

Living Together:  
The Metaphysics of Radical Democracy

Andrew Blake Girdler

PHIL 399: Senior Thesis

Dr. Bethany Henning, Dr. Timothy Brownlee, and Dr. Richard Polt

April 21, 2023

## I. Cartesian Dualism and Interaction

It is one thing to ask “how should I live?” It is an entirely different thing to ask “how should *we* live?” When I ask about what informs our actions in relation to others, I find that the others become extricable from the self, or rather, the individual. If we wish to write political philosophy or ethics, we must examine the conditions of existence, which unavoidably takes us into the arena of metaphysics. Since human interaction implies an existence that is extricable from a collective, does it make sense to start from concerns over *individual* rights? As a primary tool of analysis, I intend to focus on the effects caused by the acceptance (consciously or subconsciously) of a set of metaphysics as opposed to others. This way I just might be able to answer the daunting question: “how do we live together?” Or rather, what set of metaphysics is best equipped to be used as the tools to create such a philosophy of politics? How should we think about the self in this situation of togetherness, and how would this thought inform our action?

If we can accept that mind-body dualism is a persistent habit of the modern mind, there is no better starting point than René Descartes. He provides a compelling view of reality for many as he seeks a foundation that is aimed at the most “rational” ideal: certainty. In his awakening from the dream-like deceptions of his education, he decides he must “raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations.”<sup>1</sup> Descartes makes the ultimate decision that nothing he has learned can be trusted. While this is done in the quest for certainty, he finds, at least initially, much more doubt than certainty. Not only can his previously learned facts not be trusted, but he can also not even trust his own body. Descartes writes, “I have noticed that the senses are sometimes deceptive; and it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in

---

<sup>1</sup>René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 59.

those who have deceived us even once.”<sup>2</sup> Descartes, in this case, does not choose a slight skepticism of his reality, nor does he choose to entertain particular concepts or sensations; Descartes chooses a system of *radical* doubt that ultimately requires a separation of mind from body. Descartes' dualistic metaphysics finds its justification in the viability of a hypothesis, presented to the reader as tactical, that everything he has sensed or learned is false. He writes, “I will accomplish this by putting aside everything that admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be completely false.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the dismissal of the body and its ultimate separation from the mind has its grounding in the argument that the bodily senses are unreliable, as they are “sometimes deceptive,” and may be false.<sup>4</sup>

Since the senses of the body can not be trusted, Descartes searches for truth in the reasonings of the mind. If we cannot trust our senses to access the world, then reality can only be known by a disembodied spectator, where the ego (mind) must employ rationality to make judgements of truth and falsity in relation to an external, doubtful, reality. This is a metaphysics that bisects experience such that ultimate reality comes from within a mind that is inherently separate from the outside. This bisection has implications for the question at hand: how do we live *together*? Considering that Cartesian metaphysics situates the individual as primary, a problem arises in the word “together.” Descartes teaches the individual how to live a life of the mind that is separate from the external world, which alienates them from their relations with other human beings.

Descartes' influence on modern philosophy can hardly be overstated, and from the perspective of our political crises, it seems likely that it is also the assumed metaphysical habit of our current age. Though it is no wonder that Descartes thought of this separation as a necessary

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 60.

component of rational knowing. In fact, Susan Bordo offers a compelling psychological analysis of his proposed metaphysics of separation. Bordo, in *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought*, points to Descartes' need for God in the *Meditation* as a crucial key to understanding his primary psychological conflict. Bordo writes, "the need for God's guarantee... is a principle of continuity and coherence for what is experienced by Descartes as a disastrously fragmented and discontinuous mental life."<sup>5</sup> God is absolutely necessary if Descartes wants to uphold his classic proof that two plus three shall always be five.<sup>6</sup> In the wake of mathematical proof, and Copernican notions of heliocentrism, Descartes finds himself in a confusing place in the cosmos. There now is a lack of inherent continuity between the internal and external world as he now has nothing to physically ground him. Like a child lacking object permanence in the absence of their mother, Descartes' subsequent anxiety brought about by this feeling of dislocation ultimately calls for something that reaffirms a sense of continuity: God.<sup>7</sup> Without the assurance of God, the continuity of inner life (and consequently human reasoning) cannot be guaranteed.<sup>8</sup> Bordo writes, "this strong sense of the fragility of human cognitive relations with the object world is closely connected to the new Cartesian sense."<sup>9</sup> Descartes' dualism asserts, however, that the separation of mind and body, thus the necessity of the interior self as opposed to *res extensa*, is in fact, reality. If this is the case, there should be nothing fragile about it. This fragility not only shows the cracks in the concrete of Descartes foundation, it speaks to a larger condition Descartes is, perhaps unconsciously, subject to.

---

<sup>5</sup>Susan Bordo, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," *Signs* 11, no. 3 (1986): 441, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174004>.

<sup>6</sup>Descartes, 61.

<sup>7</sup>Bordo., 446.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 442.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 442.

It is no coincidence that colloquially humans have referred to the natural universe as “mother nature.” In fact, as Bordo reveals, the classical view of nature has been a particularly feminine one. She writes, “For Plato and Aristotle, and throughout the Middle Ages, the natural world has been ‘mother’ –passive, receptive, *natura naturata* to be sure, but living and breathing nonetheless.”<sup>10</sup> Nature, throughout human history, has always been a kind of mother. The Renaissance marks the point in time where this comparison seems to lose its weight. This age, as Bordo writes, “had brought the worst food crisis in history, violent wars, plague, and devastating poverty.”<sup>11</sup> The world had thus become unruly, uncontrollable, and frightening. To humanity (including Descartes) the nurturing mother had abandoned us. This view of nature corresponds directly to the omnipresent gynophobia of the era, in a phenomenon that Bordo calls “the seventeenth-century flight from the feminine.”<sup>12</sup>

A reflective look upon the years between 1550 and 1650 reveals that, as Bordo writes, “the prevailing ideas of the era now appear as obsessed with the untamed power of female generativity and a dedication to bringing it under forceful control.”<sup>13</sup> Descartes admits himself that the goal of his newfound method is to become, “masters and possessors of nature.”<sup>14</sup> Though if this comparison is to stand, it must suppose a connection between the view of women and view of nature present around Descartes’ time.

Coping with the absence of our mother is a crucial point of development in the psychology of a child. In fact, this separation is the foundation of the self as a mental concept. Bordo recounts the thoughts of Margaret Mahler, “our true psychological birth comes when we

---

<sup>10</sup>Bordo, 452.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 454.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 453.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 453.

<sup>14</sup>Descartes, 35.

begin to experience our separateness from the mother, we begin to individuate from her.”<sup>15</sup> Descartes, taken as a key voice from his era, has thus undergone a particular variation on the process of separation from mother (nature). As Bordo explains, this manifests in Descartes' mental life as a deep sense of separation anxiety, like that of an infant that no longer has its mother in sight.<sup>16</sup> Descartes, along with the rest of the people of his time, now must come to terms with a sense of alienation from what was once their nurturing mother. Possibly more consequently, they must come to terms with individuation brought on by maternal separation. With this in mind, the proof of an eternal and constant God can be understood as a psychological necessity for Descartes as he needs God (the father) to serve as a replacement for the mother that is no longer trustworthy, and his newly individuated self. As Bordo states, “only God the father can now provide the (external) reassurance Descartes needs.”<sup>17</sup> Though Descartes takes this notion a step further, since the mere proof of God's existence is not enough for Descartes. He does not want to wait around for some omnipotent Christian God to step in to control nature, he wants to do it himself.

The cartesian goal of mastery becomes, as Bordo argues, the goal to become “the father of oneself.”<sup>18</sup> Descartes witnesses an intense societal shift, and with the help of his proposed method, wants to shape it as a kind of *re*-birth.<sup>19</sup> The discovery (and proof) of God through rational thought internally relates God and the thinker. God, to Descartes, is found within *res cogitans*. The father, needed to bridge the gap, is ultimately found within the rational mind. In his anxiety, Descartes wishes to be reborn, to be the father of the cosmos, so that nature can be tamed and controlled. Bordo writes, “most of us are familiar with the dominant cartesian themes

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 444.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 445.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 446.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 448.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

of starting anew, alone, without influence from the past or other people, with the guidance of reason alone.”<sup>20</sup> Cartesian dualism, when read from this angle, appears as a reaction to the deeply troubling experience of separation anxiety from mother nature, for which radical individuation of the self is the defense. Descartes goes far enough to deny that nature was ever genuinely a mother to begin with. To imagine nature as an unruly feminine figure, is to accept the possibility that she cannot be controlled. Bordo points out that in scientific rationality, “‘she’ becomes ‘it’—and ‘it’ can be understood.”<sup>21</sup> If nature can be understood, or as Descartes envisions, *known for certain*, then it can also be controlled. This is the true desire behind the reasoning of the superiority of *res cogitans* over *res extensa*. Extended substance “abandoned” Descartes, and he can never trust her again, thus we must start anew.

Stepping away from Descartes for a moment, if I choose to not separate mind and body, thereby abandoning the current dualistic perspective, I can find support for this perspective by turning to the thoughts of John Dewey. His metaphysics, informed by his earlier work to develop a psychology that resists mechanistic linear causality, places *experience*, rather than *substance*, as the ultimate reality. In a practical sense, Dewey explains, “immediate empiricism postulates that things—anything, everything, in the ordinary or non-technical use of the term “thing” – are what they are experienced as.”<sup>22</sup> This removes doubt as a central theme of informed metaphysics, particularly the variety that we find from Descartes. In the Deweyan view, the mind is no longer the spectator who seeks a rational account of some kind of external, material reality. The concept of the spectator is ultimately challenged by this line of thinking. Dewey writes, “unless knowing

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 452.

<sup>22</sup>John Dewey, “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 115.

is the sole and only genuine mode of experiencing, it is fallacious to say that reality is just and exclusively what it is or would be to an all-competent all-knower.”<sup>23</sup>

If *certain knowledge* is chosen as the ultimate form of reality, we lose our capacity to have a crucial part of experience. When an experience is, well, experienced, this event often includes cognition. Biases and judgements emerge in the context of an experience in a phase familiar to us as reflection. Dewey provides an example of the experience of fright to demonstrate these two distinct phases of experience. If a loud noise occurs and I am frightened by it, in the immediate sense I am frightened; only after I cognize my experience can I conclude that I *know* that I am frightened. Dewey writes, “I-know-I-am-frightened, or I-*am*-frightened? I see absolutely no reason for claiming that experience *must* be described by the former phrase.”<sup>24</sup> When, as Dewey says, I *am* frightened, I have imported none of my intellect, judgment, or bias to assist my cognition of the experience; in fact, I have hardly cognized the experience at all.

This experience as “*am*” frightened is purely present, real, and primary. Secondary experience, while a very real phase of our overall experience, emerges only in response to the primary phase. To come to the conclusion that I “know” I am frightened, I have to retroactively analyze my initial fear. It is only then can I make certain judgements and verbal descriptions of the fearful interaction I just had with my environment. In a given situation, I may decide I had nothing to fear at all, but that does not make my initial fear any less real. Reality, in this case, has simply *changed* on the basis of my reflection. Dewey writes, “this is a change of experienced existence effected through the medium of cognition.”<sup>25</sup> I began as simply frightened, without any context, thought, or judgment implemented on such a feeling. I then, after time had passed, understood that some thing had caused my fright, and I could then judge the past situation

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.



accordingly. I could only come to that conclusion through the medium of cognition, which mends the space between my primary “am frightened” and my secondary “I know I am frightened.”

This gives rise to a new metaphysics that emphasizes the primacy of immediate experience, and restores continuity in the gap between mind and body that has been established in the centuries following Descartes. The human is no longer categorized as a mere observer to the external; they are a part of nature, they feel it without a mediating rationality. With this alternative in mind, we can return to the initial inquiry. Is cartesian dualism compatible with democracy, an approach to life that values the interaction of a collective? It certainly “can” be used as a basis, as it has been implemented excessively in the modern world. I can certainly live “together” with others, in some sense, as a dualist, though I cannot do it well. This is because I believe that Cartesian dualism advocates for the primacy of the individual as separate from the external world because, as Bordo explains above, the external world cannot be trusted.

In this anxious metaphysics, the mind is separate from the body, and thus thought is separate from action. Not only this, but mind and thought are believed to be superior to body and action, since the body is unreliable, and nature is either an uncontrollable maternal object or else an impersonal inert thing. This leaves the status of *other* people, who I may only know through my senses, somewhat doubtful as well. In this case the mind, as a self-enclosed rationality, and the only arbiter for reality, is the only sovereignty that I can rationally consult. Likewise, reality and being can only be proven to be within the mind of the individual. As Bordo writes, “under such circumstances, *cogito ergo sum* is, indeed, the only emphatic reality, for to be assured of its truths, we require nothing but confrontation with the inner stream of self.”<sup>26</sup> In the modern world

---

<sup>26</sup>Bordo, 443.

that tacitly accepts this dualism as its primary metaphysics, the effects of such an acceptance are directly visible.

Dewey explains that from a young age we are impressionable and plastic.<sup>27</sup> As he writes, “there is no miracle in the fact that if a child learns any language he learns the language that those about him speak and teach, especially since his ability to speak that language is a pre-condition of his entering into effective connection with them, making wants known and getting them satisfied.”<sup>28</sup> This introduces the existence of habits in our world, and to a greater extent custom, “or widespread uniformities of habit.”<sup>29</sup> These customs are informed by previous ones, such as the case of the child who learns the language of their parents. Society, practically speaking, runs on customs. Though for a time, a single custom can become dominant. Dewey even writes, “for practical purposes morals mean customs, folkways, established collective habits.”<sup>30</sup> Custom is not only mere acceptance of repetitive action, custom *is* morality itself.

Although, what happens when a custom or a moral principle needs to be questioned? Perhaps a group of the population is negatively impacted by a currently agreed upon custom. As Dewey writes, “never before in history have there existed such numerous contacts and minglings.”<sup>31</sup> In this modern scenario, the likelihood of two people meeting with different sets of customs is great. This creates an environment where the question at hand of living *together* must be explored. If we seek to live *together*, we need to be able to adequately handle such probable meetings.

---

<sup>27</sup>John Dewey, “The Place of Habit in Conduct,” in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 2: Habit, Conduct, and Language*. eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 38-39.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 47.

What was once a reasonable custom, may one day become one that harms a society. But it is the nature of customs to continue unless we intervene. In fact, we can very well become subservient to these customs, considering how ingrained they are to us. After all, it is our developmental plasticity as children that initially forms our habits, and as these habits become widespread, they take on the momentum and force of custom.<sup>32</sup> Dewey writes, “for what makes a habit bad is enslavement to old ruts... It identifies morality with what was sometime rational.”<sup>33</sup> The key word Dewey uses is “was.” Habits and customs may work for a society for a very long time, but that does not guarantee its future success. We can become programmed by the society we live in to follow what has already been established, a situation for which Dewey’s word “rut” is especially suitable. Action and thought will default to flowing through the trenches that have already been dug. Though as it has been made clear, the time may come where the two need to go in a different direction than what has already been paved. It is, in fact, our ability to question and change the current customs that prevents us from becoming slaves to these ruts. Darwinian notions of evolution are a physical display of the necessity of change and adaptability in a contingent world. Such ideas show that there perhaps may be some virtue in escaping old ruts.

It seems the world is designed specifically to prevent the change of custom, however. As has been stated, human society is run by ingrained customs that are informed by the ones that precede it, the language learned by a child being an example.<sup>34</sup> We are thus taught how to act by following the instruction of those who raise us, and we develop in response to those who we grow up around. Our customs are formed through interaction with our environment. This includes the ways in which we are explicitly *educated* to act. However, it is not always

---

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

adaptability that we teach the young, since we often prefer their *docility*.<sup>35</sup> As Dewey writes, “education becomes the art of taking advantage of the helplessness of the young; the forming of habits becomes a guarantee that the maintenance of hedges of custom.”<sup>36</sup> This is what we are truly up against in the quest to live *together*. The enforcement of custom leads to stagnation, which creates the ruts to which we become slaves.

The ability to escape the enslavement from these ruts, or rather the ability to change our customs will be the primary value for embracing a metaphysics that can better allow us to imagine the ability to truly live *together*. But, how do we change if all we can do is repeat what we are taught? As Dewey explains, there is luckily more to our habit than mere repetition. As he writes, “we are confronted with two kinds of habits, intelligent and routine.”<sup>37</sup> Allow the consideration of the performance or creation of that of an artist. The artist is not a mindless machine that just repeats and displays pure automation of the body; something else is working within them. “How delicate, prompt, sure and varied are the movements of the violin player or an engraver,” Dewey poetically exclaims, “How unerringly they phrase every shade of emotion and every turn of idea!”<sup>38</sup> The artist is no mere automaton, nor are they the pilot of one. In their intelligent expressions of emotions and originality, the artist displays something a bit more “masterful.”<sup>39</sup>

This demonstrates the ability and need of the human to go beyond pure mechanization of action. The human being requires more than the dull, mindless repetition of physical habit. We need more than what Dewey calls routine habit. The artist demonstrates intelligent habit as the alternative to the routine habit that dominates most of our existence. Dewey explains, “the

---

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

technique or mechanism is fused with thought and feeling.”<sup>40</sup> This demands a departure from our accepted metaphysics of dualism. In this particular instance, mind is indistinguishable from body in the creation of a wholly intelligent, willful, and dare I say, beautiful act of artistic expression. Intelligent habit is the ability to inform our habits and action with creative thought that is not dictated by pure routine. If a custom does not serve a society well, it is the job of intelligent habit to build our way out of the current rut.

But, this is what authoritarian education, which is the generally accepted form, does not permit. A good student is expected to repeat and regurgitate what they are told. Dewey writes, “the regime of custom assumes that the outcome is the same whether an individual understands what he is about or whether he goes through certain motions while mouthing the words of others.”<sup>41</sup> Current education, and modern society, value routine habits. Artistic expression and creative questioning of the dominant custom remains suppressed.

This demonstrates the failing of the dualistic model that values separation from mind and body. Returning to the example of art, Dewey explains the incompatibility of the cartesian worldview and the intelligent action needed to properly live *together*. He writes:

The current dualism of mind and body, thought and actions, is so rooted that we are taught (and science is said to support the teaching) that the art, the habit, of the artist is acquired by previous mechanical exercises of repetition in which skill apart from thought is the aim, until suddenly, magically, this soulless mechanism is taken possession of by a sentiment and imagination and it becomes a flexible instrument of the mind.<sup>42</sup>

The Cartesian worldview fails us in its inability to grasp and explain artistic expression. This of course speaks to its greater inability to accommodate creative action, or rather intelligent habit,

---

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 43.

that allows us to change our habits when the time comes. For a society whose goal it is to live *together*, this ability to change is one that cannot be forfeited in the name of a dualistic approach to reality that devalues the body and the senses that act in the physical world, and values thought only for its ability to find certain truth. Cartesian dualism is thus incompatible with experiences of *togetherness*, as it is an anxious reaction to a perceived separateness from a maternal mother manifested in an over exaggerated superiority of the self and the self alone. This is not philosophic soil in which another can be seen as inextricable from the self, or could find the level of existential validity needed for *togetherness* to flourish.

## **II. Democracy: Absolute Law and Plurality**

As René Descartes' teachings have become a metaphysical habit, in other words, have become the primary lens for seeing the world and others, it will be hard to even consider an alternative approach to metaphysics. In fact, the Cartesian habit of the mind penetrates so deep that considering metaphysics at all is sacrilege to the holy sciences. Though I believe we must address our assumed (and likely unspoken) metaphysics if we are to engage in an informed discussion of political philosophy. While often overlooked and unspoken, our politics and our ethics must derive from something a bit more metaphysical than it may be assumed. A useful analogy comes to mind from an unorthodox source: the fictional character Miranda Priestly, played by Meryl Streep in the 2006 film *The Devil Wears Prada*, provides some insight. Her assistant Andrea, played by Anne Hathaway, is doubtful of the necessity of the fashion industry, yet she wears what she thinks to be an unimportant blue sweater that makes no statement whatsoever. However, the kind of blue of the sweater happens to be a particular shade of blue, “cerulean.” Priestly says to Andrea, “You’re also blithely unaware of the fact that, in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns.” Priestly continues, “cerulean quickly showed up

in the collections of eight different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores, and then trickled on down into some tragic casual corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin.”<sup>43</sup> In the case of the place of metaphysics in political science, we can see cerulean blue as a certain kind of metaphysical assumption, thought, or basis. In effect, we all have had to dig our ethics and our politics out of some clearance bin, wholly unaware of the great thinker(s) who gave us the metaphysical principles to allow them to exist to begin with.

If this is a lighthearted way of understanding this connection, it is still a demonstration for why it is imperative that we consider an alternative metaphysics to the assumed dualism of the modern mind. If we seek to build the habits for democracy, we need a political philosophy that is open to the interaction of a collective rather than disparate judgements that issue from individuated minds. As previously stated, even asking a question that concerns *togetherness* implies a reality where the other is inextricable from the self. Thus I cannot simply ask, “how can I live well?” As I must rather ask, “How can *we* live well?” Due to the necessity of *togetherness* implied by a discussion of politics, an alternative to our assumed dualism must focus primarily on interaction. John Dewey’s concept of customs, or “established collective habits,” can be useful here because the acceptance and allowance for change is necessary.<sup>44</sup> In short, we must adopt a system of thought that allows us to not become enslaved by mindless routine habits of society that no longer serve us well.

If I am to consider John Dewey’s approach to inquiries of knowledge, I find his notion of immediate empiricism. To propose this as an alternative to our Cartesian habits, a few

---

<sup>43</sup>*The Devil Wears Prada*, directed by David Frankel, featuring Anne Hathaway and Meryl Streep, Story by Lauren Weisberger, adapted by Aline Brosh McKenna (20th Century Studios, 2006), 0:23:38, [https://www.amazon.com/Devil-Wears-Prada-Meryl-Streep/dp/B000LX00RY?ref\\_=nav\\_ya\\_sign](https://www.amazon.com/Devil-Wears-Prada-Meryl-Streep/dp/B000LX00RY?ref_=nav_ya_sign) in.

<sup>44</sup>Dewey, “The Place of Habit in Conduct,” 44.

clarifications must be made. While it can be said that Dewey's philosophy of experience, "postulates that things—anything, everything, in the ordinary or non-technical use of the term 'thing' – are what they are experienced as;"<sup>45</sup> there is much more to say about the place of experience in this thinking. Often when using the word "experience," we mean to describe a certain event perceived by our consciousness at a given point in time; such as an experience that is already determinant in a way that is manifest to consciousness. However, for Dewey, experience is something different. He writes, "experience is something quite other than 'consciousness,' that is, that which appears qualitatively and focally at a particular moment."<sup>46</sup>

Dewey sets up a hypothetical situation regarding fright in "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," which is an example I briefly mentioned in a previous section. In this situation an individual is startled by the sound of a shade hitting a window.<sup>47</sup> As Dewey would argue, it cannot be said the experience of fright was wholly contained within the mind of the one frightened; an experience is not the private possession of any individual. Instead, the situation is what it is because it is pervaded by a *quality* of fright. Fright is something quite real and immediate. This is something that is felt (first in a non-reflective way, and later cognitively understood) by the one who is frightened immediately *as* primary experience. Dewey writes, "Experience includes dreams, insanity, illness, death, labor, war, confusion, ambiguity, lies and error; it includes transcendental systems as well as empirical ones; magic and superstition as well as science."<sup>48</sup> Experience exists not only as a method of "knowing" per say, but as the stuff of existence, which we have in the primacy of the interaction and immediate quality of a given situation.

---

<sup>45</sup>Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," 115.

<sup>46</sup>John Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," in *Volume 1: 1925: Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1988), 369.

<sup>47</sup>Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," 116.

<sup>48</sup>Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," 371.



Cartesian knowledge, with its goal of certainty, is not Dewey's aim, nor is it the primary aim of human experience. Dewey writes, "knowledge is itself one of the things that we *have*."<sup>49</sup> This is to say that, "knowing" is not something we must, as Descartes may say, deduce through logic and reason while disregarding and doubting sense and body. As he writes, "thus what I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind."<sup>50</sup> In Dewey's view, we must turn our attention to experiential quality which provides the necessary context for us to "know" anything about a situation. We may be able to feel and interact with quality in a given situation, but may not necessarily "know for certain" anything through deductive reasoning. In the example of fright, the man *is* frightened long before he is able to know the reasoning behind the series of events causing his fright. In the moment, *experiencing* and *having* ultimately mean much more than deductive certainty. When we experience the qualitative situation (or perhaps when another experiences us as a qualitative reality), we ultimately *have* what Dewey calls, "preconditions of reflection and knowledge."<sup>51</sup> I can only dive into an inquiry of my fright, as Descartes may wish, *after* I have *experienced* fright.

Dewey gives a similar example to the one of fright, this time regarding illness. Dewey writes, "a man may doubt whether he has the measles, because measles is an intellectual term, a classification, but he cannot doubt what he empirically has."<sup>52</sup> Focusing on qualitative experience gives us a way to interact with the world that can truly be felt. While we do not "possess" nor "master" nature, we become much more in step with its motions. This approach does not abstract knowledge into something invisible and unobtainable. This is a metaphysics of experience, not

---

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 379.

<sup>50</sup>Descartes, 63.

<sup>51</sup>Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," 377.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 379.

of “certainty” and possession via “certainty,” as Dewey writes, “their [qualities] existence is unique, and, strictly speaking, indescribable; they can *only be* and be *had*”<sup>53</sup> A diagnosis of measles may not help a man if the given treatment for this technical classification of illness fails to make him feel better. Though in a system of Cartesian science, the blame may be put onto the man’s perception or “knowledge” of his condition, rather than the failings of his treatment to adequately consider the man’s existence, and what he empirically *is* and *has*.

When the diagnosis is given, this proposition in the traditional method is seen as absolute certain knowledge, scientifically proven to “fix” the patient. Bethany Henning provides a bit of clarification on the alternative view. She writes, “the propositions that we interact with are not there for us to ‘know,’ they are there to take something done or tried in the past in terms of how it may or may not help us in a new situation, as we collaborate to shared ends.”<sup>54</sup> Only through interaction with others (and nature) may we investigate, and in the Deweyan sense of the word, *know* anything. The extent to which anything functions as knowledge is *had* in the degree to which it is *useful* for action. If the doctors treating a man’s measles think this way, the failings of the initial treatment leave room for a successful one to be discovered, tailored to the man’s unique way of existing. This *uniqueness* could only be discovered through the doctors’ genuine collaboration with the man, and their encounter is a concrete qualitative interaction. The diagnosis that is proposed, the treatment that is prescribed, the prognosis for healing are only intelligent insofar as they are connected with that qualitative encounter. Interaction, and our qualitative *having* of it, is the heart of Dewey’s metaphysics of experience, whereas a traditional western metaphysics posits a static and eternal *being* that could be identified with truth.

---

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 378.

<sup>54</sup>Bethany Henning, *Dewey and the Aesthetic Unconscious: The Vital Depths of Experience*, (London: Lexington Books, 2022), 67.

The requirement of interaction in order to find what Henning calls “shared ends” is clearly at the center of Dewey’s thoughts.<sup>55</sup> This implies the metaphysics’ ability to account for change, especially if I am going to be viewing “change” in light of the previously discussed issue of dominating social customs. With our current Cartesian habits, we may see this issue of change and try to find a doctrine of natural science that matches with the goals at hand. Luckily for our Cartesians, Darwin’s theory of evolution provides just this. The new theory brought on by Darwin’s research, demonstrates the virtues of a conception of nature that includes change. Henning stresses the connection between Dewey and Darwin as she writes, “Dewey’s philosophy emphasized that evolution, including cultural evolution, is possible only on the basis of organic continuity such that the inseparability of the mind and the body is equivalent to the inseparability of culture in nature.”<sup>56</sup> Dewey’s principles of experience inherently connect us more with the world, in a way that Cartesian dualism cannot adequately support. When quality is the focus rather than pure “truth” the world can be the setting for a project of experience, rather than resorting to the deductions of an individualized mind as our ultimate laboratory. This way, change can be permitted, cultural evolution can be accepted and appreciated, and ultimately the world can be accepted as continuous without the need of Descartes’ “God.” Henning writes, “the medium that enables and engenders that continuity, the glue of the world, is the qualitative dimension of experience.”<sup>57</sup>

John Dewey paves the way for a political project of this kind. While we may be familiar with what we have been sold as “democracy,” Dewey’s conception may seem a bit foreign to us. There are a variety of theories of what constitutes democracy, but Alexis de Tocqueville has had a profound and somewhat destructive influence on the matter. His writing in *Democracy in*

---

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

*America* paints democracy as a revolutionary new political ideology that has potential, yet remains exceedingly dangerous if it is unguided. Tocqueville fears the potential for tyranny is an intrinsic element of a democratic system of government. This leads to his account of the dangers of democracy reading as terribly ironic. However, I find that Tocqueville's view of democracy is limited through an absolutist world view that cherishes fixed law. As a result, he disregards certain liberating values that have the potential to emerge only within democracy. Dewey shows in his work that Tocqueville's fears cannot only be alleviated, but can be done so by the very system he fears and the values he neglects.

Tocqueville frames democracy as a coming revolution, brought on by the success of the Americas; As he states, "a great democratic revolution is among us: all see it, but all do not judge it in the same manner."<sup>58</sup> Tocqueville first sets the stage of democracy on his observations of the United States and what he calls its "equality of conditions."<sup>59</sup> To understand this meaning, Tocqueville gives a short history of power and where it could be acquired. He begins with landed property, later upended by the clergy, and then again by commerce.<sup>60</sup> As a French Aristocrat, Tocqueville's biases regarding preference of power in a system of government are clear. To put it succinctly, the history of power to Tocqueville is assumed to be one consistent with top-down hierarchy. In these cases, truth and law flow downwards from one absolute authority, such as the king to the subject, the lord to the peasant, and the Pope to the layperson. Though as Tocqueville interprets, this new democratic scene in America has found a unique and dangerous way in which it can be attained, namely in its relatively "level" nature.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, Harvey C. Mansfield, and Delba Winthrop, *Democracy in America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 5.

What Tocqueville calls the equality of conditions in America is the way this new system allows for attaining power. Tocqueville writes, “America, once discovered, presents a thousand new routes to fortune and delivers wealth and power to the obscure adventurer.”<sup>62</sup> Unlike the old systems, power is no longer something bestowed by a lord or king, and it is no longer something that can be found only in birthright. Tocqueville writes, “trade becomes a new source opening the way to power, and financiers become a political power that is scorned and flattered.”<sup>63</sup> Commercial power in this equality of conditions provides a sort of “universal leveling.”<sup>64</sup> The ways of attaining power have changed and progressed, eventually leading to the new democratic system in America. As Tocqueville observes, the importance of the “equality of conditions” is clear in America, as the new system has fully embraced them. However Tocqueville interprets that power can be bought and sold by practically anyone. Through commerce, the commoner now has the ability to find a voice, a taste for luxury, and even a political power once thought unholdable by such a man.

While this universal leveling may seem like a great victory for equality and freedom at first, Tocqueville warns of its potential shortcomings. The leveling of power inherent in democracy has developed in such a rapid and uncontrolled manner that it is broken and unguided. Democracy is lacking refinement and has, as Tocqueville writes, “been abandoned to its savage instincts; it has grown up like those children who, deprived of paternal care, rear themselves in the streets of our towns and know only society’s vices and miseries.”<sup>65</sup> As stated above, in the equality of conditions seen in America, the ability for the common man to find power through commerce has been fully unlocked. This gives way to the essential spirit of

---

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 7.

democracy, that every individual is valued equally, specifically in their perspective and/or wisdom. In this sense Tocqueville calls this the “theory of equality applied to intellects,”<sup>66</sup> and this is absolutely crucial to the concept of democracy. This forms the basic structure of its moral alignment, and Tocqueville asserts that it is how democracy fundamentally operates. Power of instruction in democracy does not flow from top to bottom (from the lord to the commoner), rather, it flows from each individual outwards forming the greatest moral force: the majority. To Tocqueville primary moral value in democracy is, as he writes, “the idea that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in many men united than in one alone.”<sup>67</sup>

While a noble thought, according to Tocqueville, America proves this system of morality to be problematic. The immediate effects of such a morality seem harmless, Tocqueville warns of a future danger. From his perspective, democracy seems to mean that the masses, people, or citizens come together to make policy based on majority opinion. Since the majority in America effectively runs the moral and legislative system, it gains a kind of omnipotence over society. When an opinion is held by the majority, it becomes impossible to operate *outside* of it. This omnipotence, as Tocqueville writes, “draws a formidable circle around thought.”<sup>68</sup> This is democracy’s mistake, as granting omnipotence to anything is sure to strangle what lays outside of its accepted boundaries. Nothing stands before the legislature/majority’s moral dominance, as it exists in a circular echo-chamber of “perpetual adoration of itself.”<sup>69</sup> Thought is threatened above all else in rapid expansion; Tocqueville thinks that this is proven by what he sees as a distinct lack of intellectual freedom in America. Tocqueville writes, “no literary genius exists without freedom of mind, and there is no freedom of mind in America.”<sup>70</sup> In fact, there cannot be

---

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 244.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

freedom of mind in a democratic system where the majority has realized its omnipotence and drawn its moral boundaries. Tocqueville warns, “inside those limits, the writer is free; but unhappiness awaits him if he dares to leave them.”<sup>71</sup>

It is clear from Toqueville’s account of democracy at the time of his writing *Democracy in America*, that he sees it as something that is *yet* to oppress citizens of America or any other modern republic. He fears the *future* possibility of Tyranny; in other words, he fears the door that democracy opens to such a reality. Tocqueville admits to this as he writes, “I do not say that at the present time frequent use is made of tyranny in America, I say that no guarantee against it may be discovered.”<sup>72</sup> This shows that Tocqueville’s fears are the result of his speculation of what is to come. Though, it is not the speculative nature of Tocqueville’s fears that make his account unconvincing: it is rather in the absolutist character of his perspective. It is clear that Tocqueville has a rigid view of law, power, and the respective command of both. It appears to me that his desire to direct the growing strength of the masses, which, in Tocqueville’s descriptions often seem to form an unruly and dangerous beast. We have a clear description of the heart of a French Aristocrat, for whom democracy, like nature, must be tamed with an absolute authority. He views democracy blindly, and does not acknowledge the values held by a democratic citizen. John Dewey addresses the absolutist directly through his definition of the term: “democracy”.

To Dewey, “democracy” is an alternative to a philosophic mindset that has dominated much of political philosophy. To come to this conclusion, Dewey himself raises the question of how to define democracy. He notes that his definition is rather arbitrary. Dewey writes, “anything that can be said in the way of definition in the remaining moments must be, and confessedly is,

---

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 242.

arbitrary.”<sup>73</sup> Though, as Dewey continues, “the arbitrariness may however, be mitigated by linking up the conception with the formula of the greatest liberal movement in history—the formula of liberty, equality and fraternity.”<sup>74</sup> Dewey extracts these terms to find some meaning to the vagueness of the word “democracy.” Here, in a concept such as liberty, the value of democracy may be explored. This is a consideration that Tocqueville does not account for. In his interpretation, Tocqueville assumes a rigid structure in the new democratic system, a fault made by himself and Descartes alike. Tocqueville’s fear of democracy perfectly echoes Descartes’ anxiety of nature as unruly. The solution for the two thinkers in both instances require an assertion of truth as static, and/or law as fixed and absolute. Tocqueville points to the fault of the democrat for granting omnipotence to the majority, yet he misses the principal virtue of democracy, which is had in its capacity to operate in the absence of an absolute power and without fixed law. Thus he misses the potentiality of crucial values that serve to guide the functioning of a democratic society, such as liberty.

Dewey sees liberty as being interpreted in two different ways. The first kind of interpretation is done by those who see liberal value in abiding to absolute law. Dewey writes, “one of them says that freedom is action in accord with fixed law; that men are free when they are rational, and they are rational when they recognize and consciously conform to the necessities with the universe exemplified.”<sup>75</sup> This type of liberty, while “noble” as Dewey calls it, is limiting. This absolutist view of liberty in adherence to a complete structure limits opportunity for change in the future. In other words, it does not account for a contingent and continuous world, permitted by a qualitative approach in accordance with a darwinian view of culture, as

---

<sup>73</sup>John Dewey, “Philosophy and Democracy,” in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 75.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 76.



Henning discusses. The absolutist view limits itself in its dissuasion from “a vain task of revolt,”<sup>76</sup> as the world’s set nature would leave any such attempt back to where the instigator began. When western philosophers assume law is rational (consistent with Descartes’ *res cogitans*), fixed, static, they fail to account for democracy as something that is genuinely pluralistic.

This view of liberty as absolute law is where Tocqueville may be classified. As stated above, when he speaks of the freedoms forfeited by the writer in a system such as America, he speaks of the freedom of mind that is lost. He thinks that this freedom is not lost under a king since the monarch “holds only a material power that acts on actions and cannot reach wills.”<sup>77</sup> Tocqueville views more liberal value in a system in which one obeys the king’s material law, but keeps his freedom of mind intact. Dewey would identify this as an absolutist view of liberty, and shows how Tocqueville cannot view democracy from any other position than that of an aristocrat. Thus, I forward that Tocqueville is incapable of conceiving a system other than one of top-down hierarchy. It is clear through an “absolute” view of law there could be no other kind of power structure. This is one of many reasons that Tocqueville fears the majority in a “democratic” system. To Tocqueville, the majority is at the “top” of the democratic system and takes the place of a king or aristocracy; for a king would supposedly permit freedom of thought and writing. Afterall, aristocracies, monarchies, dictatorships and the like are famously known for their protections of the freedom of thought, press, and assembly.

The second view of what liberty means is why we ought to celebrate the inherent vagueness of the term “democracy.” Dewey writes, “the strivings of men to achieve democracy will construe liberty as meaning as a universe in which there is a real uncertainty and

---

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Tocqueville, 234.

contingency, a world which is not all in, and never will be, a world which in some respect is incomplete and in the making.”<sup>78</sup> This sense of liberty is where democracy finds its richest meaning. It is the political philosophy of change, or rather the ability *to* change. Revolt, in democracy, is not in vain when it embraces the contingency of its own nature. Dewey notes that human error is inevitable, and that there is fruitfulness in fallibility.<sup>79</sup> Dewey rejects the logic that the absolutist unreflectively accepts, and which limits Tocqueville’s version of liberty. To the absolutist, an order must be fixed, whether that order is material or ideal. This can be recognized in an analysis of Dewey’s second element of democracy: equality.

While the absolutist may assume that only a quantitative logic can establish equality, this is to rely on an “atomistic individualism,”<sup>80</sup> and they leave out the genuine value of equality as an *experience*. The meaning of equality is found in the democrat’s heart. Considering the democratic meaning of liberty, Dewey writes, “whatever the idea of equality means for democracy, it means, I take it, that the world is not to be constructed as a fixed order of species, grades, or degrees. It means that every existence deserving the name of existence has something unique and irreplaceable about it.”<sup>81</sup> This rejects the order required by the absolutist. From the perspective of a metaphysical habit that is still primarily Cartesian, Democracy may appear to be put at a disadvantage by not being able to assert itself within the rigid structure of a fixed reality that is assumed by the absolutist view point. In the top-down systems of Western Europe, we have tended to rely upon a fixed law. However, democracy has the advantage of its ability to “develop a more kindly and humane set of social institutions.”<sup>82</sup> Deweyan democracy does this because it does not need, nor does it endorse a system of fixed truths. Rather plurality and

---

<sup>78</sup>Dewey, “Philosophy and Democracy,” 76.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 78.

qualitative interaction are embraced, and adaptive changes can flourish. This permits a system in which the individual has the ability to see themselves and others as interconnected, valued, and part of a greater community, rather than isolated and alone in their own mind.

Dewey's account radically shifts the meaning of an individual's value from Tocqueville's. Above, Tocqueville speaks of the theory of equality applied to intellects. The primary thrust of this theory is that "there is more enlightenment and wisdom in many men united than in one alone."<sup>83</sup> This means that each man within a democratic system (as Tocqueville conceives of it) has equal value in their opinion, and when these are quantified, a majority can be identified. If you find yourself with an opinion outside of the majority's, you have the collected and ultimate force of these united men to fear. The majority finds its legitimacy through sheer numerical advantage. But Tocqueville's perspective of "equality" is limited by his inability to conceive of value in a way that is not defined quantitatively. While Tocqueville recognizes the equality of each man, he does so in a way that misses the mark by discounting the qualitative dimension of value. Dewey shows that there is no number residing inside each human that represents their value. We are equal not because there is an equivalent quantitative representation of value within us; we are equal because we *are*—singular, qualitative wholes. Every human is, as Dewey would put, "existence deserving the name of existence"<sup>84</sup> and thus each person "has something unique and irreplaceable."<sup>85</sup> Value is not a quantity. Value, for Dewey, is the immediate qualitative richness that *is* the existence of interactions, of communities, and of persons.

In the same regard as equality, fraternity is also accounted for in the democratic world view. When considering the changing world and the value of the individual experience, Dewey is

---

<sup>83</sup>Tocqueville, 236.

<sup>84</sup>Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," 77.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

able to reach this notion of “fraternity as continuity.”<sup>86</sup> Dewey describes this “as association and interaction without limit.”<sup>87</sup> Dewey reaches his definition of democracy as a combination of these concepts in their respective democratic versions. It can be interpreted that “democracy” exists as an idea where individuals, irreplaceable and incomparable in value, may associate with each other in an ever moving and changing world. Change and error are embraced so that improvement may be made possible. In doing so they will only “make the life of each more distinctive.”<sup>88</sup> This worldview rejects isolation, it rejects rigidity, and it rejects atomization of the individual. It provides the liberating and pluralistic alternative to an absolutist world view that represses change and reinforces the isolation of the individual.

Deweyan democracy, although purposefully vague in its definition, finds its strength and viability for this very reason. In a system of Dewey’s liberty, equality, and fraternity, we will truly be able to live *together*. By forfeiting an absolutist view of our political system and a turning towards continuity and pluralism, democracy becomes a project and a way of interacting with one another, not a doctrine or definition, that we may be more familiar with. This will not lead us into “tyranny” as the famous aristocrat warns, it will liberate us from the ruts of routine custom, advertised by our assumed dualism, that currently enslaves our thoughts and actions.

### **III. Visualizing Radical Democracy**

My peers and I were brought up in the era of the “Common Core” system of education. A set of institutions focused on total leveling that would supposedly bring about true equality in the education of the youth. If all children are taught the exact same way, then they would all have equal chances of success. In schools today, there is an unspoken understanding of the nature of the material being taught, regardless of the class. That is, Mathematics, English, History,

---

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

Science, Art, etc. are all taught in a similar fashion. The routine is easy to understand and crucial to follow. Enter class, listen to the teacher, remember the facts, regurgitate said facts onto an exam or quiz, and then ultimately forget them – rinse and repeat. The line that separates what is being taught as differing “subjects” is arbitrary. We are told that the individual facts learned in the classroom are forgettable because perfect, lasting memory is not the goal. We are told that we are being taught *how* to think, not what to think. Under this conjecture, the “best” form of thinking is wrongfully assumed to be linked to the regurgitation and repetition of mindless ordered tasks. Judgment and creativity are left out of the equation.

In any civilization that identifies with the term “democracy,” similar features are expected to be found. From the age of democratic Athens to the modern American Republic, democracy shares a similar meaning: rule of the people. More specifically, it is the citizens’ will that is supposed to direct the actions of the state on nearly all levels. Additional elements such as representation, parliaments, senates, courts, executives, constitutions, charters and the like are all toppings that can be spread and iced across the cake of the core values of democracy. Regardless of how many layers may separate us from democracy in its purest form, ideally, the core idea remains: citizens make the decisions. It is my intention to strip away these layers, and view democracy in its most radical form. A philosophy of democracy that extends beyond a mere institutional form acts as a way of life, rather than a system of governance.

As it has been said democracy, in its most basic formulation, is the rule of the citizens. This, along with John Dewey’s interpretation of liberty, equality, and fraternity as qualitative values, provide the crucial building blocks of radical democratic thought that will best allow us to live *together*. Dewey explains that what makes democracy special is its “primary emphasis on

the *means*” that are used to fulfill societal ends.<sup>89</sup> As opposed to a regulated, semi-democratic liberal republic, a *radically* democratic system is one that places its entire faith in democratic means. Dewey continues, “there is, moreover, nothing more radical than the insistence upon democratic methods as the means by which radical social changes be effected.”<sup>90</sup> If I am to propose a philosophy for the sake of a life lived in accordance with Radical Democracy, I must focus on the notion of the citizens and their democratic inputs. If a philosophy aims for political life to be one that engages with and relies upon the citizens for its political action, it would ideally have very “good citizens.” The people of this society would be brought up with an education that informs and entrusts them with the responsibility of interacting with one another. Thus, democracy begins with the democratic education of the democratic citizen. As I have previously discussed, if we are to escape from our habitual Cartesian dualism, we must have the capability to question our currently established customs, and change them if need be. This prevents enslavement to our old ruts, and the insistence on habits that no longer serves us. If children, still impressionable and plastic,<sup>91</sup> are taught to value this rather than their accordance with dictated “fixed law,” they will adequately be able to participate in a system, or rather life, of democracy.

As I have said, I was raised in the era of the “Common Core” methods of education. While these formal institutions are rather new, the values that uphold them are not. John Dewey speaks to this in *Human Nature and Conduct*, as he writes, “thus far schooling has been largely

---

<sup>89</sup>John Dewey, “Democracy is Radical,” in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 338.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Dewey, “The Place of Habit in Conduct,” 38-39.

utilized as a convenient tool of the existing nationalistic and economic regimes.”<sup>92</sup> The system of repetition and regurgitation taught by the Common Core systems, and much of what precedes it, condition a specific habit of following orders. I do not mean this to imply that we are imbued with a Spartan-esque sense of military valor; we are rather trained in the kind of rule following that is proper to a corporate drone. Education in its current form aims to create a worker, one that will adhere to corporate hierarchy, take orders and complete tasks well. As I have mentioned, the emphasis of modern education is not focused on what is taught, but rather how to think. Students are not expected to form any kind of attachment to what they are taught in their primary and secondary education. They will be lucky if they find themselves in a college or university that does not emulate a similar experience as well. The subject matter of the paperwork does not matter, nor does the product of the assembly line, nor do the crops being farmed. The workplace is designed so that the worker is not concerned with the product of their labor, for they have no valuable incentive to do so. Their focus is instead directed towards wage and salary, a quantitative marker of value echoing the grading system of modern education. The employee is valued by their adherence to the employer. Thus the teacher becomes a dictator in the classroom as a mirror of the students’ work lives to come. This is all due to the fact that, as Dewey writes, “adults have given training rather than education.”<sup>93</sup> This is the primary value taught, or rather conditioned, by modern education.

However, it becomes increasingly clear that this corporate value of education rapidly bleeds out of our economics and into our politics and communities. We find ourselves as workers amongst workers rather than citizens. Individuals remain isolated in their homes and nuclear

---

<sup>92</sup>John Dewey, “Impulse and Conflict of Habits.” in *Human Nature and Conduct*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University University Press, 1988), 89.

<sup>93</sup>John Dewey, “Plasticity of Impulse.” in *Human Nature and Conduct*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University University Press, 1988), 70.

families because interaction beyond the required corporate and civil duties is seen as meaningless, if not dangerous. The ruts of routine habit have a serpent's grasp on the lives of the workers. The release of creativity and emotion remain, in partial form, in the occasional get-together or local music performance. Though events of this kind are seen as "leisure" and "entertainment" rather than integral to the vital parts of our lives. This kind of thinking, and its playful, creative, and intelligently collaborative nature, must remain absent from the workplace, and in effect, our politics. Emotion, art, creativity, and intelligent habit, in their abilities to bind community and foster change, have been exiled to the realm of personal fantasy. They have no place in our "democracy," so it must be recognized, we have no democracy at all.

If we intend to create an environment of *togetherness*, of Radical Democracy, we must begin with education. It is clear our current methods fail society in their failure of the youth. If we want a truly democratic society, we must usher in a new era of the democratic classroom. This form of education will allow the inherent intelligence present in children to emerge. With the allowance of interactive play and curious exploration in their education, the creation of intelligent habits as they grow will be naturally aided. Our modern method of education is only capable of creating routine habit in the youth, as it simply punishes all else by means of grades and numbers until intelligent habits are almost fully repressed. A democratic classroom seems like a radical idea from the perspective of a society that has formed a counterintuitive habit to isolate individuals from the collaborative play that supports democratic life. This form of education will be one that is, as John Dewey calls it, "truly humane." He writes, "a truly humane education consists in an intelligent direction of native activities in the light of the possibilities and necessities of the social situation."<sup>94</sup> That is to say, education should be adaptable to a world

---

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.



that is naturally contingent. That is the only proper way to prepare people to be thinkers, and thus citizens.

There may be questions about what this kind of education may look like and if it is viable to prepare the youth with proper faculties for adult life. If children, in a sense, “choose” their education, then how can they be trusted to choose correctly? Despite a question of this nature having implicit biases against the intelligence of the youth, likely due to ingrained valuing of routine habit informed by modern economics, it also makes a wrongful assumption of the nature of a democratic classroom. To address this further, a clarification must be made regarding our habits and customs. Not all routine habits/customs currently fail us; though, when they do, there must be a way to escape them. For example, the desire to create a literate public may perhaps be a custom that serves us quite well in the modern world. In this case, teaching the youth to read should still be a common practice. However, this does not mean that teaching children to read has a “one-size-fits-all” method, nor does it call for tyrannical teaching methods. As a hypothetical situation, allow us to imagine a child who only wishes to learn and talk about dinosaurs, but cannot yet read. Perhaps instead of forcing the child to read a predetermined book by means of punishment or reward, they could instead be given a book about dinosaurs. This, in effect, is what a democratic classroom looks like.

As children grow into their primary and secondary education, their democratic input can evolve. They will become more mature and have more mature desires in their education. They will ask tough questions and engage in controversial conversations. They will question the values of the past and imagine what the future holds. They will find those with similar interests and create great works of art. They will ultimately grow into roles of leadership for their families and communities, all in radically democratic ways. Democratic education creates a natural flow from

schooling to politics, which in a democracy, all citizens are intrinsically a part of. In this system, if it may be called this, no hierarchy is assumed, no future certain, and no utopia to be reached. The line between constituent and representative blurs as local communities create and define their ever evolving culture through creativity.

Our habitual dualism has robbed us of a life in which community is paramount. As static truth is assumed with individualism as the only facilitator, we view ourselves as islands that interact with others on an as needed basis. As Descartes' metaphysics have been cemented into our minds as the assumed backdrop of our world, quantitative value comes to dominate our customs and morality. We impose numerical and mathematical value on nearly every element of lives, including our fellow human beings. This morality commands our obsession with fixed law and absolute power as we constantly look up to politicians and business leaders to guide us towards our next horizon, long before we look to the person next to us. While we continue to reinforce our habits of Cartesian individualism, we ignore the isolation it imposes upon us.

Radical Democracy is constantly aiming towards the future, while none are assumed. What lies before us is entirely unpredictable, and to act as if it were not will only satisfy us for a time. Turning to a metaphysics of experience informs a democratic learning model that truly creates citizens, prepared for the contingent world ahead of them. They face it with no "certain" knowledge, nor mastery and possession. Many doors will be opened blindly into the complete unknown, and we will walk into the darkness *together*.

## Bibliography

- Bordo, Susan. "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought." *Signs* 11, no. 3 (1986): 441.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174004>.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998.
- Dewey, John. "Democracy is Radical." in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, 337-339. Edited by Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Dewey, John. "Experience and Philosophic Method." in *Volume 1: 1925: Experience and Nature*. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1988.
- Dewey, John, "Impulse and Conflict of Habits." in *Human Nature and Conduct*. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University University Press, 1988.
- Dewey, John. "Philosophy and Democracy." in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, 71-78. Edited by Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Dewey, John, "Plasticity of Impulse." in *Human Nature and Conduct*. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University University Press, 1988.
- Dewey, John. "The Place of Habit in Conduct." in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 2: Habit, Conduct, and Language*, 24-49. Edited by Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Dewey, John. "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism." in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, 115-120. Edited by Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Frankel, David, dir. *The Devil Wears Prada*. Featuring Anne Hathaway and Meryl Streep. Story by Lauren Weisberger. Adapted by Aline Brosh McKenna. 20th Century Studios, 2006, 0:23:38.  
[https://www.amazon.com/Devil-Wears-Prada-Meryl-Streep/dp/B000LX00RY?ref\\_=nav\\_ya\\_signin](https://www.amazon.com/Devil-Wears-Prada-Meryl-Streep/dp/B000LX00RY?ref_=nav_ya_signin).
- Henning, Bethany. *Dewey and the Aesthetic Unconscious: The Vital Depths of Experience*. London: Lexington Books, 2022
- Tocqueville, Alexis de, Harvey C. Mansfield, and Delba Winthrop. *Democracy in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 200