



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/212528/>

Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:

Forstenzer, J. (2026) Educating in a world on fire: Deweyan problem-solving and the role of higher education. In: Waks, L.J. and English, A.R., (eds.) John Dewey's Human Nature and Conduct: A Centennial Handbook. Cambridge University Press, pp. 238-250. ISBN: 9781009446433.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009446389.024>

This material has been published in revised form in John Dewey's Human Nature and Conduct: A Centennial Handbook edited by Leonard J. Waks and Andrea R. English <http://doi.org/10.1017/9781009446389>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use. © Cambridge University Press & Assessment

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

DRAFT 3

Educating in a World on Fire:

Deweyan Problem-Solving and Confronting Catastrophe*

Joshua Forstenzer

University of Sheffield

Everyone knows me but no one can tell me. No one knows me even though everyone has heard my name. Everyone talking together makes something seem like me but is not me. Everyone doing things in the world makes me. I am blood in the streets, the catastrophe you can never forget. I am the tide running under the world that no one sees or feels. I happen in the present but am told only in the future, and then they think they speak of the past, but really they are always speaking about the present. I do not exist and yet I am everything.

You know what I am. I am History. Now make me good.

[Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*]

* Profound thanks are owed to Andrea English and Leonard Waks for their very helpful comments. This chapter has improved a great deal thanks to their thoughtful engagement with a previous draft. I'd also like to thank Robert Stern, Cornel West, Mona Siddiqui, Nathanael Vette, Mara Daria-Cojocaru, Lisa Avarello, Giulia D'Annibale, Antonella Alesi, Ólafur Páll Jónsson, Andrea Cheatham Kasper, Margarita Blagoeva, Angela Gorrell, Michael Festl, Abdi-aziz Suleiman, Magid Magid, Naïm Zriouel, Ruth Arnold, Keith Burnett, Luca Barlassina, and Max Khan Hayward for conversations that have informed my thinking on the content of this chapter. Finally, special thanks to Andrea Antoniou for very helpful comments and suggestions. As ever, the usual disclaimers apply.

Over the last few years, most of us have become all too well acquainted with catastrophe. For much of that time, many of us have lived under various degrees of confinement. Significant restrictions to our movements became a matter of law for months at a time. Millions of people have died of a new and frightening disease and as a result tens of millions of people have lost loved ones. Most of us experienced shock and terror, perhaps not on the scale of a war, but in a manner which was markedly different from what had appeared to be ‘ordinary life’ until then. And yet, thanks to impressively swift scientific ingenuity which rapidly produced effective, relatively affordable, and easily distributable Covid-19 vaccines, life for most of us seems to have gone back to ‘normal’.

At least, that is how it looks on the surface. If we dig a little deeper, we find a generation scarred by the experience (most obviously, school age children for whom the great Covid-19 digital dislocation was developmentally costly) and a global system suffering pang upon pang of geo-political fear (the Russian invasion of Ukraine and China’s threatening sounds about Taiwan seem to signal the start of a multipolar global order fraught with the potential for large-scale war) and economic after-shocks as well as the emerging global consequences of the deeper unchecked ecological and climate crises. Biodiversity is plummeting. Large wildfires fill our skies with dark smoke, kill wildlife, and threaten entire cities.¹ Floods drown away animals, people, buildings, and roads. Ice-shelves are collapsing. All the while, our leaders seem outmatched. Democracy itself now seems fundamentally more vulnerable than in the recent past. The rise of authoritarianism within well-established liberal democracies and beyond is palpable and threatening. The outcome – perhaps of the very survival of our species – hangs in the balance. One thing appears certain: no one is

¹ Allow me to salute here the brave people of Palermo who took it upon themselves to engage in public deliberations, protests, and civic actions to respond to and deal with the wildfires (and their consequences) as these surrounded the city in the summer of 2023.

coming to our rescue; it is up to us to find a way through. We must thus wrestle with how exactly we are to accomplish this.

In a sense, when *Human Nature and Conduct* was written, John Dewey found himself in a somewhat similar historical context. The world was recovering from a devastating pandemic (influenza), the October Russian Revolution opened a new global balance of power that reshaped the traditional game of imperial alliances, fascism had recently come to power in Italy, and the troubling consequences of the Versailles Treaty that ended World War I were becoming apparent.

In a deeper sense, however, the 1920s were rather unlike the 2020s: for much of the democratic world, the former was a period of rapid economic expansion, of renewed democratic self-confidence, and of even a rather naïve sense of optimism among many that war had been overcome once and for all by the demonstration of its insanity in the trenches. Our own democratic era, in contrast, is filled with a sense of fear that our own collective behavior cannot be controlled and is marked by economic uncertainty as well as by profound civic conflict born out of rampant xenophobia and other factors, including a growing terror and a persistent denial of the existential threats that urgently demand our attention.

Still, the problem at the heart of *Human Nature and Conduct* is as relevant to us today as it was then, since it invites us to ask the most practical of questions: How can we make sense of ourselves, as human beings, such that we be better placed to meaningfully and intelligently address our collective problems? On the Deweyan picture, education plays a crucial role in shaping our dispositions to act. It is education, in both its formal and informal forms, that is the activity most explicitly tasked with helping us confront the world in more rather than less intelligent ways. But how can education help us deal with a world in which the harsh realities of climate chaos, violence, and catastrophe threaten our collective survival?

To explore this question, this chapter will begin by discussing Dewey's conception of human nature and violence. Second, it will address how Dewey conceives of how we overcome the threat of violence via cultural means. Third, it discusses our orientation towards the future, as well as problems and catastrophes. Fourth, it addresses the role that education and higher education in particular play in supporting the task of intelligently responding to problems and catastrophes. Ultimately, I argue that Dewey's conception of intelligent cultural adaptation provides us with a helpful injunction to focus our efforts on fostering the development of moral, civic, and epistemic character across the community.

Violence and Human Nature

Perhaps the central insight in *Human Nature and Conduct* is that human nature, though constrained in various ways, is not wholly set. Plasticity – the capacity to adapt, to change, to evolve – is as much a part of what makes us who we are as our biological needs for food, shelter, reproduction, and what has widely come to be known as our genes. Biology plays an important role, but so does culture in shaping our basic dispositions, because the cultural customs in which we participate, shape and reshape human beings, generation after generation. Or as Dewey puts it: “Native human nature supplies the raw materials, but custom furnishes the machinery and the designs” (MW 14: 78). This comes down to saying that human nature as it is ordinarily understood – that is to say, as the essential features of the human being – is not fully pre-given or fixed. Rather, it is malleable (though not infinitely so). Moreover, the necessary tools to sculpt the human self are acquired through rich cultural processes of interaction with significant others within one's community. In short, for Dewey, ‘human nature’, if there is any to speak of, is as much the product of revisable habits formed through communal activities in response to our environment as it is the product of our biology.

To put it perhaps a little glibly, for Dewey, we are what we habitually do. Given that we have the capacity to change our habits over time, there is a strong degree of plasticity to what appears to be a fundamental human characteristic. This plasticity is important for Dewey in part because many once held the view that violence, conflict, and war were somehow inevitably built into our human nature.² And yet, it is not so much that Dewey fails to recognize that humans have strong tendencies that lead to conflict as it is that he thinks that culture (which, importantly, includes but exceeds the state) is, at its best, in the business of creating the conditions that minimize strife and violent outbursts. Indeed, Dewey writes:

An immense debt is due William James for the mere title of his essay: “The Moral Equivalent of War”. It reveals with a flash of light the true psychology. Clans, tribes, races, cities, empires, nations, states have made war. The argument that this fact proves an ineradicable belligerent instinct which makes war forever inevitable is much more respectable than many arguments about the immutability of this and that social tradition. For it has the weight of a certain empirical generality back of it. Yet the suggestion of an *equivalent* for war calls attention to the medley of impulses which are casually bunched together under the caption of belligerent impulse; and it calls attention to the fact that the elements of this medley may be woven together into many differing types of activity, some of which may function the native impulses in much better ways than war has ever done.” (MW 14: 79-80 – emphasis in original)

This passage reveals that Dewey’s ambition in the book is, at least partially, to articulate the cultural means to respond to the diversity of native impulses that under ordinary

² Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is a paradigmatic source for this kind of view, since it presents the state-of-nature – human existence as imagined outside of the protection afforded by a sovereign state – as defined by a ‘war of all against all’.

circumstances might result in war.³ This motivation makes all the more sense since Dewey delivered the first of the lectures that eventually resulted in *Human Nature and Conduct* in January 1919, just months after the end of the First World War in November of the previous year.⁴ The passage above also reveals two further important features of Dewey's thought. The first is that, as a matter of empirical observation, Dewey admits that war is a widespread feature of human life. The second is that Dewey draws a distinction between impulse, activity, and habit.

Impulses are, in a certain manner of speaking, primary. They emerge out of our felt experiences in raw, formless urges to act. Action is the behavior which eventually culminates from impulses. Habit is the cumulative effect of sustained actions and of the feedback received over time.⁵ In other words, habits are formed out of the repetition of certain more specific actions and we learn to take this or that type of action with more or less regularity from experience. Crucially, for Dewey, in ordinary adult life, we actually mostly act out of habit. This means that even though we may consciously tell ourselves that we are making this or that decision before acting, in fact, much of the decisions that we make are the product of unconscious processes that are the products of habits, which is to say the repetition of various

³ Dewey further explains: "Pugnacity, rivalry, vainglory, love of booty, fear, suspicion, anger, desire for freedom from the conventions and restrictions of peace, love of power and hatred of oppression, opportunity for novel displays, love of home and soil, attachment to one's people and to the altar and the hearth, courage, loyalty, opportunity to make a name, money or a career, affection, piety to ancestors and ancestral gods—all of these things and many more make up the war-like force. To suppose there is some one unchanging native force which generates war is as naïve as the usual assumption that our enemy is actuated solely by the meaner of the tendencies named and we only by the nobler." (MW 14: 80)

⁴ From May 27-May 31, 1918 Dewey delivered three lectures at the Raymond F. West Memorial Foundation at Leland Stanford Junior University.

⁵ Or, as Dewey puts it: "Habits as organized activities are secondary and acquired, not native and original. They are outgrowths of unlearned activities which are part of man's endowment at birth." (MW 14: 65)

contextually situated actions. So, for example, when I arrive at the coffee shop and think to myself “I wonder what I want to order today?”, I am in fact not really deliberating about what to order since, as a matter of habit, I reliably end up ordering a decaf almond latte. Real deliberation, on Dewey’s account, only occurs when I experience a clash of habits or when my habits cannot be accommodated in the context I find myself in. To pursue the example: If the coffee shop is out of almond milk, I will need to decide whether I want oat, coconut or soya milk (certainly not cow’s milk, as I am allergic to dairy products); or if I am in a sufficiently hip coffee shop I may well be told that they do not do decaf because of the chemicals required to decaffeinate coffee beans, at which point I will need to weigh the jitters that normal coffee usually causes in me against my anticipated lack of pleasure at drinking a (usually rather basic) green tea.

Deliberation or thought, on Dewey’s account, is caused by a specific response to an impulse activity which calls for behavioral change: “Conflict of habits releases impulsive activities which in their manifestation require a modification of habit, of custom and convention” (MW 14: 62). Though we are creatures of habit, conflicts between habits or between our habitual expectations and changes in the environment trigger the emotional impulse which leads to thought and thus to a potential change of habit.⁶ The process through which an impulse activity triggers thought which then directs action and eventually forms new habits is complex and involves a kind of meta-orientation about how we respond to the discomfort of the new, the unexpected or the conflictual. When successfully conducted, this meta-orientation is intelligent and it is guided by what Dewey calls ‘inquiry’.

⁶ As Dewey explains: “Routine habits never take up all the slack. They apply only where conditions remain the same or recur in uniform ways. They do not fit the unusual and novel.” (MW 14: 74)

On Dewey's own account of inquiry, thought is triggered by finding oneself in an indeterminate situation. This is a situation which is, in an existential sense, unsettled and unsettling. It generates a raw emotional reaction, a feeling of discomfort. But, at this stage, the character of the situation that makes us feel unsettled is unclear to us (in a communicative situation, for example: something is said to me and it does not feel good, but I do not yet glean the semantic meaning of what was said). It is only upon reflection that we can come to make sense of our situation as problematic (say, I was just told that there is no almond milk) and subsequently to seek the source of that problem (to continue the example, I cannot drink my preferred hot beverage) within the situation that we are experiencing. Once we understand the nature of the problem before us, we can choose to alter our behavior, either by employing a novel means to attain a desired good or by abandoning that specific desire. Returning to the example of the coffee shop, since my original desire was to drink my daily decaf almond milk latte, I must choose whether to leave the almond milk-less coffee shop in pursuit of the object of my desire, or I must abandon the desire itself. Once I have deliberated, decided, and acted on that decision, I find myself in what Dewey calls a 'determinate situation', one which no longer requires active thought. In so doing, I go back to habitual life or 'business as usual', but as a result of the new action I have taken, this has shifted or even changed at least one of my habits (perhaps I have discovered how much I like the taste of oat milk in a latte and resolve to order only this type of plant-based milk from then on⁷). However, not all impulses are transformed in this seemingly intelligent way.

Sublimation and Culture-Making

⁷ To my surprise, this seems to have happened over the course of drafting and redrafting this chapter.

In seeking to explain how we go from impulse to action when confronting indeterminate situations (situations where our present habits are thwarted and we experience discomfort), Dewey notes that there are three possible routes:

- The first is “a surging, explosive discharge – blind, unintelligent” (MW 14: 108) – we act without thinking (out of what feels like instinct or reflex) and we end up doing what our raw emotional impulse directs us to do: you punch me, so I punch you. The aim of my action is one with my emotional urge, which in the context of having been punched by you is to hurt you back.
- The second is sublimation – an impulse “become[s] a factor coordinated intelligently with others in a continuing course of action” (MW 14: 108). This means engaging in transformation where the original emotional response is redirected into a more socially productive and longer-term activity than mere discharge: you punch me, I tell you to stop and demand that you explain your behavior, if necessary I call the police to stop you from punching me and others. In the future, perhaps, I will develop the habit of standing up to bullies and maybe even that of campaigning against bullying and violence in general. Or, using Dewey’s examples: “a gust of anger may, because of its dynamic incorporation into disposition, be converted into an abiding conviction of social injustice to be remedied, and furnish the dynamic to carry the conviction into execution. Or an excitation of sexual attraction may reappear in art or in tranquil domestic attachments and services.” (MW 14: 108) This, for Dewey, “represents the normal or desirable functioning of impulse; in which [...] the impulse operates as a pivot, or reorganization of habit.” (MW 14: 108).
- The third is suppression. This is the attempt to merely put a halt to one’s reaction to a challenging situation, which is, according to Dewey, inevitably unsuccessful. In fact, it is only ever displaced and comes to constitute a ‘reaction’: you punch me, I refuse

to retaliate in the moment, and later, unprovoked and without realizing the connection with the previous experience, I punch someone else out of displaced rage.⁸ Dewey explains: “‘Psychic’ energy is no more capable of being abolished than the forms we recognize as physical. If it is neither exploded nor converted, it is turned inwards, to lead a surreptitious, subterranean life. An isolated or spasmodic manifestation is a sign of immaturity, crudity, savagery; a suppressed activity is the cause of all kinds of intellectual and moral pathology” (MW 14: 109).

For Dewey, sublimation is preferable to discharge and suppression because it allows for a certain measure of intelligent control. Obstacles to our habits and our subsequent responses to the resulting impulse activity are ultimately growthful “when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives” (MW 14: 146). Sublimation thus allows for the intervention of thought and reorganization of activity while discharge and suppression do not.

Sublimating, too, is a matter of habit. We can develop the habit of sublimating our raw destructive emotions when confronted with negative changes in the environment.⁹ How? By adopting, creating, and participating in one’s community to acquire the tools which help one become adept in the practice of continual readjustment to one’s physical and social environments. Imagination, thought, and communication play key roles in this since they

⁸ Suppression, I dare venture, is the path taken by the stimuli that is captured by the saying ‘hurt people hurt people’.

⁹ In my own book, I present Dewey’s democratic conception of peaceful conflict resolution with reference to Greek mythology: “Ares and Athena represent two responses to friction, violence and war. Ares symbolises sheer brutality and chaos, while Athena symbolises social skill, wisdom, the arts of civilisation, craftsmanship, military strategy, and moral leadership. They thus correspond to two different ways of dealing with conflict: Ares expresses violence in its arbitrary, savage, and uncontrollable nature [...] while Athena personifies the idea of just war and the possibility of channelling the raw energy of rage and violence into controlled and reasoned action. If Ares fights to destroy, then Athena fights in order to defend and create. Athena’s creative skills enable constructive confrontation. She channels violent energies away from Ares’ fury.” (Forstenzer 2019: 115)

provide the points of leverage for change. Education, for Dewey, plays an important role in strengthening these capacities to help us confront and overcome problems by becoming more willing and able to intelligently revise our habits, solve our problems and resolve our conflicts peacefully, as I will return to further below. The condition of moral progress, on Dewey's account, is therefore the persistent effort to continually refine and improve our linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social tools such that we gain in concrete capacity to select, acquire, or develop new personal and collective habits when seeking intelligently to address our problems. This means that we must understand ourselves as always in some important way in relationship with others and with our future.

Beings-Toward-the-Future, Problems, and Catastrophe

Human beings are story-telling animals. We think, emote, and even dream in the structure of stories. Disruptions give rhythm to these stories and the disorderly succession of puzzling sensations – chaos – provides the raw material out of which we construct our life projects. Our best attempts to glean the future are but elaborate and careful guesses based on the patterns we can identify in an available past (via memory or testimony). Our conception of the present is inevitably cloaked in the garbs we inherit from our understanding of the past and flavored by our expectations of what the future holds in store for us. If for Heidegger we are best understood as 'beings-toward-death', for pragmatists, like Dewey and I, we are better understood as 'beings-towards-the-future'. The future itself invites a kind of dread or anxiety (death is simply one element of this dread-inducing future) and we aim to domesticate that future by means of our wits, our relationships, and our stories.

Pragmatists are sometimes accused of failing to acknowledge the grotesque brutality of the world by interpreting human suffering and interpersonal challenges as mere as-of-yet

unsolved ‘problems’.¹⁰ This criticism cuts pretty close to the bone: though pragmatism is not a form of blind optimism, it tends to go hand-in-hand with a hopeful sense that progressive improvement is possible, given the effortful use of intelligence. This view is called ‘meliorism’ by Dewey. But it can be all too easy for pragmatists to be seen to understand unique and grave sufferings as mere temporary ‘problems’. Conceiving of terrible and tragic events as ‘problems’ has the benefit of inviting the thought that there might be relevant solutions. But, in some situations, there simply does not appear to be any such solution, so in those cases talk of ‘problems’ seems inappropriate. Consider the example of the Holocaust: once it happened, it was not merely a problem to be solved, but a catastrophe. The harm can never be undone, the problem can never be solved. The same goes for other morally heinous events (the trans-Atlantic slave trade and genocides stand out as obvious other examples).

To think of them as ‘problems’ invites the notion that they have ‘solutions’. But looking at it from the present, no amount of reparative efforts can ever truly ‘solve’ what has happened. At most, we can perhaps hope to help alleviate some of the residual suffering and take appropriate steps to acknowledge and honor the scale of the pain and loss. But these are not ‘solutions’ to a ‘problem’; they are more like practices of grief and perhaps attempts at reconciliation (depending on who is engaging in them). These are merely the best available options to confront a fundamentally destructive event that has already taken place. While there are better or worse responses to such catastrophic events, no response ever reaches the bar of being an actual solution. However, instead of the lack of a solution diminishing the moral significance of catastrophic situations, it is quite the opposite: catastrophes precisely confront us with the most fundamental of moral challenges. As Cornel West says, “any time

¹⁰ I have heard Cornel West raise this criticism of pragmatism in several public lectures. Privately, he also told me that, like me, he believes that Dewey has the resources to contend with this critique. In a sense, this chapter aims to begin to flesh out this Deweyan response.

we talk about [...] catastrophe we're really talking about who we are as human beings" (West in Johnson 2020). In other words, it is in the face of the truly tragic dimension of life, in the face of our limited capacities to do the good that we define our collective moral character. So, a catastrophe, on this account, is a situation characterized by the impossibility of doing the good coupled with high moral stakes.

To be clear, Dewey was well aware of the tragic dimension of human existence. Even though he did not back away from the language of 'problematic situations', he rarely wrote of 'solutions'. Instead, indeterminate and problematic situations call for inquiry (as a means of sublimation), which permits 'growth', on his account. More generally, Dewey thought that far from negating the catastrophic, pragmatism offers the only reasonable reaction to it, for "[i]t assumes [the following] obligation: – That of contributing in however humble a way to methods that will assist us in discovering the cause of humanity's ills" (MW 12: 181). This shows that Dewey was not somehow blind to the catastrophic dimension of life.

Educating to solve problems and to confront catastrophes

The most visibly unfolding catastrophe in our time is the climate crisis. Hundreds of thousands of people have already died and millions have already been displaced as a result of weather events made more likely by the high concentration of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere. Furthermore, the climate crisis threatens global food systems and fresh water distribution. As a result, it threatens global peace and quite possibly liberal democratic government (at least in some places). Rather distressingly, it is far from clear that our merely individual actions can do much to confront this catastrophe. For Dewey, institutions can help where individuals cannot. In particular, for him, education is a crucial site for improving our capacities to collectively confront problematic situations. I contend that it can also be

mobilized to help us respond to catastrophes by building a communal space welcoming of the full range of experiences, indeed welcoming of students as whole persons.

One Deweyan theme is that education aims to help us respond to problems intelligently. It does this by helping us learn how to deliberate and live together, and in so doing learn how to co-create an intelligent problem-solving community. To this end, education aims to make available to us resources to confront collective problems. According to traditional accounts of education, educators (at school and beyond) borrow from the past, sharing selected lessons or practices from previous experiences with those who have relatively fewer experiences of their own (mostly, the young) usually in the hope of preparing them for a projected future. Yet, on the Deweyan view, far from being primarily about the past, education is always a precarious exercise in intelligently confronting common problems in the present, developing crucial habits and dispositions, and thus learning to better face future problems. Deweyan education thus aims at developing capacities that enable careful and selective future-making by fostering the right kinds of habits and dispositions.¹¹ To achieve this, the Deweyan model assumes the possibility of sublimation, where our raw potentially destructive impulses can be successfully transformed into stable prosocial tendencies, habits, and projects through the process of inquiry.

However, even Deweyan educational efforts may well fail to successfully foster the right kind of environment to permit sublimation if the scale of the experience that is being confronted is too traumatic or if its moral significance is too challenging. Imagination,

¹¹ Crucial in this task, Dewey tells us, is the role of the school in ensuring that individuals are progressively introduced to and confronted with complexity (that is, the school must aim to make the best of the past experientially available to learners, but it must do in such a way that learners eventually become capable of gleaning the full complexity of extant social relations) and that individuals have a direct and thoroughgoing experience of diversity (ethnic, religious, class, etc.), as the school must “see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment” (MW 9: 24-5).

sensitivity, and compassion as well as intelligence and commitment are clearly crucially valuable in facing such situations. But such capacities may still be insufficient to help us fully confront the scale of the pain or of the responsibility when confronting catastrophes. This is because even imaginative, kind, caring, bright, and diligent people can still fail at any given moment to engage with the depth of the suffering that is at play or to recognize the enormity of the moral task they confront.

My suggestion is that the traditional features of Deweyan education should be supplemented with a pedagogic series of activities aimed at addressing overtly existential questions: What makes a life worth living? To whom am I responsible? What is the place of suffering in a life worth living?¹² But also, as Luca Zanetti (2020) aptly notes, questions about death, the meaning of existence, free will, God, the origin of everything. These questions can be addressed as part of interventions like the Community of Philosophical Inquiry developed as part of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp's Philosophy for Children (see Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan 1980; Lipman 2003; Kennedy 2004), or using other highly interactive methods. Building pedagogic spaces designed to engage directly with the existential dimension of life can help learners begin to confront the catastrophic dimensions of the world we currently live in by acknowledging the central role these questions play – directly or indirectly – in many people's lives and by offering an empathetic community capable of providing support that help the individual better cope with doubt, dread, and despair.

¹² These questions are drawn from a pedagogic program in which I have been involved for some years called 'Life Worth Living'. It was originally developed by colleagues at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. For more details, see Volf, Croasmun and McAnally- Linz (2023). My personal thanks to Angela Gorrell for showing me how effective these questions can be to facilitate a 'turning of the soul' (to use Plato's metaphor).

Dewey, I think, would be open to this suggestion, since his philosophy is keen to recognize and celebrate partial progress. Above all, he thinks that we should avoid aiming for the fulfillment of infinitely demanding moral visions, as this can only result in a cruel and disempowering pessimism. He claims that the idea of aiming for perfection “sincerely held brings discouragement and despair not inspiration or hopefulness” (MW 14: 199). Thus, for Dewey, even – maybe especially – in the face of catastrophic situations we must hold fast to our progressive, piece-meal project of moral and cultural improvement for it permits the continued renewal of hope, even in the face of failure.

This leads to the second Deweyan idea that supports my further proposal: it is only through the habitual experience of forming a community that we can become more sensitive to each other, but also to the salient moral features of catastrophic as well as problematic situations. Dewey’s educational model proposes that schools be organized around the conjoint activities of students and teachers, where problems are solved communally and deliberatively, and where common projects are developed and carried out. In order to genuinely educate, schools should be micro-communities where collective responsibility for communal life is shared by all. Continuity with the wider world and practical engagement are key features of Deweyan education precisely because students are already members of the wider community and they will soon be responsible for it. As David Hildebrand (2023: §5.2) explains: “Educating meant incorporating, with a wide berth for personal freedom, unique Individuals into a changing society which – this had to remain clear – would soon be under their dominion. This is why who the child was mattered so very much.” It is this concern for individual wellbeing and ethical orientation within a wider group which I think pedagogic activities directed towards existential questions will help address.

The development of individual and collective character is central to Deweyan education. Fostering moral, epistemic, and civic character is plausibly the only way in which

we can hope to intelligently respond to our problems. Learning to care deeply for one another may well be the only way to effectively confront catastrophes together. Still, when facing new and complex problems and catastrophes, it is likely that expert knowledge is also needed. Dewey-inspired universities can help in this task.

Deweyan Higher Education

Although Dewey wrote a great deal about how education should be reformed, he wrote surprisingly little about how higher education in particular should change. Leonard Waks claims that too many interpreters of Dewey assume that his theory of education applies simply and straightforwardly to higher education, when this is in fact not the case. According to Waks (2019: 393), “the university for Dewey is inquiry’s institutional home base.” As I understand it, Waks maintains that a Deweyan university is in the business of facilitating collective problem solving by helping articulate the nature of problems, developing hypotheses for action, and supporting efforts to take such action. The current challenge, according to Waks, is that existing universities suffer from a certain aloofness and distance from the lay public. Instead, he argues, universities should engage with the problems of surrounding local communities and seek to help solve their problems. Waks also explains that university teaching must aim to impart the knowledge, skills, and habits that permit experimental problem solving. I agree with Waks’ proposals. But I contend that a truly Deweyan university would need to go further still by embracing the following features:

- (a) A rich interdisciplinary curriculum: a Deweyan undergraduate education must combine vocational and liberal subject-matters such that the different disciplines be fruitfully brought to bear on the task of addressing pressing problems and confronting catastrophes – both highly practical and existential questions should be at the core of this curriculum;

- (b) A pedagogic outlook that engages students in service-based learning and in well-supported open-ended existential discussions: to continually practice engagement with the world as it is, students must be in close contact with communities confronting problems and catastrophes and seek to offer assistance where possible, but they must also experience high quality deliberations that will help them deepen their sense of meaning and purpose in the world;
- (c) A broadly democratic governance structure: crucial governance decisions must be made by a body with an appropriately democratic membership – as a starting proposal, I would suggest that such a governing body be made up of one third staff (academics and support staff), one third students and alumni, and one third community representatives (local officials, local schools, members of faith groups and community organizations, lay citizens), as this would ensure that universities remain connected to the experiences and concerns of all those directly affected by its actions at the highest level.

Implementing these features might not guarantee that universities maximally participate in collective problem-solving or help us confront catastrophes, but they would probably constitute significant steps in the right direction. And yet, even Deweyan educational institutions likely have their limits.

Conclusion

According to Dewey, we must aim to improve our responses to unnecessary suffering but always with great humility: “humility is not a caddish self-depreciation. It is the sense of our slight inability even with our best intelligence and effort to command events; a sense of our dependence upon forces that go their way without our wish and plan” (MW 14: 200). He adds that “[i]ts purport is not to relax effort but to make us prize every opportunity of present

growth. In morals, the infinitive and the imperative develop from the participle, present tense. Perfection means perfecting, fulfilment, fulfilling, and the good is now or never” (MW 14: 200). There is a sense of urgency in these words which I think is crucial and resonant with the contemporary need to confront both problems and catastrophes with care, intelligence and sensitivity. This message of relentless, reflectively informed, communally supported effort to improve our responses to the world is one echoed by many people who have lived through previous catastrophes.

So, in closing, I would like to share two examples drawn from the beautiful volume, *The Courage to Care* (which is based on the award winning film of the same name). The first is Magda Trocmé who had, along with her pastor husband, helped Jews hide in and around the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon (in the Haute Loire) during the Nazi occupation of France. She explains her heroic and courageous actions in the following way:

Perhaps there is also a message for young people and for children, a message of hope, of love, of understanding, a message that could give them the courage to go against all that they believe is wrong, all that they believe is unjust.

Maybe later on in their lives, young people will be able to go through experiences of this kind – seeing people murdered, killed, or accused improperly; racial problems; the problem of elimination of people, of destroying perhaps not their bodies but their energy, their existence. They will be able to think there always have been some people in the world who tried – who will try – to give hope, to give love, to give help to those who are in need, whatever the need is.

It is important, too, to know that we were a bunch of people together. This is not a handicap, but a help. If you fight it alone, it is more difficult, but we had the support

of people we knew, of people who understood, without knowing precisely all that they were doing or would be called to do. None of us thought that we were heroes. We were just people trying to do our best.

In the end, I would like to say to people, “Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances that will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision of your own, not about other people but about yourself.” I would say no more. (Trocmé 1986: 107)

The second is Odette Meyers (1986: 23), who was a survivor of the Holocaust. She summarizes this call to action with reference to a Jewish proverb: “If you are in a place where there is no human being, *be* a human being.”

Bibliography

- Dewey, John 1916. *Democracy and Education*, In *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. MW 9. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, John 1920. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, In *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. MW12. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, John 1922. *Human Nature and Conduct*. In *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. MW 14. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press
- Forstenzer, Joshua 2019. *Deweyan Experimentalism and the Problem of Method in Political Philosophy*, New York: Routledge.

- Hildebrand, David 2023. 'John Dewey', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, available at:
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/dewey/> [Retrieved 1/10/23]
- Johnson, Rob 2020. 'Cornel West: Sing A Song of Love and Faith in a Pandemic', *Economics and Beyond*, podcast transcript, Institute for New Economic Thinking, 15 May, available at: <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/podcast/cornel-west> [Retrieved 1/10/2023]
- Kennedy, David 2004. 'The role of a facilitator in a community of philosophical inquiry'. *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 35, No. 5, pp. 744-765.
- Lipman, Matthew 2003. *Thinking in Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lipman, Matthew, Sharp, Ann Margaret, & Oscanyan, Frederick 1980. *Philosophy in the Classroom* (2nd ed.). Temple University Press.
- Meyers, Odette 1986. "Odette Meyers". In *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, edited by Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers. New York: New York University Press, pp. 18-23.
- Trocmé, Magda 1986. "Magda Trocmé". In *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, edited by Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers. New York: New York University Press, pp. 100-107.
- Volf, Miroslav, Croasmun, Matthew & McAnally-Linz, Ryan 2023. *Life Worth Living: A guide to what matters most*, New York: Viking.
- Waks, Leonard 2019. 'Dewey and Higher Education', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey*, edited by Steven Fesmire, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 393-410
- Zanetti, Luca 2020. 'Why am I here? The challenges of exploring children's existential questions in the community of inquiry', *Childhood & Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 36, pp.1-26.

