

On the Metaphysics of Presence

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Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut tells the story of a man who has escaped from the metaphysics of presence. The author writes, “Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between. He says.”¹ This pilgrim, this searcher, has escaped from the myth of passage, the quest to explain his life through a series of causes and effects in existent time. Billy Pilgrim did not just exist in a time which externally surrounded him; instead, time was the heart of his existence. As John Dewey writes of Lincoln, Lincoln as an individual *is* a history. Individuals are not *in* time, their interactions with other individuals *are* time.

Jim Garrison draws from Martin Heidegger in his critique of the metaphysics of presence and here we see important connections to Dewey as well. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger first develops a pragmatic account of how our primary relation to the world is through the “knowing how,” “ready to hand” use of equipment for our own ends.² Heidegger’s later account of authenticity and inauthenticity is grounded in an analysis of different ways we can pursue these ends. Both parts of this analysis depend on an account of non-successive temporality, a “standing out,” or “ecstases,” in which we dwell in a past, present, and future that are not earlier or later than one another.

We know this was the way Dewey described his own life. In the compelling and dramatic account he gives in his only autobiographical essay, *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, Dewey refuses to center his narrative on a self-acting, fixed entity. He writes instead of situations and scenes, influences and interactions, accidents and cravings. For those who know the standard history, Dewey the solid citizen, son of middle class burghers, productive, responsible, a perennially sincere and level-headed professional and champion of intelligent progress, the contrast in his essay is startling. Dewey envies those who can tell their story straight-away in a unified pattern, but because of, as he puts it, “the road I have been forced to travel,” he remains entangled, unstable, chameleon-like, unsettled.³ Yet, for Dewey, “forty years spent wandering in the wilderness like that of the present is not a sad fate — unless one attempts to make himself believe that the wilderness is after all itself the promised land.”⁴ Like Billy Pilgrim, Dewey has come to see his wandering in the wilderness as a liberation from the false solace of fixity and the bad faith of self-action. When Billy finds himself on the planet Tralfamadore in some unknown space-time dimension and asks, why me? his hosts answer, “Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is.... There is no why?”⁵ As Garrison puts it for Dewey, questions of ultimate causation and ultimate origin

are either meaningless or specific questions used in a relative sense to designate a point in the past at which a particular inquiry broke off.

Billy Pilgrim's story and Dewey's autobiographical essay, in their rejection of the metaphysics of presence and the present, make the idea of the search for identity problematic. In these accounts, there are events without an order imposed by telos or temporality. Yet, neither is chaotic. Heidegger links the search for identity to the idea of an "ability," understood as not merely a capacity or skill, but as the way we "press ahead" into a "for-the-sake-of-which," an end in terms of which we understand and identify ourselves. These projective identities, being-a-carpenter, being-a-parent, are more than mere skills; they constitute an "aiming" of how and what we care to be. Still, these aimings are not bound by some essence or temporal presence. Inauthentic choice for Heidegger, a "falling," and a turning away from the routines of life, for Dewey the habit which is thought, are efforts to *avoid* projecting an identity-end and this avoidance itself makes possible a kind of identity — a non-successive project that explains tasks and goals indirectly by leaving them to be settled elsewhere in time, scene, and circumstance. Thus for Heidegger and Dewey, rather than understanding the search as the effort to discover something existent, these pilgrimages are primarily about expression. Or better put, these pilgrimages are *in* expression. Essence *is* expression; the saying or expression *is* the identity itself, not just a symbolic vehicle for representing something outside, separate, from the conduct. Garrison puts it from Dewey, "Essence is but a pronounced instance of linguistic meaning.... Essence is never existence, and yet is the essence, the distilled impact of existence, the significant thing about it, its intellectual voucher." For Dewey, there is a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence; namely communication, language, discourse. In this view, language is not the vehicle for naming the world, somehow already there. Language, or better expression, *is* the world, bound not by some external or latent reality, but only by our imagination and situated purposes.

Profound educational questions emerge from this perspective. If essence is expression, if intelligence is the capacity to describe our experience as events in interaction, then literacy has a particular quality. Dewey's project was to understand how to become human — not by an appeal to a fixed essence, not by an appeal to some mirrored correspondence or relation with something non-human, but by developing the reflective intelligences that enable us to tell masterful and moving stories of our participation in community. For Dewey, this is the only meaningful sense of literacy. When Dewey writes of reflection or reflective intelligence, he uses metaphors of creation, construction, or reconstruction of new identities and meanings as a consequence of symbolic interactions, rather than mirror metaphors of representation, image-formation or copying of that which exists antecedently. That is, for Dewey, the root meaning of reflection is not in lux or light, but instead in *lection*, from *legein* or *legere* — to read. Reflective intelligence for Dewey is expressed in metaphors of reading and re-reading and more generally in metaphors of literacy where the texts are the durational events of experience in interaction. As such, for Dewey, the successor to philosophy after Darwin is educational inquiry.

The Tralfamadoreans, who have been studying Earthlings, tell Billy they have little interest in Jesus Christ, but are engaged most by Charles Darwin who taught that those who die are meant to die and that corpses are improvements. And they wonder how Earthlings can think at all within the boundaries of time. The Tralfamadorean guide describes the difference this way:

The guide invited the crowd to imagine that they were looking across a desert at a mountain range on a day that was twinkling bright and clear. They could look at a peak or a bird or a cloud, at a stone right in front of them, or even down into a canyon behind them. But among them was this poor Earthling and his head was encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off. There was only one eyehole through which he could look and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe. He was also strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe. The far end of the pipe rested on a bi-pod which was also bolted to the flatcar. All Billy could see was the little dot at the end of the pipe. He did not know he was on a flatcar, did not even know there was anything peculiar about his situation. The flatcar sometimes crept, sometimes went extremely fast, often stopped-went uphill, downhill, around curves, along straightaways. Whatever poor Billy saw through the pipe, he had no choice but to say to himself, "That's life."⁶

Vonnegut is here describing the educational and human possibilities inherent in two contrasting metaphysical positions. We might also think of the educational bearings of the metaphysics of presence in the contrast between the treatise and the novel. Rorty, following Kundera, writes that the treatise is didactic, seeks to reduce complexity to a formula, multiplicity to structure, possibility to Truth. The novel, in contrast, teaches by focusing on particularity, contingency, the acuteness of real pain and the exultation of real joy as experienced in concrete persons.⁷ The treatise asks why or what questions; the novel in contrast asks how, or even more, when, questions. The novel makes fun of the idea of real Truth as simply someone's attempt to manipulate others, like Billy's helmet and pipe, and insists upon the need to imagine multiple ways to read — to interpret and express the meanings of interconnected events. And it is no accident that the novel emerges as an educational form precisely at the time when treatise-like explanations and a set of universalizing social institutions, such as schools and mass culture, made it possible to conceive of literacy as the de-coding of immutable, timeless essence. The novel is no mere literary form; its purpose is to be that art which expresses existence, as a complement to science if possible, as an antidote if not. We are startled by Dewey's autobiography because it is novel, a telling of one's life which challenges the categories of identity and history. So too with Heidegger who insists that the philosopher needs access to authenticity, an "openness to being," a *novel* conception of the truth which is recalcitrant to analysis and shows itself more fully in poetic and allusive expression. Dewey's deep textual allusion to wandering in a wilderness as a way of expressing a non-essentialist identity outside of successive time is a poignant instance of just such an effort to speak a novel truth.

The Tralfamadoreans, educated without helmets and pipes, have only novels. Each novel is a clump of symbols and each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message-describing a situation, a scene. [The Tralfamadoreans] read them all at once, not one after the other. There is not any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully so that when seen all at once they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral,

no cause, no effects. What they love in their books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at once.⁸

Jim Garrison is absolutely correct in reminding us that these questions of temporality have profound bearings on the ways we think of human development, teaching, learning, curriculum, and the aims of education. When Dewey gives us an example of learning in his essay on the reflex arc, all the significant issues revolve around “when” questions. When is the stimulus?, when is the response?, when is the learning? Every good teacher knows that the received wisdom on when questions is insufficient. Science is not learned or taught in fourth period, when the teacher begins talking, when the tests are taken, when the school day begins and ends. Under much more cultural pressure than today, Dewey steadfastly refused to reduce inquiry into teaching, learning, and education to what, how, or why questions. Still, despite what we know, for almost 100 years we have been able to convince ourselves that the what, how, why, and when questions of educating could be answered within the linguistic-entity of the school. While this has never worked very well, the insufficiency of this project has become even more clear as the school loses its central role in the educational configuration. The capacity to express a sense of a non-essentialist essence, a being-who, a projective identity both individual and shared, will increasingly require the ability to interpret events far removed from the school and whose meaning is unknown and unknowable through the mirrors of our treatises. On this cusp, on the border, Dewey, Heidegger, and Vonnegut think *not for* us, but *with* us. And Jim Garrison’s urging that we write, think, and act within a philosophy of temporality lovingly makes educational inquiry, inquiry about learning to become human, the most beautiful and urgent problem deserving of our artful expression.

1. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York: Dell, 1969), 23.

2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

3. John Dewey, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” in J.J. McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Structure of Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1973), 9.

4. *Ibid.*, 13.

5. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 76-77.

6. *Ibid.*, 115.

7. Richard Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

8. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 88.