

A Deweyan Critique of Thomas Falkenberg's Article: "Teaching as Contemplative Professional Practice"

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Thomas Falkenberg, in his recent article, "Teaching as Contemplative Professional Practice," argues that the "moral purpose of mindfulness meditation" is "toward the end of suffering" by actualizing "the human potential for goodness and happiness" (quoting Keown, 1996, p. 44) (2012, p. 27). To end suffering is indeed a noble goal, but it must be queried whether Falkenberg's approach provides the required means to achieve that end.

Falkenberg adopts a dualistic approach to human experience by failing to specify coherently the relationship between what he calls internal experience and external experience. He writes:

If we say that we are aware of the cat that walks in our backyard, we mean that we are aware of a sensual and perceptual stimulus of a particular type; and if I am an ontological realist, I would conclude from that stimulus that there is a cat in my backyard that stimulated my perceptual apparatus. The internal states and processes that we can be aware of the "content" or "objects" of our awareness—include thoughts, motives, feelings, emotions, and our sensual and perceptual stimuli (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822). Our thoughts, motives (intentions), feelings, and emotions are objects of our inner life. (2012, p. 27)

This view seems to treat experienced qualities and objects as purely internal or external. To explain why Dewey opposes such a view, it is necessary to look at Dewey's view of inanimate and animate nature.

Before the emergence of living processes, qualities, such as smells and colour, had no consequences. They were mere potentialities, not actualities: "... while we are forced to ascribe qualities to events on the physical level, we cannot *know* them on this level; they have when assigned strictly to that level no consequences" (Dewey, 1925/1981, pp. 205-206).

The mere existence of qualities is, in the context of the purely physical world, meaningless. However, once living beings emerge, qualities do have consequences since they serve to aid in the reproduction of the organism:

In this response, qualities become productive of results, and hence potentially significant. That is, in achieving effects, they become connected with consequences, and hence capable of meaning, knowable if not known. This explains the fact that while we are forced to ascribe qualities to events on the physical level, we cannot *know* them on this level; they have when assigned strictly to that level no consequences. But through the medium of living things, they generate effects, which, when qualities are used to produce them, are consequences. Thus qualities become intelligible, knowable. (Dewey, 1925/1981, pp. 205-206)

Response to qualities is implicitly meaningful since the qualities serve to reproduce the living being even if that living being is unconscious of their function.

Falkenberg's assumption that experience is purely internal and that we infer the external world from an

internal world takes no account of the efficacy of qualities once the life process emerges. Life processes do not create qualities, but they actualize qualities that are only potentialities at the physical level. Hence, Dewey could deny that qualities were somehow reducible to the organism or its internal experiences: “These qualities never were ‘in’ the organism; they always were qualities of interaction in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake” (Dewey, 1925/1981, pp. 198-199). It is the life process that forms the bridge between the human world of meaning and the physical world.

The educational implications of Falkenberg’s approach can be seen when he deals with the origin of and the need for the disciplines. According to Falkenberg, action involves awareness and through the reflecting on this awareness in action, the disciplines emerged. He probably means that everyday life, which involves action and awareness, if reflected on, leads to the emergence of the disciplines.

However, it is highly doubtful that the disciplines emerged out of such a process. Falkenberg’s approach links human experience and the disciplines in a purely external manner and fails to link the disciplines as effective means to the concerns of human beings with qualitative ends.

According to Dewey, the disciplines emerged out of the practical occupations linked to the basic life process: “The history of culture shows that mankind’s scientific knowledge and technical abilities have developed, especially in all their earlier stages, out of the fundamental problems of life” (1933, p. 216). Dewey accounts for the emergence of the disciplines from common concerns for food, clothing and shelter associated with daily life; they were means to the end of the life process. They ultimately arose from humans’ natural concern for focusing on ends (1938/1986); they are control mechanisms to ensure that human concern for ends have effective means.

Common-sense inquiry focuses on ends and not on the perfection of means. Dewey accounts for the emergence of the disciplines—which are scientific forms of inquiry—on the basis of the nature and inadequacy of common-sense experience and inquiry. Common-sense inquiry has to do with problematic situations which arise in the process of daily living. It ultimately arises from humans’ natural concern for focusing on ends, either negatively or positively:

... a generalization of the inquiries and conclusions of this type under the caption of “use and enjoyment” needs much exposition for its support. Use and enjoyment are the ways in which human beings are directly connected with the world about them. Questions of food, shelter, protection, defense, etc., are questions of the use to be made of materials of the environment and of the attitudes to be taken practically towards members of the same group and to other groups taken as wholes. Use, in turn, is for the sake of some consummation or enjoyment. Some things that are far beyond the scope of direct use, like stars and dead ancestors, are objects of magical use, and of enjoyment in rites and legends. If we include the correlative negative ideas of disuse, of abstinence from use, and toleration and suffering, problems of use and enjoyment may be safely said to exhaust the domain of common sense inquiry. (1938/1986, p. 69)

Falkenberg does not explain why we need the disciplines; he fails to explain why common-sense inquiry is inadequate to the tasks of daily living. Dewey had an explanation. He argued that human beings, by nature, have an inclination to focus on ends and not on means to the end:

Concerned with prudence if not with what is honorifically called wisdom, man naturally prizes knowledge only for the sake of its bearing upon success and failure in attaining goods and avoiding evils. This is a fact of our structure and nothing is gained by recommending it as an ideal truth, and equally nothing is gained by attributing to intellect an intrinsic relationship to pure truth for its own sake or bare fact on its own account. (Dewey, 1925/1981, p. 50)

Human beings, as living beings, are more concerned with ends than with means. They need, however, to learn to be concerned with (or care for) the means used to achieve ends if they are to act intelligently since the appropriateness of the means used will determine whether the ends aimed for are achievable and realized in an effective manner. The same could be said of the ends. Ends that require means with certain associated consequences may need to be rethought when the consequences associated with the means are taken into

account.

Human beings have had to struggle for a long period of time before the disciplines emerged as control mechanisms. Since the life process not only involves ends but also means, the curriculum must enable students to learn to shift their concern from ends to means and their coordination—Dewey’s definition of intelligence (1938/1986). The Dewey curriculum, with its focus on the basic occupations, was designed to achieve this goal.

The modern curriculum, however, fails to do that. Indeed, like Falkenberg’s dualistic approach of internal and external experience, it provides no organic link between concern for qualitative ends and the effective means for controlling human experience in order to expand those ends.

No amount of contemplation of pedagogical practice can address the problem if the present structure of the curriculum is assumed to be sacrosanct. What is needed is a thoroughgoing rethinking of the nature of the curriculum to address its inadequacies as a vehicle for learning by humans.

University professors may be able to control the curriculum, but teachers in public schools do not. If the problem is at the level of the curriculum, reflections on pedagogy will fail to address the problem—no matter how aware the teacher is of her pedagogical practice. Falkenberg’s dualistic approach fails to provide any ground map for criticizing the modern curriculum. It fails to address the suffering of students who are forced to engage in activities (such as the disciplines) without any conscious plan for taking into account their own nature as beings who are concerned with ends and not just means. His dualistic approach is insufficiently powerful to reduce suffering. Despite his moral intent, his means do not correspond to his end.

References

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