

Beneath the Skin: Philosophy of the Naturals

*The following paper was presented as a keynote address at a conference on Philosophy and Nature held at the University of Hamburg in September 1996. The conference organizer, Helmut Schreier, has edited a collection of papers. The German translation of the paper will appear in the forthcoming volume entitled **Mit Kindern uber Natur Philosophieren**.*

Ronald Reed

When Professor Schreier asked me to give this talk on Philosophy With Children and Nature, I think he did so with something more than a hint of irony. The first time I stayed at his house, a few years ago, over a glass of red wine, I confessed that most American of obsessions - I liked to run, to jog in the morning. Being the lover of nature that he is, he suggested that I run in the forest near his home. There is, so he said, a clearly marked trail which would lead to the beautiful Elbe River. I could, so he assured, enjoy the forest and the river and, in addition, see great ships journeying to and from the harbor in Hamburg.

I left with trepidation - I know at least some of my limitations - but Professor Schreier is a friend and I trusted him. I crossed a city street, entered the forest and alas, within only a few footfalls, I no longer felt at home. Soon I was surrounded by what appeared to me to be the same tree, a single tree, movable, on wheels, leaning towards me, away from me, but, so the principle goes, identical because indiscernible. Certainly there were spaces, but for the life of me, I could find nothing that looked like a path, clearly marked or otherwise. I pushed further and further into the forest. At one point, I thought I heard a ship's horn in the distance, but if I did that was the closest I ever got to the Elbe River. After what seemed like days, I saw a woman walking a Golden Retriever, and followed them out of the forest and back to the safety and familiarity of city streets.

There is a great danger of hubris, of intellectual arrogance, involved in thinking one's context, somehow, the norm, but still, given the evolution of this nearly spent century, it is hard not to think that my experience is representative of the experience of more and more people, the experience of feeling at home with the made, the contrived, the produced along with a feeling of being disconnected with, out of synch with, to use the great existential word, "alienated," from the natural. Stated as such, there is an obvious, call it "historical," pull away from the cultural and "back" to the natural. The world weariness, the trepidation, that comes with the end of the millennium, whispers a romantic message, perhaps not as Blakean, as apocalyptic as it was to, say the 19th century, but still insistent: "Retrieve the natural." In a postmodern age, with narratives layering themselves on one another, with the belief in science as dominant narrative exploded, the call of the natural, as foreign as it is to many of us, has a siren quality to it. The natural promises a rest, of sorts, a place of quietude, from the clamor of the artificial.

Now, if you will allow me the personal, every part of my philosophic education over the past twenty years calls for me to resist, to dissolve the dichotomy that lurks within the above paragraphs. It is not just Dewey, that erstwhile resister of "either-or" theories, but also Dewey's more recent followers, notably Richard Rorty in "Texts and Lumps," who rail against turning convenient "blocking-offs" into ontological distinctions.¹ The temptation with Rorty is to find a middle ground between texts and lumps, between artificial creations like books and magazines and natural ones like stones and trees, and then tweak that middle ground until the walls separating one from the other become porous. Until, in effect, what was originally perceived as an ontological distinction between the artificial and the natural, is now seen as a convenient blocking-off which is useful in dealing with the experiential. The temptation, then, is to revert to training and resist the siren call. I feel, perhaps, the ungrateful son, but in what follows, I propose, at least for a short time, to turn my back on my heritage, and follow the siren's call.

The mistake, it seems to me, is to view the natural as monolithic, as one thing, or as a series of things having a single quiddity, an essence that holds them together and distinguishes them from their opposite, the artificial. The implications for practice is that once one grabs hold of the natural, once one touches it and

finds it strange or hostile or repellent, one is sure to “drop” it, to retreat back into the safety of the continual. Think, on the other hand, of the natural as “they,” a rough collection of loosely related family members, differing as much, and as little, as a dotting great-uncle from a newborn child, and the temptation to discard (or embrace) is, at least, meliorated. I became lost in the forest and, so, my relationship to the natural as forest becomes tenuous. But what of my relationship to the natural as X, or the natural as Y?

So. Let us assume the natural as diverse and then try to burrow beneath the skin of one of the naturals, with an eye to drawing some, at best, tentative conclusions. To do so, I once again have to rely upon the personal and the anecdotal. There was a movie made sometime in the early 1980s called *Atlantic City*. In it, Burt Lancaster, portraying an aged petty thief and con-artist, tells a young waitress, Susan Sarandon, about the past. As they walk along the boardwalk at New Jersey, Atlantic City, he points to decrepit houses, falling-down hotels, vacant lots and with each step describes what was and, most importantly, what has been lost. Finally, he stops, puts his right hand on Susan Sarandon’s elbow and with his left points to the Atlantic Ocean. Without a touch of irony, he says: “You should have seen it in the old days.”

There are senses, both Heraclitean and ecological, in which the lack of irony is called for. You cannot enter the same decrepit hotel twice, you cannot step into the same river twice, and, by the smallest extension, you cannot see the same ocean twice. It is not just that the Atlantic Ocean of today is different from the Atlantic Ocean of yesteryear. It is, pace Heraclitus, different from the Atlantic Ocean of yesterday. In a more political, a more ecological sense, the levels of toxins and pollutants had risen dramatically from the, say the 1940s to the 1980s. An ocean that is the environment for submarine battles is an ocean, qualitatively different from an ocean functioning as a graveyard of sorts for the medical waste of late-century disease and plague.

Those senses are worthy of respect, but in the context of the movie, they do not preclude a final sense. There has been a violent crime, a crime that seems incongruous somehow with the pettiness of the lawbreaking that characterizes the movie, and now Burt Lancaster hurries, as best an old, defeated con-artist can hurry, along the boardwalk at Atlantic City. It is late afternoon on a pale January afternoon. There are gulls perched on the backs of summer benches, leaning into a frigid winter breeze, bending, almost like frozen statues, into a wind that feels like, at any moment, it will become vicious. And Burt Lancaster looks towards the ocean, and the wind catches his hat, a grey fedora, and it is pulled to the decrepit hotels, unrecognizable hotels, the hat bouncing on currents of air. But Lancaster doesn’t see the ballet, his eyes fixed on the ocean, tearing, seeing the ocean for what it was, seeing himself for the young man he is. The lines and the anguish melt away from his face and for a brief moment, so goes the magic of movies, or perhaps, better still, so goes the power of the Atlantic Ocean when captured with just the right angle, at just the right time of the day, the young man is returned to the old man who, mistakenly, had thought he had forgotten.

The scene is deeply romantic, almost embarrassingly so, and the director Louis Malle, seems to realize it, and, so, brings the movie back to a resolution of sorts, a resolution in which deeds, both bad and good, are punished. But, here, since we are listening to the siren call, I want to stay with that romance a bit longer.

Burt Lancaster’s character finds himself in what John Dewey calls an experiential situation. The situation is an interaction which takes place between a sentient being, a person and some part of his/her environment. Using Dewey’s imagery, there is a doing and an undergoing in which the person pushes against his/her environment and the environment pushes back. The experience exists in the situation, better yet the experience is the situation. As such, the experience is neither subjective nor objective, but is an exchange between subject and object, an exchange sensitive though not completely dependent on things like purpose, perspective, respective histories (or perceiver, of environment) and so on. In addition, the situation has, or discloses itself, in what might be called an aleatory fashion. There is something chance-like, inherently unpredictable about the exact nature of the situation. A change in atmosphere, emotional or otherwise, changes the situation. With Emerson, we cross a field late at night and experience a joy that makes us shudder. The same passage on a different night might cause only indifference, or if shudder we must, be a sign less of joy and more of terror. Every situation, at heart, has quality similar to Martin Buber’s I-Thou experience. Sometimes we look, but do not see. Other times, we see without (seeming to) look. Complete control of the situation is illusory. We just do not live in that sort of world.

There is, then, a problem, if one accepts, and for the purpose of this paper I ask that we accept, Dewey’s notion of the experiential situation. Since the situation, itself, has an aleatory quality, the attempt to come

up with hard-and-fast mechanisms, of algorithms for dealing with the situation, for reconstructing it, for wrestling educational value from it, for saying what it means is, somehow, wrong-headed. In the U.S. today, much is made about proactive teaching. I'm not sure what that means but the way the locution is used suggests something about thinking ahead, making the first strike, and so on. Surely, there is nothing wrong with thinking ahead, trying to predict, and having plans in place, but the teaching act, if Dewey is right, is more reactive than proactive, more artful than algorithmic. The task, it seems to me, is to respond appropriately, to help the student respond imaginatively and creatively and critically to the situation that presents itself. Try as hard as we might to control the educational environment, to create situations, in the words of the progressives that are "truly educational," each situation is, in effect, what it is and not what it is meant to be, meant to be by the teacher, by the curriculum maker, by the textbook writer. Discovery, keep in mind the connection between the subjective and the objective, takes place within the situation. We find ourselves in situations and, moving to William James, each situation even seemingly the most bizarre, or the most trivial, has something significant to tell about the nature of reality. The task is to allow the situation to "speak" in such a way that the language is understandable to the hearer.

What I have been trying to do, so my title suggests, is to get beneath the skin of the natural, burrow just a little deeper with an eye towards saying something about the natural in the education of children. I know, of course, that the twentieth century is one of tragic excess, that we have done perhaps irreparable damage to the environment, and finally, we ought to do all sorts of things in the schools to counteract that excess. But, again, as the twentieth has shown us so clearly, there is a difference between "schooling" and "education." The two are not synonymous and in some instances not even diagramable as overlapping circles. So, what I am trying to do is to find a way to connect the naturals with the specifically educational in schooling. I support all of the environmental "educational" packages, programs, and so on that I have come across and think that they can do enormous good even if they are not educational (educational in the sense-making way referred to previously). If a program in the schools can reduce inner-city air and noise pollution, can gather support for a position on protecting the ozone layer, or muster sympathy for endangered species, that might be sufficient reason for supporting it. I am simply saying that those good things might be achieved without much educational impact, and what I am after in this paper is focusing on the nature of the educational impact.

The tone of the paper, so far, has been if not pessimistic then cautious. We have dealt with the conditions that enable education and have seen that they are enormously complex, idiosyncratic to persons and to their individual histories, and existing in an indeterministic (a not completely determined) world. In effect, we have discovered, after all this time, an educational truism, something every experienced teacher knows - you can do everything right and still produce a lesson that means virtually nothing.

The caution, the skepticism is healthy. It guards against excess, keeps teachers and theorists on their toes, helps them refrain from making outlandish claims. Still, most of us need something more than a healthy skepticism. We need, at least some of us, a promise, couched in qualifications as it may be, that if success is achieved, the success itself will be of such magnitude as to make the effort, to make the educational gamble, worthwhile.

There is a quotation that is bandied about in most of the Philosophy for Children literature that might help here. The quote is about the relation of civilization to conversation, and is by that most conservative of philosophers, Michael Oakeshott:

As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of a inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation begun in the primeval forest and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. Of course there is argument and inquiry and information, but wherever these are profitable they are recognized as passages in this conversation... Education, properly speaking, is a initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.²

I am aware of the fact that metaphors can be overburdened, and that if you put too much conceptual weight on them, they may collapse. Still, if you are willing, I am ready to put an enormous amount of weight on this one, and on the previous notion of an experiential situation. View the conversation of which Oakesholt speaks as an enormous one that erases temporal and geographic boundaries and, almost literally, allows us, sitting in this nice room, to converse with primeval women or men, hunched low over a fire in some late autumnal forest, the smell of winter heavy in the air. Primeval women, let our initial conversation be with a woman, speaks and her language, as languages must, floats on a sea that is her context. The referents of her speech, the images that she uses are local. She makes the points she makes by means of the counters at hand. She reveals herself and her situation by means of the things with which she is most familiar. And so, as we listen to her, as we decipher what she says, we hear talk of the changing of the season, of small animals scurrying through dense brush, of what the painter Dega would call the sponginess of the land on which she walks. For her, these natural events are precisely that which gives meaning to her life. As she tells us of the natural she tells us what her world means.

For those of us, hearkening back to Rorty's distinction between texts and lumps, who are creatures of the texts, for those of us city-born and city-bred, existing, as it were, outside of the natural, the primeval woman's speech must be almost indecipherable. Just as I was lost in Professor Schreier's forest, we, city-dwellers all, must be lost in the primeval woman's speech. We may find the speech quaint, or interesting on antiquarian grounds, but the deep meaning, the utilitarian implications, what the speech means in the terms of how she makes her way in her world, and by extension, what we may learn about how we are to make our way in our world, is lost to us. To the extent that we are cut off from the natural, to the extent that we find ourselves ill-at-ease with the natural, to that extent will the primeval woman's speech be indecipherable.

If you go back and look at Oakesholt's quotation, you will note that he is making at least two claims: the first is that there is what John Dewey labeled the "funded capital" of civilization (the "significata" of a civilization that distinguishes it from other groups), and that each of us is an inheritor of that capital and, by extension, has the same sorts of claims on it, claims of entitlement, that all heirs do.

The second is that initiation into the conversation - learning "... to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper reasons of utterance... [to] acquire the proper intellectual and moral habits... is that which defines us as distinctively human." A Cartesian thinks of the person as discrete, as individual, as solitary thinking substance, but Oakesholt's notion of the person is, if not Vygotskian, if not post-modern, then distinctively pre-modern, a notion that sees the humanity of the individual as arising in the communication with one's fellows.

When you put it this way, and I hear the metaphor creak but, I think, it is still capable of bearing the weight we put in it, one has a clear mandate to attempt an education into the naturals, and here I would like to bring the school into it. Children are entitled to partnership in the conversation. Full partnership can only be achieved by helping children arrive at a position in which they can understand the context of various members of the conversation. The schools, having the charge of educating the young, have an obligation to nurture, or attempt to nurture, that understanding.

Furthermore, if the schools are places in which, in addition to being places where students' pass (and sometimes fail) examinations and where students, more or less, prepare for the future, are places where children learn how to become human, learn the dispositions and attitudes that make us distinctively human, then again, pace Oakesholt, the schools have an obligation to attempt to nurture the natural in the education of young students.

So, the mandate is clear. In an important sense, one can argue that there is nothing more important to us as humans than an education into the natural. And perhaps that is why, even recognizing the aleatory quality of educational situations, even recognizing the fact that historical circumstances have changed dramatically in this century and that we have become text-creatures, dwellers of cities and not forests, in ways that no previous generations might imagine, perhaps that is why we must cringe a little bit when one realizes that it is the contemporary school that is charged with this awesome task.

I would like to close on notes both optimistic and pessimistic. A good teacher, it seems to me, a teacher aware of the dignity of her/his calling, a teacher skilled both in the craft and the art of teaching, a teacher familiar with her/his students and the situations in which those students exist, a teacher with sufficient time and resources, will find ways to create situations, for even the most jaded of city-dwellers among us, in which

the natural can be heard, in which the primeval forest dweller's voice can resonate. The task is formidable, and becomes even more formidable as the historical context continues to evolve, but it seems to me that, given the right condition, there are grounds for reasonable hope

However, when one looks at the schools, and here I am speaking, in general, about Western schools, and specifically about American schools, the ground for hope becomes, at best, shaky. I do not want to indulge in the time-honored policy of bashing schools, of holding them responsible for the majority of society's ills. Indeed, it seems to me that the schools have much to be praised for, and that cultural villains tend to be found in institutions more business-like, more military, and more political. Still, when one thinks about this amorphous thing called nature-education one is hard-pressed to say that the school as we know it is a conducive place for such an enterprise.

There are many things I could say here. I might say, with virtually every modern critic of the school, that the focus of schooling has been skewed, that, a la Locke, we concentrate on the accumulation of information, and ignore the cultivation of virtue and wisdom and breeding or a la Paulo Friere, we treat children as empty containers, deposit information in their otherwise empty heads, and create a citizenry as dull as it is compliant.

Or I might say, with Aristotle, in *The Politics*, that leisure (leisure in the sense of freedom from economic want and leisure in the sense of the time to weigh issues, time to ponder) is essential to the educative process and that the way we view students as competitors in a grim race to help nation-states achieve their ends is antithetical to the very idea of education. But those criticisms are, I think, as well-known to you as they are accurate. Instead, I would rather leave you with the hint of a somewhat, I hope, novel criticism. A criticism that might have some link with our earlier claims about the ongoing conversation which began in the primeval forest.

In a recent article in a Brazilian journal, Mat Lipman mentioned, in almost an off-hand fashion, that one of the things educators did not aim for, but should, is the development of friendship. Lipman did not explain the remark much, but I will take the opportunity, here, of doing so. Think of a friend in an Aristotelian sense, as another self, in a sense a better self, a self that has similar values, accepts similar criteria and standards, but occupies a different perspective. In this Aristotelian sense, the friend relationship is, in effect, John Dewey's notion of the Democratic Community in miniature, it provides the like-mindedness that allows inquiry to begin and it encourages the commerce with the other that forces inquiry to self-correct. We may in the schools at times encourage inquiry and we may, in the schools, especially in the early grades, encourage the development of friendship, but it is rare, so Lipman might suggest that the sort of intellectual friendship that Aristotle alludes to is cultivated.

I end, irrefutably, with a dualism and now, apprentice Deweyian that I am, I must attempt to dissolve it. Perhaps a return to metaphor might help - education is not a race among individuals, among nations, but a leisurely stroll along a boardwalk where when talking with one another, when talking among friends, we sometimes are fortunate to hear the articulate speech of the Atlantic Ocean. Schools do not have to muffle the deep beauty of that speech. Good teachers have always attempted to make it articulate.

NOTES

1. Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," in *Rorty Objectivity, Realitivism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp 78-92.
2. Michael Oaksholt, "Poetry as a Voice in the Conversation of Mankind," in Oaksholt, *Rationalism in Politics* (New York: Mentheun, 1962), p. 119.

Address correspondence to:

Ronald Reed, Ph.D.
Bebensee University Scholar
Professor of Philosophy and Education
Texas Wesleyan University
1201 Wesleyan Street
Fort Worth, TX 76105, U.S.A.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)