Dewey, Derrida, and 'the Double Bind'

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> I recall that from the beginning the question of the trace was connected with a certain notion of labour, of doing and that what I called pragrammatology tried to link pragmatism and grammatology
>
> —Jacques Derrida[1]

The texts of Jacques Derrida seem inextricably connected to the word deconstruction, yet, Derrida insists, 'The word "deconstruction," like all other words, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions … The word has interest only … where it replaces and lets itself be determined by such other words as … "trace," "différance," "supplement"' (Kamuf, 1991, p. 275). The reader immediately senses the elusiveness of Derrida's thought. His writings do not limit themselves to merely making a point; they perform it. His texts, by virtue of both their singularity and their intrinsic relation to generality, perform the action of opening themselves to the incalculable, unpredictable, and the non-programmatic. They exhibit his effort to call a response by the 'other' for whose arrival they have opened the way. Always on the move, Derrida allows no word, no concept, and no non-concept to master him or inhibit the play of language. Derrida himself does not think deconstruction 'a good word' and concludes, 'It deconstructs itself' (Kamuf, pp. 274, 275). Derrida lives in a world without a stable center. Everyone does; that is one lesson his philosophy teaches.

Explicating the texts of Derrida is exhausting enough; doing the same for the often-misunderstood texts of Dewey multiplies the difficulty. Combining them so as to reflect each critically in the mirror of the 'other' seems almost foolhardy; like fools, I rush in. Substituting 'trace' for 'différance' the following passage provides some excuse for my folly: 'We must begin wherever we are and the thought of the trace … has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be' (Derrida, 1976, p. 162). It is possible to trace a series of substitutions forever. For Derrida there is no master word, no ultimate foundation of meaning that must end the series. I begin within texts signed 'Jacques Derrida' where I believe it fruitful for educators to begin. I begin with a discussion of 'différance' and the ethical, political, and institutional nature of Derrida's thought.

Différance and the Place of the Ethical, Political, and Institutional in Derrida

Derrida (1982) starts his explication of différance with a description of the function of the sign:

> The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, 'thing' here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence … The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence. (p. 9)

Derrida deconstructs anything—transcendental consciousness, transcendent object (or Deity), or facts of nature—that presents itself as some kind of cosmic fixed point, eternal truth, or unalterable meaning. Dewey (1940/1991) insists, 'The eternal and immutable is the consummation of mortal man's quest for certainty' (pp. 98–99). Derrida deconstructs the quest for certainty, or what he calls 'the transcendental signified,' the belief that there is some eternal, immutable, and final reference for discourse, writing, or inquiry. Logocentrism, for Derrida, just means the immediate presence of a perfectly self-identical meaning or object; especially the immediately present object of pure knowledge. Logocentrism presumes that inquiry may complete the quest for certainty and arrive at an immediately present, self-identical object of thought or reason.

Différance indicates a double meaning in all language. First, there is 'difference;' the sign is different from the signified. Second, there is 'deferred presence.' For structuralist thinkers any system of signs (e.g. a theory, a text, a narrative) eventually terminates either in some master word in the system or in some 'transcendental signified,' that is, something outside the symbolic system to which all the symbols individually or in grammatical combination refer (see Derrida, 1976, p. 158). The transcendental signified terminates the play of signs because it is, supposedly, the presence of the indubitable self-identical thing, the referent. Derrida denies the existence of the transcendental signified, thereby challenging Western metaphysics. Derrida (1978), though, does understand the desire to escape the anxiety of uncertainty:

> The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of the certitude anxiety can be mastered … a history—whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence. (p. 279)

The promise is false, but the human need is real.

Against those who condemn him as merely de\structive, Derrida argues, 'Deconstruction certainly entails a moment of affirmation. Indeed, I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not. Deconstruction always presupposes affirmation' (see Kearney, 1984, p. 118). Derrida is quite clear about what he wants to affirm; deconstruction, for him, is 'an openness towards the other' (see Kearney, 1984,

p. 124). Deconstruction problematizes because it constantly points away from itself toward absence and otherness. It welcomes in advance the excluded 'other.' Derrida states deconstruction's affirmation thus:

> I mean that deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it. Deconstruction is therefore vocation—a response to a call. The other, as the other than self, the other that opposes self-identity … The other precedes philosophy and necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin. It is in this rapport with the other that affirmation expresses itself. (in Kearney, 1995, p. 168)

Deconstruction urges recognition and respect for what is different, left out, or queer. It is this positive response to the 'other,' to those persons and situations different from the 'norm' that, in writing my paper, I want most to urge educators to consider. What is called for is not the arrogance of institutionalized knowledge with its rigid standards, categories, and identities, but acknowledgement, respect, and, perhaps, recognition.

There is no ultimate beginning or ending in Derrida's world; nor is there a bottom (or top) to Being. Derrida (1978) rejects the metaphysics of invariable presence and its retinue:

> The entire history of the concept of structure … must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center … It could be shown that all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence—*eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) … (pp. 279–280)

Eidos refers to something's characteristic form, or essence. *Arche* refers to ultimate origin, foundation, or first principle. *Energeia* is the functioning of a capacity or potential to achieve its fulfillment and actualization. It conjoins with *entelecheia*; that is, the capacity or force to achieve its perfect self-actualization. For instance, a properly functioning acorn will become a giant oak. *Telos* refers to completion, end, or purpose; it also connects with *entelecheia*. *Ousia* refers to ultimate substance or subject.

In an essay on 'Metaphysics and Essence', Derrida (1978) urges,

> *Respect* for the other *as what it is*: other. Without this acknowledgment, which is not a knowledge, or let us say without this 'letting-be' of an existent (Other) as something existing outside me in the essence of what it is (first in its alterity), no ethics would be possible. … The 'letting-be' concerns all possible forms of the existent and even those which, by essence, cannot be transformed into 'objects of comprehension. (p. 138)

This is ontological respect and openness to what one does not understand. Education is an ethical practice and ethical relations begin in respect for the particular, even if unknowable, being of other beings. Logocentrism drives out difference; it

reduces everything to the essences, categories, and norms of the knower. Deconstruction exposes an ethics of acknowledgement. It opens a site for the consideration of the implications of scientific knowledge as a primary practice of ethical knowing.

Modernity assumes progress automatically occurs if we can master nature. In the social sciences, this means mastering human nature. The tool of mastery is Reason. As an abstract noun reason tends to be totalizing; it tends to deny, repress, and violate 'otherness,' difference, and uniqueness as deviations from the norm. Derrida challenges all norms by raising critical concerns about what it is that structures these. What is it that structures meanings, practices, 'laws' that promise mastery? His work opens questions about *why* certain practices become intelligible, valued, deemed as traditions, while other practices become impossible, denigrated, or unimaginable as norm\al. Unlike claims to detached, dispassionate, and neutral rationality resting on indubitable metaphysical or epistemological foundations, Derrida (1981) declares, 'Deconstruction … is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*' (p. 93). It intervenes, for instance, to deconstruct the master words used by masters of political domination to exclude participation in the political process by 'others' different from them. This domination is all too easily translated into educational standards. Deconstruction challenges the logocentric construction of (for example, white male) identity as exclusively 'normal.' For his part, Dewey (1930/1984) decried 'The efforts of those engaged in what is euphemistically called a science of education aimed at setting so-called norms' (p. 132).

Deconstruction shakes the foundations of oppression. It is a philosophy of connection/disconnection and inclusion/exclusion. It militates against fixed borders and hierarchies, and we may use it to deconstruct oppressive social, political, and institutional constructions. That is the way I approach the deconstructive texts written under the name 'Derrida.' I will look long and hard at Derrida's 'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, In Admiration' as a testimonial to Derrida's (and Mandela's) deconstruction of an oppressive system of laws, an illegal legal code. I believe Derrida's efforts in this essay both reflect his political response to apartheid and reveal the political responsibility of his deconstructive practices.

Mandela and the Deconstructive Laws of Reflection

Derrida has recognized that the currently available codes for taking any political stance are not at all adequate to radical deconstruction. The impression that deconstruction is apolitical only prevails, he claims, 'because all our political codes and terminologies still remain fundamentally metaphysical, regardless of whether they originate from the right or the left' (see Kearney, 1984, pp. 107–126). Thus, he is obliged to address any political theory or discussion of politics obliquely through the posing of questions of singularity, universality, alterity, and difference. He must also address such related topics as the ethics of relating and responding. This is the strategy in his essay 'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, In Admiration.' In this essay, Derrida produces a reading of the 'Law' that he argues is reflected in a

singular person and the proper name, Nelson Mandela. It is a structure of 'Law' that Mandela, in all his particularity, opens, calls forth to transgress the determined historicity of the law as Western law. Mandela in his specificity constitutes for Derrida a gathering in action of singular traits, an apparatus of reflection that gives birth to 'the law itself, the law above other laws', 'a law beyond legality' (Derrida, 1987, pp. 11, 42). It is instantiated in his name, in his reflection upon the law, and in his reflection of it (pp. 15, 34). This is no routine exercise, for Derrida is not proclaiming or acclaiming Mandela a great man. He is paying homage, admiring him for his interrogation of the *meaning* of the law, interrogation of its origin, its aims, and its limits. Derrida shows Mandela as a figure inquiring after the grounding of the ground itself.

'Mandela', his name, is inscribed within a *common* geo-political history, tradition, and problematics. As a human being, his vocation is that of a 'man of the law' and as such he both reflects it and reflects upon it in the living of his life (Derrida, 1987, p. 26). Mandela reflects the law, but not in a simple speculative reversal because the law in South Africa has been usurped, represented by an oppressive white minority. His becomes the name of the 'Law' by the laws of reflection. They work this way. In struggling against apartheid, Mandela inspires admiration by the admiration *he feels* for the logic of the law. This admiration that demonstrates for something that by its very nature tends toward universality, generality, makes him, a singular person, admirable to his friends and to his enemies alike. Without reducing différance (in this case, his own particularity), Mandela forces 'difference,' a multiple mirroring involving the 'Law,' of which he is clearly within, and the law, which he is clearly outside.

Derrida's text as well as its subject produces a gathering of a multitude of non-symmetrical and non-speculative reflections that cannot refer or represent any totality nor create any unity or synthesis. The hypothesis in Derrida's (1987) words is that Mandela 'becomes admirable for having, with all his force, admired, and for having made a force of his admiration, a combative, untreatable, and irreducible power' (p. 15). Derrida performs this movement of reflections outside a logic of exclusive either/ors, thereby freeing the idea of difference from normative connotations. In thinking difference differently, he demonstrates a distinction between the conceptualizable difference of common sense (different from the norm) and a difference that is not brought back into the order of the same. (Mandela, *both* a man of the law *and* a man outside it). Difference here is neither an identity nor a difference between identities. The figure of Mandela deconstructs Western moral law and its basis in the logical law of identity. Mandela's Law makes its production possible by transversal of responsibility to a questioning, to the interrogative demand for a *just* structure of law. He, his name, his life irrevocably moves the discourse of politics to its ethical relation among human beings.

In this essay and others, Derrida refuses Habermas's claim, for example, that there exists a necessary link between universalism, rationalism, and modern democracy. Yet, he is strongly committed to the democratic project. He shows Mandela as a figure reflecting the lack of availability of an Archimedean point— such as Reason—that could guarantee the possibility of a mode of argumentation

that would have transcended its particular conditions of enunciation. No rational grounding secures the institution of apartheid. He shows the distinction between the public man and the private man, important as it is for democratic politics, is not one of essence. Mandela's life problematizes that differentiation, reflects it as an unstable frontier constantly trespassed, with personal autonomy investing public aims, and the private as political.

The 'Laws of Reflection' elaborate a non-foundationalist thinking about democracy and I believe present a convincing case for the importance of deconstruction for politics and ethics. The radical democratic principles Mandela forces by the mobilization of passions and sentiments are only defensible in a situated contextualist manner, as being constitutive of his form of life. Derrida argues that he expresses democratic values, not by appealing to some neutral ground to some transcendental rationalist argument based on politically neutral premises, or by seeing the individual as prior to society, as abstracted from social and power relations, language, and culture. His name consists in the legitimization of conflict, keeping democratic hope alive by the refusal to eliminate it through the imposition of an authoritarian South African structure of law.

Derrida attends to the *excess* within the closure of the law by his homage to Mandela. He complicates the play of reflexivity of the code of politics in which the two concepts of 'original' and 'image' mirror each other, intensifying the slippage between 'original' and copy, between the thing and its disguise. His writing reminds us of the chain of significations in which the word 'law' is caught. He writes of Mandela:

> As a lawyer worthy of that name, he sets himself *against the code in the code*, reflects the code, but making visible thereby just what the code in action rendered unreadable … His reflection … does not re-produce, it produces the visible. This production of light is justice—moral or political. (p. 34)

I believe good education involves careful reflection on the moral, political and scientific codes that control its construction. This means the stories education tells itself must become interested in the archaeology of its own construction, the sedimentary grounds of its own authority. Educators encountering the 'texts' of schooling and culture must, like Mandela, move to acknowledge both the structure of the narration of the stories and what it is that structures its modes of intelligibility. The categories I use to describe ourselves and others, the meaning of our methods and aims, the maze of dualisms in which I have explained our intentions and our tools to ourselves become sites of contention.

Derrida, Dewey and the Double Bind of Postmodern Criticism

The neo-pragmatist Richard Bernstein (1992) admires Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction, particularly its openness to differences and attention to the violence wrought by exclusionary laws, norms, and standards. Although he sees deconstruction as a powerful tool for critiquing exclusive social, political and (I add) educational,

practices, Bernstein thinks such radical openness finds it difficult to take strong positions in ethical, political, or institutional struggles. He believes, rightly, there is no ethics or politics possible without taking some, at least temporary, position. What Bernstein calls 'the double bind' is that Derrida wants to ameliorate the violence of Western thought by challenging logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence without falling into nihilistic relativism. Derrida recognizes the problem:

> But the difficulty is to gesture in opposite directions at the same time: on the one hand to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality; on the other, to intervene here and now in a practical and engaged manner whenever the necessity arises. … I try where I can to act politically while recognizing that such action remains incommensurate with my intellectual project of deconstruction. (in Kearney, 1984, p. 120)

Derrida often expresses worry about responsibility even as he authors situated, contextualized texts such as 'The Laws of Reflection.'

'Metaphysically,' writes Derrida (1978), 'the best liberation from violence is a certain putting into question, which makes the search for an *archia* tremble' (p. 141). Dewey's philosophy of reconstruction liberates us from ethical violence by including the 'other' in the same way as Derrida's deconstruction; that is, by making the metaphysics of presence tremble. He does so in ways that do not lead into Derrida's 'double bind.'

Dewey's Copernican Revolution: Decentering the metaphysics of presence

Dewey (1929/1984) intends to foment revolution, and that involves destruction, if not deconstruction; consider:

> Neither self nor world, neither soul nor nature (in the sense of something isolated and finished in its isolation) is the centre, any more than either earth or sun is the absolute centre of a single universal and necessary frame of reference. There is a moving whole of interacting parts; a centre emerges wherever there is effort to change them in a particular direction. (p. 232)

Dewey's emphasis is always on reconstruction rather than deconstruction.

Ralph Sleeper (1986) remarks that Dewey clearly distinguished 'the theory of inquiry and the theory of existence, as well as the theory of language that links them' (p. 6). 'The subject-matter of metaphysics,' notes Sleeper, 'is existence' (p. 111). The subject matter of logic is essences and identities. Dewey (1925/1981) clearly stated that 'there is a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence; namely communication, language, discourse' (p. 133). Here is how Dewey describes the relation between existence and essence:

> Essence … is but a pronounced instance of [linguistic] meaning; to be partial, and to assign *a* meaning to a thing as *the* meaning is but to evince

> human subjection to bias … Essence is never existence, and yet it is the
> essence, the distilled import of existence … its intellectual voucher.' (p. 144)

Jean-Paul Sartre thought existence preceded essence only for human beings. For
Dewey, the distinction includes all being, although only beings capable of language
and logic (inquiry into inquiry) could bridge it, and know it. Dewey transfers the
functions normally associated with the metaphysics of presence to inquiry. For him,
the existential task is to create a cosmos from chaos by guiding indeterminate events
in new directions that promote prosperity. Directing the course of events is the
office of inquiry.

In 'The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,' Dewey (1909/1977) declares:

> The conception that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and
> knowledge for two thousand years … rested on the assumption of the
> superiority of the fixed and final … In laying hands upon the sacred ark of
> absolute permanency, in treating forms that had been regarded as types
> of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin
> of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to
> transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals,
> politics and religion. (p. 3)

Dewey might well have added metaphysics. Traditional metaphysics places ultimate
ontology beyond time, contingency, and change. Dewey converts the primary sub-
ject matter of ontological metaphysics (*eidos*) into the subject matter of inquiry.
Essence is a product of inquiry and not an antecedent existence into whose imme-
diate presence it is the task of inquiry to conduct us.

A species is the ultimate ontological subject of evolutionary theory. Dewey did
for essences what Darwin did for species. Dewey declares, 'The conception of
$\in\iota\delta o\varsigma$, species, a fixed form and final cause, was the central principle of knowledge
as well as of nature. Upon it rested the logic of science' (p. 6). After Darwin,
Dewey (1920/1982) insists, 'natural science is forced by its own development to
abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognize that what for it is actually
"universal" is *process*' (p. 260). A species is an *eidos*. Like Derrida, Dewey (1909/
1977) recognizes the determination of *eidos* by *telos* when he states that 'the classic
notion of species carried with it the idea of purpose' (p. 8).

Estimates are that 99 per cent of all species that have ever existed are now
extinct.[2] Dewey realizes that what holds for biological essences also holds for
logical essences. Dewey (1925/1981) insists that 'even the solid earth mountains,
the emblems of constancy, appear and disappear like the clouds … A thing may
endure *secula seculorum* and yet not be everlasting; it will crumble before the
gnawing tooth of time, as it exceeds a certain measure. Every existence is an event'
(p. 63). Dewey's reconstruction of *eidos* renders it not only completely temporal
and contingent, it also removes it from the domain of metaphysics.

Existence for Dewey is an event. There is nothing fixed and final in a Darwinian
universe. In Dewey's philosophy, existence or 'nature is viewed as consisting of events
rather than substances, it is characterized by *histories* … Consequently, it is natural

for genuine initiations and consummations to occur in experience' (Dewey, 1925/1981, pp. 5–6). For him, existence, the subject matter of metaphysics, is events; it is about processes, not ultimate substances (*ousia*). Dewey's Darwinian intuition is that everything, existences, and their distilled import, essences, is in flux, everything changes; whatever is constructed will someday be either intellectually deconstructed or physically destroyed.

Dewey probably derived his thinking about essences from William James who rejects any notion of permanent fixed essence; for him there is only practical purposes. James (1890/1950) insists:

> *the only meaning of essence is teleological, and that classification and conception are purely teleological weapons of the mind.* The essence of a thing is that one of its properties which is so *important for my interests* that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest. (p. 335)

Questioning the purposes for which they were initially constructed can deconstruct any scheme of essences. Reinterpreting the purpose quickly deconstructs a pragmatic classification or concept. There is a *telos* to pragmatic essences, but it is practical, temporal, and contingent, not metaphysical, atemporal, and necessary.

Strangely, James continues to comprehend necessity and causation as metaphysical. Dewey does for necessity and causation what James did for essences. Sleeper (1986): 'The [scientific] explanation has not so much been "discovered" as "produced" by the process of inquiry. The character of "necessity," therefore, is "purely teleological" and contingent' (p. 37). For Dewey (1893/1971), both contingency and necessity are moments in the continuous movement of inquiry:

> Contingent and necessary are thus the correlative aspects of one and the same fact … Contingency referring to the separation of means from end … necessity being the reference of means to an end which has still to be got. Necessary means needed; contingency means no longer required—because already enjoyed. (p. 29)

Dewey understands necessity 'only with reference to the development of judgment, not with reference to objective things or events' (p. 19). Following James's treatment of essences, Dewey comprehends necessity as a logical and not an ontological concept. Necessary laws are dependent on the inquirer's purposes and, therefore, are endlessly subject to deconstruction. Dewey's view of necessity helps undermine the sense of *energeia* and *entelecheia* found in the metaphysics of presence.

Dewey includes causation in his analysis of necessity: 'We call it "means and ends" when we set up a result to be reached in the future … we call it "cause and effect" when the "result" is given and the search for means is a regressive one' (p. 36). Again he affirms 'the supreme importance of our practical interests' (p. 36). As with formal essences (*eidos*) and necessity (part of the *arche*), Dewey assimilates causation (*energeia*, *entelecheia*, or *telos*) to logic, not metaphysics. Dewey's strategy is one of draining the swamp of Western metaphysics into the basin of logic.

In the following passage, Dewey (1909/1977) drains off a great deal: 'Philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore

specific values and the specific conditions that generate them' (p. 10). There is no ultimate cosmic beginning (*arche*) or ending (*telos*) in Dewey's naturalistic Darwinian world any more than there is in Derrida's deconstructive one. Origins and teleology, including *entelecheia*, or *eidos*, are only comprehensible within the context of purposeful logical inquiry, not metaphysics.

Dewey effectively rejects the quest for the transcendental signified:

> Once admit that the sole verifiable or fruitful object of knowledge is the particular set of changes that generate the object of study, together with the consequences that then flow from it, and no intelligible question can be asked about what, by assumption, lies outside. (p. 11)

Objects of knowledge, essences, necessity, causation, etc., do not exist outside the confines of inquiry. This is 'the direction of the transformation in philosophy to be wrought by the Darwinian genetic and experimental logic' (p. 13). Dewey's naturalism refuses to extend itself beyond the contingent products of disciplined inquiry conducted for finite human purposes.

As a pragmatist, Dewey emphasizes the importance of the relatively stable and fixed more so than Derrida. This permits him to take critical positions more readily. Still, every construction is contingent in a Darwinian universe; hence, every construction is subject to deconstruction and reconstruction. In this process, Dewey puts the accent on the constructive and reconstructive phase more than the deconstructive. Dewey's neo-Darwinism imparts urgency to his philosophy of reconstruction that is missing from Derrida's deconstruction. This is the way out of Derrida's 'double bind' and a more responsible attitude to take.

Metaphysics, Criticism, and Context: Finding temporary positions for creative criticism

Bernstein (1992) complains that criticism of all kinds has been 'drawn into a grand Either/Or: either there is a rational grounding of the norms of critique or the conviction that there is such a rational grounding is itself a self-deceptive illusion' (p. 8). Most educational thought falls into such grand either/ors. Instead of assuming either one or the other opinion must be the right one, Bernstein suggests an alternative. He believes that critique goes on forever, the final meaning not only of the critiqued object, but also of critique itself, is forever deferred. Bernstein (1992) concludes, 'I do not think we can any longer responsibly claim that there is or can be a final reconciliation in which all difference, "otherness," opposition and contradiction are reconciled' (p. 8).

Bernstein suggests we think of criticism as constituted by a 'logic' that avoids conceptual universals or the either/or. He advocates a both/and 'logic' rather than the logocentrism of perfect identity. That is why Bernstein (1992) admires the way 'Derrida deconstructs the Either/Or itself' (p. 184). Nonetheless, Bernstein remains concerned with the question: '*how can we "warrant" … the ethical-political "positions" we do take?* This is *the* question that Derrida never satisfactorily answers … What are we to do after we realize that all *archia* tremble?' (p. 191). Dewey

responds to these questions better than Derrida, although the difference is more one of emphasis and attitude than fundamental philosophical disagreement. Both emphasize the cyclic relation between criticism and creativity. In the critical/creative cycle of construction–deconstruction–reconstruction, Derrida tends to emphasize deconstruction; whereas Dewey accents reconstruction.

Those who do not grasp the critical importance of creative play often deride Derrida for his lack of seriousness. Dewey wants only to constrain the field of play in responsible ways. Dewey (1930/1984) declares:

> Ideals express possibilities; but they are genuine ideals only in so far as they are possibilities of what is now moving. Imagination can set them free from their encumbrances and project them as a guide in attention to what now exists. But, save as they are related to actualities, they are pictures in a dream. (p. 112)

For Dewey, concrete, embodied lived situations constrain possibility in ways that Derrida seems to ignore. The task of inquiry, including educational inquiry, is to connect the ideal with the actual to transform the present situation. Ideas, hypotheses, etc. mediate between the undesirable actuality and the ideal possibility.

One may enjoy free imaginative play when one is at leisure, safe and secure. Often we first glimpse our most desperate desires as a dream or fantasy. Dreams, though, can be dangerous, even deadly, in a world where 99 per cent of species that have ever existed are now extinct. Derrida is right to emphasize play; it is a delight and necessary for survival. Still, excessive deconstruction can lead to destruction in a Darwinian world. Dewey seems to understand this threat better than Derrida; that is why he places greater emphasis on reconstruction instead of deconstruction. Dewey always firmly situates freedom; that is why he chooses to emphasize real possibility grounded in the current actual state of concrete affairs, rather than abstract possibility. The horizon separating real possibilities from those too distant to actualize is difficult to discern for even the most experienced captain of the ship of responsible critique. Sailing the ship of continuous critique means constantly searching the open horizon for material to reconstruct the vessel while remaining afloat.

Consequences for Education

Dewey and Derrida both make the metaphysics of presence tremble. The consequence is a cultural catachresis that extends to the site of cultural reproduction—education. If there are no fixed essences, then there is no fixed human essence. Without a fixed essence (*eidos*), education has no ultimate, immutable, and eternal fixed *telos* that represents the perfection (*entelecheia*) of the process of education. There is no *arche* of timeless immutable foundations of education. Children are not substances (*ousia*) with the latent potential to actualize (*energeia*) their essence any more than acorns alone have the latent potential to actualize their essence as a giant oak tree. What children become depends on the transactions they enter. Choosing these wisely, we may survive and thrive in an ever-changing Darwinian

world. Learning to makes such choices is an educational task. So, what is the aim of education? Dewey's (1916/1980) answer is: 'Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself' (p. 58). The aim of education is growth just as the meaning of life for an existentialist like Dewey is to make more meaning.

Separating metaphysical existence from logical essence clears up a great deal of existential ambiguity. Draining the swamp of metaphysics into the logic of inquiry allows us to construct enduring essences (*eidos*), temporary telos (*telos*), flying perfection (*entelecheia*), relatively stable foundations (*arche*—even the earth's tectonic plates move), and sufficient substance (*ousia*) to serve the *functions* of inquiry without the promise of completing the quest for certainty. Each may function as a transient 'centre,' a temporary position, for efforts to redirect existence. I believe that Derrida, in fact, does much the same thing. Serge Doubrovsky asks Derrida, 'You always speak of a *non-center*. How can you, within your own perspective, explain or at least understand what a perception is? For a perception is precisely the manner in which the world appears *centered* to me' (cited in Macksey and Donato, 1970, p. 271). Derrida's reply is revealing:

> First of all, I didn't say that there was no center, that we could get along without the center. I believe that the center is a function, not a being—a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable. The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it. (cited in Macksey and Donato, 1970, p. 271)

I believe that, for Derrida as for Dewey, centers arise whenever there is an effort to redirect the course of events, but these centers are merely functions (or subfunctions) within a larger context. Subjects persist, but they become situated and contingent functions that we cannot disconnect from their context. Nelson Mandela is an example of such a subject who functions in ways that require us to interrogate the *meaning* of the law, its origin, its aims, and its limits. Mandela engages in an inquiry in which he reflects and reflects upon the logic of the law. In so doing, I believe he carries out a Deweyan inquiry in which essences, telos, perfections, foundations, and substances are not only subject to deconstruction, but serve the *functions* of inquiry without the promise of completion. An insightful student of Derrida such as Peter Trifonas (2000) can write:

> Deconstruction, however, if we are to believe Derrida, *does not, cannot, nor does it wish to exact the death of logocentrism*, to eliminate it, despite troubling the epistemic validity of a phonological prototype of signification that linearises the relation of *signans* and *signatum*. (p. 274)

Derrida knows we cannot live without relative centers and all that goes with them, nor can we complete the quest for certainty. What we can do is learn to live in a radically contingent and infinitely pluralistic universe. On that, both Derrida and Dewey are in profound agreement.

What can we say about Nelson Mandela besides his ability to engage in profound inquiry? For one thing, he is precisely the type of transient center of cultural

deconstruction and reconstruction that emerges wherever there is effort to change events in a particular direction. He is singular, particular and, from the perspective of colonialism, a radical alterity. He would have to be such an 'other' to bring about profound social change. As Dewey (1925/1981) states, 'mind in an individualized mode has occasionally some constructive operation. Every invention, every improvement in art … has its genesis in observation and ingenuity of a particular innovator' (p. 164). Mandela is also a source of connection/disconnection that simultaneously breaks codes and enacts them. He is a responsible source of *both* deconstruction *and* reconstruction, able to construct temporary positions that overcome 'the double bind' of alleviating violence without falling into nihilism. There is a telos to his action, but no timeless and unalterable essence of justice for him to enact. For Dewey, and Derrida, there are no cosmic purposes guaranteeing progress. Dewey (1922/1983) states:

> There is something pitifully juvenile in the idea that 'evolution,' progress, means a definite sum of accomplishment which will forever stay done, and which by an exact amount lessens the amount still to be done, disposing once and for all of just so many perplexities and advancing us just so far on our road to a final stable and unperplexed goal. (p. 197)

We can do our best without any cosmic backup story guaranteeing success. That is part of maturity and the attitude of the meliorist in contrast to the optimist. Dewey (1920/1982) writes:

> Meliorism is the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered. (pp. 181–182)

I believe Mandela is a meliorist who may or may not believe in progress.

Mandela is an excellent particular example of the kind of creative, deconstructive, and melioristic individual that education should strive to create. I believe such paradoxical characters, schooled in the 'logic' of both, are ideal personalities for dealing with the tensions of the double bind. Derrida and Dewey pose a tremendous challenge to educators, and for that we should admire them.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. See Derrida, 1996, p. 78.
2. See Parker, 1992, pp. 57–58.

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