

NOTES AND COMMENTS

**EDUCATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT:
EXPERIENCE, DEPENDENT ORIGINATION, AND
RELATIONAL IDENTITY****Douglas W. Shrader**

In his article, "Causal Efficacy and Concrete Experience," John P. Azelvandre invites us to consider environmental education as a "process dealing, at its core, with discovering and fostering fruitful relationships between human learners and the wider world of which they are a part."¹ The invitation may appear at first to be a fairly innocuous description of an area that many educators, unfortunately, regard either as (a) a specialized study beyond their reach and/or (b) a nonessential set of studies safely relegated to the margins of "we'll get to that if time permits." If I read Azelvandre correctly however, the recommended approach to environmental education gives rise to a series of questions and observations that spawn, in turn, an unflattering critique of contemporary educational practice as well as a non-trivial set of prescriptions for both education and life. It is thus an essay that merits serious attention by a wider range of scholars than may have initially been attracted to the piece on the basis of its title or subject matter.

This brief review article is intended to illuminate, reinforce, and underscore both the substance and seriousness of Azelvandre's concerns. I also hope to provide additional context for conceptualizing those concerns as well as suggestions for an alternative framework of thinking about ourselves and our relationships (to others as well as "the world"). Particular attention will be given to parallels between Azelvandre's concerns and those of John Dewey.

To provide an ontological and epistemological framework for

his account, Azelvandre appeals to Alfred North Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism (a.k.a. "Process Philosophy). Of particular importance are the following concepts and ideas:

- 1) **Ontology:** the world is not composed of static, unchanging things. We do better to think in terms of events, processes, and happenings. Infinitesimally brief, idealized events are termed actual occasions. As Azelvandre explains, "The world is composed of occasions constantly emerging then perishing, thus forming the foundations for a new crop of occasions. Actuality is a process of constant change, not necessarily of form, but always, in a sense, of matter."²

- 2) **Epistemology:** there are two pure modes of perception. What we generally think of as conscious perception is termed presentational immediacy. Presentational immediacy is attention grabbing, but superficial and intermittent. Without causal efficacy, a basic but typically unconscious (or preconscious) sense of "causal connection of ourselves to the antecedent occasions of our bodies and our surrounding environment,"³ even the most basic experiences we associate with day-to-day living would be impossible. Azelvandre explicates the need for common ground between the two modes of perception as follows: "When I observe something, say for example a species of plant, I share with this plant a causal past. It is this shared causal past, responsible both for my eyes and the plant's leaves, which makes it possible for me to have the visual perception in the mode of presentational immediacy of the color green."⁴ The point is not simply that we need both modes of perception, or even that we need a proper balance or proportion between the two, but rather that any genuine opportunity for learning requires a dynamic interplay between presentational immediacy and causal efficacy.

In a fairly obvious and direct sense, my understanding of the world depends on my relationship with it. Only slightly less obvious

is the corollary that my relationship with the world depends on my understanding of it. Azelvandre's premise that environmental education deals with discovering and fostering fruitful relationships with the world positions those studies in a place of ontological, epistemological, ethical, and pedagogic importance. If the suggestion that environmental education may point the way toward a new mode of being and/or understanding seems somehow strained or implausible, consider John Dewey's 1909 lecture series at Columbia University.

Speaking within a context he describes as "the twilight of intellectual transition,"⁵ Dewey provides a cogent assessment as well as a probing set of predictions concerning the consequences of the Darwinian revolution. "Few words in our language," he observes, "foreshorten intellectual history as much as does the word species."⁶ In fact, Dewey begins his presentation by noting that the simple combination of the words origin and species "embodied an intellectual revolt and introduced a new intellectual temper."⁷ For millennia, Western philosophers and scientists had constructed systems of understanding based on the idea that experience is best explained by reference to a set of supposedly fixed and immutable forms. To take Darwin seriously would require rethinking the character as well as the role of experience in philosophy, science, and education. It would mean giving less credence, less centrality, and less prominence to concepts and ideas. In short, it would require a commitment to an uncertain and forever ongoing process of evaluation and reconceptualization of our most hallowed concepts of self as well as those concerning the world with which we interact.

Illuminated through these lenses, Dewey's writings take on an interesting set of hues. Much of his work can be seen as an extended inquiry into the consequences of this "new" Darwinian way of thinking. Of special importance are:

- (1) his uncompromising insistence on the central role that experience plays in the process of thinking,
- (2) his plea for a mode of understanding that emphasizes ac-

tivities, relations, and connections (versus unchanging forms, static things, and established facts),

- (3) his mistrust of rote learning, words, and concepts, and
- (4) his characterization of education as a process of growth and development, the success of which is gauged in terms of whether it leads to new opportunities for growth and development.

Consider first the role that experience plays in the process of thinking. In *Democracy and Education*, a landmark book still used in many *Foundations of Education* courses, Dewey writes:

The nature of experience can be understood only by noting that it includes an active and a passive element peculiarly combined. On the active hand, experience is *trying*—a meaning which is made explicit in the connected term ‘experiment.’ On the passive, it is *undergoing*. When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return.⁸

The value of experience, he explains, is found in the connection between trying and undergoing. Learning is transformative; it occurs “when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us.”⁹ Thus even when approached on its own, independent of any social or ethical agenda, there is something fundamentally wrong with thinking that is not “connected with increase of efficiency in action, and with learning more about ourselves and the world in which we live.”¹⁰ This leads to Dewey’s definition of thinking as “the accurate and deliberate instituting of connections between what is done and its consequences.”¹¹

Having set forth his account of experience and cognition, Dewey cautions against the pedagogic mind/body dualism that permeates

the educational system, now even as it did then. Three consequences of the dualism merit specific mention. First, it treats bodily activity as an unwelcome intruder into the educational process (generating “discipline” problems and an inordinate measure of nervous strain and fatigue for both teacher and student).¹² Second, it transforms senses and muscles from “organic participants” in instructive experience into “internal and external outlets of the mind.”¹³ Finally, it “throws emphasis on *things* at the expense of *relations*.”¹⁴

Ninety-five years after the publication of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey’s criticisms remain disturbingly current. Much of Azelvandre’s critique is rooted in the observation that contemporary educational practice is predicated on an excessively sharp distinction between *presentational immediacy* and *causal efficacy*, privileging the former over the latter. The unnatural disjunction between the two creates a very real danger of “getting stuck in habits of the mind which constrain our perception of causal efficacy and thereby distort our interpretation of presentational immediacy.”¹⁵ The remedy for this condition, quite naturally, is to “get out and see the world around us.”¹⁶ Azelvandre thus calls for a renewed emphasis on concrete experience. This, he notes, amounts to “a recurrence to causal efficacy: a directing of the light of presentational immediacy onto the fact of the community of causal interrelatedness; a widening of perspective to include this ground of understanding, this ontological knowing.”¹⁷

As evidenced in the preceding quotation, the experiential approach to cognition leads naturally to an emphasis on activities, relations, and connections. Thus Azelvandre writes of uprootedness and the importance of establishing a sense of ontic as well as moral community. In like manner, Dewey complains that perceptions and ideas are frequently treated as though they can meaningfully be separated from a myriad of relations, including but not limited to causal connections. On the contrary, he maintains,

...every perception and every idea is a sense of the bearings, use, and cause, of a thing. We do not really know a

chair or have an idea of it by inventorying and enumerating its various isolated qualities, but only by bringing those qualities into connection with something else... A wagon is not perceived when all its parts are summed up; it is the characteristic connection of the parts which makes it a wagon. And these connections are not those of mere physical juxtaposition; they involve connection with the animals that draw it, the things that are carried on it, and so on.¹⁸

Both Azelvandre and Dewey criticize the dominant educational model for putting too much emphasis on rote learning, words, and concepts. Part of the problem is the seemingly simple one of detachment and isolation. Azelvandre explains,

Books present symbols ... which represent a bird, a plant, a community. But books only very distantly and faintly tell the causal story of the trees from which they are formed. A student in a classroom, under artificial light, with books in front of her, is effectively cut off from and uprooted from the object of study (unless the object of study be classrooms, lightbulbs and books!)¹⁹

Before dismissing Azelvandre's concern as impractical or overly romantic, consider the consequences of an excessive preoccupation with concepts and symbols. As Dewey observes, the risk of intellectual decay is substantial, almost guaranteed:

We get so thoroughly used to a kind of pseudo-idea, a half perception, that we are not aware how half-dead our mental action is, and much keener and more extensive our observations and ideas would be if we formed them under conditions of a vital experience which required us to use judgment: to hunt for the connections of the thing dealt with.²⁰

Azelvandre's warning is no less grave:

...without the refreshing influence of felt causal connection, concepts become stale and limiting. We are apt to spin out a web of meaning going from concept to image to concept, always going farther out on a limb away from any sense of connection with one's surroundings. A sort of mental isolation sets in. Taken to pathological extremes such isolation leads to psychosis and death.²¹

The situation is discouraging but not hopeless. Azelvandre seems confident that if we make more room in the educational process for direct experience, "and if at the same time we can relinquish our hold on concepts, get out of our mental ruts and set ways, we can be open for fresh insight into our own self-constitution."²² Opening ourselves to new possibilities for growth and development is characteristic of what Dewey calls an active habit. "Active habits," he writes, "involve thought, invention, and initiative in applying capacities to new aims. They are opposed to routine which marks an arrest of life."²³ In this vein, Dewey defines education as "the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age."²⁴ He concludes, "Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself."²⁵

How then do we go about cultivating active habits and relinquishing our hold on outdated concepts that limit us as well as our interactions with others and the world in which we live? Part of the answer, assuredly, is the advice given by both Dewey and Azelvandre: create more space for concrete experience, treat learning as an active process that promotes integration of learners and their environment (vs. detachment), and pay more attention to connections and relationships. In the process, we must rethink our concepts of both self and world. While this short review note does not provide a sufficient forum to pursue the matter in any great detail, we may do well to compare the dominant Western concepts of self and world with ones from other philosophical traditions. Three concepts that have been particularly useful in my own experience are those of relational identity, *anatta*, and co-dependent origination.

Though not exclusively a Confucian notion, it is nonetheless the Confucians who have most clearly articulated and defended the concept of relational identity. At root it is a fairly simple, even commonsense notion. Although I may appear to have independent existence, my identity derives (at least in large measure) from my *relationships*. In a very real nontrivial sense, I am my relationships. Without a wife, I am not a husband. Without children, I am not a parent. Without students, I am not a teacher. If I wish to understand myself, I must look for a better understanding of my relationships. If I wish to improve myself, I must look for ways to improve my relationships.

The concepts of *anatta* (no self) and co-dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*) are Buddhist in origin. Though explications and commentaries concerning these concepts have often become amazingly complex and mind-boggling,²⁶ the basic ideas are reasonably simple. First, *anatta*: I am not an independently existing, eternal, unchanging essence. If the self is conceived of as some sort of eternal being, then I neither am nor have a self. Rather, and this is the notion of co-dependent origination, everything (including me) comes into being as part of an intricate set of causal dependencies. Thus whatever being I have is (*a*) fleeting (changing from one nanosecond to the next), (*b*) dependent on the causal conditions that gave rise to this nanosecond of existence, and (*c*) intimately interconnected with everything else in the universe. I can distinguish between my “self” and the keyboard upon which I type these words, but such distinction is based on heuristic principles of organization rather than inherent differences of existence.

If we are to successfully meet the criticisms of Dewey and Azelvandre, we must cease thinking of ourselves as beings who are somehow detached or separated from the world (“objectively” viewing that world from a safe epistemological and ontological distance). Pedagogically, that may involve placing renewed emphasis on experiential education. Programmatically, it may mean providing a more central role for environmental studies. Conceptually, it may require

replacing or augmenting traditional Western notions of self and world with Asian ones like relational identity, *anatta*, and co-dependent origination.

State University of New York, Oneonta

Endnotes

1. Azelvandre, p. 49.
2. *Ibid.* pp. 50-51.
3. *Ibid.* p. 51.
4. *Ibid.* p. 53.
5. *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, p. 9.
6. *Ibid.* p. 3 (italics added).
7. *Ibid.* p. 1 (italics added)
8. *Democracy and Education*, p. 139 (scare quotes added).
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.* p. 152.
11. *Ibid.* p. 151.
12. *Ibid.* p. 141.
13. *Ibid.* p. 142.
14. *Ibid.* p. 143.
15. Azelvandre, pp. 55-56.
16. *Ibid.* p. 56.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Democracy and Education*, p. 143
19. Azelvandre, p. 59.
20. *Democracy and Education*, p. 144.
21. Azelvandre, p. 60.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.* pp. 52-53.
24. *Ibid.* p. 51.
25. *Ibid.* p. 53.
26. See, for example, Shrader and Thera.

References

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Education and the Environment: Experience, Dependent Origination, and Relational Identity

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