

# What Calls for Critical Pragmatism? An Introduction to Educational Wonder

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Our planet is on fire, and all we do is fight. In stark summary, this is the predicament in which our society finds itself. Sci-fi writers can scarcely conjure up a more dire, all-encompassing emergency. Yet instead of rising to the occasion, we have been steadily destroying our capacity for a democratically cooperative response. It is as if something like William Blake's "invisible worm" were mysteriously eating away our joy in the common world.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, there are many, complexly intertwined reasons for this failure and despair. The urgency is obvious, however, and it is on this that I want to zero in here. Together, we need to overcome our peculiar indifference and do something effective soon. This imperative calls for an attitude at the root of one of the central traditions, if not *the* central tradition, of American philosophy of education. Following Barbara Stengel, we may name it the stance of "critical pragmatism."<sup>2</sup>

What is critical pragmatism? The term, and the line of thinking it names, recalls the legacies of William James, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, and associated thinkers, and it establishes an essential alliance between philosophy and the project of education. Stengel proclaims that "in a world of educational action, we are all pragmatists whether we admit it or not, whether we ever take Dewey's name in vain or not" (Stengel, 24). Although this is a provocative way of putting it, I am going to sketch an explanation of why I find her observation convincing. My main focus in this paper, however, is on a pair of even stronger assertions. In response to our experiences of disenchantment—including, I want to stress, our periodic and current disappointment with democracy and with nature—Stengel insists that "the only defensible approach to that dilemma is . . . a critical pragmatist one" (Stengel, 24). Given the enormity of the social crisis that is bound up with such disenchantment, she furthermore contends that "critical pragmatism is the most interesting and generative philosophical stance currently available" (Stengel, 22). Now, rather than pick at such sweeping

declarations, I want to examine some fundamental questions that they open up. What results, I believe, will be not a refutation of Stengel's claims on behalf of critical pragmatism but a kind of Kantian critique of them, one that positively affirms them but within acknowledged limits. These limits, I shall suggest, boil down to the need for a supplemental, qualitatively different approach to philosophy of education alongside critical pragmatism, one that makes a personal commitment to the latter possible. I call it that of an *educational poetics of wonder*.

Stengel articulates the critical pragmatist stance in her response to the 2019 PES Presidential Address of Kathy Hytten.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the brief space of such a reply does not give Stengel much room to explain this stance in detail. But she does a fine job of nailing down its essentials in a way that illuminates why the pragmatist tradition has become so dominant in philosophy of education. For her, this tradition is above all one of action: "pragmatism is not simply one philosophical alternative among others but the essential element of any stance that takes action seriously" (Stengel, 22). To echo my opening invocation of our emergency situation, pragmatists realize that they have to do something. Necessarily fortifying this realization is "a certain kind of positivity, of hope, of optimism" (Stengel, 23). Pragmatists cannot act without believing that they have the power to make a constructive difference to the situation that is calling for their response. Chief among their desires is that to be useful. A basic measure of such usefulness is whether the consequences of their action on this situation will significantly improve their, and their communities', lived experience, their material and spiritual quality of life. For this to be accomplished, such action should be considered part of more sustained, dedicated, collective, long-term work toward the concrete "reconstruction of social relations and personal meaning-making" (Stengel, 24-25). This active response and commitment to what life at a particular time and place and in a particular company is currently demanding of us thus constitutes a form of principled, philosophical responsibility. And such a stance equally emphasizes an appreciation of the distinct power of education, of how society can be regenerated for the better, with a gain in experiential meaning, by widening and intensifying our communicative interaction with others.

To this traditional stance of pragmatism, Stengel adds a stress on crit-

icality. This is a bit puzzling since no one could credibly accuse the pragmatist tradition of being uncritical or of failing to acknowledge that as times change, it needs to be critical in new ways. Although she does not explain this stress, I take her to be noting that for the pragmatist tradition to be sufficiently critical for our time, it must bring into itself concepts and arguments that originally emerged from outside philosophical traditions. In particular, various thinkers elaborating approaches rooted in critical theory, analytic philosophy, and deconstructionism, among other lines of inquiry that demand rigorous negation, can be useful for pragmatists even if the work of these thinkers lacks an explicit call to optimistic action. Accordingly, Stengel urges us to face squarely the large-scale social pressures and structures that shape our lives and the daunting, sometimes disenchanting realization that “our social circumstances are both useful (to some) and dangerous (to others), open to alteration in search of good and better, but never able to be ‘fixed’” (Stengel, 25). Even when she cannot honestly see a path to victory over the forces that threaten diverse communities differently, she places all the critical insights available to her in the service of “resistance.” In the crisis that is currently calling for something from us, she is determined to act pragmatically without being naïve.

It is in this spirit that Stengel replies to Hytten’s address. Besides being quite insightful, Stengel’s response is utterly sympathetic, not least because Hytten, too, is an avowed pragmatist. These two philosophers of education share the basic stance. Nonetheless, on this occasion, Stengel presses Hytten to be more uncompromising: “When Hytten suggests that there may be other philosophical paths to her argument and other philosophical stances that will confront us with the joy she articulates, the joy that both emerges from and prompts thinking-into-constructive-and-reconstructive action, I think she is not quite right” (Stengel, 24). Critical pragmatism alone is the way. As I shall explain in a moment, what arouses this rebuke is Hytten’s account of how she was led to pragmatism. Stengel seems wary of this story. There are reasons for her to be, and they disclose telling limits of this philosophy.

On the basis of our sketch of the pragmatist stance, we might expect Hytten to recount how she was motivated by a challenging problem threatening her and her community. And indeed, the later part of her personal history does

do this. However, it is striking that her story commences in response to a very different experience. “Like many philosophers,” Hytten testifies, “I was drawn to this field because I was full of questions, full of wonder” (Hytten, 4). She relates how this wonder led her to pursue the study of philosophy in college, where she engaged with the traditional literature of this practice and learned its disciplinary skills. Along the way, she was moved to affirm a direction for her whole life: “Perhaps most importantly, I learned important lessons beyond the classroom walls, notably that I should prioritize making a meaningful life, and trust that making a living would eventually follow” (Hytten, 4).

Eventually, pragmatism explicitly enters the picture. Here is how Hytten portrays her conversion:

I initially struggled with the posturing and abstraction in many of my philosophy classes, where too often the goal seemed to be to win an argument but not to understand why the arguments even mattered, especially to peoples’ actual lives in the here and now. This changed with my study of John Dewey, who argued that one of the most important roles for philosophy is to understand contemporary social, political, and moral struggles and participate in addressing them. He maintained that “ideas are worthless except as they pass into actions which rearrange and reconstruct, in some way, be it little or large, the world in which we live.” Similarly, Dewey says one of the best tests of the value of philosophy is whether it ends “in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful.” The quest for a philosophy that mattered led me to the study of education, and to questions about what we need to learn, understand, experience, know, and do in order to live fulfilling lives and share spaces in community with diverse others. Like Dewey, I have come to see how the sphere of education is where philosophical assumptions, beliefs, and visions often matter most, especially as schools are always

passing on implicit and explicit lessons about what constitutes a good and meaningful life. (Hyttén, 5)

I have quoted this passage at length because it sets forth, with exceptional clarity and grace, a vision that I imagine inspires many of us. To Stengel's point, even though I do not consider myself a card-carrying Deweyan, I, too, find existential meaning in putting my shoulder to the wheel of this philosophy of education project. Furthermore, in line with Stengel's emphasis, this vision comes to Hyttén in response to a problem: namely, the irrelevance of much philosophical study and debate to the struggle to improve the quality of ordinary social life. How can we in good conscience pursue philosophy if that means turning our backs on this struggle? When Hyttén instead devotes her philosophical efforts to it, she achieves, in Stengel's words, the "work-life integration" of a calling.

The piece that does not quite fit into the critical pragmatist picture is the opening spark of enchantment. For Hyttén, before there was a problem, there were questions of wonder. The challenge of how to reconcile philosophy and common life only emerges afterward as a problem of maintaining this enchantment. In her story, disheartening encounters with philosophical pedantry are succeeded by the even more disenchanting realization that the whole business model of academia, with its audit culture of competitive productivity, works to kill philosophical wonder. Professional philosophers, like their colleagues in other departments, are trained to value above all what counts in the market; they are taught that "entrepreneurial subjectivity" is the path to tenure and the good life. To this, Hyttén pledges resistance. She characterizes this struggle as "the kind of engaged, communal, and activist work that keeps alive the things that drew me to philosophy in the first place: passion, wonder, joy, and hope" (Hyttén, 14). Even as she exhorts us to steel ourselves for an arduous and indefinitely long fight ahead, she returns us once more, as the poet John Ashbery puts it, "to the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago."<sup>4</sup>

It is this affirmation of an initial enchantment that evidently makes Stengel nervous. As I remarked, it deviates from the pragmatist's orientation, which focuses above all on problems and our responsibility to address them. A drama focused on unexpected failure, moral demand, and decisive, cooperative, and effective action does not have a central role for wonder. Taking this

wonder seriously, on the contrary, brings us to the source of Stengel's unease. The experience of enchantment has a wild side that does not necessarily lead one to pragmatist responsibility.

"The 'enchantments' of philosophy," Stengel warns, putting "enchantments" in scare quotes, "are considerable but always subject to their own pragmatist critique" (Stengel, 22). The reason is that philosophy is a tricky thing. "What counts as philosophy is a question for inquiry, an inquiry that has to uncover assumptions (and bewitchments), analyze language, reveal constitutive dimensions of the experience, and deconstruct the 'grand narratives' that make the enchantments make sense" (Stengel, 22). In her view, philosophy is a practice that is continuously criticizing—and should be criticizing—itsself. From this, it follows that while one may think one is drawn to philosophy, one may be in truth uncritically bewitched by something non-philosophical. Accordingly, Stengel questions Hytten's understanding of what happened to her:

I suggest that the initial enchantment which Hytten describes *is* enchantment but not with philosophy. Rather, it's an adolescent enchantment with our own minds. Enchantment with *philosophy* requires a kind of "second conversion," a recognition that my own mind—and even the minds of other philosophers—aren't all that interesting. What *is* interesting, what compels philosophy of education for a lifetime, is lived experience subject always to scrutiny. . . . The question challenging us, the one that motivates the Work-Life integration Hytten recommends, is whether we actually want to practice philosophy or simply prefer to stay enthralled in enchantment with our own minds. (Stengel, 23)

Stengel's criticism reframes Hytten's story of her calling in a way that squares more with the pragmatist stance. In the beginning, yes, there is her enchantment with so-called "philosophy." But this experience leads her eventually, in a twist, to become disenchanted with the part of philosophy that is merely immature narcissism. It is in response to this disillusionment that her true, second conversion to real philosophy occurs. Hytten's enchantment sets her up for disenchantment, and it is when she responds to the challenge of the latter that she is called to the genuine discipline. Indeed, Dewey rescues her from a youthful error. The

original enchantment belongs more, then, to the history of the problem.

Now, two things trouble me about this interpretation of Hytten's calling. First, it encourages us to skip over, without seriously engaging, Hytten's explicit call for a pragmatism that saves, not saves her from, her initial inspiration. Even though this call departs from the orthodox pragmatist stance, revising this stance along Hytten's lines so that it is more responsive to enchantment than to disenchantment might actually make it more appealing and, therefore, more effective. Stengel does not explore this possibility, but I shall try to broach an approach to it.

This interest brings me to my second concern: the way Stengel represses our memory of the role of wonder in philosophy. According to her, "philosophy begins in wonder about the world(s) we construct in and through shared experience (and not merely in texts)" (Stengel, 23). Surely, though, this is too presentist a characterization of philosophy's origin, projecting back into that starting point a pragmatist, already somewhat disenchanted account of the object of wonder. Rather than describing this experience of wonder in the terms of later philosophical developments it gave birth to, is there some way of appreciating the continuing significance of the experience as it inaugurally happened? Indeed, could respecting more scrupulously the historical distance between ourselves and the beginning philosophers of wonder disclose what this wonder may still meaningfully put at stake for us?

Suppose, accordingly, we heed the ancient experience of *thaumazein*. Citing Plato and Aristotle, Hannah Arendt reminds us that this experience is the very spring of philosophy. She glosses the term as "the shocked wonder at the miracle of Being."<sup>5</sup> Testifying to this inner awe, she points out, is one of the most publicly remarked and startling stances of Socrates: "the sight of him time and again suddenly overcome by his thoughts and thrown into a state of absorption to the point of perfect motionlessness for many hours."<sup>6</sup> The magnitude of the wonder is conveyed by its overpoweringly stilling force on Socrates' body—which does not prevent it from moving the minds and eventually the bodies of his neighbors. *Thaumazein*, which is essentially speechless, ignites the speech of philosophy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Arendt furthermore understands that this big-bang experience also tells us something about philosophy's end.

This . . . would explain why Plato and Aristotle, who held *thaumazein* to be the beginning of philosophy, should also agree—despite so many and such decisive disagreements—that some state of speechlessness, the essentially speechless state of contemplation, was the end of philosophy. *Theoria*, in fact, is only another word for *thaumazein*; the contemplation of truth at which the philosopher ultimately arrives is the philosophically purified speechless wonder with which he began.<sup>7</sup>

If we take Arendt's retrieval of this experience seriously, then we are in a position to raise questions about both Hytten's and Stengel's accounts of philosophical enchantment. First of all, Arendt, in a different way, casts doubt on Hytten's understanding that what she was enchanted by is philosophy in itself. The books, the classes, the arguments, the traditional questions and techniques—all of these, Arendt suggests, are not the ultimate objects of philosophical enchantment, or are so only idolatrously. If this is the case, Stengel's reservations about whether Hytten may have been enchanted by a mere semblance of philosophy are beside the point and a red herring. Philosophy as such should not be conceived as something that can bewitch us; it is a response to something beyond, and prior to, itself. Hence, philosophy cannot be critically against enchantment—it *is* enchantment.

Before we proceed from this, however, we need to address a predictable objection from the pragmatist tradition. Suppose we grant that philosophy began as a form of intense wonder; perhaps it issued in a discourse that can be plausibly characterized as wondering. And suppose we allow this historical truth to question us today, to put critical pressure, for example, on our degraded confusion of wonder with *divertissement* and on the incessant commodification of enchantment. Nevertheless, are there not good reasons, at the end of the day, to uphold the pragmatist rejection of *theoria* and contemplation as idle spectatorship? What about Dewey's contention, in *Democracy and Education*, that the classical age of philosophy was too much in thrall to figures of authority, a critique that seems all the more salient given our current crisis of democracy?<sup>8</sup>

This argument returns us to Stengel's worry about narcissism. Even if we understand ourselves to be enchanted not by philosophy but by “the



miracle of Being,” could not the result be the same: that we stay mired in our own minds? Indeed, philosophy engages us with at least the minds of others. Being? Whatever it is exactly, it does not seem all that unlike, in its quieting effect, a reflecting pool.

In line with my overall affirmation of critical pragmatism, I agree with Stengel that if *thaumazein* calls for a withdrawal from others and from action, if it does not stimulate, let alone inhibits, democratic cooperation, then we should consider it too problematic an experience to pursue. Two things, however, encourage me to believe otherwise. First, there is Arendt’s discerning observation that the life of contemplation entered into opposition with the active life of the maker, *homo faber*, not so much out of fidelity to *thaumazein* and *theōria* as such but because these became increasingly, but contingently, tied to Plato’s doctrine of perfect forms that render those of any craftsman wanting. Arendt can agree with Dewey that the metaphysician stands on the side of do-nothing aristocrats who look down on the world of mutable shadows with which workers grapple. However, she emphasizes this represents a fall from, not the culmination of, the pre-metaphysical condition of wonder.

Contemplation . . . is quite *unlike* the enraptured state of wonder with which man responds to the miracle of Being as a whole. . . . The motionlessness which in the state of speechless wonder is no more than an incidental, unintended result of absorption, becomes now the condition and hence the outstanding characteristic of the *vita contemplativa*. It is not wonder that overcomes and throws man into motionlessness, but it is through the *conscious cessation of activity*, the activity of making, that the contemplative state is reached.<sup>9</sup>

Veering away from any metaphysical justification for contemplative idleness, then, could there be a way to say yes to the experience of wonder, to affirm the miracle in which one is participating, to allow it to absorb one—but keep moving? Keep acting, keep making, keep working with others, but in orientation to enchantment? The second thing that encourages me to believe that there is, is Hytten’s very testimony of walking such a path. Although I identify its source not precisely with philosophy per se, I read her story as one about

how she was educated by enchantment. By *education* here, I mean specifically to stress one of its Latin roots, *ēducere*, usually translated as *to lead out*. Hytten is led from her childhood self and family home to the Chenango Valley and then to Chapel Hill, and then out further into the unfamiliar world, by that most *unheimlich* of experiences: philosophical wonder. Along her journey, she encounters disenchantment, but in resisting it, she is fighting for the truth of her prior experience. Thus, she demonstrates that wonder need not freeze you in yourself; it can inspire you to engage with others in this world of beauty. And a particular point of engagement can be the experience of *thaumazein*.

How common, though, is such an experience really? Is not “the miracle of Being” an esoteric and rarefied idea, requiring at least an introductory course in ontology? My modest and concluding response to these qualms has three dimensions.

First, I propose that we renounce trying to turn the object of *thaumazein* into a concept. We may not need to grasp the nature of Being in general, especially if that understanding smothers the wonder. Instead, we could concentrate on savoring and celebrating the experience of the miracle, of this special sort of happening. What does this experience concretely feel like?

This brings me to the vital role of figurative language. Suppose we take the term *Being* in a loose sense to evoke the possibility that despite their manifest differences, everything is like every other thing in the way they happen: miraculously. How may we actualize this possibility? How do we become aware of the miracle in various settings and circumstances? How do these situations stage our surprise and wonder? How do we register the metaphorical associations among these miracles and the way each is a synecdoche for the miracle of them happening all together? In her address, Hytten points the way when she begins and ends by quoting Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day.” To it, I would join Wisława Szymborska’s “Miracle Fair,” part of which runs as follows:

Commonplace miracle:

that so many commonplace miracles take place.

[. . .]

A miracle in the first place:

cows will be cows.

Next but not least:

just this cherry orchard  
from just this cherry pit.

[. . .]

A miracle that's lost on us:

the hand actually has fewer than six fingers  
but still it's got more than four.

[. . .]

An extra miracle, extra and ordinary:

the unthinkable  
can be thought.<sup>10</sup>

As Szymborska bears witness to, and as many, many others would maintain—think of the tradition of haiku—the most ordinary, inconsequential incidents can strike us as miraculous. This lyric side of life has, furthermore and secondly, a dramatic, educational dimension. The miracles we encounter do not simply enchant us. Our wonder at them is charged with attraction—we want them to stay in our lives and lead us out of what they stand in contrast to: disenchantment, “objective” causes and reasons to which we are indifferent, aimlessness, drudgery, and resignation. As we struggle to stay true to what happened to us, to what we felt, we affirm that life is not all “ye same olde shite”: we are drawn in a particular direction and act accordingly. Reflecting on how we have been led out from one miracle to another, then, we may appreciate how our life as a whole is the history of an education. Friedrich Nietzsche suggests that in the poetic logic that links the turning points of such a personal narrative, one may furthermore discern where one is being led to next. Hence, one may actively venture forth with the enthusiastic force and sense of a calling, of a provisional destiny.

Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature and their sequence will give you a law, the fundamental law of your

own true self. Compare these objects one with another, see how one completes, expands, surpasses, transfigures another, how they constitute a stepladder upon which you have clambered up to yourself as you are now; for your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be.<sup>11</sup>

Our true, educated self, accordingly, is our striving to be true to a historical sequence of loves that led us, and continues to lead us, beyond our known and familiar self, beyond the image in the mirror.

What call people like Hytten and Stengel to critical pragmatism, I am suggesting, are miraculous events and encounters that reverberate in a language of wondering poetry and dramatic history. Of course, no one is born knowing how to think and talk in this way. This brings me to the crucial third dimension of my response to the doubt that *thaumazein* is something we have in common: namely, that no such language could be possible without our initiation into it by very different others. One's calling, with all that is at stake in it, is forged in conversation with people who are groping toward theirs in diverse directions. Over the length of our lives, we are continually testing and revising how we make sense of our experiences in interaction with new strangers. The wonder that is decisive for our personal lives is thus inherently social. An educated life is simply impossible unless we involve ourselves with surprising, and disconcerting, outsiders.

Like other philosophies of education, educational poetics studies the nature of education. More than some, though, it examines how moments of *thaumazein* lead people out on their paths. Moreover, it aims to do this in a way that engages as large a popular audience as possible by prioritizing figurative language over conceptual. It encourages us to appreciate the educational texts of our own personal lives by comparing them with artistic ones in the public culture.

Such an inquiry supports the tradition of critical pragmatism by pushing back some at its tone of critical disenchantment. A little polymorphous wonder might do this tradition, and all of us, some good. Critical pragmatists might appreciate that they are called by more than is dreamt of in their problem-solving philosophy. Yes, the present predicament is urgent, but we may rise

to the occasion with more vigor if we affirm that our history is one of regular elevation. More broadly, democratic citizens might appreciate that, however much they have to gain from triumphing over opponents in battles over justice, those same opponents also hold keys to their most intimate education. And we all together might realize not only the measure of what would be lost if we let the planet burn but also the infinity of what nature gives us when our minds are ablaze with the miracle of Being.

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## REFERENCES

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7 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 302.

8 See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916).

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