, since both conservatism and revolution cannot represent, in themselves, absolute principles of the historical concreteness of political and social life: if considered in the long run, every socio-political system is supposedly ruled by the dialectics between the need for change and the need for stability, namely by the need for continuously re-describe and thus improve human life and aspirations. In other words, conservatism and revolution should be considered as the two interconnected features of human historicity, i.e. of “our cultural inhabitation of the world”—to use Thomas Alexander’s definition of Dewey’s concept of experience. More precisely, Dewey suggests that social and political development corresponds, so to say, to a process of “changes within continuity” and accordingly he does not accept the Marxian idea of revolution as a tool for realizing a social order better than the existing one.

Dewey’s conception of democracy received a number of different interpretations about its possible placement in the vein of liberalism or that of socialism. In this regard, the only substantial point of convergence of critical interventions is to exclude both a direct derivation of his political thought from the work of Marx and his unequivocal distancing from Marxism if not simply from the specific socio-economic organization of Soviet Union set in motion by the ‘historical materialism.’ At any rate, it is apparently certain that the American philosopher never read the texts of Marx, although his work is plentiful in expressions that echo his ideas. For instance, one could notice that, in a text of 1843, Marx defines himself as “radical democratic” in the same sense in which Dewey declares his own intent to promoting a “radical democracy.” Moreover, clear examples of Marx’s echoes can be noticed in Dewey’s claims about the necessity to providing “a social control of economic forces” in order to allow the free self-realization of individuals and, more in general, in order to “release human energy for pursuit of higher values”. (DEWEY, 1985, vol. 11, p. 63). Finally, there is certainly an assonance between Marx’s philosophical materialism and the naturalist, anti-dichotomist setting up of Dewey’s instrumentalism.

Nevertheless, there is a strong opposition of Dewey to some key concepts of historical materialism, for instance to the criterion of “struggle class” as an instrument for progress and emancipation of the proletariat. Most importantly, he does not welcome the drawing of an all-purpose economicist philosophy of history which the Marxian doctrine intrinsically involves. More precisely, it is true that Dewey pays great attention to the economic factor as an eminent aspect of human history, but he also maintains the exquisitely instrumentalist stance that what really matters is the critical analysis of the particular socio-political events and contingencies, of the specific situations or problems as they concretely come into play, rather than providing generalized theories about human history, especially those involving the pre-determination of a definite end to be achieved as well as the means to achieve it.

The issue of the means to be entrusted with the achievement of a fully deployed democracy is the core of almost all Marxist critics of Dewey, who in fact complains his omission of specific programs of action to pursue.<sup>8</sup> This lack might appear not only as a symptom of an unproductive abstractness of his political thought but also an

---

8 Among the numerous texts on the matter cf. DAL PRA, M., 1960; GAVIN, W.J., 1988; WEST, C., 1989, p. 93ff.



implicit allowance to the most disturbing implications of capitalist liberalism, if one does not take into account that Dewey's approach to political problems is intrinsically ethical and moral rather than technical or formal. In any case, from an overall point of view, one can agree with Cornel West's claim that, apart from some tangible errors in a few hasty assertion by Dewey about particular aspects of Marx's doctrine, the latter acted as an indirect source of inspiration for the project to promote a new form of liberalism. Nevertheless the most salient features of this project go through the American culture of Emerson's mould, but also—as already indicated—through the appreciation of the practical requirements of Christianity that Dewey's political thought eventually translated into the “faith” in the values of democracy.

## 5 Education as a plea for democracy

As I have previously argued, the positive value of conflicts is acknowledged in the wave of Hegel's concept of negation, i.e. regarding conflicts as the original source of every new pattern of “concrete universality”, which is—according to Hegelian dialectics—the result of the alienation and the particularization of pre-existing models of universal points of reference. At the same time, Dewey acknowledges the tragic aspect that conflicts present in regard to the survival of democracy and it is just at this level that education is foregrounded. Indeed, it is the danger of overturning democratic ideals that he apparently keeps constantly in mind when speaking of their roots in modern Western civilization and, at the same time, pointing to the serious crisis of democratic policies during so many historical periods. To put it in different words, his claim of democracy's contingent origins implies the awareness of its fragility or unwarranted survival, and it is for this reason that his philosophy goes hand in hand with his pedagogy, namely with a theory of education crucially devoted to accomplish democracy as a social and personal way of life.

Dewey provides a model of democracy based on the notion of “epistemic resistance”(MEDINA, 2012), namely a set of theoretical tools that help to regard democracy as a socio-political system which gives room primarily to the resistance or battle against injustice much more than to political consensus. In brief, Dewey's model of democracy “makes dissent epistemically productive” and, from such point of view, two basic requirements must be safeguarded: 1) the possibility for particular social groups to express their particular experiences and needs; 2) the individual and social responsiveness to the problems and different point of views that these people express. To be sure, these two requirements are never ready-made or established once for all in any social context; on the contrary, they have to be constantly assessed and revitalized and this is a matter of cultural edification which, in turn, implies a specific ethical engagement of mass media, but it is apparent that neither cultural settings nor ethical standpoints could be accomplished without a strong educational effort. Dewey's firm conviction of the inescapable intertwining of democracy and education deserves a great deal of comments, but I necessarily will confine myself in a few remarks which could be hopefully useful to enlighten his plea for faith in democracy.

As Cornel West claims, “Dewey's emphasis on culture leads him to promote principally pedagogical and dialogical means of social changes” (WEST, 1989, p. 106). This implies that every single socio-political problem, including also the

difficulties deriving from the economic structure of a society, should be first of all considered as a matter of public debate within which the continuous reconstruction of the relationship between the 'ideal' and the 'real' would be crucial. The concrete relevance of continuous analysis of such a relationship is stressed in a fascinating chapter of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, which eventually suggests the need to distance oneself from the dogmatist stance that threatens to go along with every theoretical system, especially with broad-spectrum socio-political theories. In a few words, there is an appeal for developing a critical mentality hospitable to the possibility of modifying theories according to historical contingencies and, above all, according to the results of the practices through which theories have been implemented. Once again, what comes to the foreground is the pragmatist interweaving of ideas and concrete life and this is tantamount to giving theoretical value to the warnings coming from human practices and not at all to simply claiming the applicative side of theories or to trivially stating that every theory has its own practical implications.

Several interpreters have complained about the lack of a precise normative theory for the construction of the public sphere in Dewey's arguments about the problems of democracy.<sup>9</sup> This criticism—similarly to the above mentioned reproach for the lack of precise programs of actions to be pursued in order to achieve democratic ideals—seems rather inadequate when one considers that, from the beginnings, the hub of his theoretic arguments was not the question of defining the procedures intended for arranging the public space, but the need to identify the conditions of possibility of a way of life, both social and individual, that could promote the cooperative relationships on which the functioning of democratic institutions depends. In a nutshell, it is mainly important to affect the quality of personal and interpersonal relationships, since it is at this level that any improvement of public institutions toward a more truly democratic society becomes possible. Then it is quite reasonable to maintain a solid link between Dewey's plea for faith in democracy and the concept of citizenship as a set of 'sentimental virtue' in the sense expounded by the current philosophical debate on the socio-political problems, i.e. according to a theoretical view that stresses the importance of civic virtues as necessary requirements also for the construction of personal identity. This position implies an analogy between Dewey's democratic individualism and the current attempts to show that civil virtues become the virtues of democratic citizenship when they are used also for the purposes of self-knowledge, as far as the construction of personal identity is conceived as a narrative process that cultivates concepts, metaphors and images drawn from the social vocabulary. It is worth stressing that such a perspective shifts the customary idea of human imagination as merely aesthetic and subjective ability into a 'social' picture of individual creativity, namely into a philosophical horizon characterized by the practical-theoretical acknowledgement of the continuous interweaving between individuality and sociality, between personal needs or aspirations and traditional, shared values.<sup>10</sup> This is, in fact, a typical claim of Dewey's works and there are good reasons for interpreting his texts on educational

---

9 Recently TALISSE, R., 2005.

10 See on the matter the essays edited by MADDALENA, G. and ZALAMEA, F., in EJPAP 1/2013.

practices as a sort of 'sentimental education' to democratic values that presents fertile points of convergence with contemporary theories of education for Citizenship. Without a doubt, the very concept of 'Citizenship education,' so important in our time, implies the decline of the sharp distinction between 'individual' and 'social' supported by traditional liberalism, which in fact is opposed to Dewey's proposal of a 'new individualism' aimed at a society made up of responsible and well-informed citizens.<sup>11</sup> In Dewey's perspective, this last requirement is basically equivalent to the faith in democracy as faith in the possibility to develop mental habits corresponding to the cooperative, anti-dogmatic, and experimental spirit of scientific methodology.

## References

CALCATERRA, R. M. The linguistic world. Rorty's aesthetic meliorism. In: KOCZANOWICZ, L. (ed.). *Beauty, responsibility, and politics*. Ethical and political consequences of pragmatist aesthetics. New York-Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014, p. 93-109.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Idee concrete. Percorsi nella filosofia di J. Dewey*, Milano: Marietti, 2011.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Dewey e la grammatica della democrazia*. In: P.P. Poggio (a cura di), *L'altronevecento. Comunismo eretico e pensiero critico*, Milano: Jaka Book, 2013, p. 105-140.

CORRADI FIUMARA, G. *The metaphoric process. Connections between language and life*. London: Routledge, 1995.

DAL PRA, M. Dewey e il pensiero del giovane Marx. *Rivista di filosofia*, n. 3, p. 279-92, 1960.

DEWEY, John. A common faith (1934). In: *The later works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. v. 9. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 1-58. [The later works are cited as LW followed by volume and page number.]

\_\_\_\_\_. Christianity and democracy. In: *The early works of John Dewey, 1882-1898*. v. 4. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972, p. 3-10. [The early works are cited as EW followed by volume and page number.]

\_\_\_\_\_. Creative democracy – the task before us (1939) In: *The later works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. v. 14. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 224-230.

\_\_\_\_\_. Ethics and physical science. In: *The early works of John Dewey, 1882-1898*. v. 1. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972, p. 205-226.

---

11 Cf. MOUGAN RIVERO, J.C., 2007; for a synthetic account of Dewey's relevance for contemporary educational-political debate see PAPPAS, G.F., 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_. Individualism, old and new (1930). In: *The later works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. v. 5. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 41-123.

\_\_\_\_\_. Liberalism and social action (1935). In: *The later works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. v. 11. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 1-65.

\_\_\_\_\_. Reconstruction in philosophy (1920-1948). In: *The middle works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*. v. 12. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978, p. 77-203. [The middle works are cited as MW followed by volume and page number.]

\_\_\_\_\_. The public and its problems (1927). In: *The later works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. v. 2. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 235-372.

GAVIN, William J. (ed.). *Context over foundation: Dewey and Marx*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1988.

GOOD, James. *A search for unity in diversity: The hegelian deposit in the philosophy of J. Dewey*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008.

KAPLAN, Abraham. Introduction to DEWEY, John. Art as Experience. In: *The later works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. BOYDSTON, Jo Ann (ed.). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

MADDALENA, Giovanni; ZALAMEA, Fernando (eds.). European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy (EJPAP), v. 5, n. 1, 2013.

MEDINA, José. *The epistemology of resistance: gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

MOUGAN RIVERO, Carlos J. John Dewey and the necessity of civic democratic education. In: *Education for a democratic society*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2007, p. 11-20.

PAPPAS, Gregory F. Dewey's ethical-political philosophy as a present resource. In: SHOOK, John; KURTZ, Paul (eds.). *Dewey's enduring impact*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2010, p. 98-112.

ROCKEFELLER, Steven C. *John Dewey: Religious faith and democratic humanism*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1991.

ROGERS, Melvin L. *The undiscovered Dewey: religion, morality, and the ethos of democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

RORTY, Richard. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1989.

TALISSE, Robert. *Democracy after liberalism*. Pragmatism and deliberative politics. London-New York: Routledge, 2005.

WEST, Cornel. *The american evasion of philosophy: a genealogy of pragmatism*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

WESTBROOK, Robert. *John Dewey and democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

### **Endereço/ Address**

Rosa M. Calcaterra  
Università Roma Tre  
Dipartimento di Filosofia, Comunicazione e Spettacolo  
via Ostiense 234, 00145 Roma, Italia.

Data de envio: 18-07-14

Data de aprovação: 22-08-14

