

John Dewey, un « communautarien libéral » selon Michael Sandel :

Dewey's pragmatism gave his liberalism a distinctive, and in some ways unfamiliar, cast. Most versions of liberal political theory rest on moral and metaphysical assumptions at odds with Dewey's pragmatism. John Locke held that legitimate government is limited by natural, inalienable rights; Immanuel Kant argued that no policy, however popular or conducive to utility, may violate principles of justice and right that are not derived from experience but are prior to it; even John Stuart Mill, who based justice and rights on "utility," broadly conceived, relied on a strong distinction between public and private spheres of action.

Dewey rejected all of these versions of liberalism, for they rested on moral or metaphysical foundations that were held to be prior to politics and prior to experience. Unlike these classical liberals and many contemporary ones, Dewey did not base his political theory on the existence of fundamental rights or a social contract. Although he favored civil liberties, he was not primarily concerned with defining the rights that limit majority rule; nor did he try to derive principles of justice that would govern the basic structure of society, or to identify a realm of privacy free from government intrusion.

Central to Dewey's liberalism was the idea that freedom consists in participating in a common life that enables individuals to realize their distinctive capacities. The problem of freedom is not how to balance individual rights against the claims of community, but how, as he put it to establish "an entire social order, possessed of a spiritual authority that would nurture and direct the inner as well as the outer life of individuals."¹ Civil liberties are vital for such a society, not because they enable individuals to pursue their own ends but because they make possible the social communication, the free inquiry and debate, that democratic life requires.

The overriding importance of democracy for Dewey is not that it provides a mechanism for weighing everyone's preferences equally, but that it provides a "form of social organization, extending to all the areas and ways of living," in which the full powers of individuals can be "fed, sustained and directed."² For Dewey, the "first object of a renascent liberalism" was not justice or rights but education, the task of « producing the habits of mind and character, the intellectual and moral patterns that suited citizens to the mutual responsibilities of a shared public life. »³ Democratic education of this kind, he stressed, was not only a matter of schooling but the essential task of liberal social and political institutions as well. Schools would be small communities that would prepare children to engage in a democratic public life, which would in turn educate citizens to advance the common good.

Michael Sandel, « Dewey's Liberalism and Ours », *New York Review of Books*, 1996.

¹ *Liberalism and Social Action*, p.24.

² *Ibid*, p.25.

³ *Ibid*, p.44.