

Moral and Epistemological Implications of John Dewey's Instrumentalism

Ihejirika, Cardinal, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt

Rivers State – Nigeria

cardinalihejirika@gmail.com

Abstract

Humanity embarks on epistemological quests in order to achieve knowledge that could in turn minister to human needs. Knowledge by this token becomes a tool for problem-solving. The human specie therefore theorizes in order to explain myriad difficult existential challenges and to gain firm control of their environment. John Dewey in the 20th century advances his instrumentalism postulate, which proposes a reconstruction in philosophy. He proposes a pragmatic reconstruction of truth in terms of its practical function such that knowledge, morality and even education could be instrumentalized. Dewey adopts the scientific methodology of experimentalism in order to fully achieve his instrumentalism. Regrettably, he overemphasizes the method of science as all sufficing and this renders society's set goals indeterminate and breeds solipsism. When knowledge and morality get instrumentalized, morality becomes relativized leaving no possibility of a reference to any fixed moral code. This research therefore aims to expose the moral and epistemological implications of Dewey's instrumentalism. The author adopts the textual analysis method of enquiry and suggests a humanization of instrumentalism, which protects human dignity and personhood as well as promotes the safe appropriation of the positive benefits of the scientific adventure.

Keywords: Morality, Epistemology, Instrumentalism, Personhood.

1.1 Introduction

Science as "knowledge which derives from experience, observation, experimentation and arranged in an organized or orderly manner" (Uduigwomen,2007, p.20), has no doubts helped man to master his environment. As Morris (1964) points out, "advances in science and technology have increased man's power to effect his will and to produce the kind of things this modern civilization demands (p.38). In this quest for pragmatic knowledge, John Dewey got disappointed with the approaches of philosophies prior to his time, hence, he introduces his version of instrumentalism, which abandons previous epistemological theories of both rationalism and empiricism, having considered them as hindrances to the task of problem-solving. Dewey rather conceives the task of philosophy as constituted of reconstruction in terms of the problems that confront man as science does hence, his rejection of the classical understanding of epistemology. Not only does he shy away from using the term epistemology in its classical sense, (Which he replaces with the term, instrumentalism), Dewey also rejects ethics as a branch of knowledge and says that it is based on apriori reasoning or divine precept. Consequent upon this rejection, Dewey contends that desirable moral conduct is a function of participation in the social group or communal living. His disproportionate faith in science persuaded him to apply his scientific method on morality and further maintains that only the rise of the method of science in ethics can secure the continued adoption of values to changing human needs. Dewey's instrumentalism espouses the idea that cognition constitutes in the task of forgoing ideal tools or instruments with which to cope with any giving situation that may evolve" (Ihejirika, 2015, p.3).

This Science Zealot, (Dewey) claims that man's sole nature is to successfully master his universe through science. In his *Essay in Experimental Logic*: published in 1916, Dewey insists that philosophy and theology be made subjects under science. Dewey's Instrumentalism as couched in the afore-mentioned document gives us the impression that life itself is experimental but unfortunately, reality indicates otherwise. This paper observes that

such approach to life is fraught with errors hence, the history of techno-scientific enterprise bears witness that "no sooner had it gathered momentum than "...man started to loose his human quality for his human quantity" (Ijioma, 1996,p.vii).Our particular disturbance which prompts our present research is therefore, the overbearing implications of Dewey's instrumentalism on morality and epistemology. These are found to breed epistemic naivety and solipsism whenever and wherever Dewey's instrumentalism pill is swallowed uncritically. In Dewey's expression of his scientific faith, he plays down on morality, which guides humanity to positively appropriate the benefits of the adventure, called science. His suggestion that science has all the answers and should be allowed to operate without a moral umpire is too bogus to be tolerated.

Granted that Dewey's instrumentalism avails much progress and resolves hitherto trouble-shooting philosophical issues occasioned by traditional empiricist and rationalist ideologies, this paper considers his uncritical ingestion, prescription and glorification of science as unphilosophical. Dewey seems to forget that the most important of all scientific answers aim to serve the interest of humanity hence, Maslow (1990) asserts that "The apex of human mental activity is witnessed in self-fulfillment" (p.46). When human values are sacrificed at the altar of scientific method, science becomes destructive as in the case of its misapplication in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the world war II (1939-1945) and subsequent wars.

Our paper therefore, makes a case for the moral fibre of existence which is the missing link in Dewey's instrumentalism. It is this moral fibre that guides and informs the reflective consciousness of man (the reason for which the human being is distinct from beasts). Consequently, this study suggests a humanization of instrumentalism. This is hoped to protect human dignity and personhood via a moral and epistemological orientation, which will still welcome the positive benefits of science and technology. We shall therefore proceed to expose Dewey's pragmatic thoughts, his notion of instrumentalism and further draw the moral and epistemological implications of Dewey's instrumentalism before rounding off with a conclusion.

1.2 Dewey's Pragmatic Thoughts/Instrumentalism

Dewey couches his pragmatic thoughts in three dimensions, which might not be easily noticeable to an average reader of Dewey's work. The first of these is its ecological side. This aspect relates to the mutual influence, which the human as well as plants and animals exert on the environment and the response they get from it. The second part is what has properly speaking, been called the pragmatic side of his philosophy. This second aspect of John Dewey's pragmatic thought has much to do with those aspects of his teaching, which border on concepts like verification, experimentation, truth and meaning of ideas and in the majority of cases, it is also called the epistemology of his epistemology. The third aspect of Dewey's pragmatic thought is the critical aspect of his pragmatism namely, instrumentalism. This theory revolutionizes traditional philosophy by launching a verbal attack on traditional notions of truth. Dewey does this rejection by replacing polemically the old conception of truth as static, with a new social order which sees truth as communitarian and interactive. As Robert and Kathleen (1996) submit: "By this rejection of traditional notions of truth, Dewey tends to have effected an epistemological revolution with similar content as the works of Copernicus and Immanuel Kant in the history of Philosophy (p.256). He expressly rejects the term, epistemology preferring "The Theory of Enquiry" as more representative of his approach. Jones and Fogelin (1969) observe that for Dewey, pragmatism "was not an epistemological theory as it was for Pierce, but a therapeutic device" (p.36).

However, our major focus in this work namely, his instrumentalism fluctuates between the second but mainly the third aspect of his pragmatic theory of truth. Yet, for us to adequately explain how John Dewey developed his instrumentalism, our point of entry is to acknowledge that Dewey's pragmatism is not only multi-dimensional but also interrelated (both within itself and other pragmatic thoughts prior to his time); hence, it cannot be explained in isolation. Dewey's pragmatism is in many respects a brain child of his predecessors, mainly William James and Charles Sanders Pierce. Thus, their closeness seems to suggest that the deeper we go into attempts to understand the three figures, the further we are able to understand the pragmatism of each of them. This is not to say that there is no distinction between their thoughts and Dewey's. He distinguished himself by bringing their philosophies (Pierce and James) to their seemingly logical conclusion. In Dewey, we see an advanced

capacity to synthesize disparate thoughts. As Law head observes: Dewey synthesized the logical and scientific concerns of Pierce with the moral and humanistic ideals of James" (p.472).

Dewey's instrumentalism starts from the point of view of fallibilism: "that absolute certainty about knowledge could at least in principle be mistaken" (Luke & Mastin, 2008, p.218). Man, in his environment, is an active participating agent and keeps updating his intellect with new challenging experiences. This particular conception brought to birth Dewey's concept of instrumentalism. Dewey built his instrumentalist system of thought from Jamesian assertion that "theories are instruments, not answers to enigmas in which, we can rest" (William,1975, p.68). Thus Dewey (1931) sees instrumentalism as:

an attempt to establish a precise logical theory of concepts, of judgement and inferences in their various forms, by considering primarily how thoughts function in the experimental determinations of future consequences... that is to say, it attempts to establish universally recognized distinctions and rules of logic by deriving them from the reconstructive or meditative function ascribed to reason (pp.463-473).

Ihejirika(2015) submits that: "Dewey calls his pragmatic theory instrumentalism in order to distinguish it from other forms of pragmatism (p.93). The term however captures Dewey's emphasis that ideas are tools for solving problems and/or shaping our environment to suit our ends. Dewey's instrumentalism holds that "thought, thinking, inquiry and ideas are instruments of solving practical problems" (Dewey, 1977,p.50). Inquiry for Dewey, becomes "a progressive transformation of an indeterminate situation into a more determinate situation towards a unified whole (Dewey,1960, pp.130-136). Lawhead (2002) reports that: "Dewey battles in his instrumentalism what he calls spectator theory of knowledge, which describes the assumption that thinking refers to fixed things in nature and the view, which presents the mind as a classroom detached from the world, containing ideas the way a museum contains pictures" (p.472).

Dewey accuses traditional epistemological positions of rationalism and empiricism of conceiving the mind as instruments for considering what is fixed and certain in nature. He rejects this kind of knowing which Okaegbu (2012) avers that "this image of the mind existing in isolation from external world is what led philosophers like Descartes to wonder whether anything at all is outside the mind" (pp.52-67). Stumpf (1994) submits that for Dewey therefore, the mind or more specifically, intelligence is a fixed substance and knowledge is not a set of static concepts (p.349). In fact, the more active reason Dewey rejects earlier ways of philosophizing is simply because they constitute for him, a hindrance to the task of problem-solving. He argues that they separate theorizing from practical concerns and focus on absolute solution to philosophical norms. Consequently, he decides to place knowing on a new and actual setting namely, contextualism. He therefore claims that the only prospect of substantial progress in the theory of knowledge is in this new contextual logic, a method of knowing "essentially in terms of the biological and psychological role that the mind plays in the knowing process in human affairs" (Sydorsky, 2008, p.197).

For the sake of brevity, it will be helpful to note these peculiar assumptions of Dewey's instrumentalism as noted by Ihejirika (2015) and they include the following:

- All concepts and hypothesis function as instruments
- All logical forms we use in the course of inquiry are understood as ideal instruments.
- All practical consequences of theories should be identified as instruments.
- All beliefs and culture are instruments.
- The air we breathe is an instrument.
- Terrorism is considered an instrument.

- Weapons of war are all instruments.
- The human intellect/brain is an instrument.
- All human beings are instruments (p.96).

Now, the foregoing seems to be saying that all things are instruments and all instruments are things. As one will observe from the above assumptions, some of the conceived instruments may have destructive consequences. A destructive instrumental conception can lead to ignition of unquenchable fire as well as long term social disharmony. On the other hand, if we assume that at the long run such conceived instruments can bring about peace and social harmony as in the popular assumption that after wars come calmer peace. Can we assuredly say that this is the understanding Dewey reaches about his concept of instrumentalism? If it is, then we may still find ourselves in an epistemological merry-go-round, a vicious cycle which only Darwinian evolutionary influence can engender. The foregoing query necessitates an in-depth study of Dewey's instrumentalist submission in order to uncover its' implications.

1.3 Moral Implications of Dewey's Instrumentalism

Morality discusses the quality of being right or wrong, which more often than not, has to do with the degree of conformity or non conformity to conventional rules. Ordinarily, moral reflections as Audi (1999) observes involves "consideration of others" (p.512). The moral status of a theory is pertinent to humane living hence, the discipline of moral epistemology tries to sort out the epistemic status and relations of moral judgment and principles and how they affect lived life. As earlier remarked in our introduction, Dewey seems to downplay the place of morality in human affairs hence, his suggestion that "science should operate without a moral umpire" (Dewey, 1922, p.32) and should not even be subjected to the guidance of any other institution of the society. In his struggle to secularize and instrumentalize anything religious, Dewey created an intolerable lacuna in his instrumentalism as we will subsequently discover. But that does not mean that Dewey's ethics are generally unacceptable. For instance, Elizabeth Anderson in her "*Dewey's Moral Philosophy*" avers that:

Dewey's ethics replace the goals of identifying an ultimate end or supreme principles that can serve as a criterion of ethical evaluation with the goal of identifying a method for improving our value judgments. Dewey argued that ethical inquiry is of a piece with empirical enquiry. More generally, it is the use of reflective intelligence to revise one's judgement in light of the consequences of acting on them. Value judgements are tools of enabling the satisfactory redirection of conduct when habit no longer suffices to direct it. As tools, they can be evaluated instrumentally, in terms of their success in guiding conduct (Edward 2010, p.207).

Granted that there may be aspects of the above citation that reflect existential truths, a truer inquirer discovers that if Anderson's interpretation of Dewey is anything to rely upon, then even the same foregoing citation indicts Dewey. When there is no moral code which acts as a norm, disorderliness becomes the order of the day. In a lawless society, where there is lack of any reference to a more or even a legal code, life must certainly turn brutish in the style of the Hobbessian state of nature. Again, reality indicates that Dewey's equation of ethical inquiry with empirical enquiry leaves much to be desired. The truth remains that there is no laboratory that suffices to experimentally tell us the good from the bad. Given that actions are carried out within human environment as Dewey rightly observes, it necessarily follows that lack of a criterion of reference that readily defines good or bad, right or wrong will leave society confused on what is morally acceptable or otherwise. When a society scientifically flourishes without a safe-guard of human dignity and personhood which morality engenders, then such society in the words of Ihejirika, may end up "developing their process of underdevelopment" (2012, p.04). It is in tandem with the foregoing feeling that Omoregbe, (1990) warns that: "if a nation produces intellectual giants but who are moral dwarfs, it is simply producing obstacles to its own development... educated men with very low degree of morality are the greatest obstacles to the development of their country" (p.199).

Beside this, one conspicuous shortcoming of science is that it is ignorant of values and cannot answer questions about aesthetic and metaphysical realities, Alan Kazlev in this direction observes that modern science does not admit of any reasoning beyond the empirical. Kazlev (2014), maintains that "the mechanical model of explanation is what, most times dominate the so-called value-free physico-mathematical sciences" (p.1). In fact, "there is no possible scientific test that can measure whether something is... beautiful or ugly for these are non-scientific categories and not amendable to determination by any scientific experiment (Ellis,200, p.2). Could this be the reason Albert Schweitzer (1961) asserts that, "the prosperity of a society depends on the moral disposition of its members"? (p.76)

1.4 Epistemological Implications of Dewey's Instrumentalism

John Dewey's notion of instrumentalism is celebrated as a reconciliatory and bold attempt to reconstruct the society of his day by advancing a system of thought which engenders democratization of human nations as well as promotion of social change through progressive education. His application of instrumentalism to education becomes his greatest tremendous success. Kerneling commends Dewey as an outstanding, exponent of philosophical naturalism. Philosophical naturalism conceives human thought as having the capacity of crafting out solutions to life challenges by proceeding from testing novel hypothesis against experience in order to achieve "warranted assertability". This, in turn yields coherent and meaningful action. Dewey's instrumentalism resolves the dichotomy between the object and subject of knowledge that has long been dominant in the arguments of the traditional philosophies of rationalism and empiricism. Dewey espouses the idea that the object and subject of our experience interact to produce knowledge. As a believer in constant evolutionary change, Dewey argues that there is no absolute truth. Truth for him, is not constant for he contends that any idea accepted as truth is subject to change overtime. He therefore conceives truth as a mere "warranted assertability" (Dewey, 1977, p.9).

The foregoing has enormous implications for epistemology. When truth becomes relativized, whatever anyone calls truth becomes truth hence, such relativity may be arbitrarily exploited and may end in epistemic naivety. When epistemic naivety gets fully blown, solipsism is born, and such ideological positions are detrimental to social cohesion and inimical to development of any polity. In his *Experience Nature and Freedom*, Dewey (1960), espouses the idea that "man's sole nature is to successfully master his universe through science" (p.149). Dewey creates the impression that the whole problem of man is the conquest of his universe through science. Subjecting all disciplines under science suggests that all disciplines surrender their methods to that of experimental science. By this, he means all inquiries whether philosophical, theological or scientific must proceed through tests, observation and building of hypothesis, confirmation and pronouncement of judgement. The reality is that many a discipline like theology cannot strictly use the laboratory as in the case of the sciences. For Feyerabend (1975), "there is no special method that guarantees success or make it probable" (p.144). Karl Popper (1959), warns that "science does not rest upon solid bedrock... we simply stop when we are satisfied that the rules are firm enough to carry the structure at least for the time being" (p.4). Since scientific theories are but mere bold conjectures to be tested by observations and with the aim of obtaining a decisive refutation, the tentative probabilistic result they yield are not worth staking our lives for. This is part of the reason Bertrand Russell (1983), warns that "when science is not moderated by society, then we must have succeeded in sowing seeds of impurity and forms of immoral behavior towards the environment (p.776). In tandem with Russell, Alloy Ihuah in "Science, Technology and African Predicament" avers that:

...science not only offers a one-dimensional image of the person, but also presents the human person with the temptation of self-deification, self-destruction and to the detriment of the divine nature of man. At best, the legacy of scientific and technological civilization for the African could be summarized in what Thoreau says is an improved means to an unimproved end. (Asiegbu & Chukwuokolo 2012, p.122-123).

One of the most popular critics of Dewey namely, Edmonson argues that the best Dewey's instrumentalist approach to knowing could achieve was to reduce students to "lab rats". Heidegger points us to another

shortcoming of instrumental thinking, while he acknowledges that it is justified and even necessary for living a life, he claims that instrumental thought (which he calls "calculative thinking") leads to thoughtlessness when taken to the extreme. As he puts it, "In always reckoning with conditions that are given, it is prone not only to overlook or lose itself in a frenzied ordering of the actual. Calculative thinking races from one project to the next... it never stops, never collects itself" (1966, p.46). Bourne is concerned that instrumentalist (calculative) thinking restricts philosophy's range of possibilities and thus limits it. Yet for Heidegger, the risk is that "we may come to expect too much of philosophy by demanding that it serves to manipulate the enviroing world in some ways, and thereby overlook its less apparent effects" (1994, p.5).

2.1 Conclusion

We have tried to examine the moral and epistemological imports of John Dewey's instrumentalism postulate in this paper. One of the major revelations of this research is that science is not only ignorant of values but its method fails to sufficiently provide answers to all of humanity's innumerable existential questions and challenges. An uncritical and blind faith in the scientific method will at best provide us with a lopsided perspective of things, which in Dewey's fashion instrumentalizes both the animate and inanimate constituents of man's enviroing situation. When this happens, even man himself becomes a means to other ends whereas, supposedly the degree or relevance of any knowledge is directly proportional to its services to humanity. If then the purpose of any knowledge or theoretical method is thinned down to a parochial instrumentalist scheme which neglects the moral dimensions of man, such purpose or theoretical method becomes self-defeating and less productive. Science as a theoretical discipline is meant to serve man but its glorification at the expense of the moral or any other aspect of the total man as seen in Dewey's instrumentalism, will not only end up getting men well-schooled to destroy their civilization. It will additionally, equip men epistemologically with a false consciousness that enthrone self-glorification, pride and arrogance. When the result of a particular discipline's method is adjudged the best by members of that same discipline without making allowances for interdisciplinary study and criticism, such results end up suffering a limitation that is universally intolerable. These are some of the reasons epistemic naivety and solipsism are the greatest enemy of academic research. After all, "we seek knowledge ... for the guidance of our conduct in life, orientation of our activities and in order to make it minister to our needs" (Aja, 2002, p.75). By this token, knowledge should serve the interest of persons not just a person all the time, communities not just a community unless, the universal community. Any knowledge that neither considers the entire wellbeing of the total man nor has at least, a practical function of having some influences or bearing on the actual tenor or conduct of our lives becomes an exercise in futility.

It is against this backdrop that our paper suggests a humanization of Dewey's Instrumentalism. Granted that instrumentalism is already a humane ideology, it becomes germane that we clarify more on our proposal. Dewey's instrumentalism may be considered humane in some quarters consequent upon the fact that its pragmatic elements render it of service to humanity. However, our point is that it needs to get fleshed up and enriched with the moral concerns of man. We kill the world when our ideological leanings fail to have as its central focus, the safety of humanity. The upholding of human dignity and personhood, which only proper moral orientation of our minds championed by moral philosophy is capable of must constitute our focus in all our theorizing. Any attempt to try otherwise will have humanity theorizing itself into extinction. This calls for an in-depth critical reflection and a sense of judgment, which may be the only available instruments for humanity to salvage herself from self-destructive ventures hence, our present reflection.

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