Rick Davis[*]

Group Morality and Forms of Life: Dewey, Wittgenstein and Inter-Subjectivity

Abstract. In this paper, I attempt to establish connections between the pragmatist philosophical tradition and the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. I argue that among these connections is the affinity between John Dewey's account of the development of group morality as articulated in his early work and Wittgenstein's admittedly vague concept, 'form of life.' I argue that this affinity is evident in that both are dependent on inter-subjective experience. Moreover, both Dewey's account of the development of group morality and Wittgenstein's concept of form of life suggests an intimate relationship between the individual and the community. I argue further that both Dewey's account of group morality and Wittgenstein's form of life concept hold that there is a significant influence of inherited norms, conventions, traditions, etc., on the development of the individual and her conduct in a variety of social interactions. I go on to raise and address potential and anticipated criticisms. In this section I take what I consider to be the most penetrating of the potential criticisms of the arguments presented in this paper: that Dewey and Wittgenstein direct their analyses at different issues (the former directs his analysis toward group moral development and social issues, while the latter directs his toward linguistic activity and its grounding social context), that Dewey focuses much of his attention on moral agency, whereas Wittgenstein is more concerned with what might be called epistemological issues, and finally that my treatment of the form of life concept is incomplete in that I spend a roughly proportionate amount of time discussing related concepts: language games, meaning as use, and, to a lesser extent, rule- following. I respond to these criticisms in turn by arguing that a careful reading of these aspects of each philosopher's work circumvents such criticisms. The goal of this paper is to contribute to the growing literature on connections between Wittgenstein's philosophy and the Pragmatist tradition. The subject matter might also be a contribution to the history of philosophy and possibly have implications for epistemology. There is also the hope that in establishing commonalities between the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Dewey one can provide an interpretation of some of the more vague concepts in Wittgenstein's philosophy, prompting further discussion on these concepts. Finally, this research might pave the way for further research into connections among different aspects of Dewey's and Wittgenstein's philosophies. This paper is a first step toward a study of a much larger scope and should not be taken as conclusive.

This paper argues that among the connections between Wittgenstein's philosophy and the pragmatist tradition is the commonality between Dewey's account of the development of group morality and Wittgenstein's concept, 'forms of life.' To my knowledge there is nothing in the literature that has focused on the affinity between these aspects of each philosopher's work. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the growing literature on Wittgenstein's philosophy and the pragmatist tradition in a way that prompts further discussion about concepts that are not so often addressed by scholars making similar connections.

This paper proceeds in the following way: first, I provide a brief review of literature that has alluded to connections between the philosophies of Dewey and Wittgenstein; second, I briefly review and show important connections between the aspects of each philosopher's

[*] Washington State University [richard.davis@email.wsu.edu]

work with which this research is concerned: Dewey's group morality and Wittgenstein's form of life; third, I raise and address potential and anticipated criticisms; finally, I conclude by reiterating my main points and stating why this research is important. My overarching argument here is that both the form of life concept and Dewey's account of group morality are dependent on inter-subjective experience.

Prior Work on Dewey and Wittgenstein

Despite the growing literature on Wittgenstein and Pragmatism, there is surprisingly little, if any, systematic study dedicated exclusively to the philosophies of Dewey and Wittgenstein in relation to one another. Robin Haack's excellent essay (1984) is perhaps the most satisfying treatment of the connections between Wittgenstein and Dewey, but this analysis is strongly supplemented by equally thorough treatments of Peirce, James, Rorty, and pragmatism more generally. This takes away from the force of the connections she establishes. Nonetheless, Haack's insights are invaluable to any study looking to establish connections. For instance, she argues that there are 'naturalistic' elements in both Dewey and Wittgenstein and that these elements have similar relationships to the two philosopher's accounts of "meaning, behavior, and justification" (1984: 163). Moreover, Haack observes that Wittgenstein and Dewey both associate meaning with behavior. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1952), Wittgenstein writes that in most cases the meaning of any linguistic item is its use. Since Wittgenstein understood language as an activity, this is close to Dewey's claim that "Meaning is primarily a property of behavior" (in Haack 1984: 164). This, Haack concludes, means both Wittgenstein and Dewey hold that language—its structure *and* meaning—cannot be understood if divorced from its context.

Richard Rorty's (1982) well-known account makes strong claims about consistencies in Dewey's and Wittgenstein's work within the history of philosophy, but he spends more time comparing the so-called 'Early' and 'Later' Wittgenstein to the philosophy and significance of Kant and Dewey, respectively. "The later Wittgenstein belongs with Dewey," he writes, "as the earlier Wittgenstein belongs with Kant" (1982: 28). This comparison obscures more than it elucidates, however; connections between Dewey and Wittgenstein are a part of a broader claim about the import of Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to changes in philosophy as practiced during his early and later work. As a result, Dewey's philosophy is compared to Wittgenstein's within the history of professional philosophy. Important claims are made, but not toward the sole end of establishing affinities between the two. Rather, Rorty more situates Wittgenstein's philosophy in the Western philosophical tradition.

The significance of Rorty's essay, however, should not be underestimated. It has been in opposition to Rorty's interpretation that some of the best work regarding Dewey and Wittgenstein has been advanced. For instance, Richard Prawat (1995) rejects Rorty's claim that Dewey was a postmodernist before his time, but he goes on to entertain the notion that in being critical of traditional philosophical problems, Dewey does move away from philosophy as practiced at the time. Through his project of "reconstruction" (Dewey 1920), Prawat suggests, Dewey was able to develop and "move into" a new language game within professional philosophy. What this means is that Dewey was able to establish a vocabulary regarding topics of his interest that his peers were willing to accept as a part of 'legitimate' philosophical discourse. This falls short, though, of the being on equal footing with ideas developed and advanced in the so-called linguistic turn, since the language of pragmatism was seen as a subset of a broader and accepted philosophical discourse.

Prawat goes on to discuss how Dewey's alternative to the *mind-body* problem in traditional philosophy was a "triangular relationship between the individual, community, and the world mediated by socially constructed ideas" (1995: 14). This is similar to Wittgenstein's remarks on the 'from of life' concept, although it does not seem that Wittgenstein was directing these remarks at the *mind-world* problem as much as toward philosophy itself. For Wittgenstein, as we will see, there is an inherent relationship among the individual, community, and the social conventions rooted therein. For both philosophers, then, communally developed and agreed upon beliefs, practices, etc., contribute to meaning and conduct. Language use and what is and is not considered legitimate behaviors, like any communal activities, are the result of cooperation.

Other approaches are less entangled in differences in interpretation: James Farr (2004), for example, aptly argues that there are elements in Dewey and Wittgenstein that can contribute to the 'Social Capital' literature in the social sciences. This is an accurate observation. Both Dewey and Wittgenstein are concerned with the manner in which agreement in a community grounds activity, behavior, and communication. Both also hold that this strengthens group solidarity. This can be a powerful supplement to Social Capital Theory: Social Capital Theory holds that strong social ties among members of a community contribute to the betterment of a community in a variety of ways. These ties, it is maintained, have dissipated overtime, culminating in a dire social arrangement perpetuated by a variety of factors (depending on which theorists one consults) that encourages and/or enables a reclusive life over public and civic engagement (Putnam 2000). Given the emphasis on communally agreed upon standards of conduct, among other aspects of social life in both Dewey and Wittgenstein, it is appropriate to incorporate them into debates concerning the concept of Social Capital and its role in group life.

These and other studies give those who wish to show strong connections between Wittgenstein and Dewey a good place to start. It is also evident in the limited literature that many of these connections are to be found in aspects of each thinker's philosophy with which this research is concerned: how group dynamics, norms, and practices influence and indeed organize and guide the activities of the individuals of which a given community is comprised. This, I believe, justifies pursuing this research. Both Dewey and Wittgenstein see the demarcation between community and individual as one that is blurred to a significant extent. For both, there is no other way to understand such a relationship. An individual detached from her social context is nothing more than a social fiction.

Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Inter-Subjective Experience

In Dewey's middle period, he places a great deal of emphasis on the dynamics of group life, especially as they pertain to communal practices and ethical norms. For Dewey, there is an intimate and reciprocal relationship between the individual and the community of which she is a part. This, according to Dewey, has been the hallmark of group life since antiquity: "Individual judgment," he suggests, "is caught up, repeated, and plays its part in group opinion" (1972: 56). The inverse is also true. Broader communal or group morality influences the manner in which a person develops her moral system. Dewey writes, "customs and mores have in them an element of social approval, which makes them vehicles for [individual] moral judgments" in that one's moral judgments are reinforced by the fact that they are derived from a communally approved moral system.Although these judgments can at times "sink to the level of mere habit" there are safeguards derived from group life that bring them back to the level of "conscious agencies." Dewey lists a few:

> The education of the younger, immature members of the group and their preparation for full membership. (2) The constraint and restraint of refractory members and the adjustment of conflicting interest. (3) Occasions which involve some notable danger or crisis and therefore call for greater attention to…avert disaster. (1972: 59).

For my purposes here, it is only important to note that institutionalized group practices not only provide members of a community with their initial code of behavior, but also provide the means by which this behavior is regulated, suggesting that certain actions are grounded in the dynamics of group life. In this way, these "conscious agencies" are encouraged by the community to remain an engaged part of public life as opposed to devolving into passive beliefs or mere habit (59).

The standards of group morality, Dewey continues, are social, but only unconsciously so. Dewey puts it better when he explains that standards of group morality are not those that "each member deliberately makes his own. [Rather,] he takes it as a matter of course. He is in the clan, "with the gang"; he thinks and acts accordingly" (1972: 72). This means that the contours of group morality are internalized early in one's life and become increasingly entrenched the more one participates in communal practices governed by, and rooted in, those standards. Indeed, "The young are carefully trained to observe them" (1972: 55). Dewey continues:

> Whenever we find groups of men living together…we find that there are certain ways of acting which are common to the group…There are approved ways of acting, common to the group, and handed down from generation to generation. Such approved ways of doing and acting are customs (1972: 56).

These customs in turn influence and guide individual conduct: "they imply the judgment of the group that they are to be followed. The welfare of the group is regarded as somehow imbedded in them" (1972: 54-5). This means that a person's actions are either validated or invalidated depending on the extent to which those actions accord to group standards. This is different from other ethical traditions such as utilitarian or deontological approaches in that an ethical system is derived from, and grounded in, a particular communal context as opposed to adhering to abstract principles or social calculus.

Daniel Savage (2005) has examined group life and morality as articulated by Dewey and has coined the phrase 'intersubjective verification'. Savage's concept is helpful in coming to a clearer understanding of Dewey's account of the development of group morality and is therefore worth briefly reviewing here. The phrase is quite intuitive: it is meant to refer to the aspects of Dewey's philosophy that hold individual moral values and standards to be derived from, and logically justified by, group or communal customs and mores. Savage also notes the inter-subjective experience goes both ways: ideas often begin with individuals and are inter-subjectively verified by the broader group or community. He provides the excellent example of the technological innovation leading to the development of the heavy plow:

> Motivation for the invention came from dissatisfaction with, or criticism of, current methods of cultivation. Although the idea for the new design must have originated in a single individual's imagination, this individual did not have to start from scratch. His or her idea contributed to a progressive development of cultivation…It was [subsequently] verified as the best exist-

ing plow through the intersubjective experience of individual farmers. The spread of its use across Europe was the result of the communication of its effectiveness (2005: 11).

Moreover, inter-subjective verification applies not only to technological innovation but also to normative ethical and political ideas. In almost the same breath, Savage argues:

> The concept of individual rights has a similar history. It was motivated by criticism of, and therefore dissatisfaction with, existing political institutions…It was the best idea regarding the organization of a political community devoted to the good of its members that had been developed up until that time. This was verified intersubjectively through the experience and communication of the populations of Western Europe and North America (2005: 11).

The emerging point is that ideas –be they in regard to technological innovations or the development of normative ethical and political ideas– operate within the intimate relationship of the individual and community. The individual is at once the product of, and a contributor to, social norms and practices. This is the crux of Dewey's account of group morality and is consistent with his pragmatist philosophy more generally. This connection between morality and practical problem-solving is something that is echoed in Wittgenstein's philosophy. For Wittgenstein, there is also an inherent connection among group standards of conduct and a variety of actions.

Dewey's account is similar to Wittgenstein's remarks on what he calls a 'form of life.' However, given its importance to his later philosophy, the 'form of life' concept is rarely mentioned by Wittgenstein. Upon further examination, however, the thoughtful reader understands that other concepts important to Wittgenstein's philosophy are dependent thereon. For instance, to paraphrase one commentator, the term 'form of life' helps one to understand that the manner in which we develop our proficiency in language games is dependent on context and a socially embedded complex of language, rules, behavior and action (Ayer 1985). In Wittgenstein's words: "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (1952: § 19). What this suggests is that our 'form of life' is an "interweaving of culture, world view, and language" (Glock 1996: 124). This being the case, a proficient understanding of the context-dependent nature of what Wittgenstein calls language games helps one better understand the role of the form of life concept in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

The connection between language games and a form of life becomes clearer as Wittgenstein proceeds: in response to his interlocutor's inquiry in the *Investigations* about what constitutes truth or falsehood in a language game, Wittgenstein explains that the truth and falsehood of an utterance is determined by "what human beings say; and it is in their language that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinion, but rather in a form of life" (1952: § 241). This means that linguistic practices are derived from one's environment, a community or culture that is of course shared with others. Social convention binds human beings together in a form of life based on a general agreement about a diverse set of social interactions. As Wittgenstein suggests as early as the *Blue* and *Brown Books* (1958), to imagine a language is to imagine a "culture" (1958: 134). Accordingly, a form of life can be understood as "a culture or social formation, the totality of communal activities in which language-games are embedded" (Glock 1996: 124-25).

Related to the concept of language games is Wittgenstein understanding of meaning as use. For Wittgenstein, meanings of terms are not their referent or an abstract idea; rather, meaning is derived from the manner in which terms are used in regular social interaction, in everyday conversation. As he explains,

> For a large class of cases of the use of the word "meaning"—even if not for all cases—the word can be explained thus: The meaning of the word is its use in language (1952: § 189).

In fact, the later Wittgenstein is hostile to referential theories of meaning that characterized his early work. In the opening of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein refutes Augustine's account of language. He explains the account holds,

> a certain picture of the essence of human language: that the words of language name objects—that propositions are combinations of such names. –In this picture of language we find the root of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. (1952: § 1)

The referential theory of meaning is problematic for several reasons. As one example, given this account, after the object ceases to exist the meaning remains. How, then, can a referential theory of meaning allow for such a term to be meaningful. What Wittgenstein sees as the shortcomings of such theories of meaning leads him to believe that one cannot understand a language until she sees how it functions in a form of life, as a "pattern in the weave of life recurring in different variations" (1952: § 43).

Not only are the concepts of forms of life, language games, and meaning as use intimately connected, but there is also a connection between these concepts and Wittgenstein's discussion of rules and rule following. As Mark Addis notes, "a rule, as with meaning, is rooted in a form of life" (2006: 104). Similarly, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, "the word *language-game* is used here to emphasize the fact that the speaking of a language is part of a [rule-governed] activity, or of a form of life" (1952: § 23, emphasis in original). Furthermore, he states "obeying a rule is a practice" (1952: § 99). Language games and related conduct, simply put, adhere to rules. These rules, of course, emerge from social context.

Like the above-mentioned concepts, following a rule is embedded in a form of life. For Wittgenstein, a rule, like meaning, is not abstract, nor does it govern activity in the same way with every application. To the contrary, he thought that much of the misunderstanding of rules and rule-following can be attributed to the fact that most people understand rules as being applied in the same way in all situations. Wittgenstein understood rules as normalized behavior in a particular form of life. He writes: "to obey a rule, to make a report, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions)." As such, rules do not transcend their applications, but rather their applications are rooted in different social contexts, different forms of life (1952: § 202).

For Wittgenstein, activity in linguistic communities is governed by customs and social convention based on agreement in a form of life. This is not limited to linguistic activity, but extends to all activity (1952: § 241). These activities are in turn rule-governed, the rules having been established by agreement in a form of life. This is similar to the claim made by Dewey that different kinds of activity are based on agreement in a community. Furthermore, for both Dewey and Wittgenstein social practices are provided with a significant degree of legitimacy by virtue of their being accepted and seemingly validated by the broader community, as well as by past generations. These customs are seen as having been inter-subjectively verified by the group. Concomitantly, these same practices serve as a starting point for individual innovation in regard to group practices that, if deemed useful, will also be inter-subjectively verified. For both Dewey and Wittgenstein, then, inherited customs

influence social conduct, interactions, and practices of all kinds. Ideas concerning social practices spread through social approval, through inter-subjective experience.

Both Dewey and Wittgenstein understood that group activity is governed by a complex of rules, traditions, norms, etc. They saw group life as an elaborate social matrix established and perpetuated by agreement among the members of the group. Both also realized that this agreement and the resulting complex of social conventions can be blindly accepted by successive generations, and this might have negative implications. But the affinity between Dewey's account of the development of group morality and Wittgenstein's forms of life that concerns this research lays in their shared emphasis on the important role of inter-subjectivity. Both the concepts of Dewey's group morality and Wittgenstein's forms of life depend on the transfer and approval of ideas. The inter-subjective experience binds groups and forms of life together in social arrangements, the basis of which is a kind of social consensus in regard to what constitutes legitimate social behavior of different kinds.

Potential Objections

At this point some objections might be raised. One of the most obvious might be that Dewey and Wittgenstein are not directing their analyses to comparable topics. It is true that Wittgenstein was primarily a philosopher of language, and Dewey was, for lack of a better term, a social theorist. Therefore, it could be argued that they are concerned with different things (language and morality, respectively). But insofar as each account is concerned with interaction between the individual and social customs in regard to social action, there is a strong connection. Each acknowledges that social customs have a significant influence on the development of one's basis for action. Similarly, there is a voluminous literature on the relation between ethics and moral action. So even though on a superficial level there might seem to be some conceptual incongruity, upon further examination it is clear there is consistency in these concepts in regard to social action that is guided by social conventions.

Another objection that might be raised, similar to the first, is that Dewey places a lot of focus on the extent to which an individual's actions and ideas can influence adopted modes of social behavior by being integrated into group morality—what some might call moral agency. Wittgenstein is comparatively silent on this point. Wittgenstein is more concerned with how what one learns from a form of life influences their knowledge of, and action in, the world. This does not mean, though, that for Wittgenstein an individual is somehow trapped in the worldview established by her form of life. For instance, in his discussion on rule-following Wittgenstein explains that although one is taught to observe rules, the nature of those rules allows for some deviation, some latitude for the individual. Such behavior might of course be deemed inappropriate since it would be inconsistent with a form of life, but the point is that individuals are not held captive. They are merely limited by the social norms that comprise them. The same can be said of any established worldview, which in his subsequent work Wittgenstein addresses (Wittgenstein 1969).

Finally, it might be argued that my treatment of the 'form of life' concept is incorrect or incomplete. The argument can be made that my account is incomplete in that it spends a roughly equivalent amount of time discussing related concepts. However, as mentioned, the term 'form of life' is mentioned only a few times in Wittgenstein's published work, and therefore supplemental concepts, such as those mentioned above, are needed to elucidate this idea. This is an appropriate course of action because a proficient reading of Wittgenstein shows the extent to which language games, meaning as use, and rule-following are dependent on a form of life. Given the scarce remarks on the concept, in concert with how

these remarks explicate the connection among other important concepts, a discussion of forms of life necessitate a discussion of these other, related concepts.

Conclusion

I have argued in this brief paper that the similarities between Dewey's account of the development of group morality and Wittgenstein's concept of forms of life are among connections between Wittgenstein's philosophy and the pragmatist tradition. I have done this by focusing on how both concepts can be understood as dependent on inter-subjectively established group customs. I have also argued that Dewey and Wittgenstein see communal life as one in which an individual is of one's community as opposed to being detached in some way. The implications of this, I have argued, are that one's action –be they moral or linguistic– are governed by rules that are accepted as legitimate. In short: both Dewey and Wittgenstein see group life as an interwoven, context-dependent system of language, behavior, action, and more. In this way, I have attempted to show the extent to which Wittgenstein's philosophy and the pragmatist tradition (represented here by Dewey) are in accord with one another.

I also raised and addressed some potential and anticipated criticisms: that Dewey and Wittgenstein's approaches are directed at different issues, that Dewey places much emphasis on the extent to which an individual can influence a group's system of customs, whereas Wittgenstein is more concerned with what can be called epistemological issues, and finally that my handling of the Wittgenstein's concept of form of life is incomplete. In the prior section, I address these potential criticisms in turn and argue that they can be resolved by a careful reading of both Dewey and Wittgenstein. Although neither, to my knowledge, employ the term 'inter-subjectivity', the concept itself teases out connections between the two concepts with which this study is concerned.

This research picks up where previous, relevant research leaves off: focusing solely on connections between Dewey and Wittgenstein. Such a study can only contribute to the growing literature concerning Wittgenstein and pragmatism, even if only through stimulating more discussion about the potential relationship. That is, even if others do not agree that these connections exist or are important, this study will have achieved the objective toward which is directed: a contribution to the ongoing and important debates relating to Wittgenstein and pragmatism. This is important because it fills a 'gap' in the existing literature.

Furthermore, by establishing affinities between what are sometimes considered vague or ambiguous Wittgensteinian concepts with concepts that are part of a seemingly more coherent philosophical system such Dewey's might help to stimulate discussion on these concepts by providing a viable interpretation. The only way philosophical problems (or puzzles) are worked out is through discussion. Providing even a possibly 'correct' interpretation of difficult concepts will no doubt contribute to debates that seek to elucidate these concepts. Concomitantly, through comparison each philosopher's account of group life is made clearer. To put this differently, there is a mutual clarification when comparing two or more philosophers in that by teasing out similarities, each concept or philosophy necessitates a careful reading of each philosopher.

Also, Dewey and Wittgenstein were contemporaries, although it is not clear that they read one another (although Wittgenstein was quite fond of James and was therefore exposed to pragmatism). Regardless, the contemporaneous relationship suggests research such as this that establishes strong similarities between two or more philosophers holds promise for studies in the history of philosophy. Through establishing these (and other) kinds of

similarities one can better understand the interplay of philosophy and other social factors in a given period. Too often, philosophies are treated as addressing perennial, trans-generational issues, which is not counter-productive in itself, but it is unrealistic to think that inquiries into these ideas proceeds in manner independent of historical context. The political historian and theorists Quentin Skinner (1988), who by his own account is heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, argues that although philosophy is often concerned with such 'timeless' questions, such an approach is of lesser value if it ignores historical and linguistic context.

Finally, in showing affinities between Dewey and Wittgenstein, other comparisons might be prompted and established, not only between Dewey and Wittgenstein but also among Wittgenstein and other pragmatists: as an example, Peirce's interest in the manner in which we come to develop our doubts and beliefs bears a resemblance to many of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* (1969). Also, James' holism is something that can at once be compared to Dewey and Wittgenstein (Haack 1984). Given the diversity of views within the pragmatist tradition, this holds great promise. If parallels can be drawn among Wittgenstein and more than one pragmatist (and this has been done, but more research in this area is needed), the connections between the two traditions will seem more evident. If ideas between, say, James or Holmes and Wittgenstein are shown in a convincing way, this is indicative of an inherent connection between Wittgenstein's philosophy. Many of pragmatists have ideas that correspond with many of Wittgenstein's concepts. This research can be a step in thedirection of demonstrating these parallels.

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