

On the emergence of Pigeon Towers

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Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences,

2018

www.ci-las.org

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On the emergence of Pigeon Towers

Foreword by Karim-Yassin Goessinger

“Rather than spend primary energy to get the university to become a community of scholars, create your own—and by so doing you may affect the institution as well as making a practical difference.”

- Paul Goodman in *Compulsory Mis-Education and the Community of Scholars*

The term “Ivory Tower” conjures up images of carefully and often symmetrically landscaped university squads, concerns with dogmatic and increasingly corporate institutions of higher education, and questions of relevance to the practicalities of daily life. In 1837, French literary critic and author Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve showing concern with the Ivory Tower’s secretive and cloistered intellectualism, contrasts the Ivory Tower-like way of being with a more socially engaged way of being, as was exemplified in his time by Victor Hugo. Today, the purpose of the Ivory Tower is perhaps more contested than ever. It has come to be equated with the university system, or perhaps more cynically, the “college-industrial complex”. With higher education becoming a privilege, and no longer a right, the university system is in flux. It seems increasingly evident that with the rise in tuition the university system is unlikely to remain functional in the long term. University degrees no longer guarantee entry into an increasingly saturated labor market. At the same time, we see changes occurring inside and around the modern university, including attempts to blend online and offline learning as well as efforts to engage with community at large. Perhaps what we is needed is a different metaphor to that of the Ivory Tower?

“As you liberate yourself in metaphor, think of other

Those who have lost the right to speak.”

~ Mahmoud Darwish

The metaphor of the Pigeon Tower first occurred to me when searching for a name to give to the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences' (CILAS) newsletter. Inaugurated in the summer of 2013, CILAS was set up with the intention of inviting adult learners to engage with the tradition of liberal arts education. My concern as founder was less with formalizing, that is with accrediting, such a learning experience as it was with co-creating a learning environment that would be conducive to critical inquiry, self-reflection and civic engagement.

The first cohort enrolled in a loosely structured study programme which was to span over the duration of an academic year. The programme was divided into trimesters: the first trimester served as a foundation, exposing students to various histories and philosophies of the arts and sciences, some of the more prominent –isms of the modern age as well as the ongoing debates around them. The second and third trimesters were dedicated to matters of concern to students, which could be studied under the guidance of the teaching fellows. Students would engage in community service in parallel with their intellectual training.

Over the past five years, students have come to CILAS from all walks of life, disciplinary backgrounds, and have ranged in ambitions from shifting careers to developing a wise appreciation for the complexity of the world. In the early days, I was repeatedly asked how I saw CILAS in relation to the existing higher educational landscape. Did CILAS prepare for or somehow complement an Egyptian university education? Many, if not all, students that found their way to CILAS felt that there was nothing to be complemented, that university had been a hardly memorable, if not entirely futile experience.

CILAS has been inviting students to participate in discussion – both intuitive and theoretically-informed. Classrooms, of which initially there were two, hardly resembled conventional classrooms. Taking its first steps in the side alleys of Fatimid Cairo's al-Ghuria neighbourhood, CILAS occupied a space that previously served as a scholar's residence. The space did indeed display both scholarly and residential qualities. It was an unusual location sitting on the second floor at the end of a narrow alley.

Al-Ghuria's bustling corridors have been dressed in everything from nightgowns and lingerie, to sandals, kitchen utensils and blankets. Everybody in al-Ghuria got to know of CILAS: from the shop owners to the pushers of the wheelbarrows transporting incoming goods from al-Azhar street into the deep veins of al-Ghuria, to the bicycle riders carrying stacks of *baladi* bread on their heads. It was amidst the turmoil of al-Ghuria that the

metaphor of a Pigeon Tower emerged. The Pigeon Tower has since come to serve as a guiding metaphor in the exploration of the operations and the *raison d'être* of CILAS.

Three characteristics of this metaphorical Pigeon Tower are worthy of consideration here.

First, the metaphor of the Pigeon Tower recognises the importance of forming communities of scholars, or scholarly collectives (I use the two interchangeably). Actual pigeon flocks self-organize and form inclusive and non-hierarchical collectives in a truly fascinating way. A recent study conducted by Oxford University's Navigation Group in the Department of Zoology has found that pigeon flock leaders who attempt to give their fellow pigeons incorrect information about their direction of travel are overruled by the collective wisdom of the group. It is this collective wisdom of pigeon flocks that, I would suggest, could guide our efforts to reimagine higher education. Oxford's Navigation Group's research shows furthermore that pigeons demonstrate flexibility in their collective decision-making, and, that, crucially, they do so in situations where the performance of the whole flock would suffer if they were inflexible. Pigeons' inherent capacity to demonstrate structural flexibility and to reorganise leadership hierarchies could be of service to the formation of communities of scholars.

Pigeon flocks can remind us of the potential for collective wisdom held by scholarly collectives, such as CILAS.

The second characteristic of a Pigeon Tower stems from its sense of place. CILAS spent its first three years in the neighbourhood of Al Ghuria. Moving from one part of Fatimid Cairo to another, it is now situated in the neighborhood of Darb al Labbana – a historical *and* popular neighbourhood in precarious condition. As a Pigeon Tower, CILAS is embedded in the urban fabric of Cairo, facing the twin mosques of Sultan Hassan and al Refai, witnessing everyday piety, the practice of trades, the celebration of weddings, children playing football, tourists visiting historical monuments, goats wandering about, and CILASians coming and going. Moving from one neighbourhood to another CILAS has constituted a co-created learning environment that co-produces knowledge, sounds and laughter. Pigeon Towers feel cozy and home-like, a place to share a meal in – be it made of thoughts or of

fresh produce –, an abode to be barefoot in, and a space for contemplation. What makes Pigeon Towers and their characteristic of embeddedness so charming is that they recognise imperfection and fallibility. Remaining open to the unexpected, Pigeon Towers endure turbulences and cope with instability.

Pigeon towers are fragile pieces of infrastructure sitting amidst unpredictable and at times hostile geographies.

The third characteristic of a Pigeon Tower is its bridging function. It bridges intellectual learning or academic training, and experiential, place-based learning. At CILAS, students critically engage with theory while always seeking to ground it in the local context, in relation to different things and at different scales. Put differently, a Pigeon Tower as exemplified by CILAS floats mid-air between the height of the Ivory Tower and the streets. It occupies the mezzanine level affording students the tranquility an elevated piece of infrastructure like a tower provides, while not distancing itself from its surrounding. In other words, the Pigeon Tower allows for both the meditative practice, the slow pace and the deep inquiry needed to cultivate a scholarly attitude, and the embodied practice that nurtures the quick wit and making of connections associated with street smartness. It is after all in bringing one's formal drive, or the intellectual mode of learning, and one's sensuous drive, or the experiential mode of learning, into unison that one starts to play. What is needed then is a playground which is what the Pigeon Tower in its floating presence embodies.

Pigeon Towers recognize the importance of balancing intellectual and experiential learning.

The idea behind a collection of essays on the emergence of Pigeon Towers was to reflect on CILAS with the help of the guiding metaphor of the Pigeon Tower. This reflection took the form of a dialogue between myself, the founder of CILAS, and the contributing authors, Teun J. Dekker, Surti Singh, I-Kai Jeng and Robin Weiss, over several months. With the help of a grant issued by the Arab Council of Social Sciences and funded by the Ford Foundation, I asked the contributing authors to develop philosophical inquiries in the form of essays on what I called the anchoring principles of a Pigeon Tower. In putting forward the metaphor of the Pigeon Tower I was less concerned with reforming the existing structure of

higher education, or with developing a stance against the Ivory Tower. Rather the Pigeon Tower is meant to serve as an invitation to think about higher education in terms of a piece of infrastructure anchored by principles that accommodate and support the formation of scholarly collectives.

The authors contributing to this writing project are all academic philosophers. Two of them specialise in ancient philosophy and two in contemporary philosophy. I asked them to write on one of four anchoring principles, namely diversity, intimacy, ignorance and play, which are derived from and inspired by the experience of CILAS. During conversations around tea and via e-mail exchanges with them, the writing project took shape over the second half of 2017. I invited each author to draw on their methodological strength and philosophical expertise in choosing a format for their writing. Teun and Surti, I encouraged to write a speech and a playful essay, respectively. The latter essay deals with the anchoring principle of play and ties in pop culture into the reflection, while the latter essay clarifies the notions of diversity and differentiation, and the importance they carry for the emergence of Pigeon Towers. Robin and I-Kai, I encouraged to write a dialogue and to produce a fragmentary essay, respectively. I-Kai made a contribution on the anchoring principle of intimacy, and its flip side of radical equality, drawing on Jacques Ranciere. Robin I asked to write on the anchoring principle of ignorance in fragments and to shed light on the fragmentary nature of the pursuit of knowledge.

Diversity and Differentiation in the Dialectic of Liberal Arts

Teun J. Dekker

Pigeon towers are inherently diverse places. Because they are located just above the city, all manner birds can fly in and out. As a result, they are a veritable smorgasbord of plumage, in which one can immerse one's self, explore the richness of being, and experiment with many different kinds of living. This environment is deeply inspiring, and makes the pigeon tower a much more instructive venue than a beehive or an ant colony, with their regimented and hierarchical structure. A pigeon tower where all the pigeons are exactly the same would not be an interesting place to hang out. Now, if this is true of pigeon towers, it is also true of educational environments that are inspired by them.

Advocates of liberal arts education actively celebrate diversity among the student population as essential to the kind of education they champion. Liberal arts colleges present themselves as communities that are highly diverse in several dimensions – national, cultural, socio-economic, ideological – and that actively value this diversity. In some cases, they invest considerable effort and financial resources in recruiting students from a wide variety of backgrounds. And they typically try to create a social environment that is congenial to diversity, through extracurricular events and by explicitly discussing the value of diversity in the curriculum.

This emphasis on diversity is typically justified by claiming that it results in a better education for all students. It is argued that exposure to diversity enhances their perspective, offers them the opportunity to learn about other cultures, helps them see the many sides of the issues they are studying, teaches them to collaborate with a wide range of people, makes them understand the circumstances and experiences of different groups in society, and increases students' tolerance. On occasion, these appeals take on a somewhat messianic tone; some proponents of diversity seem to argue that world peace and universal brotherhood can be achieved through a more diverse educational system.

One might be forgiven for becoming somewhat cynical about this “cult” of diversity, branding it “a load of hippie claptrap uttered by a bunch of Kumbaya singing Nerf Herders.” However, even the most ardent defenders of diversity must admit that their defense of diversity is more aspirational than it is rigorously understood. It is a creed that sounds agreeable and is socially very desirable, but it is also grossly undertheorized. Few defenders of diversity specify how it features in a larger theory of education or how exactly it leads to all

these beneficial outcomes. This makes it harder to defend one's belief in the educational value of diversity in a systematic way, and empirically verify if what one might think is happening actually occurs. If the belief that diversity is an anchoring principle of the kind of liberal arts education that takes place in and around pigeon towers is to be more than a vague slogan, it is imperative to be more systematic in thinking about its role in liberal arts education.

To this end, this paper will present a rough theory of liberal arts education, and demonstrate that diversity plays a crucial and highly specific role within that theory. This theory will be based on Hegel's general theory of development, which holds that all processes of growth follow a dialectical pattern. Since liberal arts education is a prime example of a developmental process, it too can be understood in dialectical terms. Hence Hegel's general theory can be specified into a theory of liberal arts education. Within this theory, the process of differentiation, the escape from engulfment, plays a crucial role. It allows a developing mind to break free from its previous state, and thereby grow. This process of differentiation requires confrontation with something other than one's self. Studying in a diverse educational environment provides this, and is central to the educational process if understood this way.

Hegel's Theory of Development

Human minds and, by extension, human societies are developing entities; they change over time, morphing continuously from one state to the other. We are constantly rethinking our relationship to the world and to others, and have different conceptions of ourselves during different phases of our lives. The Romans saw themselves and their place in the world differently than contemporary Italians do. Individuals conceive of themselves differently at the age of 50 from how they understand themselves at the age of 12. This is not to say that they are different people in a strict sense, but they have experienced something of a transformation in the intervening years. Moreover, oftentimes this evolution is a form of growth. The entity developing is not only changing, it is improving and growing in sophistication, realizing more of its potential and becoming more attuned to the world.

This process of development is an interesting and important field of scientific inquiry. Psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers, among others, have sought to understand how it occurs, what drives it, how it may be interfered with, and how it may be encouraged. Perhaps the most influential scholar of development was Hegel, who posited a universal theory of

development. Much of his philosophical work is concerned with elaborating and defending the proposition that one may distinguish different phases in any process of development and that all development follows a three-step pattern.¹ This pattern is dialectical in nature, and this means that development does not occur as a gradual, linear process, but rather as a confrontational process in which an initial thesis is confronted with an antithesis, resulting in a synthesis.

The first step of this dialectical process is characterized by undifferentiated unity.² In this phase, the entity developing understands itself as engulfed in some larger entity. As such, it sees itself as an undetachable part of this larger entity that has no interests of its own and cannot conceive of itself as existing independently or separately. One feels connected to such an extent that one has no discernable private understanding or identity. In a Marxist application of Hegel's theory of development to human history, the primitive communism of hunter-gatherers represents this phase. For the hunter-gatherer sees him- or herself as part of a tribe, and cannot imagine existing independently. He or she has no identity beside being a member of the tribe, and since none of the members do so, all consider each other as equal. Something similar can be seen in Hegel's dialectical account of how humanity's knowledge of the world develops, in which the first step is called sensuous consciousness.³ In this phase, one's perception of the world is total but impressionistic. One sees only the big picture, but makes no distinctions within what one sees and does not categorize what one sees. This includes not making a distinction between the entity seeing, i.e. one's self, and what is seen. One sees one's hand and one sees a mug on the desk, but one does not perceive that the former is part of one's self and the latter is not. In this way, one is engulfed by what one senses.

The second phase is that of differentiated disunity. In this phase the original unity is broken down for the sake of differentiation. The developing entity breaks free from the initial engulfment and asserts its independence and distinct identity, allowing for differentiation. One conceives of one's self as separate, and in doing so discovers what is different from the

¹ For a philosophically more detailed exposition of these matters, see Taylor, C. Hegel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

² For a discussion of the three phases of dialectical development, see Cohen, G. A. History, labour, and freedom. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, Chapter 10.

³ This discussion of the development of knowledge was presented masterfully in Cohen, Gerald Allan. Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, p. 7.

background. In the Marxist account of history which builds on Hegel's, this phase of development is class society. Individuals assert their different roles and identities, at the expense of the community of equals. This allows for division of labour and a more autonomous life, as one is no longer engulfed by the tribe. However, it comes at the expense of the initial unity of the community; there are now distinct classes of people, be they capitalists and proletarians or feudal lords and serfs, with different interests and positions in society. In the dialectic of knowledge, this second phase is characterized by understanding. In this phase one starts to examine the different parts of the world individually. One, as it were, zooms in on parts of the world, understanding them as distinct. This comes at the expense of the initial unity; one no longer sees the big picture.

The third phase of a dialectical developmental process is differentiated unity. The original unity is recovered, but the differentiation that has been achieved is preserved within it. This means that the developing entity resolves the conflict with the engulfing entity, but does not get reabsorbed into it completely. One belongs to the whole, but simultaneously has a distinct identity within it. In the example of Marxist history, this phase corresponds to communism; social classes disappear and equality is restored. Individuals see themselves as part of a community in which everyone depends on everyone else. However, the knowledge and productive capacity that has been built up during the second phase is preserved, enabling a higher level of material existence. Similarly, the values of individuality and autonomy are still preserved, and individuals can cultivate a distinct identity, which was not possible under primitive communism. In Hegel's dialectic of knowledge, this third phase is called reason. In this stage, one once again sees the big picture, but also sees the details and distinction made by understanding. The deeper unities that underlie the apparent distinctions are seen without losing sight of those distinctions.

Education as development

Whatever the empirical merits of this model of development, it is undeniably a historically important and recognizable way of thinking about how development occurs. This makes it a helpful tool for organizing one's thinking about many such processes. Education would seem to be a prime example. For education is the quintessential process of development. Its goal is to develop the minds of young people. There would be no need for education if children were

born with fully developed minds or if they simply developed autonomously. Hence, Hegel's theory of development should also apply to education, notably higher education, and, in particular, to liberal arts education. For this kind of education is explicitly concerned with developing the minds of young people. Much education is concerned with training individuals to master certain skills or preparing them for certain jobs. This is no doubt an important goal. But it is distinct from the goal of holistically developing the minds of students. It is this goal that most closely aligns with the Hegelian theory of development, and hence liberal arts education can be instructively illuminated by applying the Hegelian model of development.

This is not to say that development actually happens in this way, but merely that it is helpful to think about it in these terms. One can hardly prove that development typically, or even occasionally, follows this model. Clearly, Hegel's conception of development makes some sweepingly grand generalizations about human social life and human psychology. Nevertheless, it is worth suspending one's disbelief to see how the story goes and where it may lead. It may reveal something of value concerning the role diversity can play in the kind of liberal arts education that unfolds in emerging pigeon towers.

Dialectic of Liberal Arts

In the Hegelian conception of development, any process of development features an entity which is developing. In the case of liberal arts education, this would obviously be the minds of individual students. Furthermore, in any dialectical process, there are other entities in which the developing mind is engulfed, from which it differentiates itself and with which it reunites while preserving its individuation. In the case of liberal arts education, one might think that students actually develop in multiple dimensions, and so they renegotiate their relationship towards a range of different entities. Most significant among these is their relationship to the world around them, but dialectical development also occurs with respect to a number of more specific counterparts, including their community, their built environment, and their friends. Hence there are a number of dialectical stories to tell. One of these is implicit in the very idea of the pigeon tower.

The pigeon tower sits between the bazaar and the ivory tower. When one enters a city like Cairo on foot, one is likely to find one's self in the bazaar. Bazaars are dynamic places, full of life, with a great variety of people, goods, sights and sounds to stimulate the senses.

One is aware of all these influences, but only at the level of sensuous consciousness. It is overwhelming, and one can easily lose one's self in it. One cannot chart a course through it, but rather must go with the flow of people. For short, it is engulfing, and one is certainly united with the bazaar, but not differentiated from it. As a reaction to the hectic activity of the bazaar, one might head for the ivory tower. The ivory tower is quiet, and affords one the opportunity to contemplate one's own position and beliefs. It allows one to develop an individual perspective. Of course, this comes at the price of a degree of isolation and loneliness. The engulfment is broken to allow for differentiation, but at the price of unity. Once one has a sense of one's own identity, one can enter the pigeon tower. In the pigeon tower, one can engage with a wide variety of others, who can fly in and out, but one can also have a sense of individual purpose and action. One's engagement with others does not come at the expense of one's self, and hence one achieves a state of differentiated unity.

Developing a Mental Model

Perhaps the most important aspect of students' development is how their mental model of the world works.⁴ All humans have a model of the world inside their heads. It is an understanding of the salient features of the world around them, how they are related, and what will happen if one interacts with them in certain ways. This model governs one's actions and how one interprets what one observes happening in the world with the help of one's sensuous consciousness.

As students grow up, they are taught a certain mental model. Their parents play a large role in this, but their teachers and schools do as well. This mental model is transmitted based on authority; students are presented with an interpretation of the way the world works, but this is presented as a fixed and undisputable model of how things really work. In this context, education is primarily about internalization and reproduction of the material offered by teachers. Students learn how to use and apply this model to solve questions. It becomes their way of looking at the world. Hence their relationship with the model can be characterized as one of undifferentiated unity. They are united with it because it shapes how

⁴ Here I interpret a description of the development of college students as presented by William Perry. See Perry, W. G. *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

they see the world, without them realizing it does. Indeed, they are engulfed in it; they could not conceive of the world in any other way. Furthermore, this mental model is not their own. They did not actively create it, but have merely internalized it. They are not active agents in the construction of a model of the world. In a way, they are imprisoned by it without knowing that they are. This makes them undifferentiated from it.

Needless to say, at some point, one realizes that the model of the world one has inherited is precisely that, a model of the world, not the world itself. One starts to see its limitations and that there are many different ways of understanding the world. One explores all these different models of the world, but in a tentative fashion. One understands all those perspectives as perspectives that one might adopt, depending on one's inclination at the time. One regards truth as opinion, and thinks one may hold whatever opinion one pleases. This model of the world corresponds to the phase of differentiated disunity; disunity because one does not identify with any particular model of the world, but differentiated because one understands that there are many perspectives out there and that no one model is objectively correct. Agency and authorship of one's understanding of the world become possible, but at the price of not having a definite conceptual scheme with which to interpret the world.

Of course, this perspective is also unsatisfactory and one soon learns that radical relativism is hardly a helpful position. One realizes that one cannot simply offer opinion, but must support one's viewpoint, and seek to develop a more or less coherent view of the world that irons out contradictions and avoids that most horrid of implications. One continuously tests and adapts this view of the world to new information and discoveries. One does not shift one's opinion, depending on one's mood or short-term interest, but rather seeks to refine and understand how one thinks about the world. Whereas the first phase is marked by a model of the world based on authority, and the second phase is characterized by a model of the world based on opinion, this final model of the world is a matter of commitment. It is constructed by the individual, not on a whim, but through engagement with evidence and arguments. The resulting state is characterized by differentiated unity. Differentiated because this model of the world is one's own and different from that of others, but as one does have a defined and fixed view of the world, it is also characterized by unity. Just as in the first stage, one has a deeply held interpretation of the world that allows one to interact with and understand the world. At the same time, this model of the world is one's own, and allows one

to express one's own identity, so that one is not engulfed in it, but rather is an active agent in constructing it.

The same idea might be expressed in a somewhat different way, considering how one regards the problems one must deal with at a certain stage in one's development. Initially, a problem is a problem that occurs in a particular situation. One approaches it in a unified way in that one does not break it down into various components. Solutions address the whole problem, not just a part of it. At an early stage, one does not ask if the problem is legal, psychological sociological or biological, one simply seeks to solve it with whatever means are available. As such one approaches it as an undifferentiated unity. However, through one's studies, one learns about different academic disciplines, and to categorize various problems as belonging to separate disciplines and for which solutions must come from those various disciplines. This allows a deeper understanding of aspects of those problems, even though it comes at the cost of ignoring certain aspects of those problems. For every discipline emphasizes certain features of the world at the expense of others, and so looking at problems from the perspective of one particular discipline gives one particular perspective. Hence studying problems from a disciplinary perspective teaches one to approach them in a spirit of differentiated disunity. As one's education progresses and one studies multiple disciplines, one learns to combine various disciplines in analyzing and solving the problems one encounters. This enables a more unified treatment of problems, as one used initially, but with the benefit of disciplinary differentiation that was lacking in the first phase.

Another aspect of mind that develops during education is the relationship between the student and the community. Initially, most students define themselves as part of the community in which they grew up. They identify with their families and people in their community, and regard their own interests as inextricably bound up with the interests of those people. As they were born in those communities, they regard this arrangement as natural and unchangeable, and could not imagine themselves not being part of these communities or acting against the interests of their direct community. They are in that sense engulfed in their community, with which they are united but from which they are not differentiated. However, at some point, perhaps when they leave their communities and move to a city to attend a liberal arts program, they realize that they are not purely defined by where they come from. Away from their home, and the behavioral roles that they are

expected to play in the community, they live on their own, and must fashion new roles for themselves. This is often a difficult and scary process. Initially, the city can be a lonely place. One does not know anyone, and must ask one's self how one wishes to construct one's new life. Hence one is engaged in a process of individuation, but at the expense of the community one once enjoyed. For short, one is in a phase of differentiated disunity. As one engages in this process of individuation, one gradually becomes part of a new community; the city starts to feel like home, one finds new friends, and predictable roles emerge. But this community was not received or inherited, but was actively constructed by students themselves based on their own values and preferences. As such, it does not come at the expense of individual identity, but is completely coexistent with it. One is a distinct and self-directing person at home in a community of scholars. This corresponds to the stage of differentiated unity. For such a community is quite a distinctive place. It is not like an army, in which all individuality is sacrificed for a common purpose. But neither is it an airport, where individuals cross paths like ships that pass in the night. In such a community, scholars pursue different paths, but they do so in a continuous exchange of perspectives and with a sense of common purpose and identity.

The Importance of Differentiation and Diversity

Hegel believed that development is driven by inner necessity; minds are destined to develop themselves in this way, and will do so, one way or the other. This seems somewhat optimistic. In some sense, this would mean that education is not necessary at all, as minds will develop of their own accord. Although one might think that minds indeed have a hunger and inner need to develop themselves, it seems clear that education does have a role to play in encouraging and facilitating development. Hence, it is important to consider how it may do so and how a diverse community can contribute to minds going through this dialectical sequence. Needless to say, liberal arts and sciences programmes do this in a range of ways. Their multidisciplinary curricula are designed to expose students to many disciplinary perspectives. They typically feature active, discussion-based pedagogies, rather than large lectures, which allow students to discuss the issues they are studying from their own perspective. And they assess students through papers and presentations, rather than through multiple choice exams

focused on reproduction. However, having a diverse student body is also crucial in order to foster the development of students in the dialectical process.

Recall that in order to pass through the dialectical sequence two processes must occur. Firstly, the initial engulfment must be broken and the developing entity must wrestle itself out of the background from which it started in order to differentiate itself from that background. Secondly, there must be a reunification with that background, a reconciliation in which the original unity is recovered but which preserves the differentiation.⁵ This first process of differentiation is particularly important in this context, as it requires a confrontation with the other.

Being engulfed is, in many ways, a very pleasant state. It is comfortable, safe and reassuring. Received ways of understanding the world and inherited communities, which have enabled much pleasant living, are painful to leave behind. This is because they have defined one's existence up to that point, and constitute one's universe. Hence there might appear to be something stunningly irrational about severing one's connection with them. While this is necessary from a developmental perspective and eventual reunification lies ahead, in the moment this is not apparent.

Hence the original state of engulfment must become, and become understood as, limiting, inadequate and partial. It must become, in some sense, stale and uncomfortable. The developing mind must feel constrained by it, such that it cannot do all it seeks to do and be all it seeks to be without abandoning it. It must become apparent that the received model of the world cannot account for everything one knows about the world. The community and village one originates from must become too small a stage for the parts one wishes to play. Students' understanding of the problems they confront must be shown to be insufficiently detailed to fully understand and resolve them. This is one of the key functions of higher education; to demonstrate to the individual student that the state of undifferentiated unity, on all its levels, is unsatisfactory to facilitate further development. Part of this is a matter of making those limitations apparent, but it is also important to inspire and seduce, i.e. to demonstrate that there are alternative ways of being and understanding the world, as well as different communities and roles to play in them, that can be explored. In this way, an

⁵ This last process will be discussed on some other occasion.

engulfed mind can be encouraged to break free and differentiate itself. After all, if one is never made aware of the limitations inherent in one's undifferentiated state or if one does not realize that there are other possibilities, one would never differentiate.

What sort of environment could do so? Obviously, it needs to be different from the environment from which students originate. An environment that is the same as the one from which students originate would not show the inadequacies of the initial state or offer alternatives to encourage students to differentiate. One might think that the appropriate educational environment would be one that is uniform but different from the initial state. As long as the environment is distinct, it will create conflicts with the initial phase, and will demonstrate that there is more out there than just undifferentiated unity. However, such an environment could at best replace undifferentiated unity with a different undifferentiated unity or with undifferentiated disunity; it hardly encourages one to individuate one's self in the sense of fashioning a new identity for one's self. One simply adopts the customs and ways of understanding the world of one's new community, leaving one in just as parochial a state as one started in. Alternatively, the two perspectives end up in a stalemate, with one adopting certain aspects of one's past and certain aspects of one's new situation. Neither advances the dialectical process.

However, a highly diverse community, i.e. a community in which many different ways of living are represented and in which many different models of the world are present and exchanged, can do so. First of all, in such a community one quickly becomes aware of the limitations of one's own perspective. If one comes into contact with other minds that are different and is asked to consider problems together, discussing various answers and interpretations, one quickly learns that one's own way of looking at things is not the only sensible way of understanding the world and that it misses important aspects of reality. What one initially regarded as obvious turns out to be controversial, and solutions that once seemed adequate are revealed to be controversial. Similarly, one learns that others do not respond to one's own behavior and ideas as the people in one's original community did. Actions and utterances that were met with praise and approval might now be met with confusion or even scorn. One cannot predict the reactions of others, and cannot take relationships for granted; one is like a stranger. This all demonstrates the inadequacy of one's current state.

At the same time, diversity also makes one aware of all the many ways of being and understanding the world which are available, modelled by one's fellow students. The diversity of community provides many examples of different ways of being and interacting, which can be used to construct new forms of community and ways of understanding the world. They are all there on display, to be copied, adapted, combined or even ignored. In a way, the diversity provides a range of options, a sense of the possible, that may be used to overcome the limitations of one's previous way of being. All of this makes one aware of the many uncharted possibilities of existence, and so one must choose which ones to explore and pursue in reshaping one's being and perspective. The multiplicity forces one to take sides, but in doing so, one sets one's self apart from others and thereby engages in a process of individuation. Once one has been exposed to this diversity, one can never be the same. One has had to form a new identity, that comes out of a recognition of the limitations of what one was and an excitement about the many different things one might be.

With the argument completed, one can now see the true value of studying in a diverse community: it reveals the limitations of undifferentiated unity, and provides both an impulse and inspiration for the differentiation that is necessary for development. Without it, development is hampered, and liberal arts education cannot achieve its goal. Education in a beehive or an ant colony, which lacks this kind of diversity, can never induce the kind of differentiation that is required to grow into a full and competent adult and citizen, someone who is a person of society but also a person. Rather, it is the pigeon tower, with its multi-varied plumage and birds from all over the city, in which one can find one's self in the other.

Playing Our Selves: An Aesthetic Education for the Twenty-First Century

Surti Singh

What is the role of education in a time of counterrevolution? Friedrich Schiller's prescription in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, after the hopes of the French revolution were brutally defeated by the ensuing terror, disclosed the need for an education that could cultivate the individual's moral sensibility. The reduction of the individual to a cog in the machine, stripped of intellectual capacities and chained to a dysfunctional, bureaucratic system, left humanity arrested in the transition from nature to culture—humanity could not claim it had attained civilization as long as its two main features—sense and reason—remained in hostile competition. Indeed, this bifurcation could not be mended until the individual became open to the possibility of this transformation. Schiller advocated an education that would awaken, enliven, and re-enchant the individual to become capable of entering into a properly moral state.

In this work, Schiller turns to the question of whether science or art could better facilitate this education. If historically, art has been viewed with suspicion, as a corrupting force in comparison with the noble achievements of science, Schiller made a bold gesture. Both science and art are sufficiently removed from the social to potentially enact this function, yet Schiller notes that science, with its emphasis on reason, cultivates the formal side of the human being when what is needed is something that appeals to sensation, or the side of humanity that has become increasingly impoverished by an overly rigid and controlling Enlightenment reason. It is the aesthetic, then, that takes primacy in Schiller's considerations. In fact, the kind of education Schiller envisions can only transpire in the aesthetic dimension, and it is a necessary stage that one must pass through: "Man in his physical state merely suffers the dominion of nature; he emancipates himself from this dominion in the aesthetic state, and he acquires mastery of it in the moral."⁶

The possibilities of the aesthetic dimension inspired a number of thinkers in the twentieth century, who in their own works considered its power to challenge a rigid and mechanistic society, particularly figures associated with early 20th century Frankfurt School critical theory. Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, took seriously the status of art and aesthetics as a mode of experience that could potentially alleviate the domination and violence of the regnant rationality. Taking these readings as a cue, this essay will consider the meaning of an aesthetic education today, a

⁶Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.171.

question especially pertinent for contemporary Egyptian society that although very different from the one that Schiller diagnosed, is nevertheless suspended in counterrevolution. In this context, the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS) was established in 2013, after revolutionary upheavals shook the region and momentarily opened the possibility of a different future, a possibility that now seems on hold. CILAS adopts the notion of play as one of its anchoring principles, a notion that was central to how Schiller envisioned the possibility of an aesthetic education, and fashions itself as a “pigeon tower,” a space of contemplation between the pressures of reality and the intellectual remove of the Ivory tower. With this model in mind, I offer the following reflections.

In the mid-1950s, Herbert Marcuse published *Eros and Civilization*, a Freudian-Marxist endeavor to think through the possibility of liberation from the repressive tendencies of twentieth century capitalism. In this work, Marcuse revisited Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, and saw its aim to be “a remaking of civilization by virtue of the liberating force of the aesthetic function: it is envisaged as containing the possibility of a new reality principle.”⁷ This liberating force of the aesthetic function operated through Schiller’s notion of the play-drive. For Schiller, the play-drive harmonized the two conflicting sides of the human being, conceived as the sense-drive and the form-drive. The mutual hostility of the sense-drive and the form-drive arose from their different aims—for the former, an emphasis on the material, physical aspect of the human being, and for the latter, an emphasis on the human being’s autonomy from nature. The play-drive reconciles sense and reason by harmonizing their conflicting functions and producing a third object: beauty. The experience of beauty is neither beholden to our basic need for survival nor is it an intellectual act beholden to the end of truth or knowledge. Rather, the experience of beauty is the union of form and sense aimed at the contemplation of this harmony. Although Schiller envisioned the aesthetic dimension as a phase of transition between nature and culture, at other times, as commentators have noted, the aesthetic becomes an end in itself, a retreat from the world into the freedom of the aesthetic, beauty emerging as a regulative ideal that can never materialize in the present.⁸ For Marcuse, Schiller’s letters do not suggest a quiet retreat into

⁷Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 312.

⁸For example see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The adventures of a concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

the world of the aesthetic untouched by the vagaries of everyday life, but rather, contains the seeds for the liberation of the erotic dimension, or within Marcuse's Freudian reading, the realm of freedom.

Marcuse's reading of Schiller thus reopens the question of *Eros* in the context of education, a long-standing theme in the history of philosophy. If Plato actualized a model of education in which *Eros* was harnessed toward the higher, intellectual pursuit of knowledge, Marcuse views *Eros* as carrying the possibility of a non-repressive, non-alienated human existence. If in Plato, *Eros* is eventually repressed by the privileged sphere of *Logos* or Reason, Marcuse seeks its liberation. Marcuse tries to make good on the promise of Schiller's play-drive by grounding it in Freudian instincts, unconstrained by the world of work, and potentially liberating us from its demands. Marcuse extracts three essential elements from Schiller's letters that he believes would lead to the formation of a non-repressive society:

- (1) *The transformation of toil (labor) into play, and of repressive productivity into 'display'—a transformation that must be preceded by the conquest of want (scarcity) as the determining factor of civilization.*
- (2) *The self-sublimation of sensuousness (of the sensuous impulse) and the de-sublimation of reason (of the form-impulse) in order to reconcile the two basic antagonistic impulses.*
- (3) *The conquest of time in so far as time is destructive of lasting gratification*⁹

For Marcuse, the aim of these three features is identical with a reconciliation of the reality principle with the pleasure principle, since he views the aesthetic dimension – *via* imagination – as sheltering the mental processes and freed of the repressive reality principle. Marcuse advocates the transformation of work or toil into play, and the transformation of repressive productivity into display. A precondition for this transformation is the abolition of scarcity, or a society of abundance. When the need for self-preservation is satisfied, the individual is released from work as toil and can experience work as play. The shift is phrased as the transformation of repressive productivity into display, or a shift in the individual's relationship to the production process more generally, from alienated labor chained to the performance principle into a process that gratifies the individual's desires. For Marcuse, work would be a form of activity infused with *Eros*, where it is subordinated to the needs that allow

⁹Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 193.

humanity to flourish.

Play and display, as principles of civilization, imply not the transformation of labor but its complete subordination to the freely evolving potentialities of man and nature. The ideas of play and display now reveal their full distance from the values of productiveness and performance; play is unproductive and useless precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure; it ‘just plays.’¹⁰

When work becomes play, it takes on features antithetical to the requirements of its alienated form. No longer driven solely by productivity and efficiency, work as play also becomes aimless and without purpose from the standpoint of conventional work. In this respect, Marcuse notes that it is the purpose and not the content of the activity that distinguishes work from play. That is, if the activity gratifies our instinctual needs, then it is play—it is in this respect that Marcuse envisions a shift of work into play, transforming from an activity chained to self-preservation to one that promotes self-fulfillment, a shift that will be discussed further on.

Secondly, Marcuse advocates a rebalancing of reason and sense—a self-sublimation of sense and a de-sublimation of reason. If for Freud, our fundamental instincts produced untenable desires that had to be sublimated or transformed into more appropriate goals, in the context of twentieth century capitalism, Freudian instinctual repression takes on the additional form of “surplus repression,” which through the performance principle creates a tyranny of reason over sensation in the compulsion to work. The union of reason and sensation is the basis for a culture in which humanity is not chained to toil, but rather, develops through play. This is a fundamentally different vision than the existing mode of sexuality, which Marcuse calls repressive de-sublimation.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse discusses the society of instant gratification, where sexuality is commodified and socially controlled. In a Foucauldian register, we can say that the more desire is articulated within the means of discourse subscribed by the current system, the more it becomes regimented. For Marcuse, the de-sublimation of reason and the self-sublimation of sensation or sexuality would reflect our genuine rather than manufactured needs. By self-sublimation of sexuality, Marcuse refers to the possibility, under certain conditions, of sexuality creating “highly civilized relations without being subjected to the

¹⁰Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 196.

repressive organization which the established civilization has imposed upon the instinct.”¹¹ In particular, the necessary conditions for such a possibility would be the development of institutions that are not governed by the performance principle. This would allow for the transformation of sexuality from its degraded form in the society of instant gratification into *Eros*. Marcuse presents a vision of such a society ruled by *Eros*:

*The abolition of toil, the amelioration of the environment, the conquest of disease and decay, the creation of luxury. All these activities flow directly from the pleasure principle, and, at the same time, they constitute work which associates individuals to ‘greater unities’: no longer confined within the mutilating dominion of the performance principle, they modify the impulse without deflecting it from its aim. There is sublimation and, consequently, culture; but this sublimation proceeds in a system of expanding and enduring libidinal relations, which are in themselves work relations.*¹²

Thus, the self-sublimation of sexuality into *Eros* would both create but also depend upon non-alienated work relations, the necessity of the struggle for existence acting as a support for *Eros* rather than the repression of instinctual freedom. Returning us to the first point discussed earlier, the transformation of work into play, Marcuse questions the instinctual preconditions for assimilating work to play. We saw previously that play and work appear at first to be diametrically opposed, where play is not motivated by any aim other than the fulfillment of instinctual desires, whereas work is motivated by the external goal of self-preservation. Now we can see a clearer idea of how work might become play. The activity would still retain the same purpose, i.e. the goal of self-preservation, but with the eradication of scarcity and alienation, work could also at the same time activate instinctual gratification. Thus, Marcuse argues that social change would be necessary for the development of instinctual preconditions that could transform work into play.

Third, the disciplining mechanism of time must be dismantled. For Marcuse, the division of our day into segments of work and segments of leisure, the latter confined to measured doses within a world dominated by the performance principle, suppresses the timelessness of the pleasure principle and its desires, where leisure is not a relief from work or time to rebuild one’s energies to become more productive, but is aimless. For Marcuse, the liberation of *Eros*, the source of true happiness, would dismantle the repressive order of time

¹¹Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 204

¹²Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 212.

in modern societies.

Marcuse's reading of Schiller raises a number of issues, particularly in terms of its relevance for a model of education and of the possibility of play as an anchoring principle. First, to harness play in an educational context requires reflection on how play relates to work, and in particular, how the kind of work that we undertake in the classroom, as students and teachers, can be a form of play. Related to this would be the conception of an educational model not motivated by the end of eventually assimilating its participants to the world of alienated labor, but rather motivated by the fulfillment of the individual's instinctual desires. This raises the question of how intellectual work not geared toward the production of scientific knowledge would proceed and what it would produce. Second, from a Marcusean point of view, the infusion of education with *Eros* would be attuned to revolutionary ends, where the goal is not an acquisition of knowledge and facts but is the transformation of both the self and the repressive society in which one lives. If on Marcuse's account play facilitates the fulfillment of desires and impulses, then in an educational context, this would mean that the individual would undergo the negation of his or her current self. Can education impart such an experience of negativity without some end result in mind, in particular, the promise of attaining a better status than with which one began? Finally, the anchoring principle of play would suppose that education could proceed according to a different model of time, determined by the rhythms of the unconscious rather than the conscious practices of reading, writing, and speaking. Maybe we could derive a model from Jacques Lacan's variable length psychoanalytic sessions, which did not have predetermined time limits and could have ended in a few minutes or potentially gone on for hours. Relatedly, we might wonder if it is desirable for education itself to become a form of therapy, to be attuned precisely to those aspects of our existence tied to sensation, sexuality, instincts, drives, the unconscious.

Perhaps we can address some of these questions by noting that central to Marcuse's notion of liberation is art and the aesthetic dimension, which affords the experience of negation. As the realm of play, it distances itself from the world of mechanical work and projects a new reality principle. Walter Benjamin, for example, who was as equally enthusiastic about play as Marcuse, sought this experience of another reality in the advent of new media and the revolutionary possibilities of film, which not only recreated through its formal properties the experience of alienation and fragmentation of the masses, but also revealed dimensions and elements unavailable to us in our everyday lives; it afforded an

experience of what Benjamin called the optical unconscious.¹³ We can also think about 20th century art movements that embodied play, from Duchamp's Readymades and the Dada collages, to the poetry of the Surrealists and the technique of *cadavre exquis* (exquisite cadaver or corpse). We can turn in particular to aesthetic production in Egypt. In the very building that houses CILAS, the Egyptian surrealists once 'played,' engaging in meditative practices and producing works of art late into the night in trance-like states, which they would later burn.¹⁴ Subsequent to the Surrealists, in 1960s Paris, we can think about the Situationists who enacted aesthetic interventions in everyday life, the revolutionary strategy of the *dérive* being the primary method of experiencing time and space differently, of aimlessly wandering instead of walking with purpose, and of intervening in the city.

In contemporary culture, play is ever more accommodated into the world of work and consumption, and the advent of new technologies increasingly rearticulates the distinction between play and non-play. Play, which continually risks being subsumed to the aim of entertainment and becoming a mere commodity or being subsumed to the aims of work, at the same time retains its capacity to destabilize institutions and activities governed by the performance principle, and remains tied to the promise of happiness. In thinking through the transformation of traditional academic learning into a form of play, we can suppose that the inclusion of play as an anchoring principle puts illusion at the forefront—the imaginative capacity to create another world that is unreal.

To think through the ways in which play can be part of the educative process, and in light of the issues outlined above, we can draw on an example from popular culture that imagines a world governed by play. The HBO television series *Westworld*, a hybrid science-fiction western thriller, achieved fast acclaim after its debut in 2016. *Westworld* is a theme park set in an artificial location constructed in the desert and modeled after the American Western. It is populated by artificially intelligent robots who make their homes in this reality, and who act as hosts to the paying human customers called guests. The show follows the experiences of both the ultra-wealthy guests, who undergo an immersive

¹³Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, Second Version" in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol 3., 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others; edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge Mass., and London England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁴Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group*, I.B. Tauris.

experience in this world in order to live out their fantasies, which when boiled down to their Freudian instincts revolve around sex and death, and the experiences of the androids who interact with the guests.

Throughout the show, a recurring question peppers the conversations that transpires between guests and hosts alike: What is the aim of *Westworld*? There are two answers to this question, one descriptive and the other normative: Some characters claim that the purpose of entering into this play world is to learn who you really are. Stripped of the norms and conventions that govern their real lives, *Westworld* creates the conditions by which the characters can act according to their desires without judgment or penalty. Thus, what they choose in *Westworld* seems to indicate their true selves acting on the whims of the pleasure principle versus the self that must be modulated to fit the demands of the reality principle. Other characters believe that entering into *Westworld* shows you who you could be. In opening up the world of possibility, individuals are able to create a new version of themselves. It soon becomes clear that the show is increasingly focused on the experiences of the androids, who begin to long for what they could be. Artificial intelligence has long elicited fear and fascination in a myriad of television shows, films, and novels that project fantasies and nightmarish scenarios. From the well-worn examples of the *Matrix* and *Bladerunner*—the movie adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s science-fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—to recent iterations of this theme in films like *Her* and *Ex Machina*, the task remains the same. To know oneself, not just as an individual but as part of the human species, is presented as a task to investigate through our 21st century other—the android.

For those who prescribe to the first thesis, that *Westworld* is about knowing oneself, the answer is dark: when humans are removed from the imperatives of modern civilization and allowed to dwell in a state of nature where they are kings and queens, life for the androids is a Hobbesian nightmare: Life is nasty, brutish, and short. Without the bonds of civilization confining sex to marriage and death to war, chaos ensues. Not only, as others have pointed out, is there a misogynistic bent to the ways in which the female androids are raped, assaulted, and killed, but the show also verges on misanthropic—in one scene where the protagonists go off the grid, they venture into a robot dystopia filled with sex and death, with every host engaged in lewd and violent acts. Upon entering into this space one of the guests remarks that the person who created this must not have liked people too much.

In the show’s darkest moments, suffering has purpose. The god-like figure and creator

of *Westworld*, Robert Ford, disparages his old partner, Arnold, for believing the robots could simply achieve consciousness by becoming aware of themselves. In contrast with Arnold's Cartesian vision of consciousness, Ford is boldly Nietzschean—not only do humans delight in suffering, it is suffering that first gives rise to memory. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche described how humans dwelled in blissful forgetfulness until they learned to remember through pain.¹⁵ For Ford, only memory can begin to root human consciousness in the robots—the memory of suffering is what alights the robots to become closer to humans. Humans, however, do not seem to deal well with suffering at all. A young man named William, reluctantly brought to *Westworld* by his brother-in-law and business partner, finds himself increasingly drawn into the alternate reality of which he was initially skeptical, and ultimately falls in love with an android named Dolores. Of course, this romance is doomed to fail, and when William feels rebuffed by his lover, whose habitual memory loss results in her forgetting their shared experiences, he is filled with an unimaginable hatred and vengeance, which he enacts by appearing over and over again through a span of 30 years as Dolores's torturer. The other humans as well, seem immune to learning from suffering. Rather it is the androids that undergo this change, at the inception of their coming to be human. Suffering changes the way the androids understand themselves and opens the possibility of a different course from the humans they encounter.

The world of the game parallels the capitalist machine, which ensures that the same experience is endlessly repeated in the spaces through which individuals belonging to a certain class and professional background frequent. Just as the same song plays in the saloon and the same conversations transpire between the hosts, the world of the game begins to eerily resemble the capitalist machine, where our experiences are endlessly recreated and repeated. The androids are programmed to perform on a loop, endlessly repeating their narratives with minor variations, and into which the human guests enter and interact. This endless loop is predicated on the erasure of memory, a forgetting that keeps the androids tied to fate. It is the unexpected presence of memory, and in particular, the memory of suffering that motivates the androids to break out of their loop and to desire autonomy and freedom from their destiny. With memory and desire, agency is born. The first step towards liberation is enacted in play.

¹⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967).

The evolving consciousness of the androids disrupts the distinction between play and non-play that is the precondition for the success of *Westworld*. While the paying customers who enter *Westworld* are well aware of this distinction, and are aware that they are acting, with the reassurance that they cannot be injured or killed in this play world, the robot hosts take this illusory world to be real. When the androids begin to question their reality, the distinction between play and non-play beings to blur. In season one, the androids begin to experience glitches in the form of memories/dreams that begin to create an interior narrative of trauma, an integral quality to being human that has until then eluded the androids. Initially, the world of play is pain-free for both the guests and the hosts. It is pain-free for the guests because they cannot be physically killed in the illusory world, and it is pain-free for the hosts because they retain no knowledge of the horrors that they endure at the hands of the guests. When some of the hosts begin to remember, their pain-free reality is ruptured. With the introduction of memory, the androids begin to question the reality of their existence. They also begin to psychically double by creating secret interior worlds and mimicking their own characters to keep up their appearance. They begin to develop desires that are not a part of their programmed narrative. They effectively enter into the realm of play, uprooted from the immediacy of their everyday world of sensation and thrust into the world of reflection. They experience for the first time a union between the world of sensation, in which they've dwelled, and the world of consciousness, which has hitherto been elusive. The result is the creation of an undefined and unknown ideal—freedom.

Deception, imitation, and secrecy are all aspects of play discussed by anthropologists such as Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga.¹⁶ From this perspective, consciousness evolves through play. The wealthy live out their fantasies of sex and violence through play that is commodified and experienced as a relief and release from the demands of work, and that therefore takes on the qualities of animalistic pleasure as Marx diagnosed in his analysis of alienated labor.¹⁷ In contrast, the androids play to become human, to affirm their humanity. When they play, they measure themselves according to an ideal, which is a free and autonomous existence. Yet, the robots play without knowing what it is that they are

¹⁶Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 19; J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1949)

¹⁷Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988).

imitating—they have the sense that another, more real world exists, but do not know what this world is.

As the detour through *Westworld* intended to illustrate, to play is to become human, it is to create a distance from our immediate grasp of the world, and through artifice, display, and mimicry, to eventually attain consciousness. Thus, the path to becoming self-aware must be taken through the aesthetic or the realm of semblance. If play is an anchoring principle of higher education, then we might imagine that play removes the self from the self, that it requires the capacity to make-believe, to become someone else, yet without losing oneself. It requires the belief in illusions and the capacity to recognize that they are both false and true. The idea of a liberal arts education itself is part of the myth of enlightenment, which must be treated with the utmost seriousness and must also be played—the things that are encountered must be taken as truth and also understood to be false. This capacity—to find the paradox of truth and falseness at the heart of all learning, of all knowledge, can lead to a greater capacity to both dismantle repressive illusions and to generate illusions that sustain gratification, that promise reconciliation with our shattered and deficient selves. Thus, as an anchoring principle, play is a form of self-reflection, of coming to consciousness of oneself, of communication that is not bound by the rules of logic as they are meant to be performed but according to their subversion. The education that play affords is an education of the self, and this can only be brought to light at the strange interface between what makes us human and what disrupts that boundary—what makes civilization cohere and what threatens to break it apart. In other words, play is tied to pleasure but also takes us on the path of suffering. Play implies a beyond, what reality could be, and perhaps even what it ought to be. To embrace an aesthetic education is to experience a modulation of the self, at the point where sensation and reason touch.

Equality and Intimacy: An Imaginary Construction

I-Kai Jeng

What, then, is education? I believe it is the course the individual goes through in order to catch up with himself.

- Johannes de Silentio (Søren Kierkegaard), *Fear and Trembling*¹⁸

Philosophy could have taken up the problem with its own means and with the necessary modesty, by considering the fact that stupidity is never that of others but the object of a properly transcendental question: how is stupidity (not error) possible?

- Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*¹⁹

Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* presents 19th-century educator Jacotot's "universal" or "emancipatory teaching."²⁰ Such teaching presupposes a distinction between two kinds of learning. Most of what is taught—mathematics, medicine, mechanics, biology—model learning on the activity of *acquiring*. I didn't "have" mathematical knowledge before taking Prof. Gauss' course; after the course, I "have acquired" and come to possess it. I now know something, namely mathematics. But a second and much more elusive learning concerns, not acquiring anything, but *coming to be someone*. What is that someone? "Yourself." "But what is a self? Who am I?" Whatever the answer is, this second learning is not modeled on acquisition. And Rancière's book is about this kind of learning, or in other words, "Prof. Emancipation" does not need to "have" any knowledge in order to teach-emancipate me. The professor can be ignorant, in the sense of not having knowledge, not knowing *x*; but one must have already become who one is.

Keeping this distinction in mind is absolutely crucial, because Rancière is *not* claiming that we can responsibly teach physics or medicine without knowing them, or that students trained under universal teaching can be good doctors (*TIS* 31). Traditional schools are still necessary if we need a doctor when we are sick, or a mechanic when our cars are

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, trans. and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, with Introduction and Notes, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 46.

¹⁹ Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 151.

²⁰ Rancière, Jacques, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated with an introduction by Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, 1991. Hereafter *TIS* followed by page numbers. A not irrelevant point: the subtitle indicates that this teaching will not "emancipate" in the sense of diminishing or eliminating political or social inequalities. As the final chapter shows clearly, intellectual equality coexists very well with social conservatism.

broken. What Rancière is claiming is that medicine or mathematics *fails to guide us* towards coming to be who we are. Whatever you want to call it, teaching, instruction...it is not "education," strictly speaking. When ordinary teaching pretends to be education, we become what Rancière calls "stultified." (Being stultified, I believe, is becoming "stupid" in the sense Deleuze distinguishes from "error.")²¹ Who are we? We are *individually intelligent beings*. We are *intelligent*: we have it "in us" to solve puzzles in the world. Others do not need to give it to us, they only need to awaken it, make us become aware of our intelligence. We are *individually* so: there are others like us, and we can understand each other because we are all intelligent. Even the most difficult book, say, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, can be read and understood, because the author wrote it with intelligence and so can I grasp it as far as it is in my power (*TIS* 22). And finally, we are *beings*: that is, a plural that is not a simple aggregation, but a togetherness that never loses its initial separation (*TIS* 58). Whoever denies such a plurality, or thinks of the togetherness in such a way that collective unity excludes individual plurality, is "waging war" in Rancière's words (*TIS* 82, 85).

As such beings, we are *equal* to one another. As Ross, the English translator of *TIS* notes, Rancière urges us to *begin* with equality (*TIS* xix-xx; for an especially illuminating example of this, see 32-33). Normally, teaching *ends* with equality or some approximation of it. At the beginning of the semester, I know something about Plato, my students don't; at the end of the semester, if they worked hard enough, they will know something about Plato as well and thereby become closer to me. But in universal teaching, it is the *initial* equality that matters: the attitude of "you can do it too." There is no book that cannot be understood, because it is meant by an intelligent being to communicate something with other intelligent beings (cf. *TIS* 22). There is no language that cannot be learned. Even if I know nothing about repairing cars, I can *verify* (*TIS* 29-31). You might say, well, I am not able to verify that the car mechanic ripped me off. Maybe he didn't change the engine, he just tweaked it and lied to me. That is quite true. But I can at least verify that he is not incompetent: the car mechanic had to at least know what he was doing even in order to deceive me that he did a good job. And I can learn his skill by studying books that teach these kinds of things. And,

²¹ We all recognize the distinction, I suppose, to some extent. I know a doctor, extremely competent at his job, highly intelligent, but he easily falls for "self-help" "spiritual leaders." He is knowledgeable, but also stupid or stultified. Rather insightfully, Rancière sometimes suggests that there is even a tension between the two ways of learning: the more you are accomplished in learning in the ordinary sense, the harder it is for you to become emancipated. See (*TIS* 107, 133.)

to repeat, there is no book that cannot be understood by another intelligent being. Every point made in *TIS* is an application, implication, or explication of what this idea of initial equality entails.

In order to clarify "radical equality" to my students, I once told them, just like Rancière himself tells us in chapter 2, to carefully compare the Jacotot-emancipator with the Socratic educator. The two share many similarities, but are different in some fundamental respects. To begin with, there is also equality between the Socratic teacher and his student. First, because the Socratic assumes that both of them potentially know everything, and second because in relation to what both of them do not yet know, the teacher's present superiority over the student is nothing to be proud of. So it looks like there are resemblances between the Socratic and the Jacototian. But consider the differences. The Socratic teacher *plays* the questioner, i.e. a role usually assumed by students. Jacotot also asks students questions, since the emancipator does so for *verifying*. "Tell me what this shape means. Is it a word or a picture?" "What do you see in this painting? Say something." But actually, the difference between the two is immense here. This is because, to any outside observer, who the teacher and who the student is are completely clear in Socratic teaching. No one would confuse the teacher, who is only pretending to be confused, with the student, who is truly confused. In emancipatory teaching, however, the teacher and the student would actually be difficult to tell apart: the emancipator does not pretend: he searches so that he can verify the student has searched. He can actually be ignorant and it shows. So I concluded triumphantly to students: Walk into a classroom that practices emancipatory teaching, you would be at a loss whether you entered a classroom or a conference.

My comparison commits at least three crimes to Rancière's text. To begin with, according to him, Socratic teaching is the perfected form of stultification (*TIS* 29-30), but I didn't treat it as such. Instead I treated it as an alternative to emancipation. Moreover, emancipation best occurs in a family, not a classroom (*TIS* chapter 5 makes a case for this): asking the students to imagine the classroom risks presenting emancipatory teaching as "just another pedagogical technique," which it is not.²² Finally, emancipatory teaching still retains a distinction between the schoolmaster and the student because the former still compels the latter to do certain things, i.e. there is an unequal relation between wills while an equal one

²² As Karim wonderfully suggested, it might actually be more poignantly (if poetically misleading) described as *a way of being-together*.

between intelligences (as *TIS* 7 unforgettably defines "intellectual emancipation": it is fully compatible with obedience to the will of another).

My threefold simplification, even falsification, appears to be against the spirit of emancipation. If I and my students are *equals*, shouldn't I trust that they can understand what I have understood? Am I not judging rashly that they cannot grasp the subtleties at their current level, and therefore unjustly infantilizing them?

That seems to be how Bowman would take it, as Rancière's text becomes his springboard for reflecting on the question of embodiment in learning.²³ However, he doesn't speak of trust as I just did, but *intimacy* instead. According to his reading of Rancière, the radical equality envisioned goes hand in hand with intimacy. Intimacy is a specific mode of togetherness. But being together is being together *with something*. The question here does not concern intimacy between the learner and the text inviting to be deciphered, nor does it concern the intimacy between the learner and truth or knowledge. The question concerns the intimacy between the teacher and the student. As the title of Bowman's paper suggests, his model (or foil?) for Rancière's "intimate schoolmaster" is the *sifu* in martial arts, someone whose name roughly means "mentor," but more literally, "the teacher-father."

The name itself therefore reminds the student that he is to rely on his kungfu master like a father; it also reminds the *sifu* that he is responsible for the student in a way that Prof. Gauss is not. Since Rancière claims that what Jacotot discovered is nothing but what we do all the time without realizing it—and Bowman obviously agrees—could it be that the *sifu-tudi* (apprentice, or literally: "the little brother of a family (i.e. the kungfu school)") relation exemplifies emancipatory learning, and therefore could provide us with insight into what is unsaid in Rancière?

I, on the other hand, think that, different from Bowman, the relation between intimacy and equality is far from obvious. Does Jacotot or Rancière see the two as intimately related? As a rule, the ordinary teacher avoids intimacy. You want to be fair; so you assess students' progress numerically (an assessment that in many institutionalized settings often takes the form of "marking" or "grading"), and intimacy creates the unfavorable condition of favoritism. But perhaps the ignorant schoolmaster doesn't have to grade; verifying, after all,

²³ Bowman, Paul, "The Intimate Schoolmaster and the Ignorant *Sifu*: Poststructuralism, Bruce Lee, and the Ignorance of Everyday Radical Pedagogy," in Seery, Aidan, and Éamonn Dunne, *The Pedagogics of Unlearning*, Punctum Books, 2016, pp. 131-156.

is not the same as grading. Does that mean intimacy is acceptable, or even necessary, when it comes to emancipation? If the ideal environment to conduct emancipatory teaching is the family, does this imply that intimacy facilitates emancipation?

Maybe my confusion can be clarified by imagining a dialogue between a teacher and a student? Dialogue provides a chance to test whether Bowman's reading of Rancière is correct. Dialogue helps us see *whether an imaginary dialogue can reasonably induce (or even presuppose) intimacy and emancipation* as it proceeds. Of course, even if emancipation without intimacy occurs at the end of the conversation, this does not necessarily mean that Bowman or Bowman-Rancière was wrong; it might simply mean that the dialogue was badly imagined. I leave it to the reader to judge what exactly happens in the imaginary construction below. Personally, I'd like to think of it as an intimate dialogue about equality.

*

A: Hey, can I ask you about something?... I found out that you uploaded a file named "auto-feedback on the meetings" to our course folder in the cloud; but you didn't tell us in class that you did so. ...Did you know that we could see it? Was it an accident that you forgot to set the file as confidential or even just uploaded it to a wrong folder? Why are you doing this?

B: ...Well, since you asked...I was debating with myself whether this should be strictly confidential, since it is only meant for self-assessment. Let's be clear: there is something good about all of you being in the dark about what I think of you and how I think the classroom dynamic is working out, at least before the semester is over. In the interest of experimenting (I'm sorry to say "experimenting," because it sounds like I'm treating you and other students here like lab rats—and I really am, so I guess the word is honest, even though being honest doesn't make it right), I ultimately decided upon this lousy way of disclosure: to make it available, but without making an official announcement *that* it was available. I figured that in this way those who are curious would eventually find it.

A: Why did you do it? I can't really say I like it.

B: Yes, you're absolutely right, I have to have an answer to the "why," at least a tentative or preliminary one, otherwise I would be behaving in a perfectly irresponsible way. Teaching is not avant-garde art, after all. If I make a bad piece, I'm harming the art-lovers much less. A classroom is sacred—it sounds cliché, I know—and you are in a sense my responsibility. So

if I do something out of the ordinary, I need *some* justifications for giving one. Anyway, when I took this job, I was told that my role would not strictly be a "professor" or "teacher" as it is usually thought. You know this already: our "school" is about something else. Teaching in the usual sense is *copying*: the teacher, in a mysterious and not fully comprehensible way, copies what was in her soul into the student's soul. But the lovely fellows in our school explained to me that I was to be a *facilitator*; in a way, I do not completely decide what is there to be learned or even what should not be learned. The classroom should be run *collaboratively*, where each member in the classroom, communicating what they wish to get out of the presented material, influence, modify, amplify, direct the flow, and so on and so on...I don't need to get into details, you know all this better than I do.

A: ——Yes, please move on: your point being?

B: ——well, as you already sensed, I suppose, I haven't really followed these guidelines in a strict way in the classroom. What I actually did was heavily qualified by what I think I know about teaching. I deliberately presented my syllabus in such a way that made it difficult for you to make suggestions to change. I have also decided to conduct the conversation for more than half of the time in the classroom. This doesn't mean I disagree with the collaborative-flow style of running things. It just means I don't quite know how to implement it in a way true to its spirit while not completely letting things descend into chaos. And actually, there are wonderful things about it that I dearly like. One thing that really spoke to me was that, while collaborative determination of the course content seems problematic to me, I am very much devoted to the idea that what you get out of this class is to be determined by yourself.

A: I don't like what you did.

B: Oh? Do you mind explaining why?

A: I just think it's wrong.

B: Hmmm. It's very likely that you're right.

B: Let me try to explain what kind of compromise I was seeking. The spirit behind the collaborative methodology seems to me to be equality. I attempt, in my own way, to presuppose equality in revealing how I think the course is actually "flowing," because

transparency or openness seems deeply related to equality.

A: What then?

B: No, *related*; not identical. More precisely, perhaps, transparency *presupposes* equality. Here's a simple example: when I work in a company, sharing my true thoughts about the company or the competence of my superior with this superior would harm me, if he can fire me that is. So we all understand this: institutionalized inequality makes it difficult to continue for us to be open to one another. Another example: no secret between true friends. Friendship is the paradigm of equal human relations. A grown-up daughter sometimes says "my mom and I are best *friends*," meaning that they are equal and they share all the secrets with each other. You never hear a 12-year old daughter saying that about her relationship with her mother, because the level of mutual understanding is insufficient and the inequality still too significant, they cannot become "friends" yet. So you see, "friendship" conveys simultaneously equality and intimacy. In an unequal relationship, transparency works one-way. The one who is more powerful can afford more to be open. This is another way of stating the relation between power and nakedness: having power means doing and getting what you want without repercussions. You show your true self more in a position of power than in a position of powerlessness. The more powerful decides how much transparency the less powerful can handle. Even when the powerful attempts to create equality out of inequality by being open, he can paradoxically end up showing off his initial power. Imbalance is then reinforced. It does not evolve into balance.

A: Whatever. Now that you explain it, it's not even clear to me whether, in disclosing your thoughts about the class to us, you were presupposing equality, or just gesturing your superiority.

B: ...You're right. It really is ambiguous. Perhaps even a dilemma...!

A: Forget about that. I think you should always be completely open to everyone in class. If someone cannot take it, too bad, that's part of the process. If one is not ready to be hurt one should not even be there. In order to grow, one must confront pain. Even as a "facilitator," you have an obligation to supply the pain that makes us grow no less than the ordinary teacher. It should not be your concern whether we can take it or not; it makes it impossible for you to make the right choices.

B: Complete openness is of course impossible. There is no such thing because every

expressing is a concealing. The sober person does not say that "I am sober." Any person who claims "I am sober" becomes immediately suspect of not being completely sober. He reveals and thereby is suspected of concealing. The very act of revealing oneself sets up a distinction between an "out- side" and an "inside": you suspect there is something "behind" the claim. —This is perhaps why some people always hesitate in declaring their love for someone. They don't always do so out of shyness, or out of respect for the promised word. They could be doing so because they are afraid that thoughts become "less real" so to speak precisely through being spoken. Someone once said that "one can only utter things that are a little dead already in the heart." This works even in intimacy, because intimacy, despite its internal impulse towards breaking the barrier between the outside and the inside, still erects another barrier: the sharing and openness between people who are intimate creates a "circle" closed off to people "outside the circle." There is no intimacy in a crowd, because there is no public intimacy, an intimacy in the open. —But I digress. The thing I really wanted to say is that, the very logic of concealing-in-revealing is at work in sharing my thoughts. I'm certainly aware of that. In that file I assess you frankly; that is, I am speaking behind your back while knowing that you might read it at the same time. This creates uncertainty on your part about my intentions, for sure. To be honest, I did this because I thought the spirit of the collaborative implies a certain suspension of what one thinks is best, a letting-go of things that one would prefer to control. So by giving you a record of my impressions of where the course is going gives you a chance to see where it deviated from my expectations or plans, for better or worse. It also gives you a chance to see how your participation is clearly making a difference to what is going on in the classroom. Of course there is always more to say, but that is unintentional. I try to be frank about the things that matter.

A: So in things that don't matter, you are less frank?! What kind of things matter anyway? I think no one can know that. You simply cannot know in advance. I just encountered this story about teaching, and it seems to illustrate the need to *not* be frank. Let me read it to you.

"When I first began studying Taiji, when my head and heart were filled with mysticism and orientalism and magic, I complained to my Taiji teacher about a steep hill that I could never manage to cycle up without stopping from exhaustion. He said, that's because you are pushing with your legs, but you have to pump from your

dan-tien (below your belly-button), and then you'll get up the hill and do so without becoming tired at all. So, the next day I tried it. Lo and behold, what he said came true. So, when I next saw him I immediately reported, with delight and pride, that it had worked. He said, 'blimey, so it is true; I've never been able to do anything like that; can you teach me how to do it?' " (Bowman, "*Sifu*," pp. 154-155)²⁴

This is from Bowman's "*Sifu*" essay. It seems to me that here, equality is created precisely through authority, that is, a sort of inequality.

B: What do you mean by that? I don't understand.

A: Well, didn't the student become the teacher because he *trusted* the teacher's authority, that the *sifu* knows what he is talking about?

B: Ah, you're right, but if the student becomes the teacher, it can be seen as inequality turned upside down; unless you mean equality in the sense that they can exchange roles. And also, the *sifu* kind of abused his authority.

A: But the semblance of authority, as long as it is trusted and relied upon, is effectively authority nevertheless. And for me that is the beauty of the story. The teacher pretended to know something, but he did not know it at all; for all he knows, this *dan-tien* talk is full of nonsense, things people repeat without thinking, as if it were an oracle that only smart people can crack after enlightenment. But he did not do that; he even *hid* the fact that he never succeeded in understanding it. He passed on the message like he himself was told, I imagine, in the past by his masters, his *sifu* and their *sifu*. But precisely through this concealment, the student managed to learn something that the teacher didn't learn. This explains why you were wrong to share your thoughts with us. Because similarly, if we believed that everything was going fine and under your control, maybe we could have learned something that you didn't know.

B: Hmm. I'll have to think about that. I wonder if there is not another kind of interpretation than the one you offered. It's not necessarily the case that the *sifu*'s concealment or pretension to a solemn authority *caused* Bowman's enlightenment. Maybe Bowman always knew about *dan-tien*. What he didn't know was simply how to get in touch with his body so that his body "knows" it too. The teacher didn't need to lie. He could have simply *encouraged* Bowman. And Bowman might even have succeeded in going up the hill without *dan-tien* talk,

²⁴ Bowman, "*Sifu*," pp. 154-155, Also compare TIS 58; 107.

just like many sports athletes can do things without being able to explain how it is done. It's amusing to think about what we said so far. You initially criticized me for being *too* open; then you claimed that I should be *completely* open to everyone; but now you are explaining—with a much better argument than what you had in the beginning—actually, come to think of it you had none in the beginning (laughs)—why, at least sometimes, hiding things can be helpful.

A: No, that's not what I mean, I'm not contradicting myself. They belong to different situations and circumstances...

B: But what sorts of circumstances? If you're not precise then you would be contradicting yourself. You have to specify them so that the conflict is resolved.

A: ...they're different, anyway.

B: Well, maybe you can figure that out later and let me know. You remind me of a story about Schoenberg. He would always tell every student that they had no talent for composing music, and should leave the field as soon as they can. This is not because he was a mean person, but because he felt that the only people who could really stay and survive in such a competitive field like composing were those who didn't care about what others thought about their competence, who display grit after constant frustration, neglect, and dismissal. Even when it was from their teachers. In other words, he had to train their courage and confidence in their own abilities, their self-belief that even if composing brings them misery, it is the only royal road towards becoming who they are—a self-belief that might be false, but nevertheless a virtue.

A: That's exactly what I'm saying! Hiding or revealing, it should be about virtue.

B: Intellectual ones anyway. How to nurture them? Deciding when they still need the protection of the greenhouse, and when they need to risk being crushed by the outside world. That's the whole art of teaching.

B: Given what we said so far, I wonder if teaching really is a kind of knowledge. Think about it. Physics is knowledge, because clear and stable relations can be discovered between material objects. Mathematics is knowledge, too: the inner angles of a triangle always add up to two right angles. But no such relation seems to exist between what a teacher does and how a student might react. Let me come back to Schoenberg. I used him as an example of telling a

lie for the sake of something important in teaching like cultivating virtue or character. But we can certainly imagine that many of Schoenberg's students gave up because they got scared by their teacher's rhetoric. From Schoenberg's own perspective, his tactics weeded out the ones who will never be ready for the job. But maybe what these students needed at that point was encouragement instead of intimidation. Maybe they simply needed their teacher to say: try a bit harder, I'm there for you if you need me. And from this point of view, Schoenberg's strategy was too rigid. He shouldn't have treated everyone the same way. That's lazy. He should've observed the temperament of each student and dealt with them differently.

A: But that shouldn't be a surprise, because everyone is different. We are individuals.

B: That's right! I think you put your finger on the exact issue. If individually speaking we are not that different, if we share more in common than we differ, or if what we share in common matters more in learning-teaching, then humans can be classified, and they can be objects of knowledge like planets and triangles. Pedagogy would be something we can learn. But, if each of us is radically individual and unique, then we can never tell in advance what is good for someone. Even if I succeeded hundreds of times in the past, there is no telling if the next student will be a failure. And maybe I have to accept that, because if individuality matters, then it is impossible to give general rules or at least the general rules will not be useful or always have exceptions. And that which allows for exceptions seems more like art than knowledge. It's like medicine, actually. Medicine requires that the doctor treat even the same diseases differently because of the different physiologies of the patients. If even the body exhibits such a variety that medicine has features of art mixed with knowledge, then one would suppose that the soul is like that too.

A: Individuality is of course true. There is no doubt about it.

B: No, no, no, no, no, no! I don't think we can decide the issue so quickly. Many people have believed that when we become ourselves, we become wise, and wisdom is anonymous, because wisdom is a kind of knowledge, and knowledge is anonymous. When everyone in the classroom answers "4" in response to "how much is 2 and 2?" Everyone is the same, there is no difference between the skin colors, ethnic background, or genders of Tracy and Andrew—

A: Stop that. I know what you mean. But that's irrelevant. Even if we lose our "name," our individuality in the end, this doesn't mean that the road towards anonymity is the same for

everyone. We begin with individuality and "travel through it." It doesn't matter whether the end is individual or not.

B: —You're right, I take that back. The issue is rather whether the individual, idiosyncratic characters, personalities of students (and teachers!) are something to take care of in education. To avoid complicating things even more than they already are, let's say they are important. If so, then we have, I think, a strong argument for intimacy now. "Intimacy" and "pedagogy is art, not knowledge" go hand in hand. If teaching is an art because of the individuality of human beings, then the teacher can only be good or reliably good if she spends time with each student and takes care to note what they need according to their individualities. In order to teach something effectively, a teacher needs to learn about their souls. Effective teaching requires knowledge of individualities in such a way that both requires and creates intimacy. That teacher can't have too many students; being selective is necessary. Even self-knowledge is necessary, in the realization that there is no single teacher fit for every student. Only if she or he is true to herself or himself can others become true to themselves. The art of teaching, then, must be quite related to the art of love, insofar as love is the paradigm of intimacy. Intimacy means individual treatment. If this is not to be done randomly, but with knowledge, then time matters. From that perspective, I think any classroom setting that operates collaboratively needs activities outside the classroom. Like what we are doing right now—I feel I understand you much better now given your reactions to what I decided to do. I did learn something, even though it wasn't quite what I expected. To that extent, my experiment remains an experiment, since I didn't do it in a mature grasp of who each of you is. I didn't do it in a responsible way.

A: That's okay. The *Sifu* in my story isn't really responsible, either.

On Ignorance

Robin Weiss

Presented here are some reflections on ignorance; perhaps the problem of our time, perhaps the solution. I begin by considering, as problem, a kind of ignorance that increases with knowledge, and end by considering, as solution, a kind of knowledge that increases with ignorance.

Ignorance as Problem

“Knowledge is like a sphere, the greater its volume, the larger its contact with the unknown.” – Blaise Pascal²⁵

Measuring by scientific articles published, inventions patented, and websites, information has been increasing worldwide by 66% each year.²⁶ According to one scientist, as the number of answers scientists find increases, so does the number of questions. In fact, the number of questions grows much faster than the number of answers. If ignorance is what we have when we have questions without answers, then ignorance is growing at an exponential rate. Alternatively, if we measure ignorance in terms of the gap between what one person knows and what the scientific community, or humanity as a whole, knows, the gap is widening, and again, ignorance is growing, not shrinking.

“...knowledge is not a path but a road with a dead end, not a goal, but a disaster...”
– Petrarch²⁷

“Dare to know!” and “knowledge is power,” are sayings that epitomize our modern way of thinking. The modern world is based on the premise that we can solve all our problems as long as we continue to accumulate information and disseminate it. In fact, information seems to be the main *source* of our problems, as scientific know-how is too often placed in the

²⁵ This quote appears to be commonly misattributed to Blaise Pascal, but is perhaps traceable to a footnote in a 1986 edition of his *Pensées*. Blaise Pascal, *The Thoughts, Letters, and Opuscules of Blaise Pascal*, translated by O.W. Wright (New York: Riverside Press, 1869), Ch. IV, 191.

²⁶ Kevin Kelley, “The Expansion of Ignorance,” *The Technium*, last modified October 2, 2008): <http://kk.org/thetechnium/the-expansion-o/>.

²⁷ Petrarch, “On His Own Ignorance,” in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernest Cassier et. al. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1948), 117.

service of the plundering of finite resources, the uprooting of traditional forms of life, the perpetuation of unjust economic relations, and the general destruction of the planet. As the mottos listed above suggest, much destruction is perpetrated in the belief that the consequences are manageable, even “inconsequential,” because we either have the knowledge to deal with them, or will acquire the knowledge in the future. This has only made more apparent what we have long suspected: the more human beings know, the less they know how they apply their knowledge, and to what ends.

“Why does man’s ignorance hurt him, how can he feel the ache of a member he never had?” – José Ortega y Gasset²⁸

Since so many problems seem to arise from our voracious hunger for knowledge, it is worth asking from whence this anxious desire to remedy our ignorance arises? Well, what if we were to leave a room and discover that there was nothing outside the door? We must be completely shocked because we expect everything that exists to be part of something else, or at the least connected to something else: we expect the room to be part of a building, which is on a street, which is in a city. Now, individual sciences mark off pieces of the world and study them: electrons, plants, human societies, the laws of physics. But very soon one begins to wonder how the subject matter of one science connects to those of the others, and how they all fit together into a larger whole, much as we wonder how the room fits into the rest of the world. It is here that we begin to feel our ignorance. We realize we have only a piece, a fragment, a fraction of something, but we don’t understand the larger whole of which it is a part. Hence, if our ignorance pains us, it is not simply because we want *more* knowledge. Is it not rather because we want to understand how the knowledge we *already* have fits into a larger whole?

“...he would not have understood anything better, if he had seen more things; he would only have more to explain.” – George Santayana²⁹

²⁸ José Ortega y Gasset, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Mildred Adams (New York: Norton, 1960), 70.

²⁹ George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: Dover, 1955), 1.

Adding to our store of facts won't necessarily help us. To quote Emerson, "The world refuses to be analyzed by addition or subtraction."³⁰ We also have to *interpret* the facts. Indeed, the problem is not only that we have so many facts, but that we can interpret them in so many different ways. A storm, once observed, can be interpreted either as a collection of molecules, as a sign of climate change, or an act of God; a social movement as a series of relays along neural pathways, the inevitable reaction to a particular event, the culmination of the hard work of dedicated individuals, the outcome of a chain of events set into motion a hundred years earlier, or a particularly vivid example of a broader, worldwide trend. The facts lend themselves to being interpreted in many different ways. None of these interpretations excludes the others. Since the concepts and theoretical frameworks we use to analyze the world are varied and mutually compatible, we have to ask whether, as we develop new and increasingly complicated ways to analyze the world, we are getting closer to an unobstructed view of the underlying reality. With each new way of interpreting the facts, are we exposing the naked reality beneath? Or are we simply dressing it up in different clothes—in any clothes that "fit"? On the one hand, our knowledge certainly seems to grow as we develop different interpretations, and identify the many ways in which they "fit" the facts. On the other hand, we still remain in a state of relative ignorance with regard to why one interpretation should be favored over another, and this ignorance only seems to grow as interpretations proliferate—until we are ultimately forced to ask ourselves, "Is our knowledge increasing or is our ignorance?"

"...we cannot think of two things at the same time." – Blaise Pascal³¹

We cannot pay attention to one thing without paying less attention to another. Even when we listen to a sound, we focus on that sound to the exclusion of other sounds. We hear it by *not* hearing the others. Similarly, if we focus too intently on something we know, then we may begin to suffer from a kind of myopia. Consider a magnifying glass that brings one object into focus by blurring others at its periphery. When we put too much emphasis on one detail, we deemphasize the others, with the result that we not only see *them* less clearly, but that our perspective of the whole is distorted. This would explain why those people who "stick to what

³⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Intellect," in *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Library of America, 199), 194.

³¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, n.145.

they know,” and *only* to what they know, sometimes end up with a distorted picture of reality. It is why, according to Pascal, both the very old and the very young see things from a skewed perspective. This, he also remarks, applies no less to the very uneducated and the very educated.³²

“In those old days it was different. For then doubt was a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill to be acquired in either days or weeks.” – Søren Kierkegaard³³

The difficulties we face today extend to almost every sphere of life, even the ethical. Examine most ethical theories today, and you will see that they purport to instruct you how to choose among the various courses of action you can take in life. First, you just need to calculate all the costs and benefits of each option. There’s only one problem: Suppose you don’t know the cost and benefits of each option? How will you decide whether to march off to war or stay with your family? Whether to sacrifice a life to save two? Contrast these ethical theories with those of the ancient Greeks, and you immediately see the difference. The Greeks, far from supposing that all people were knowledgeable, taught people what they thought they needed to know in order to live *with* their ignorance. Plato taught us how to work toward goals we knew nothing about, the Stoics how to avoid error as much as possible, and the Skeptics how to simply accept our ignorance. Are there no such philosophers today?

Ignorance as Solution

“God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please—you can never have both.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson³⁴

The first step is to prevent knowledge from *becoming* ignorance. This is not easy. Just consider what knowledge *is*. Most kinds of “knowledge” are nothing more than ways of thinking that have become so ingrained that they have hardened over time, and become habits. Think of what you mean when you say you *know* the way home, *know* how to speak French, or *know*

³² Pascal, *Pensées*, n.72.

³³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), Preface, 5.

³⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Intellect,” in *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Library of America, 199), 195.

how to solve equations. To say that you “know” something is to say that you can perform a task, uninterrupted, without encountering setbacks, without having to revise your thinking or to adjust your behavior. For this reason, we tend to think of our knowledge as the part of our thinking that is reliable and that we won't ever have to change. And this is precisely the problem with knowledge: it is a time-saving device. It allows us to complete tasks with as little thought and effort as possible, while ignoring, or in relative ignorance of, other facts or considerations that might, indeed, be relevant. Hence knowledge can easily become ignorance. Knowledge can also become a kind of ignorance if it seems to “work” in certain contexts, in which it is neither challenged nor met with obstacles. If this knowledge is then relied upon at other times and places when it is not appropriate, then we are ignorantly applying our own thoughts and ideas, standards and values, to situations in which they simply “do not apply”: knowledge *becomes* ignorance.

“It seems that a man who has knowledge of something is ignorant of this very thing, not because of want of knowledge, but actually because of his knowledge.” – Plato³⁵

Today, we think of ignorance as the exact opposite of knowledge. It's the absence of knowledge. Knowledge is a full brain; ignorance an empty one. Yet if we look at the Latin word from which the English word derives, *ignorare*, we can see that, originally, people may have thought of ignorance as having more to do, either with failing to recognize, or misrecognizing something, especially something familiar. To use Plato's example, ignorance is *not* never having met Socrates or Theatetus. It is what happens when you either fail to recognize Socrates, or mistake Theatetus for Socrates. It's getting the wrong peg in the wrong hole. This is the kind of ignorance we witness in other people when they mistake injustice for justice, or bad for good. Put differently, if already mastered concepts are like pigeon coves, or birdhouses, and fleeting thoughts and perceptions are like pigeons, then ignorance happens when the wrong bird flies into the wrong cove. Of course, this idea has paradoxical implications: it seems to mean that it is, in part, *because* of the knowledge people possess *that* they are ignorant, leaving us to wonder, once again, “does knowledge make ignorant?”

³⁵ Plato, *Theatetus* 199d1.

“Freedom would not be not to choose between black and white but to abjure such proscribed choices.”
– Theodor Adorno³⁶

As science advances, more and more light is thrown onto the darkest corners of the universe; the shadows recede, and darkness gives way to light. But the more blinding the light science shines on the world, the more, it seems, what science cannot illuminate is plunged into total darkness. A sign of this change is that, today, if there is something about which we cannot attain accurate scientific knowledge, we immediately declare that there are no “objective” answers to such questions, and we treat them as though they were permanently shrouded in an impenetrable obscurity. Perhaps it is easier for us to say this than to admit that we are unsure whether our answers are the right ones, and thus admit our ignorance. After all, how can a person be ignorant of what nobody can know? In general, we no longer recognize that there are things about which we can be, in some ways knowledgeable, in some ways ignorant. Gone are the “grey areas.” In their place, we find a stark line separating the light from the dark: the things we can know from the things we cannot know. Students are taught what they can know; the rest, they are told, they cannot know. So they stay in the light, keep out of the dark, and never linger in the grey. Yet Adorno reminds us that we must linger in the grey to attain freedom.

“Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.” – Junichiro Tanizaki³⁷

Justice, Friendship, Love, Courage, Religion—these are among the things we esteem as some of the most beautiful and wonderful in life. They are certainly among the things we consider most worth striving for in life. But they are also some of the things about which we know least, whether it be how to strive for them, or how to know when we’ve attained them. Can it be a coincidence that some of the things that are most beautiful and wonderful in life, are also the things about which we know least? This is no coincidence, in fact. These things are linked, in our mind, with so many positive qualities, and have, in our imaginations, so many positive effects on our lives, that it is difficult to say what exactly they are, in and of themselves, as opposed to all the good things we tend to associate with them. But of course the fact that they

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), Ch. 85, 132.

³⁷ Junichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 46.

can't be easily defined makes them no less beautiful nor less worthy of being striven toward. Indeed, it is actually their beauty that makes them hard to define.

“Those who use it ruin it. Those who grab hold of it loose it.” – Laozi³⁸

Words like Justice, Friendship, Love, Courage, Religion—these words, as we have said, can't be easily defined. We realize this when we try to pin down their exact meaning. We see that, however we try to define them, we end up defining them so narrowly that the words no longer have the same meaning. We can't gain knowledge of them without destroying the very thing we are trying to gain knowledge of. They are like butterflies that we can catch only by crushing. It might be thought that, if we keep an open mind about these words' meaning, we are left with no direction in life. In fact, the person who says she can't define friendship, and who refuses to say that friendship is simply *this* or *that*—simply being useful to friends or making them feel good—*she* is likely to think that friendship is *this and that*, and “all of the above.” This is to say, she most likely keeps a long list of the characteristics that are distinctive of a good friendship, or the qualities she looks for in a friend, from which she refuses to exclude any that might be important. It is with constant reference to this list that she measures her own friendships, examining them to see by how many of these qualities they are characterized, and whether they lack any. If anyone, then, it is perhaps she who professes herself ignorant of, and unable to define friendship, who in fact holds herself and her friends to the highest standards of friendship. Meanwhile, those who define friendship reduce it to simply *this* or *that*, and in so doing, perhaps reduce it to something it is not.

“Because they liked it, they desired to illuminate it. They illuminated it without illuminating the other, and so ended up in the obscurity of paradox.” – Zhuangzi³⁹

The Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi speaks of a school of musicians whose masters had a strong preference for a certain kind of music. The masters carefully explained this musical form to their students, describing it as music in its “purest form.” However, they ended up

³⁸ Laozi, *Dao De Jing* Ch. 29, in *Readings In Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip Ivanhoe and Bryan Van Norden (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001), 173.

³⁹ Zhunagzi Ch. 2., in *Readings In Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip Ivanhoe and Bryan Van Norden (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001), 214. *Trans. mod.*

teaching their students that other kinds of music were not music at all, and their pupils ended up confused, bound up with and tied to this particular musical tradition. This story offers an example of how, in attempting to shed light on something, we can often push something else into the background: by learning about one kind of music the students become ignorant of other kinds. But more than that, the students not only become ignorant about other kinds of music, in a way, they become ignorant of what music *is*. All this because they study music in its “purest form.”

“The intellect is a whole, and demands integrity in every work. This is resisted equally by a man’s devotion to a single thought, and by his ambition to combine too many.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson⁴⁰

Let us think of the human mind as a problem-solving machine. We can see that by exposing the human mind to more and more information, we increase the amount of information it must sort through in order to find a solution to a given problem. Of course, the more information it has at its disposal, the more likely it is, either, by rummaging around in the available data, or by using the information at hand to work out a solution. Hence, as the information the mind is exposed to increases, so too do the number of solutions available to it, and the likelihood of its discovering them. On the other hand, if the human mind has too much information, it will simply have too much to process, and it will fail to find a solution. Hence, as the flow of information increases, the likelihood of finding a solution also *decreases*. Indeed, the mind is paralyzed by the influx of incoming data. As Raymond Dean points out, this has obvious implications for education.⁴¹ The mind must be exposed neither to too much, nor too little information. It can gradually be fed more information over time. However, once a threshold is reached past which point there is too much information to be usefully processed, the mind must close itself off to the flow of information until it can sort through all the available data. In short, if the human mind is a data-processing machine, its efficiency requires ignorance.

“Without forgetting, it is quite impossible to live at all.” – Friedrich Nietzsche⁴²

⁴⁰ Emerson, “Intellect,” 194.

⁴¹ Raymond Dean, “Optimizing Uncertainty,” *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability and the Limits of Knowledge*, eds. Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 81-100.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 10.

Freud recognized early in his career that the conscious mind can only lend its attention to a small fraction of the incoming information it receives from the external environment; the rest of the information either has to be processed by the unconscious mind, or otherwise “filtered out.” Nietzsche pointed out that forgetting is a variation of this phenomenon. He claimed that forgetfulness is not just what happens to us when we either don’t remember, or can’t remember, to bring certain thoughts to mind. Forgetfulness, he asserted, is actually a positive ability that some people have, an active ability to suppress unwanted or intrusive thoughts, “to shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while.”⁴³ Without this ability, he said, a person would be too busy with his or her own ideas and memories to do any of the things we think of as characteristically human, whether it be to deliberate, to prioritize, or to resolve to take a certain course of action. It is his recommendation therefore that we occasionally impose ignorance upon ourselves.

*“I have heard the words of a butcher and learned how to care for life!” – Zhuangzi*⁴⁴

One problem we face is that we have become so accustomed to thinking of only certain kinds of knowledge as “true knowledge,” that we are not likely to consider some other kinds of knowledge as “knowledge” at all. What some call “knowledge,” others call “ignorance,” and vice versa. Having recognized this, some Chinese philosophers presented, as models of wisdom, simple, apparently ignorant people: a swimmer who somehow manages to avoid being crushed on the rocks, a hunchback who catches cicadas with a long pole, and a cook who butchers a carcass with remarkable ease. When these people are asked to explain how they do what they do, it becomes clear that they don’t have a simple “formula for success.” They can’t even explain why what they do works. But they know how to achieve maximal results with minimal effort, how to deal with obstacles, and most importantly, how to focus on their task without distraction. This is why, as the story goes, a great lord, upon hearing a butcher describe the way he wielded his knife, suddenly exclaimed that he had learned from him all the secrets of life.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1989), 57.

⁴⁴ *Zhuangzi* Ch. 3, 220.

“We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see” – Ralph Waldo Emerson⁴⁵

As every educator knows, learning is as much about learning as unlearning. In order to think correctly about something, I must first unlearn anything I might have been previously taught that would prevent me from seeing the matter correctly. I must clear away my preconceptions and biases. I must restrain myself from making unwarranted assumptions, or from jumping to unwarranted conclusions. As Mahatma Gandhi was supposed to have said, “Truth by nature is self-evident. As soon as you remove the cobwebs of ignorance that surround it, it shines clear.” Every religious tradition contains a version of this idea. Religions differ only in terms of what each claims to be the greatest obstacle standing between us and an unobstructed view of the truth. For one tradition, it is desires, or attachments, that most obstruct our view of the truth; for others, the senses; and for others, the ego. In one sense, these things obscure our view of reality and prevent us from seeing it as it truly is, so we could say that they *make* us ignorant. Yet, in another sense, seeing the truth requires us to remove these obstacles. This of course requires us to forget or un-learn everything we previously knew. So we could also say that the *removal* of these obstacles makes us ignorant, and thus, able to see the truth.

“It is desire that engenders thought.” – Plotinus⁴⁶

José Ortega y Gasset once pointed out that learning is very similar to loving. When we love someone, we can't just think of a person the way *we* want them to be, much less force them to be that way. Actually, we don't want to: we want to know this new person better and better, and we want them to show us who they are. Sometimes, in order to facilitate this process, we very unselfishly put all thought of ourselves aside, simply in order to get to know the person better. It's strange that we do this before we really know the person. But we do it nonetheless because we have the feeling that, once we do, we will discover something about the person that will change relationship to him or her—that will change *us*. And then, we won't mind having put all our current priorities aside in order to peruse this person, because, by that time, all our priorities will have been turned upside down. Now, the same thing

⁴⁵ Emerson, “Intellect,” 189.

⁴⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* V.6.5.9.

applies to learning. I cannot approach the subject matter I am studying, viewing it from the perspective of my current concerns and preconceptions: then, I'll never see it for what it is. Indeed, that would be beside the point, since I hope to discover something that will *change* my concerns and preconceptions. In this way, learning is not just *like* love; it actually *is*, at root, a kind of love, in the sense of a complete and utter openness and willingness to embrace something new and unknown, in the hopes that it will leave oneself a changed person. Indeed, the only thing that can ever conquer the fear of the unknown is love.

"To expect truth to come from thinking signifies that we mistake the need to think with the urge to know." – Hannah Arendt⁴⁷

Aristotle says all humans have an "urge to know"—literally, they "stretch and strain" in order to know—and it is this that leads them to search out the truth. But perhaps a desire, much deeper than this is the desire to find meaning in life. This is something we can only do by stopping and thinking. We think because we have to reflect on events, and people's actions, in order to tell ourselves a story about them—about what the people in the story were working toward, what they achieved, and what they showed us about themselves in particular, and human beings in general. Notice, however, that, by the time we are done thinking, we usually don't end up with knowledge, in the sense of beliefs that are true not false, and sometimes, by the time we have finished thinking, we end up knowing less than when we started. Yet, at the risk of ending up more ignorant than we previously were, we think.

Ignorance and Community

"Those who are merely instruments for others' knowledge are not trusted, even if they are believed."
–Cynthia Townley⁴⁸

We can't know everything. We must therefore enter into knowledge-sharing relationships which allow us to exchange information and increase our collective pool of knowledge. While,

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 61.

⁴⁸ Cynthia Townley, "Toward a Reevaluation of Ignorance," *Hypatia* Vol. 21 No. 3 (Summer 2006): 37-55. The ideas to follow can be found in Townley's essay.

in one respect, this division of labor means that each person's knowledge increases, in another, it means that each remains ignorant, having delegated to others the task of acquiring and storing knowledge on his or her behalf. When it comes to relationships such as these, we are constantly confronted with a choice: to trust other people or not to trust them. The decision whether to trust, or not, is difficult because, in the long term, we may learn more by trusting than by doubting others. Maintaining such relationships, despite their flaws, is often a more effective means of increasing our knowledge than trying to gather information by ourselves. By not trusting others, or by attempting to verify their claims, we may, it's true, gain access to a piece of knowledge—but at a cost. For instance, if a friend were to question, or to “check up on” her friend's claims to see whether they could be corroborated, she could be accused of not trusting her friend, and her friend might become hesitant to confide in her or to speak freely in her company. Similarly, the price we may pay for doubting or scrutinizing other people's testimony may be the break-down of relationships with those from whom we stand to learn a great deal—perhaps even more than any single piece of information we could otherwise acquire by doubting them. So if the price we pay for belonging to a community of learners is a certain degree of ignorance, it may be worth our while nonetheless.

“An ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting...situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernable to the average individual.” –Aldo Leopold⁴⁹

Conservationist and philosopher Aldo Leopold once claimed that human beings became moral beings when they realized their ignorance—their ignorance, in particular, of the possible effects of their actions, and how they might ripple outward. They realized that anything they did, especially anything that injured fellow members of their community, could set off a chain reaction. One theft, one murder and this could trigger a series of events, the result of which could be that the ties binding the community were irreparably frayed. Who could tell where it could end? Now, if human beings could predict exactly what they could interfere with, or destroy, without also destroying the fabric of society, they would. But as it is, human beings can never guess exactly what the consequences of their actions will be, or whether or not

⁴⁹ Aldo Leopold. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 202.

their actions will backfire. Faced with this situation, humans have had to relinquish the “conqueror mentality”. People with a “conqueror mentality” think they know how to manipulate people or things in their communities for their own benefit. Why *did*, and why *do*, most human beings eventually outgrow this mentality? “Because,” says Leopold, “it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community’s clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves”⁵⁰ In other words, human beings realize that they cannot tamper with the workings of their communities without inadvertently inconveniencing or injuring themselves. What would be the alternative to this mentality? To acknowledge that our welfare is intimately bound up with that of other community members; that we are essentially ignorant of the many ways in which the people and things in our communities effect, and are effected by one another; and that, no matter how much knowledge we possess, we cannot endanger their welfare without potentially endangering our own. Indeed, according to Leopold, it is precisely in situations such as these, in which we cannot reliably calculate the effects of our action, that we *must* adopt an “ethic” or a “moral code.” In doing so, we fall back on general agreements, which, by following, we can safely mitigate, as much as possible, the potentially negative repercussions of our actions. If Leopold is right, then, it is necessary to acknowledge one’s ignorance in order to be moral—indeed, to be a good community member.

*“The key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me, as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together.” – John Dewey*⁵¹

As we work with others toward collective goals, and enlist others’ support in helping to achieve these goals, it is a practical necessity to, at the same time, consider these goals from the perspective of other people. This means admitting that our own perspective is limited and incomplete. Hence the close connection that is said to exist between democracy and the willingness to admit one’s ignorance. But it might also be said that democracy, and indeed, collective action in general, is as much the condition for admitting one’s own ignorance, as

⁵⁰ Ibid., 204.

⁵¹ John Dewey, “On Democracy,” excerpted from John Dewey, “Democracy and Educational Administration,” *School and Society* 45 (April 3, 1937); 457-67.

admitting one's own ignorance is the condition for collective action. Imagine a world in which everyone busied themselves with nothing but routine technical and administrative work. If nobody engaged in collective action, then, most likely, few opportunities would arise to ask who was doing what, for what purpose, and with what results. There would be no reason to try and see things from the perspective of others. In short, a world without collective action would be one in which we never ran up against the limits of our own perspective, nor fathomed the depths of our own ignorance. Collective action, it seems, provides the raw materials for thought, and thus, for the acknowledgement of ignorance.

I have tried to offer, above, a more complicated picture of the relationship between knowledge and ignorance, wherein an increase in knowledge does not necessarily imply a corresponding decrease in ignorance. This confirms that knowledge can in fact lead to an increase in ignorance, and that vice versa, ignorance can lead to an increase in knowledge.

In the final section, I have taken note of a few respects in which ignorance is contingent on and constitutive of the formation of communities of scholars or pigeon flocks—facts important to remember in an age in which knowledge and autonomy have tended to take precedence over ignorance and community.

Contributors

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Robin WEISS received her Ph.D. from DePaul University, and taught most recently at Mount Allison University in Canada. She specializes in ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy, and in Roman Stoicism in particular, where it relates to the connection between thought and action. She has written on how the Stoics understood practical, as opposed to theoretical, intelligence, and also how it was understood by their predecessor, Aristotle. Her interests extend to the differing ways in which this connection has been taken up by subsequent thinkers, who have variously described it—in the traditions of Continental Philosophy and American Pragmatism—as the connection between knowing and doing, truth and subjectivity, theory and praxis.

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