



John Dewey's Liberalism: Individual, Community, and Self-Development

Associate Professor Daniel Savage PhD

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John Dewey's classical pragmatism, Daniel M. Savage asserts, can be used to provide a self-development-based justification of liberal democracy that shows the current debate between liberal individualism and republican communitarianism to be based largely on a set of pseudoproblems.

From Dewey's classical pragmatism, Savage derives a conception of individual autonomy that, while meeting all of the criteria for a conception of autonomy, does not, as the dominant Kantian variant does, require transcendence from any particular language community. The Deweyan conception of autonomy that Savage derived from classical pragmatism, in fact, requires that the individual be situated within a context of cultural beliefs. Savage argues that this particular conception of autonomy is necessary if one wants to conceive of life, as communitarians do, as a quest for the good life within a social context.

Thus, Savage constructs a conception of autonomy that consists of a set of intellectual virtues, each of which can be understood, like Aristotle's moral virtues, as a mean between two extremes (or vices). The virtue of critical reflection is the mean between the vices of dogmatism on the one hand and philosophical skepticism on the other. The virtue of creative individuality is the mean between the opposing vices of conformity and eccentricity. Finally, the virtue of sociability is the mean between the extremes of docility and rebelliousness.

The three virtues together provide a natural method of adapting to change. The method is natural because it is in accord with a continuous cycle of activity—tension/movement/harmony—that is generic to all living things, Dewey's method of adapting to change requires, in both the individual and in the community, the synthesis of integrating and differentiating forces.

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