

January 2006

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Recommended Citation

Qazi, Wasim Dr. and Rawat, Khalid, "A Phenomenological Interpretation of John Dewey's View on Education" (2006). *Curriculum and Instruction Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. Paper 57.
http://encompass.eku.edu/ci_fsresearch/57

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A phenomenological interpretation of John Dewey's views on Education

A phenomenological interpretation of John Dewey's views on Education

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Abstract:

[Education in our times is promoting nihilism. The reason for this conclusion is that modern education is largely knowledge based and asks the learner to learn ideas that have nothing in common with the reality of the learner. Knowledge, on the other hand, does not enjoy absolute value, and, to say that a person who has more knowledge is more valuable is wrong. John Dewey's criticism on traditional education is equally valid for modern education, for modern education is not performing its functions properly. The function of education is to establish a strong relationship between learner and Being. However, modern education through its emphasis on remote ideas and values, is working to weaken this relationship. Dewey's ideas about education can prove a palliative in this ailing situation. Following article tries to investigate the meaning of nihilism in education and its possible remedy through Dewey's experience based education.]

There are two important questions regarding the title of this article that are to be addressed at the outset. The first question that the title of this article raises is about its own possibility. The question is whether such a title is possible or not. Heidegger himself has used such a title for one of his famous works. The title of that work was: A Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's critique of Pure Reason. Thus, this title suggests that the title itself is legitimate.

The second question is about the task that an article or study bearing the title, A Phenomenological Interpretation of John Dewey's Views on Education, should or possibly can undertake. This question can again be answered through the analogy that the present work bears with that of Heidegger. In his work on Kant's critique of pure reason Heidegger set himself the question; in what way Kant's critique of Pure Reason helps us in arriving at an understanding of Being? ¹ Thus, in a similar fashion a phenomenological interpretation of John Dewey's views on education should give us some idea of how Dewey's views on education help us in establishing a strengthened relationship between the learner and Being. The question that this study undertakes is that, in what way Dewey's views on education can enable a learner to understand Being?

Heidegger has shown his discontent with Western philosophic tradition on the account that it severed the relationship between man and Being. Heidegger says that Western philosophic tradition learned to view Being under the yoke of ideas and thus undermined Being itself. Thus, in this way, Western philosophical tradition resulted in a complete neglect of Being. This absence of the question of Being in the Western philosophic tradition culminated in the philosophy of nihilism, which signifies a complete negation of Being.²

Nihilism means that the ideas and values preached conventionally have nothing in common with the existing reality. The very experience of an individual contradicts the ideas and values that a person has received or learned through education. Thus, human experience in our times is resulting in the negation of the extant values and ideas. This, in return results in the feeling that nothing is valuable in this world. Moreover, this contradiction of the ideas through one's experience, or through the ground realities that one faces, suggests that there is no meaning in the existing world, for, the experienced reality does not correspond to any established notion or ideal.

For instance the notion of justice, the ideal meaning of justice, seldom enters one's perception during one's experience with the existing institutions of justice. Kafka's Trial furnishes the best example for this case scenario, when he showed the real content of a person's encounter with the institution of justice. The experience portrayed in Kafka's Trial suggests that the experienced reality did not correspond with the ideal; the notion of justice does not match the reality.

History of literature and philosophic endeavors of the existentialists are pervaded with such examples when the existing reality completely defies the ideal. For instance Foucault's interpretation of prison and medical and psychiatric practices tells us that there is a huge gap between the notion we have of these things in our minds and the realities corresponding to these notions.

Thus, correspondence theory of truth that asks for the conformity of the reality with the idea, actually results in the conclusion that there is nothing in the world that corresponds to its ideal and thus, there is nothing true and valuable in this world. This is what nihilism suggests; a complete absence of values and Being.

In Western philosophic tradition that begins from Plato, knowledge primarily is the knowledge of essences or ideas. This knowledge requires a certain epistemology that asks a learner to defy his experiences and to have faith in the pre-existing ideals. Things that appear in the real world are differentiated on the basis of ideas or essences that a person knows through reason. For, knowledge is the knowledge of ideas which are arrived at through rational activity.

Things in the real world are nothing but imperfect copies of the ideas that a person already knows. Thus, truth becomes a matter of correspondence between the idea that a person has of some thing and the real existence of that thing in the world.

Thus, existing reality, if it differs from the established ideal, can no longer be considered as truth. In such cases the entity that displays differences from the ideal or the conventional notion is to be criticized and corrected. Such a criticism usually results either in the denial of the reality or in the conclusion that all meanings and values have disappeared. Thus, Platonic idealism does not accept differences. Since, Plato remained a vital influence in the history of Western thought; therefore, Western thought has a tendency of not accepting the differences between ideal and the real and displays an attitude that undermines existence. This sort of idealism resulted in a denial of existence.

Platonic thought, according to Nietzsche, is a philosophy of denial.³

This philosophy of denial has also influenced modern educational practices. Modern education largely relies on Platonic idealism as a philosophy. Plato has described the meaning of educational process in his famous Allegory of the Cave. According to Plato education prepares the learner for the knowledge of metaphysical truth, the idea.⁴ Since this knowledge results from pure reflection alone, therefore, a learner is required to defy his immediate experience with the reality along with the knowledge that results from this immediate experience. In doing so Plato imposes a morality on the learner that allows a learner to believe, or at least accept, that his reality is inferior to the ideal. The ideal person on the other hand is a spiritual, passive reflective being that does not take any interest in the existing things (particulars) and always remains preoccupied with the universals (ideas).

Thus, modern education sets an ideal for the learner to achieve. This ideal, since it is a pure ideal, can never exist in the reality and, voluntarily or involuntarily, involves an individual in a vain effort. The correspondence theory of truth asks a learner to meet the ideal requirements that are neither achievable nor are worthy of any achievement. Those who have the authority to judge people, in most of the cases, have unsurpassable standards in their minds, which no human being can possibly excel.

Thus, existence always remains less valuable as compared to the ideas. This stern idealism gives birth to a conservative mind in the sense that a person who looks at the existing reality through the spectacle of pre-conceived ideas can never affirm the emergence of a new aspect of reality. The one who thinks that he or she already knows everything and reality cannot escape the set of ideas with which one is already familiar, can hardly experience a new phenomenon. Thus, such a mind can not contribute in the progress and development of humanity.

Let us consider again what Plato has said about education. According to Plato education prepares a learner for the knowledge of truth. And knowledge for Plato is the knowledge of essences or ideas. For Plato ideas are the true objects of knowledge and can be known through rational activity independent of any experience. This epistemology is considered as erroneous by Dewey, Nietzsche and Heidegger. For Dewey and Nietzsche Plato actually inverted the reality and considered cause as effect and vice versa. Ideas for these thinkers are products of a process of experience.

If ideas are products of experience, their creation needs intelligence and skill that can allow a person to extract valuable knowledge from one's experience with the reality. This skill of forming ideas from one's experience requires three abilities. First, the person should affirm his or her experience. Second, a person should acquire skill to construct valid and logical conclusions from one's experience and to give value to the things he encounters. Third, one should acquire the skill to communicate the knowledge thus constructed to other members of the society.

The above approach, based on Dewey's theory of inquiry, holds good for both individual

and cooperative efforts to construct knowledge and values. However, for Dewey, knowledge and values when they are produced through coordinated efforts of a community and shared by all, are more relevant as compared to the values and meanings imposed from a group of people or an individual, who does not belong to the knowledge producing class. Thus, Dewey thinks that knowledge should have a democratic character and should not be imposed from without. Knowledge and values, for Dewey are inseparable from the process of their construction, from the raw experience that is sifted to construct knowledge.

Dewey criticized Plato for giving a non-democratic concept of knowledge. Dewey clearly sees that Platonic philosophy represents the consciousness of a class of people who disregard the process of production. Thus, the class of free Greek people, instead of considering the fact that ideas are the outcomes of experience, considered experience as an outcome of ideas. Plato committed the fallacy of giving ideas an unjustified precedence over existence.

This Platonic fallacy that pervaded the Western philosophic history had following three implications:

- 1- It gave birth to nihilism
- 2- It weakened the individual through severing his relationship with Being
- 3- It gave knowledge an anti-democratic character

It is quite evident that modern education is based on Platonic philosophy. It teaches knowledge as a finished product and does not allow learners to pass through the process of experience. Modern education is not oriented towards product making; where as the product of educational process is knowledge. Rather, it asks the learner to retain and memorize knowledge and restricts the ability to create knowledge in the learners. Since it does not accept or bring under consideration the experience of a learner, therefore, it always tends to create a gap between one's experience of the existing reality and the ideas learned.

Since, modern education denies the importance of learner's experience therefore, it works to sever ones relationship with Being . It does not allow a learner to affirm Being other than as ideas. Ironically, the ideas learned seldom have their corresponding instances of existences in the real world. This allows the learner to think, and quite erroneously, that there is no meaning and value left in the world. Thus, modern education entails nihilism.

Dewey's educational philosophy provides us with a remedy to these problems. Dewey's education, based on project method, enables the learners to participate in the production process and allows them to become skillful in the creation of knowledge. Dewey's main emphasis is on the fact that a learner should be empowered through the provision of skills that are necessary for the construction and sharing of knowledge.

Dewey's education actually serves to strengthen the relationship between the individual and Being. For, it does not deny existence and accepts it in all its shades. It asks people to

follow their impulses in a socially acceptable manner. Thus, it does not restrict a person from admitting an unusual passion or drive that one finds oneself preoccupied with. Dewey does not deny anything, neither the modern nor the traditional dimensions of reality. Rather he asks to consider every aspect of existence on a pragmatic ground. On the other hand pragmatism accepts differences and it admits differences.

Since Dewey believes that formation of ideas is a result of experience therefore, it is difficult to lose touch with the reality. The knowledge thus formed always strengthens the relationship between man and Being. Dewey criticized Modern education or any education that does not relate a person with his reality.

What Dewey has said in his *Child and Curriculum* about the traditional curriculum appears true for modern curriculum as well. He says that traditional curriculum presents experiences of highly matured people and it does not relate to the experiences of children. Similarly, Modern curriculum is also knowledge based and it asks the learner to memorize knowledge. This knowledge has very little in common with the experience of a child. It contains ideas that have no correspondence with reality, or at least with the reality of the learner. Thus, those who learn such ideas lose contact with the reality. For, their knowledge contradicts what they experience and their experience contradicts what they know. And to make things even worse, children are also infected with the search for truth and doubt. This leads them to conclude that there is nothing valuable in this world.

The very believe in the authority of reason and the prevalence of doubt works against the knowledge itself. Knowledge cannot be retained with out faith and the removal of doubt. Reason does not accept faith and promotes doubt. Thus, for a learner, who learns through a curriculum that promotes reason and doubts at the expense of every thing else, the chances of affirming existence remain minimized.

A person who believes in the authority of science alone and is trained to defy his experiences for which no rational and scientific explanation can be given negates his own existence. For, there are many way to get in touch with the reality and reason is one among them. To say that only reasonable knowledge is true knowledge actually amounts to saying that reality is partial and it does not fully exists. For most part of the reality is approached through non-rational means.

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