

DEWEY'S PEDAGOGIC CREED: REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION, PROCESS AND THE CULTIVATION OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract. The paper offers a series of reflections on some of the major themes of John Dewey's "My Pedagogic Creed" (School Journal, LIV (January 1897), pp. 77-80). Short, even bordering on terse for John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed" contains the seeds of his later work. Special attention will be given to (1) the socio-ethical dimension of education, and (2) the image of education as a dynamic process (embodied in quotations such as the following: "education...is a process of living and not a preparation for living," "the process and the goal of education are one and the same," and "ideas...result from action").

I. Basic Overview and Sketch of "My Pedagogic Creed"

In January 1897, John Dewey published a paper titled "My Pedagogic Creed."² Dewey was 37, a professor of Philosophy and chair of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Education at the University of Chicago, but in many respects his extraordinary career had just begun. The years to come were to see publication of a host of monumental and immensely influential texts such as The School and Society (1900), The Child and the Curriculum (1902), The Influence of Darwin (1910), Democracy and Education (1916), Human Nature and Conduct (1922), Experience and Nature (1925), The Quest for Certainty (1929), Philosophy and Civilization (1931), Art as Experience (1934), Experience and Education (1938), and of course many, many more.

In contradistinction to these subsequent, fully developed and carefully argued works, "My Pedagogic Creed" is short and sharply focused. Even so it covers a tremendous range. The piece is indeed written as a creed, divided into five articles of faith. Article I is titled, "What Educa-

tion Is” — Article II: “What the School Is” — Article III: “The Subject-Matter of Education” — Article IV: “The Nature of Method” — and Article V: “The School and Social Progress.” Each article contains a series of statements, prefaced by an all-encompassing “I believe that.” Thus Article I begins:

I believe that

- all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race . . .
- the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself . . .
- this educational process has two sides — one psychological and one sociological — and that neither can be subordinated to the other, or neglected, without evil results following.³

In addition to the social and psychological dimensions of education, as illustrated in the above passage, Dewey discusses what we might call “the existential dimension of education” — the idea that education and life are inseparable: that schools should not be insular training grounds or ivory towers, but rather critical portions of the playing field of life itself. “Education,” Dewey writes, “is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.”⁴ Several pages later he returns to the theme with the remark: “the process and the goal of education are one and the same.”⁵

He addresses methodological and curricular concerns, including the place and importance of science, art, history, literature and geography. As was to become characteristic of Dewey’s pragmatic approach to education, both method and curriculum were subordinated to the abilities and interest of the student on the one hand, and the needs and commitments of the society on the other.

There is throughout an emphasis on action and activity. Ideas,

Dewey argues, “result from action and devolve for the sake of the better control of action. What we term reason is primarily the law of orderly or effective action.”⁶

The existential, social, and psychological dimensions of education provide evidence of an irreducible moral component. Education for Dewey is a process of civilization: one of developing, transmitting and refining a social consciousness. Here, as in later years, Dewey was concerned to underscore the social importance of education. “I believe,” he wrote, “that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. [A]ll reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements, are transitory and futile.”⁷ Only in the refining of social consciousness does one engender lasting social reform.

It follows, for Dewey, that “the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life.”⁸ He concludes, “the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.”⁹

II. Evaluation and Reflections: Applying Dewey's Creed to the Existing System

Was John Dewey right? Are education and life as inextricably intertwined as he would have us believe? Must we subjugate methodology and curriculum to social need and psychological disposition? Is the moral component as irreducible and imperative as he claims?

Certainly, Dewey was neither the first nor the last to make such claims. One can easily read much of Plato's Republic in just this way. But there is also a tradition of education for the sake of knowledge, pure and untainted by either individual or collective needs, wants or potential use. In the United States, especially, there is a deliberate, conscious and intentional effort to sanitize and universalize the educational process, expunging and expurgating religious, moral, and even social or political concerns of a partisan nature.

Our scholars and universities have pursued the grail of absolute universal truth. Failing to find the chalice, they have become disillusioned with the system, with one another, and with themselves. In their disillusionment they have recreated Sophism and deconstructed even their own works.

Society in turn has become disillusioned with education. The system seems, to far too many, like an expensive baby-sitting service which fails to keep pace with the economic needs and developments of the marketplace: an industry whose product (construed as the student - i.e. the future work force) seems inferior to that produced in other countries (Japan, Germany, etc.).

The structure of our educational system is as mysterious as its goals: tiers appear strangely opposite one another. We provide elementary and secondary teachers with heavy doses of methodology and pedagogic technique, but fail to insist on significant post-secondary training in a substantive field such as history, philosophy, literature or science. For those who would teach at a college or university we mandate significant graduate study and perhaps even original scholarship in the relevant discipline, but neither require nor encourage pedagogically oriented training. In either case we scrupulously avoid differences save difference of opinion or technique.

In our fear of social mandate and prejudicial difference we have disinfected the educational process, rendering it clean, sterile, and lifeless. No matter how noble the goals, such a standardized and sanitized product could never qualify as education in Dewey's sense of the term. For Dewey requires a dynamic interplay between the individual and the larger social whole, in which both the individual and the society define and redefine one another. Here one would find a genuine dialectic of difference, replete with the need for sensitivity, understanding and exploration of alternative solutions.

If, like Dewey, we move beyond the idea that individuals are isolated, independently defined and self-contained entities — if we regard ourselves instead as participatory, creative aspects of a larger

social whole — if, in short, we accept Dewey's education-as-social-process framework — then we must also squarely face the consequence that education includes a prominent irreducible moral component. For education devoid of moral education or the cultivation of social consciousness simply could not be education as John Dewey understands it, but at best a pale and ghostly image of what could and should be — of what must be, of what is needed for perpetuation and betterment of the culture, for the growth and fulfillment of human beings, and for the justification of the educational system itself.

This is not to say that the school system should become the forum for a politically privileged group to force its particular view of morality or social arrangement on the community as a whole. In a pluralistic culture, tolerance and diversity of viewpoint must be sanctioned and encouraged. This does not mean there are no areas of broad agreement or possibility of reaching greater consensus than exists at present. Nor does it imply anything goes. Social consciousness and ethical conduct require more effort, attention, and understanding — and come with less certitude or assurance — in a pluralistic culture than they do in one in which a single code will suffice for all. As such, the structure of our society calls, not for exclusion of ethics from education, but for redoubled efforts to assure that each generation will provide proper moral guidance for the next in an increasingly complex, variegated and interrelated world community.

Similar observations apply to religion and the schools. Because religion often has significant cultural value, any attempt to excise it from the educational process inevitably compromises that process, weakens the culture and deprives the individual of potentially valuable self-definitional experience. A society with pluralistic religious commitments should have a parallel educational process, not one in which religious discussion and influence are banned. Exclusion produces neither strength nor tolerance, but a generation of cripples with limited vision and virtually no understanding of themselves, ancestral generations, or the many peoples of the world for whom religion continues to be a powerful force.

What I propose is not easy. Nor will it be popular with all segments of our society. It is however, I believe, necessary if we are to integrate education and life, or self and society. This is true not only for elementary and secondary education, but at the university level as well.

III. Test Case

In my Introduction to Philosophy class, I often give what I call a “Pop Ethics Quiz” (the double entendre is intentional). Students are asked to respond to several situations in which they might be reasonably expected to find themselves in the coming years, indicating first what they think they would do, and second what they believe they should do. I vary the situations from semester to semester, but frequently use ones such as the following:

1. You are at a party. Your best friend has had too much to drink and passed out. His/her boy/girlfriend has also had a bit too much and begins making unmistakable sexual advances toward you. What response do you believe you would make? What do you think you should do? Why?
2. Having partied a bit too much, you are not prepared for next week’s exam. A fellow student offers to sell you an advance copy, assuring you that it is the genuine article, obtained through illegal access to the university computer system. What response do you believe you would make? What do you think you should do? Why?
3. You discover that a friend is dealing drugs to elementary school children. Apparently, it is quite profitable. What do you do? What do you think you should do? Why?
4. Remember that exam in number 2? You failed it. You pleaded with your teacher that you would do absolutely anything to raise your grade, and received an unexpected response. There is something you can do — your teacher is willing to exchange grades for sexual favors. How would you respond? What response do you think you should make? Why?

5. Would your response differ if the teacher wanted drugs in exchange for a better grade? Should it? Why?
6. You find yourself (or your girlfriend) unexpectedly pregnant. What do you do? What do you think you should do? Why?

To provide a better background against which to interpret their responses, students are asked to indicate gender and class standing. But to promote truthfulness and candor, they are not required to identify themselves by name.

I collect the papers, shuffle them, then immediately redistribute them at random. Students read the responses of an anonymous classmate, then exchange papers with one or two others sitting nearby to sample the responses of another classmate or so. We then open the floor for general discussion and sharing of those responses. A simple hand-raising process regarding the anonymous responses provides a quick, unembarrassing and reasonably reliable measure of the number of students who thought they would — but should not — sleep with the girl/boyfriend of a close friend, etc.

I deliberately choose questions where there will be a diversity of opinion regarding expected response, morally preferred response, and justification thereof. Sample responses for the first question include the following:

Since it's my friend, I think it would be better not to do anything to ruin our friendship. My friends and I have discussed this because we saw it happen to someone else.

If it was my best friend, I shouldn't and wouldn't do anything. All three of us would regret it. Too much guilt.

I would and should most definitely tell him that my best friend is my best friend and that I would never ever jeopardize our relationship over a guy. I mean, would I want that done to me? No!

I would take advantage of the situation. If he was truly my

best friend then he would understand that best friends share. Besides, what's a girlfriend of my best friend hitting on me for? She would deserve it.

Do what's right. It depends on the mood. And if she's hot, she's hot - case closed. Act now, ask questions later. (Also depends on if you can get away with it.)

Dude, why not? What an opportunity! GO for it! Take him/her back where no one can see, and play cards!! This is an opportunity of a lifetime! Besides, your friend is out cold; there's no one to keep his "main squeeze" warm.

Tell him/her to just forget about it. Pull themselves together. What could they possibly be thinking about? Do they think with their brains or their hormones? I have respect for my friend. There is trust and honesty in our relationship. We could pretend the whole incident never occurred if she/he apologizes and realizes how they were selfish and arrogant.

Would do - take her up on the offer.
Should do - take her up on the offer. My answer would be different if they were married.

I should tell her to stop, that her boyfriend would not like it, but I would just go with it, and see what happens. If she didn't want to cheat, she shouldn't be on top of me, and if he doesn't understand, he isn't worth having as a friend (if he finds out). Yes, I would do it.

One thing that I have learned is never, no matter what, fool around with your best friend's girlfriend. No girl is worth losing a best friend, or a good friend for that matter.

I would politely turn her down without making her angry because I've had a steady girlfriend for over a year. If I had no girlfriend, I'd probably do the same but it just might take

longer. Yet, depending on her looks, I might do her.

Depends on the value my friend holds in such a relationship. If he doesn't feel it's a big deal, I would go for it. My friends aren't very big on monogamy at this point! It wouldn't cause a problem between us.

This is why I don't drink — the alcohol would have dulled my judgement to the point where I would have had sex with the person. If sober, I like to think that I'd say NO, loudly and repeatedly.

In this particular situation, which oddly enough has happened before and which I have acted in an opposite manner, I would refuse the come-on elegantly because I now have a serious girlfriend.

Don't do it!! Guys are jerks anyway! No one's cute enough to lose a friend.

Take her home (especially if she's hot) and hope she doesn't remember anything.

This situation has happened to me. I took care of my friend, while keeping his girlfriend out of trouble. I held onto my friendship, but was not liked by his girlfriend. She even tried to get me in trouble in several different ways because I hurt her pride.

I would not take advantage of her or the situation because I would know that it was the alcohol in her making her do those things. Not to mention I wouldn't want to lose a good friend over one night.

I would try to get my friend's girlfriend to stop thinking of me and get her to think about her boyfriend on the floor. It is more important to save a friendship than to hook up for one night. The girl would also hate you if you took advantage of her.

In the past I would have had a hard time telling the person to back off and may have ended up doing something that I normally shouldn't do. Today (I guess from maturing) I would have no problem telling the person to back off, which is what I should and would do.

WOULD - Tell him to go away and grow up. If he really cared about my best friend then he would never think of coming on to me. But never tell my best friend about the incident.
SHOULD - Tell my best friend about what happened.

I should turn her away. I would do so. Friendships are of most importance to me; girls come and go. My only dilemma would be should I tell my friend or just stay quiet.

This person is my friend, I would not get involved with her boyfriend because I know it may jeopardize our friendship. I would stay away from him. — If this guy is good-looking, I should go along with him. But I would need a good excuse — so only if we'd both been drinking.¹⁰

No matter what I would like to believe, I would object to the come-ons. I may not want to object, but I would so as not to hurt my friend's feelings not because I thought it was wrong. It would also matter what others thought.

I have provided far more responses than I had originally intended, but such is the nature of the exercise. Once I start allowing students to read aloud and discuss the responses of their peers there is no shortage of participation, novel answers, or unexpected perspectives or twists within otherwise standard answers. A seemingly simple situation such as the one I have presented here can lead to a full scale examination of human relations, obligations, and — as in the final response presented above — societal expectation.

Discussions such as these do not substitute for formal instruction

in Metaethics, the history of Ethical Theory, etc. Nor should they be expected to provide an adequate substitute for basic normative instruction. But they do provide the professor with a better feel for the ethical values, sensitivity and maturity of the class. They encourage students to talk, within a structured educational setting, about their relationships and obligations toward one another. As such, it is an occasion for moral growth and the raising of social consciousness.

Clearly, the exercise does not transform the professor into a preacher. In fact, while it is possible for the professor to express his/her moral perspective on these issues, it is also possible (and sometimes desirable) to confine the discussion to those perspectives introduced by the students. The success of the exercise depends in large measure on the viewpoint. It is, in fact, for many a consciousness raising experience just to discover that some of their peers value friendship more than sex (or a good grade more than personal integrity, etc.).

IV. Conclusion

Can we then introduce a stronger moral or religious dimension to education without thereby turning the school into the instrument of the church, or similar group? I firmly believe we can. Indeed, as argued previously, I believe we must. I do not believe it will be easy. Simplistic as my little "Pop Ethics Quiz" may seem, I believe it provides a model for how we may take some of those tentative first steps. If our students are to take full possession of the rich cultural heritage which is rightfully theirs — if they are to become responsible participants in the creation of the society in which they live — and if they are to be charged, when we are gone, with becoming the educators of tomorrow then we must provide a multiplex, participatory framework in which they are taught to explore their relationships with one another. They must learn to choose between conflicting and competing alternatives with logical rigor as well as moral and social sensitivity. Only then can they be expected to safely navigate the narrow channel between the Charybdis of unforgiving condemnation of all those who differ and the Scylla of naive belief that an open mind requires a blind eye to every difference and an absolute absence of all grounds for preference.

ENDNOTES

1. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the “Conference on Process Philosophy of Education: Confluence and Construction,” Cornell University, July 1991.
2. School Journal, LIV, pp. 77-80. Reprinted in John J. McDermott, The Philosophy of John Dewey - Volume II: The Lived Experience, NY: Capricorn Books, 1973: pp. 442-454.
3. Article I, pp. 443-444.
4. Article II, p. 445.
5. Article III, p. 450.
6. Article IV, p. 451.
7. Article V, pp. 452-453.
8. Article V, p. 454.
9. Article V, p. 454 (final sentence of the creed).
10. Note carefully the subject’s use of the terms “would” and “should” (which she underlines). Her response is particularly interesting as a contrast to the far more common, “I probably would, but should not.” Compare the following, final response as well.