

Moral Dimensions of Classroom Discourse: A Deweyan Perspective

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In his inquiry on moral theory, Dewey draws a critical distinction between what he terms “customary” and “reflective” morality. He describes customary morality as received moral codes which are handed down unquestioningly through “ancestral habit,”¹ while reflective morality involves conscious deliberation, reason and thought. For Dewey, the distinction between the two tendencies is “as important as it is definite, for it shifts the centre of gravity in morality.”² He asserts that one reason that Greek thought continues to hold our interest is that it allows us to witness the struggle to make the transition from customary to reflective conduct:

In the Platonic dialogues for example Socrates is represented as constantly raising the question of whether morals can be taught....[He] in effect points out the need of a morality which shall be stable and secure because based upon constant and universal principles....The essence of morals, it is implied, is to know the reason for these customary instructions; to ascertain the criterion which insures their being just.³

It was in this spirit of inquiry that those of us recently taking a graduate level education class on moral aspects of teaching and schooling approached our final course reading, Plato’s dialogue, *Gorgias*. The dialogue deals with Socrates’ objection to the Sophists, whom he accuses of using rhetoric which appeals to passion over reason. It also raises fundamental questions about justice and morality — whether it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, whether might is right. As the class discussion unfolded, several members expressed discomfort with Socrates’ approach, and there seemed to be agreement among them that he was calculating and manipulative. Terms such as “mind-game,” and “maze” were used to describe how he disarmed his opponents. One person said, “I know what it feels like to be in an argument with someone like Socrates. You just want to say, ‘Okay, you’re right. You win.’” Another class member accused Socrates himself of being a Sophist. Clearly the dialogue generated a lot of emotion. While I would not say that these emotional responses dominated the classroom discourse, the accusations nonetheless lent a distinct flavor to the three hour discussion, and there were moments when the conversation became encumbered. Looking back on the class session, it seems to me that Dewey’s distinction between customary and reflective morality was relevant on two levels: first, as a way of looking at the discourse within the dialogue itself, and also as a way of looking at the classroom discourse. That is, reflective thought gave rise to nuanced and expanded discussion, while “customary” responses, responses which seemed formed out of habit, tended to confine discussion. This point may seem self-evident. If, however, one agrees with Dewey that “[t]he moral quality of knowledge lies not in possession, but in concern with increase,”⁴ it is critical to explore what makes for meaningful and responsible classroom discourse.

The problem of maintaining substantive, creative classroom discourse is a complex one with a number of moral implications, not the least of which is how one

orients oneself toward a text in the first place. In fact, my classmates are not the first to accuse Socrates of rhetorical manipulation:

It has often been noted that Socrates sometimes appears to be less than fully candid with his interlocutors. Although he presents himself as engaged in a disinterested inquiry designed to arrive at the truth concerning some matter of importance, his real agenda, as we have noted, often seems to be to debunk smug pretensions to knowledge....Socrates often seems to know the end of a line of inquiry at its very beginnings; and even as he tries to convey that he is proceeding offhandedly, one has the sense that he...is setting traps for those conversing with him. What are we to say about this charge of deception?⁵

Pekarsky's question is especially pertinent to a course on morality and teaching. I am inclined, perhaps naively, to take Socrates at his word when he says "I am simply your fellow-explorer in the search for truth, and if somebody who contradicts me is obviously right I shall be the first to give way."⁶ However, let's assume for the moment that the charge of deception is legitimate. It raises further questions which were not raised during our discussion. For example, is it true that we cannot separate the form of the argument from its substance? If indeed deception did occur, could it be justified in terms of a larger goal, that of moral edification?

These are legitimate questions, and yet in my view even they tend to overlook an important point, which is that the protests — the accusations of trap-building and sleight of hand — can too easily become the object of discussion, taking on a disproportionate weight when compared to the gravity of the moral problems that the text raises. While there may be legitimate moral concerns about Socrates' means to his end, so there are moral implications to responding emotionally without sufficiently examining those emotions. As Dewey cautions, "a strong emotional appreciation seems at the time to be its own reason and justification,"⁷ but informed judgment requires much more. That is, to accuse Socrates of sophistry requires more than reiteration of that view. It is a serious charge, particularly because it is the very dangers of sophistry that Socrates professes to expose, and as such it requires serious thought and explanation. Dewey describes the relationship between emotion and thought as a progression:

First our affections go out to something in attraction or repulsion; we like and dislike. Then experience raises the question whether the object in question is what our esteem or disesteem to it to be, whether it is such as to justify our reaction to it.⁸

Whether one believes that the text reveals the Truth or tentative truths, a purely emotional response stands as a barrier to richer understanding and insight, not just for the individual, but for the class as well. If something in Socrates' manner reminds us of times when we have felt bull-dozed in a conversation, that is one thing; it is quite another to then, as one person did, feel sorry for Polus, Socrates' young foil — and would be tyrant — who says at one point:

To listen to you, Socrates, one might think that you wouldn't be glad to have the opportunity of doing what you please in the state rather than not, and that you don't envy a man who can kill or confiscate or imprison at will.⁹

It is at this point where emotions become self-confining, a trap of their own sort, because they prevent one from seeing beyond one's personal experience. This kind of response brings up the critical question of where the self leaves off and the text begins. What is the reader responding to? Is it the dialogue? Or is it really only

something in the reader herself, for which the dialogue has been nothing more than a catalyst?

While in some sense, one cannot respond to a text except as a “self,” it is important to recognize that the text is an object separate from oneself. We do not need to believe that there is an objective truth to uncover in the text, in order to believe that there is a text which exists as an object. Morrissey explains the dynamic relationship between the reader and the text as object:

It is not just that the text is an object, however; it is an object that calls to us; it needs a reader to “realize” itself — to mean something it must mean something to — and thus by its very nature it beckons to us. After being “looked at” it must be “looked into.” ...Seeing is an activity of the sense and not of the mind, more a sensitivity than an intellectual construction.¹⁰

Insight, then, taken literally, requires “looking into” the text, looking for clues that either support or refute our intuitive response. One is then objective in the sense that one makes a good faith attempt to orient oneself toward the text itself as an object existing outside of oneself, like the sun.

According to Bricker it is this aesthetic faculty which is at work when one is faced with a morally charged situation:

that is, it is a matter of letting the most striking feature of a situation catch one’s eye much as we let the aesthetically prominent features of a painting capture our attentions when we perceive beauty. A visual ability is at work here, not an ability to reason.¹¹

Bricker contends that although the ability to see is natural, “the preoccupations reflected in what adults see are not natural because they evolve through learning and self-examination.”¹² Educating the ability to discern the morally salient features of a situation is analogous to educating the ability to perceive beauty, which Bricker describes as “a long process involving, among other things, description of what one thinks one sees, analysis of the relationships between elements within a perceptual field, and comparison of one’s aesthetic perceptions with the perceptions of others.”¹³

Vallance provides a vivid illustration of how a person’s aesthetic perception can be changed by being shown the historical evolution of an artist’s work. She takes her viewers from Mondrian’s landscapes to his famous grids, showing how Mondrian “gradually abstracted his large leafy trees into increasingly horizontal and vertical patterns...eventually dropping all visible reference to the natural world.”¹⁴ She reports that seeing the progression provokes startled gasps from audience members, a dramatic illustration of how clarity of vision evokes emotional as well as cognitive responses. It seems to me that this educative process is a powerful example of what Bricker refers to above. The viewer learns to see things that she had not been able to see before and, says Bricker, as viewers become better at seeing the salient features before them, so too they become “better at verbalizing what they see so that others may know how things look to them.”¹⁵

In their study of the moral life of schools Jackson et al. found that the objective-subjective distinction was limiting for their particular purposes, preferring instead Umberto Eco’s distinction of *open* and *closed*. An open description “is one that invites further reflection or commentary; one that is closed does not.”¹⁶ Through

continued exploration of a text or speech, one may find reason to reject what was said or written, but “more typically . . . the initial statement or document becomes enriched through continued thought. Our understanding of it deepens. We begin to see within it aspects that were not apparent at first.”¹⁷ Again the concept of sight is central. A classroom conversation can provide multiple opportunities to see things anew, to perceive what one previously could not. To perceive literally means to take thoroughly (from the Latin *per* — thoroughly; *capere* — to take). To do so first requires that one receive, that is be receptive to possibilities — to possess and express a willingness to see and be shown and, as Bricker suggests above, to show others.

No one can prescribe how others should see a text, but classroom discourse is at its most fruitful when readers form an agreement (whether spoken or unspoken) to adopt, at least tentatively, what Jackson et al. describe as “a sympathetic bias”¹⁸ toward the reading. While they employ the term to describe their respectful orientation toward the teachers and students they observe, it is a concept which I think could usefully be applied in approaching a text, for it entails “a loosening up or a relaxing of the tendency to rush to judgment.”¹⁹ If we approach *Gorgias* not with reverence, but with a sympathetic bias, we will ask many questions about our intuitive responses. If we feel that Socrates is laying a verbal trap, we will ask why we feel that way. Is there something in the text we can point to so that we can show others what may have sparked this feeling? Suppose we find tentative evidence in the text to substantiate our intuitive reaction? Then what? This is a critical juncture which may lead us to further thought and reflection, an “open” search for further insights, or we may stop, remaining “closed” to further questioning. A sympathetic bias would encourage us to ask “Why would Socrates want to entrap his interlocutors?” “What can we learn from this dialogue despite our discomfort with his methods?” A sympathetic bias sets the stage for choice, for active construction of meaning; it does not dismiss emotions, but urges us to evaluate them and so avoid the temptation of premature conclusions. As Dewey observes, “We prefer spontaneously, we choose deliberately, knowingly.”²⁰ Moreover, the kind of choices we make in reading a text and in talking about it have implications far beyond the immediate classroom discourse. For, according to Dewey, each choice, however inconsequential it may seem in the moment, “reveals the existing self and . . . forms the future self.”²¹

Emotions provide information which cannot and should not be discarded from classroom discourse; they bring vitality and community to our shared enterprise. The emotional investment of many of the participants (myself included) is testament to the enduring quality of Plato’s dialogues. They are not museum pieces, displayed before us to be admired but not touched. Rather, their ideas generate a vital, present interest involving the essence of our humanity. In our class they generated a sincere effort to grapple with the questions Socrates raises. But the best classroom discourse takes place when we hold each other accountable for our assertions, when emotions are viewed as a starting point, not as a self-justified end, and where we feel responsible to ourselves and to our fellow inquirers to buttress our assertions with explanations. As Midgley writes:

What explanation does is to specify. It does not just make a claim and emphasise it. It shows in detail what *kind* of recommendation that claim has. *It makes sense of the feeling* rather than just expressing and defending it. And it functions both ways between positions, so that each respondent, by listening, finds out how to become more intelligible to the other.²²

In short, while we cannot *care* about a dialogue the same way we would care about a person, while the text has no “rights” per se, we can nonetheless develop an ethic of responsibility both in reading a text and in building a shared understanding of it with, to use Socrates’ phrase, our “fellow-explorer[s] in the search for truth.”

1. John Dewey, “The Nature of Moral Theory,” *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 1, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 162.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 163.

4. John Dewey, “Moral Judgment and Knowledge,” *John Dewey: The Later Works*, 269.

5. Daniel Pekarsky, “Socratic Teaching: A Critical Assessment,” *Journal of Moral Education* 23, no. 2 (1994): 119-34.

6. Plato, *The Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 115.

7. John Dewey, “Moral Judgment and Knowledge,” *John Dewey: The Later Works*, 269.

8. *Ibid.*, 264.

9. Plato, *Gorgias*, 52.

10. Robert Morrissey, “Jean Starobinski and Otherness” (introductory essay), in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), xx.

11. David C. Bricker, “Character and Moral Reasoning: An Aristotelian Perspective,” in *Ethics for Professionals in Education*, ed. Kenneth A. Strike and P. Lance Ternesky (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 15.

12. *Ibid.*, 19.

13. *Ibid.*, 22.

14. Elizabeth Vallance, “Mondrian as Metaphor: Mondrian, Museums and Curriculum Work,” in *Reflections from the Heart of Educational Inquiry*, ed. William H. Schubert and George Willis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 233.

15. Bricker, “Character and Moral Reasoning,” 22.

16. Philip W. Jackson, Robert E. Boostrom, and David T. Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 49.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 258.

19. *Ibid.*, 267.

20. Dewey, “The Moral Self,” *John Dewey: The Later Works*, 286.

21. *Ibid.*, 287.

22. Mary Midgley, *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 149, (italics added).