

John Dewey's Meliorism —The Logic of Intelligence and The Formula of Human Effort Using Intelligence—

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Introduction—The Request for Meliorism—

At the end of the 19th Century, a large economic block was established all over the U.S. as a consequence of rapid industrialization after the Civil War. The American life style was forced to be transformed. Independent farmers and free laborers were left behind as a result of industrialization. Some mega enterprises were born as a consequence of the Laissez-fair principle. The business activities had been dominated by such mega enterprises. The business activities of the mega enterprises brought about hostility toward small enterprises, laborers, and customers. The antipathy between Old comers and New comers was becoming serious. Dewey looked at such a situation as “the house divided against itself.”

The Progressivism of America in the early 20th Century aimed to solve many kinds of social problems which were caused by business activities under the principle of Laissez-fair. This Movement required the government to solve social problems through carrying out policies. It claimed the necessity of public control over the business activities to realize public welfare. Dewey took part in this movement at the prime of his life. He engaged in the activities of Hall House and the management of Laboratory School. His greatest contribution to this movement was that he tried to construct the logic of intelligence for demonstrating the possibility of Meliorism. Meliorism was the principle of Progressivism.

Progressivism propelled on such a principle that a man can improve the world through his effort with his own intelligence. In Dewey's book *Democracy and Education* (1916), he explained the notion of “Experience” as the formula of human activity for problem solving, in which humans are required to make the most use of their intelligence. After *Democracy and Education*, on the basis of “Experience” as a key-concept, Dewey argued many kinds of themes – philosophy, humanity, politics, ethics, art, religion and so on.

An Opponent in Argument of Meliorism

Why was Meliorism held up as the principle in Progressivism? And why was the logic of intelligence demanded to demonstrate the possibility of Meliorism?

Industrialization in the U.S. had been propelled on the principle of Laissez-fair. The right of business activity was seen as a private right originating from Natural Rights. For that reason, though that idea was already too old to be accepted, the people supporting Laissez-fair claimed that government must not control business activities through policies. In the latter 19th Century, business activities in the U.S. had taken on such an aspect as a dog-eat-dog world. As a result, mega enterprises were born.

Moreover, during this period, the theory of social evolution by H. Spencer was introduced in the U.S., which was based on Darwin's theory of evolution. His theory of the Survival of the Fittest was accepted as a logic to justify the competition on the principle of Laissez-fair. He insisted that society evolves as a result of free exhibition of the inborn superiority of individuals, and that it is important to demonstrate such inborn superiority in society without artificial interference. In the U.S, such an individual born with superiority – especially mental toughness – was regarded as a person successful in business, that is, the owner of a mega enterprise. Supported by Social Darwinism, the principle of Laissez-fair was reinforced.

Summing-up, the following points were insisted on by the supporters of Laissez-fair.

- a. There is a disparity in the inborn ability of individuals and the gap is fixed over the course of each lifetime.
- b. The life-world consists of keen competition for the survival of the fittest.
- c. When individuals with superior characters survive as the fittest, then humans and their society would evolve.

W. G. Sumner, an economist who was a backer of Laissez-fair, mentioned that it is a foolish effort for humans to try to reform our society. Sumner insisted that artificial interference such as welfare projects let the weak survive, so the evolution of society is disturbed. Such logic was a strong opponent of Progressivism.

Formation of Dewey's Meliorism

Dewey grappled with a complex issue during the period of Progressivism. *Democracy and Education* (1916) was his reply to the issue. The year 1916 was the terminal phase of Progressivism. Dewey's thought was generated through his involvement in Progressivism. His notion of 'experience,' the logic of intelligence for Meliorism, was the fruit of his ideological efforts. As Hegel claimed, using a metaphor of the owl of Minerva, "Philosophy comes later" ,

Dewey's philosophy can be recognized as the justification of Progressivism.

With what the logic did Dewey try to disprove the principle of Laissez-fair? Moreover, what formula of human effort did he propose for Meliorism?

It is said generally that Dewey absorbed three thoughts: new Hegelism, evolutionary biology, and pragmatism.

i New Hegelism

Dewey absorbed the philosophy of Hegel through T. Green's writings. He learned the Hegelian approach to society. Hegel denies the view that society consists of individuals who existed in isolation before society was organized. He insists that society consists of relations between people. Naturally observed, what is found in human history is the relations between people. History of humans is the process of the transformation of a relation into a new one. New relation always increases the mutual recognition of liberty. Therefore, the essence of human history rests not on the struggle for existence, but on the reconstruction of relation fit better for changed circumstance. Dewey recognized that the advancement of society is accomplished through cooperation or mutual assistance, not through the struggle for existence. Dewey claimed to transform the relation from formation of Laissez-fair into that of common welfare. The division among people and the hostility toward each other in the U.S. was the most serious problem for Dewey.

Each culture in human history expresses the style of relations between people. A man is born, grows up, and lives in the culture in his own time. Man is brought up through culture, so the abilities are prescribed by the culture. Even though there is a disparity in ability among individuals, the gap that is produced among people as the result of education is larger than the gap caused by inborn abilities. It is possible for all individuals to take part in public relations. It is possible for most children to develop their abilities enough through schooling.

ii Evolutionary biology

Dewey also studied evolutionary biology through the thought of T. Huxley. Opposed to Spencer, Dewey did not consider the natural world as that of survival of the fittest. He considered it as the world that is organized of various kinds of components and functions on the symmetrical interdependence between them. It is impossible in the natural world that any superior component becomes the only winner. According to Dewey, biodiversity is the law of the natural world. He recognized that maintaining biodiversity is the requirement of readaptation in the case of changes in the environment. The change in the environment occurs unpredictably, suddenly, and unexpectedly, under the contingency. So, as a guarantee of survival, they need to leave a variety of offspring. Offspring do not fight each other. An offspring that fits itself into the new environment can survive. When change in the

environment occurs, the situation of a sole winner is rather dangerous.

Similar to the natural world, Dewey asserted that there is no law in human history. He denied Hegel on this point. Hegel treated the history of human society as the process in which 'Ideas' gradually manifest in human society in the form of culture. Marx treated it as class struggle. Dewey denied both these historical logics. For him, humans are the performers who live in the world under contingency. It is inevitable for humans to engage in problem-solving continually. The problem occurs incidentally. But humans are not incompetent in solving the problems they are confronted with. It is a descriptive fact that human creates a new culture to readapt to the environment altered successfully. Such efforts made it possible for humans to renew society and survive as a species.

Dewey worked out the explanation for Intelligence based on the interaction between an organism and its environment. He rejected the 'Reason' as Descartes claims, that humans are the only ones with the inborn ability to think logically. Naturally observed, humans have an ability to interact with their environment complexly and intricately compared to other organisms. The distinction is one of level of increasing complexly and intricately. Humans have an ability to interact with distant things beyond space and time. Dewey found human intelligence in such a biotic phenomenon. Humans approach their environment to utilize it for their own survival. With Intelligence, humans are capable of solving the social problems at the time and reforming society through their own effort using intelligence.

iii Pragmatism

C. Peirce and W. James set the main theme of philosophy on increasing the certainty for human activities in this world. The pursuit of 'Truth' was not the main theme in their philosophy. They considered truth as the belief that would warrant the way of action to solve the problems in this world. Dewey had hardly used this word in his writings. Peirce insisted that we are capable of increasing the certainty of our activity based on the adoption of a clear belief that consists of meanings with high probability. Meaning is the connection between act and response. It provides the rules of action when we deliberate on the action plan — the guiding idea— to be adopted for solving the problem. James insisted that it is necessary for problem solving to clarify the ideas leading to the consequence that we want to realize, and that our activities must be guided by such ideas. Building on the pragmatism of Peirce and James, Dewey proposed the formula of human effort using intelligence that offered humans the method to solve problems in this world. If we follow his method, that is, if we use meanings that are guaranteed high probability, we can increase the certainty of our actions to solve problems in this world. Human intelligence is able to manifested in actions, such as investigating the problematic situations we face, coming up with guiding ideas through careful

consideration, and guiding carefully our actions experimentally.

Dewey proposed the formula to apply it to solving public problems. Dewey emphasized society or public rather than individual or private. He aimed to establish democratic relations between people in the U. S. His theory of intelligence for problem solving was also the theory of how to collect our intelligence to solve public problems. To collect the intelligence of the public, he attached a great deal of importance to communication in society. It is possible for people on the guarantee of the freedom of communication to participate in public activities and devote themselves to it.

Dewey's concept of Meliorism

Dewey absorbed three thoughts—Hegelianism, evolutionary biology and pragmatism. He selected from them, the notion of relationships, holism, naturalism, consequentialism, experimentalism and so on. He constructed the logic that advocated Meliorism, and refuted Laissez-fair and Social Darwinism.

In his logic, the following three points were emphasized.

- a. The World consists of multifarious components and they are related to each other reciprocally and harmoniously. It is the descriptive fact that it is impossible in the realm of nature to sweep the board, so survival of the fittest is not the truth of the world.
- b. The World is dominated by contingency. There is no law on the course of human history. The change occurs contingently. This is a kind of common problem for humans. Viewed historically, in occurrence of change in the environment, humans survived in a group by creating a new culture and a new style of relationships through their cooperation. Humans renewed their society over and over.
- c. It is not necessary for humans to be respected as the only being with Reason. Intelligence can be found in the activities of every organism in trying to adapt to the environment. As for humans, they are capable of interacting with the environment widely and complexly, beyond space and time. Intelligence is shown in the style of functioning in their activities. Intelligence is not a metaphysical notion like 'Reason,' but a descriptive notion.

Dewey demonstrated the possibility of Meliorism as such that humans transform their society to cope with the change in environment by creating new culture through their own efforts. Humans have maintained their existence as a species. This can be confirmed with the naturalistic approach.

The concept of 'Experience'

Dewey compiled the formula of human effort using intelligence for problem solving into the concept of 'experience' in *Democracy and Education*. His concept of 'experience' stands for the human activity for problem solving, in which meanings are applied deliberately, intentionally, and reflectively. Humans are able to think of ways to solve problems through thoughtfully applying knowledge (meaning). And humans can increase their ability to conduct activities by reflecting on what they have done or what they are going to do. Though it is impossible for them to be guaranteed absolute certainty for their actions, it is possible for humans to increase the certainty of their actions to the maximum through their own effort using intelligence.

After *Democracy and Education*, Dewey had developed his thoughts reflectively and argued various kinds of fields through 'experience': intellectual experience, public experience, ethical experience, aesthetic experience, religious experience, and so on. He had confidence in human activity with intelligence for social reformation. To put it accurately, he had no choice but to bet on it. He was not an optimist but an admonitor. Humans are always under pressure to solve various kinds of problems, which occur incidentally. They have no weapon except their own intelligence.

In his later book, *Common Faith* (1934), he discussed 'religious experience.' He treated it as self-reliance. Persons who are rich in experience possess an abundant accumulation of knowledge (meaning) and ability to apply it to a variety of problems which they face to. So, they are capable to foresee the course of problem solving more clearly and wider perspective than those who are not so experienced. They can see the reciprocal relationship between the various components in the world and themselves. They are confident that the universe would reply affirmatively to their actions. With such a confidence, they can fight against difficult problems and tough it out. For Dewey, 'Religious experience' is the supreme 'experience,' or the highest way of life of Meliorism.

Conclusion

Dewey proposed the logic and the formula of human effort using intelligence, which demonstrates the belief in Meliorism that humans can enhance their society for themselves.

It was necessary for Progressivism to demonstrate the logic of Meliorism to cope with and refute the principle of Laissez-faire and Social Darwinism. He compiled the logic and the formula for Meliorism as the concept of 'experience' in *Democracy and Education*. Finally, he described it as the way of living of self-reliance based on the faith in a reciprocal relationship with the universe, in other words, 'religious experience.'