

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FALLACY:

“the most pervasive fallacy of philosophical thinking goes back to neglect of context.”

~ John Dewey's *Later Works*, 6:5 cf. 1:51.

“*The philosophical fallacy*” was John Dewey's primary tool of criticism in philosophy. Though he did not systematize the various versions and formulations of this fallacy, in his brilliant study, *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy As Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), Gregory Pappas observes 4 different types:

1. Analytic Fallacy: Results of an analysis are interpreted as complete in themselves from any context:

“It is found whenever the distinctions or elements are discriminated are treated as if they were final and sufficient.” According to Dr. Pappas, “the key to this fallacy is that the rich and concrete context from which distinctions are abstracted is forgotten and the results of inquiry are given a status that they do not and should not have. The conclusions of inquiry are not only treated as final and sufficient, but they are sometimes elevated, ontologized, or as Dewey said, given ‘*antecedent existence*’ [Ibid., 26].” Pappas states:

As a result of their analyses, philosophers have dissected the world in many ways: mind and body, reason and passion, subject and object. There is nothing wrong with these dissections per se, but the concrete non-cognitive integral contexts from which things were dissected are often forgotten. With these dissections in hand, philosophical problems are then invented that center on how to reconcile features that are actually experienced as part of a unified and integral whole. With these dissections in hand, philosophical problems are then invented that center on how to reconcile features that are actually experienced as part of a unified and integral whole. This fallacy is responsible for the atomistic, dualistic, and subjective view of experience. Instead of starting with the integrated unity and unanalyzed totality found in a situation, modern philosophy begins with ontological gaps (dualism) and functional distinction that regulate primary experiences are taken as the starting point of philosophical inquiry, that is, as primary [Ibid., 26-7].

2. Unlimited Universalization Fallacy: Ignore context and elevate the conclusions of their inquiries is to give them unlimited applications:

This occurs when they ignore the fact that conclusions arise out of limiting conditions set by the contextual situation of particular inquiries. Philosophers are prone to this fallacy because they often try to formulate theories about truth, good, reality, or the absolute writ large. In many instances, one ‘converts abstraction from specific content into abstraction from all contexts whatsoever’ (LW 6:16). Philosophers tend to absolutize or universalize their conclusions because they ignore the fact that philosophical inquiry always occurs against a temporal and spatial background that is not subject as a whole to reflection [Ibid., 27].

3. Selective Emphasis Fallacy: Forgets or overlooks selectivity and the purposes of selection that are part of the context of a particular inquiry:

The most common consequence and sign of this is that non-empirical philosophers do not ascribe reality to whatever is left out of, or not selected, in their inquiries. Hence, whatever has value in some specific context and for some particular purpose determines what is real. But this is to confuse good or useful traits with ‘fixed traits of being’ (LW 1:33). Because philosophers cherish simplicity, certainty, and permanence, they convert these traits into real features of the world; meanwhile, uncertainty, change, and ambiguity are taken as phenomenal, subjective, or lacking reality. According to Dewey, however, all that happens is equally real though perhaps not of equal worth. If one is empirical one recognizes that primary experience has precarious elements as well as stable ones [Idem].

4. Intellectualism Fallacy: A combination of the fallacies above; it is perhaps the most pervasive fallacy:

Pappas observes:

Philosophers have always favored cognitive objects. The problem arises when, as a consequence of her cognitive bias, the philosopher deems unimportant or unreal whatever is non-cognitive or pre-cognitive. The consequence for intellectualism in philosophy has been a certain narrow view of experience, namely, that all experience is a mode of knowing. The concept of experience that is at the heart of traditional epistemology assumes something like an intellectualistic postulate: things really are what they are known to be. Therefore, we have to possess knowledge in order to reveal reality, and whatever is ultimately real has to have the characteristic of an object of knowledge. If things are what they are experienced, as, then there are many other ways in which we experience things than as objects of knowledge. In fact, we have a qualitative appreciation of our surroundings that precedes, underlies, and cannot be reduced to knowledge. Our intellectual activities always operate within the more general context of the world as encountered, lived, enjoyed, and suffered by humans. In primary experience ‘*things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things had before they are things cognized*’ (LW 1:27-28). The qualitative character of experience is not something merely subjective, but rather a trait of existence. ‘*The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is preeminently a qualitative world*’ (LW 5:243) [Ibid., 28].