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Dewey, Eros and Education

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We are attracted by our heart's desires. In love we passionately desire to possess the good, or at least what we perceive to be the good. But what we seek soon comes to possess us in thought, feeling, and action. It becomes who we are, the content of our character. In this paper I want to talk about education and Eros. I want to talk about Eros as a creative poetic force that makes new meanings and makes us who we are. I desire to reopen a conversation about what it means to educate for wisdom, that is, to teach the passions to desire the good.

The field of education would be better off if it would turn to a more robust philosophy of everyday life that emphasizes the emotions, the imagination, and disciplined moral action. Such an education is largely creative and aesthetic. It is precisely the kind of education that Dewey's philosophy of Eros seems to make possible. We will begin with philosophy or the love of wisdom.

Dewey understood wisdom as follows:

By wisdom we mean not systematic and proved knowledge of fact and truth, but a conviction about moral values, a sense for the better kind of life to be led. Wisdom is a moral term, and like every moral term refers not to the constitution of things already in existence, not even if that constitution be magnified into eternity and absoluteness. As a moral term it refers to a choice about something to be done, a preference for living this sort of life rather than that. It refers not to accomplished reality but to a desired future which our desires, when translated into articulate conviction, may help bring into existence.¹

Wisdom desires the best, has the aesthetic power to imagine the possible in the actual situation, and has the discipline to achieve it in action. Such wisdom lies beyond knowledge of actual facts.

In expressing his own view of the meaning of philosophy, Dewey decried Plato's ideal of wisdom as knowledge of the eternal, the transcendental, or "the Good." He proposed an alternative to any affirmation of philosophy as epistemologically foundational and transcendently metaphysical. The alternative was,

... to deny that philosophy is in any sense whatever a form of knowledge. It is to say that we should return to the original and etymological sense of the word, and recognize that philosophy is a form of desire, of effort at action — a love, namely, of wisdom; but with the thorough proviso, not attached to the Platonic use of the word, that wisdom, whatever it is, is not a

mode of science or knowledge. . . it is an intellectualized wish, an aspiration subjected to rational discriminations and tests, a social hope reduced to a working program of action, a prophecy of the future, but one disciplined by serious thought and knowledge.²

Philosophy, the love of wisdom, lies far beyond knowledge and the quest for certainty. Wisdom is what is possessed by prophets and prophetic teachers that allows them to create new social values.

Chapter 2 of Dewey's *Art as Experience* is titled "The Live Creature and 'Ethereal Things'."³ Exploring this title carefully will help explain the core of Dewey's thinking about the relations between Eros, action, and rationality. It will also help clarify his thinking in ways that will greatly surprise those who read Dewey as scientific. Thomas Alexander believes that we should approach Dewey through his aesthetics. Dewey believed all human beings desired to live life with the greatest sense of meaning and value. Alexander calls this passionate desire for life, meaning, and value "the Human Eros."⁴ A passionate desire to live and satisfy need is something we share with every living creature. Unique to the Human Eros is the passionate need and creative desire for what Dewey called "Ethereal things."

Before taking up Dewey's notion of "Ethereal Things," and the pragmatic view of creation it contains, I would like to dismiss the accusation that Dewey's pragmatism is scientific. This dismissal helps warrant Alexander's suggestion that Dewey is best approached through his aesthetic rather than his logical and scientific side. In "The Live Creature and 'Ethereal Things,'" Dewey boldly stated, "science itself is but a central art auxiliary to the generation and utilization of other arts."⁵ Scientific inquiry was a creative activity for Dewey and truths, i.e., "warranted assertions," were artifacts produced by the process. The warranted assertions could then be used to help make more cognitive, moral, and aesthetic meanings. Furthermore, science itself was a cultural artifact, a tool or instrument for making more meaning.

In explaining the second part of his title "Ethereal Things," Dewey acknowledged that he "took the liberty of borrowing from Keats the word 'ethereal' to designate the meanings and values that many philosophers and some critics suppose are inaccessible to sense, because of their spiritual, eternal and universal characters — thus exemplifying the common dualism of nature and spirit."⁶ Dewey's naturalism put the wonder of existence and the miracle of cre-

ation into daily activities within our contingent, evolving and unfinished world.

Dewey provides the passage from the poet Keats that contributed to his chapter title. It recommends that the artist should gaze "upon the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, and the Earth and its contents as material to form greater things, that is ethereal things — greater things than the Creator himself made."⁷ For Dewey humanity was a participant in an unfinished universe rather than a spectator of a finished one. In order to survive and exalt our existence, we must creatively solve our problems and evolve life-affirming values, perhaps of the kind that never before existed. The original solutions to such problems and the genesis of genuine values are always creative. In this way the creation continues to be creative and in our acts of creation we find what is most godlike within ourselves, that is, the passion and power of original creation and reconstruction—the passion that at least we share with other living creatures.

Dewey makes much of the fact that Keats "identified the attitude of the artist with that of the live creature."⁸ Dewey refers us to a passage from Keats that begins with remarks on the commonalities between the love-making and home-making habits of hawks and humans. It concludes with Keats's observation, "I go out among the Fields and catch a glimpse of a Stoat or a fieldmouse hurrying along — to what? The creature has a purpose and his eyes are bright with it. I go amongst the buildings of the city and see a man hurrying along — at what? The creature has a purpose and his eyes are bright with it. . . ."⁹ The live creature is filled with passionate desire and its actions are gliding, agile, and attuned to its purpose.

Dewey is quick to follow Keats in drawing a remarkable conclusion from the above analogy. Human action may be guided by its goal, its purposes, and it may achieve that which it values; yet, as Dewey and Keats saw it, "There may be reasonings, but when they take an instinctive form, like that of animal forms and movements, they are poetry, they are fine; they have grace."¹⁰ The passions of the hawk, the strivings of the fieldmouse, and "the Human Eros" all passionately and with a beguiling power, strive for the happiness that the good promises. The supreme power of human passion lies in its capacity of attaching itself to "ethereal things" and thereby acquiring foresight and a greater capacity to engage in reasoning in order to realize its longings. Ethereal things are values, the Deweyan "ends-in-view" that give point and purpose to inquiry. When foresight comes to the Human Eros it allows us to conceive of values and meanings that do not even exist in the present time or place. We can passionately desire what does not yet exist anywhere. Moreover, we can discipline ourselves with reasoning in order to realize our dreams, our ends-in-view. Indeed, logic and science themselves are among the things that the Human

Eros *creates*, one of the meanings that it makes, so it can continue to make more meaning. But where do the meanings and values that we create come from? Plato's answer was "the Good;" Christianity's is "God." Keats and Dewey, however, answer differently.

Dewey draws two points from the following passage wherein Keats declared, "the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repetitions of its own silent workings coming continually on the Spirit with a fine Suddenness."¹¹ The first point we have already considered. It is the conviction that reasonings "have an origin like that of the movements of a wild creature toward its goal" and in becoming instinctive become poetically creative. The second has implications for our understanding of the aims of the education of wisdom and of the kind of curriculum required. Dewey said,

... no "reasoning," that is, as excluding imagination and sense, can reach truth. Even "the greatest philosopher" exercises an animal-like preference to guide his (*sic*) thinking to its conclusions. He selects and puts aside as his imaginative sentiments move. "Reason" at its height cannot attain complete grasp and a self-contained assurance. It must fall back upon imagination — upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense.¹²

Imagination gives visions of values, ideals and ideas of things that are not anywhere, but that *could* be here now. Imagination images possibilities beyond the bounds of the actual. Strong poets imagine possibilities with a passion. They desire to possess their imagined ideals. They strive to call "ethereal things" into existence. Wise poets rely on reasonings to realize their values, but it is hardly a detached and dispassionate logic, although sometimes it is useful to pretend to work that way. Value neutrality and detached rationality are passions whose very purposes deny their possibility. For Dewey and Keats reasonableness was upon the roadway to making more meaning, a verb and not a noun, and if we have to reconstruct rationality to reach our destination then we should do so.

For Dewey and Keats imagination mediated between truth and beauty until they became whole in wisdom. Let us see what Dewey meant by this. Dewey begins by reflecting on one of Keats' most famous lines:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.¹³

Dewey connects this passage to a letter from two years earlier in which Keats wrote — "What Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth."¹⁴ Dewey helps clarify what is happening here when he observes that in Keats's "tradition, 'truth' never signifies correctness of intellectual statements about

things, or truth as its meaning is now influenced by science. It denotes the wisdom by which men (*sic*) live, especially 'the lore of good and evil'.¹⁵ At first this might not seem to help much. However, if we remember that nowhere are the Hellenistic influences that acted on Keats more evident than in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" which concludes with the two famous lines above, then we have a clue. By truth here Keats and Dewey were, I suggest, thinking within the Hellenistic tradition of *aletheia* that we translate as "truth." By *aletheia* the ancient Greeks meant the disclosure of something, the unconcealment of some being. The closest thing we moderns have to such an idea is the often discredited term "Revelation." Beauty is revealed in the work of the artist. The "truth" of art, of poetry, is that it can disclose the beauty of meaningful possibilities that are concealed beneath the mask of the actual, the ordinary, and the everyday. And this is as true of making love, making children, home making, or the making of community (statecraft) as it is of sculpting, painting in oils, or literary composition. Dewey saw no simple and sharp difference between the fine and the practical arts.

So what releases the possibilities hidden beneath the actual? The immediate answer is imagination; the mediate answer is wisdom. It is imagination that first images the bare possibility, that catches a glimpse of things, meanings and values that are not, but that could be. At first such imaginary insight into new values can only be vague, inexact, and imprecise. The beginning of wisdom lies in envisioning ethereal things. Or as Dewey put it, "ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and self-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities — to imagination and art."¹⁶ The other philosophy tries to complete the transcendental quest for certain knowledge that removes all mystery and doubt. It will have nothing to do with truly ethereal things, that is "greater things than the Creator himself made." But imagination alone will not release pent-up possibility.

To call our imaginary visions of novel values, of ethereal things, into existence, we must desire them with all the passion of the Human Eros. In this way we deepen and intensify their qualities and render them more stable, secure, and usable. We must act if we are to actualize imaginary possibilities. What's more, we must act effectively. It is here that fine reasonings are required. Wisdom requires imagination, passionate desire, determined yet intelligent inquiry, and action. Even that is not enough, for wisdom also requires understanding the difference between good and evil.

In the very last sub-section of *Art and Experience*, Dewey turned to the relation between art and morality. Dewey believed in the dictum that "poetry is criticism of life." He did not, however, think that the poet that called new things, meanings, and values into existence needed to intend her acts to be

cultural criticism for them to be effective critiques of society. As Dewey put it, "A sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are, when they are put in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating 'criticism' of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of the constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress."¹⁷ A lack of imagination and thereby a sense of possibility is the greatest oppression there is. It is here that any critical and transformational theory of education must take its departure. The actual world is in the shape that it is in because those who have power use it to mold society according to their often unenlightened and selfish interests. It is oppressive power that limits imagination. It is power that determines the one right answer on the machine-graded pencil-and-paper test which, if passed, allows the bearer of the approved seal to exchange their knowledge for power. Otherwise the knowledge would be, for them, useless. It is hegemonic power that imagines for us and then vends its censored, pre-interpreted, and limited musings to us for a price. Without an expansive imagination, one willing to go beyond approved limits, it is impossible to be free. More than that, without imagination it is impossible to be moral. Morality means the capacity to choose and to be responsible for what is chosen. Tyranny always wants us to have the responsibility without the capacity. It is imagination, as we will soon see, that takes us beyond good and evil. That is why artistic and aesthetic education could be the core of the curriculum of public education in a fully functioning democracy. First, though, we must add yet another intricacy to the idea of what it means to love wisdom.

Dewey argued that any attribution of the "moral effect" of art must take into account "the collective civilization that is the context in which works of art are produced and enjoyed."¹⁸ The collective is held together by communication, and for Dewey education was crucial; for it was there that the cultural legacy was passed on, with or without a sense of the immense possibility it contained. Dewey declared:

It is by way of communication that art becomes the incomparable organ of instruction, but the way is so remote from that usually associated with the idea of education, it is a way that lifts art so far above what we are accustomed to think of as instruction, that we are repelled by any suggestion of teaching and learning in connection with art. But our revolt is in fact a reflection upon education that proceeds by methods so literal as to exclude the imagination and one not touching the desires and emotions of men (*sic*).¹⁹

An education that touched the desires and emotions of women and men would be one that educated Eros in the ways of wisdom. Such an education needs to include the imagination as well as the discipline of devoted reasonings and deeds. But it also needs to include a sense of community and careful

communication. Dewey felt "that poetry teaches as friends and life teach, by being, and not by express intent."²⁰ The best teachers are those who be wise and do what wise women and men do.

Thomas Alexander declares, "Dewey asserts the primacy of the aesthetic encounter as the paradigm for grasping the possibilities of existence. Through the aesthetic, we grasp the significance of the imagination as the transformation of the world through action. The ontological dimensions of the creative are the intertwining of the actual with the possible and this is the context in which action makes sense."²¹ I recommend the poetic sense of life as the paradigm for the education of what Alexander calls "the Human Eros." It is of course the education of wisdom offered in Dewey's Democracy and Education. It is a poetic education.

"Imagination is the chief instrument of the good," Dewey stated, "hence it is that art is more moral than moralities. . . . The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable."²² Dewey preferred moral prophets to Plato's scientific philosopher kings as inspirers of social hope. The difference is between Plato's ideal of a static society constructed according to timeless laws, and Dewey's Darwinian vision of a state constantly reconstructing itself and, hopefully, progressing. Prophets are commonly social critics, but even when they do not intend to be they are perceived by powerful agents of social manipulation and domination to be so. Prophets have the capacity to penetrate the curtain of actuality that oppresses us and expose the possibilities that lie below. Prophets have the capacity to envision ethereal things, vague values and ends-in-view that are nonetheless capable of guiding humankind's future quests.

Once again, without imagination it is impossible to be moral or free. Without imagination we are bound to the actual, to some existing state of affairs, to the way it is. With imagination we can envision alternatives to what is. Possession of alternatives introduces the possibility of free moral choice at the existentially most basic level. If we can see that the way it is now is not how it has to be, then we might decide that the way it is now is not how it morally ought to be. We may then choose to act wisely, to call what is out of existence, and what ought to be, into existence. When Martin Luther King said he had a dream of racial equality, he was speaking poetically as a moral prophet naming a value that is even now only "half-known." King suffered the characteristic fate of prophets whose poetic critique challenged actual conditions and sought to call into existence new social values. His social hope, however, still lives.

Transformative teachers should appear as prophets to their students. Why they do not is easy to understand. Dewey continues on in the same paragraph where he speaks of moral prophets as poets to admit that, "Uniformly, however, their

vision of possibilities has soon been converted into a proclamation of facts that already exist and hardened into semi-political institutions. Their imaginative presentation of ideas that should command thought and desire have been treated as rules of policy."²³ Schools are perhaps the premier political institutions for reducing a child's visions of possibilities and alternative values that should command the passion of the Human Eros into mere rules of policy. Schools are valuable tools for the powerful agents of industry, union, and government to seize students and turn them to the ends of their hegemonic desires. Students are uncritically provided with a pre-interpreted creation taught according to a teacher-proof curriculum. Prophets and prophecy are replaced by profits. Students learn to value having more rather than being more. Technocratic micro-accountability, with its mantra of performance testing and outcomes assessment, serves to constrain the Human Eros. Suppressing that passionate desire for meaning, self-creation, and social expression is the greatest evil that schools perpetuate.

As he drew toward the conclusion of Art as Experience, Dewey considered our ethical experience and declared, "Mankind is divided into sheep and goats, the vicious and virtuous, the law-abiding and criminal, the good and bad. To be beyond good and evil is an impossibility for man, and yet as long as the good signifies only that which is lauded and rewarded, and the evil that which is currently condemned or outlawed, the ideal factors of morality are always and everywhere beyond good and evil."²⁴ Schools are excellent sorting machines for separating sheep and goats, the law-abiding and criminal, the good and bad, according to rules of policy. That is what "tracking" does. But who has the power to create the rules of policy? There are poets of hegemonic power. They passionately desire domination, that is their greatest good. Laws that allow only what such power prefers can come to define ordinary everyday good and evil. Their laws define the standard of morality and right conduct. They and those who abide by their rules are, by definition, the good. They create our curricula. The greatest irony of the dialectic of good and evil is that the moral prophet will almost always appear as the moral transgressor. In naming their visions of ethereal things, the possible beyond the actual that they feel ought to be, prophets almost always appear as outlaws. That is why transformative visionary teachers burn out or are thrown out so quickly.

Dewey concluded Art as Experience by commenting on the following passage from Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our nature and the identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man (sic) to be greatly good must imagine intensely and comprehensively.²⁵

When we look at it now, we can easily read it as a concise and accurate statement of the existential meaning of educating the Human Eros in the ways of wisdom. The only thing Dewey added was a strong sense of community and a firm faith. It is an intricate education in the etymological sense of "leading forth," a love that desires the beautiful and the good with passionate devotion. The education of the Human Eros teaches a kind of meaningful action that is thoughtfully disciplined and faithfully pursued with fine and sudden reasonings. It is a poetic not a passive education that cultivates and enculturates imagination in its matriculants.

When Dewey called for an education that freed the intelligence to reconstruct society, he was, I think, calling for the artistic and not merely aesthetic, education of the Human Eros. Let me end by affirming that I do not have any details of how the education of Eros might be carried out. The conversation, however, should get started.

Footnotes

1. John Dewey, *Philosophy and Democracy*, 1991, in Jo Ann Boydston, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1819-1924, Volume 11*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982; p. 44.
2. Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," p. 43.
3. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in Jo Ann Boydston, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Volume 10:1934, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.
4. Thomas Alexander, *Dewey and the Metaphysical Imagination*, *Transaction of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2, 1992, p. 203.
5. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 33.
6. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 38.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* The lines are from Keats famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn."
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.* p. 40.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Thomas Alexander, "Dewey and the Metaphysical Imagination," p. 209.
22. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 350.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 351.
25. *Ibid.*

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