

Conversation and the “Best Possible Point of Encounter”:  
Cavell’s Emersonian Perfectionism and Dewey’s Cultivated Naïveté

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In her very thoughtful and provocative essay, Naoko Saito begins by acknowledging her inheritance of “the Deweyan task of creating democracy from within,” including, as a key component, the potential “fertility of Deweyan communication.” Yet there is also an uneasiness here (call it a troubled inheritance) that Saito soon identifies as the “dark side” of Deweyan communication, that is, the possibility for “mystifying” the “inner life” of the other at the “limits of communication.” This is where (a) “disagreement,” (b) “refusal,” or (c) the “untranslatable” or “incommunicable” impede or obstruct conversation, yielding, at times, a “complacent,” detached state of “mutual respect” that can be interpreted as a kind of “denial” or evasion of the “unknown other.” Indeed, Saito claims that (d) the failure of communication with the unknown other due to incommunicability is essentially where John Dewey found himself after his “cross-cultural experience in Japan in 1919 and 1921.”

As an alternative means of creating democracy from within that does not harbor the same “dark side,” Saito offers us Cavell’s Emersonian Moral Perfectionism (EMP). EMP, she explains, proposes “an anti-foundationalist notion of perfection without final perfectibility, reiterated in the idea of a democracy that in our everyday life is always still to be achieved.” This, for Cavell and Saito, turns on the “‘public importance’ of Emersonian ‘personal conversation.’” Within EMP, “[p]articipation in the language community is an ingredient of our political life, where ‘the polis is the field within which I work out my personal identity and it is the creation of (political) *freedom*.’” Saito then tells us that “[w]hat is at stake here is to confront another person, to take his or her position into account, and bear the consequences.” This, she continues, Cavell calls “a relationship of *acknowledgment* involving the ‘ability to make oneself an other to oneself, to learn of oneself something one did not *already* know.’” Hence “[t]he point of Emerson’s conversation of justice is not to justify one’s position, but rather, in order to test it, to make it vulnerable to the eyes of the other.” Thus in our encounters with the radically different, “language is not used to fill the gap in communication,” to reassert ourselves and deny the incommunicable but rather to find the means of “participat[ing] again,” seeking “the best possible point of encounter” in a moral relationship that “exceeds any choice between agreement and disagreement.”

In reading Dewey’s brief essays describing his experience in Japan one can see that he was indeed baffled and befuddled by what he had encountered. Prior to his travels, he had believed that his “humanitarian-democratic position” could provide Japanese liberals with the resources to articulate a compelling alternative to the prevailing conditions under the archaic, illiberal forces of militarism and imperialism, and was eagerly anticipating the opportunity to share it. As he soon learned,

however, this opportunity was largely preempted by actual conditions “on the ground.” Be that as it may, my take on these conditions diverges somewhat from Saito’s in that I believe incommunicability through radical difference was not always the leading issue here: Dewey does suggest that he encountered Japanese liberals who were capable of conversing intelligently about democracy, even given significant social and cultural differences. Rather, the problem was often that conditions at the time made such conversations politically very dangerous and, his Japanese counterparts felt, not worth the risk. Indeed, it seems that the word “democracy” had been outlawed in Japan precisely because officials believed it was in fact communicable and posed an ideological threat to the current imperialist order.<sup>1</sup> And as Saito points out, there is evidence in Dewey’s reports that the general population at the time lacked an understanding of democracy as a form of life, even if they did have some grasp of the general concept. I raise this issue because of what I believe Dewey learned from his cross-cultural experiences in Japan and his increasing use, in subsequent years, of what he termed “cultivated naïveté.” I also want to suggest that this practice — though critically under-theorized by Dewey — shares some features with EMP such that they might co-exist in conversation in the spirit of seeking “the best possible point of encounter” between Dewey and EMP.

Like Cavell’s EMP, Dewey views the practice of cultivated naïveté as a vital form of critical-creative activity and, as such, a potential vehicle for creating “democracy from within” via the ongoing reciprocal processes of personal and cultural renewal. It is also, in Dewey’s eyes, deeply moral in import. Most importantly, he suggests that cultivated naïveté can help us avoid the intellectual insensitivity, rigidity, and blinkered vision often incurred by habits of mind that instantly make the radically different a mysterious, unapproachable “other”:

We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intellectual furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us. We cannot achieve recovery of primitive naïveté. But there is attained a cultivated naïveté of eye, ear, and thought, one that can be acquired only through the discipline of severe thought.<sup>2</sup>

As Dewey describes it, cultivated naïveté functions as a kind of personal/cultural hermeneutics: a broad-based interpretive dialectic between self and other/world that resists closure, where the meanings of things are never final. But unlike much contemporary critical theory, it is more a hermeneutics of replenishment than of suspicion. That is to say, it is first and foremost a restorative activity, one expressly conceived to help us recover and critically renew our relations with the world and others. Through this rigorous act of “intellectual disrobing” Dewey wants us to increase our sensitivity to interpretations of objects, people, and events other than those that might seem the most obvious or expeditious. In short, cultivated naïveté entails investigating the consequences of our sense-making habits through a renewed receptivity and responsiveness to formerly overlooked or neglected aspects of the lifeworld. Ideally, this practice itself becomes a habit — a way of life that promotes greater sensitivity, awareness, and attentiveness to one’s surroundings — and not simply something that kicks in whenever particular problematic

situations arise. Indeed, Dewey’s practice of cultivated naïveté led him to approach his 1928 trip to Soviet Russia very differently from his earlier visits to Japan.

Dewey titled his report on his experience in Leningrad and Moscow “‘Impressions’ of Soviet Russia,” with the word “impressions” in scare quotes. This conveys the idea that from a close-up, firsthand perspective, everything in Soviet Russia appears in a state of flux. Understanding exactly what is going on, why, and to what end is ultimately impossible, and his tentative findings should be viewed in this light. I suspect that Dewey is also trying to tell us something about his method of inquiry in light of the situation. He openly disavows being an expert on the politics and players of the Russian revolution, past or present. What is more, he utilizes a form of cultivated naïveté in making a conscious effort to suspend (pre)judgment based on what he has read or heard about the revolution from others, including acknowledged experts. In other words, in contrast with his experience in Japan, he assumes a posture of intellectual curiosity that prepares him to be open and receptive to whatever he finds and the various people he spends time with, even if it conflicts with his own beliefs about or and hopes for the future of Soviet Russia.

Moreover, unlike the committed Marxist Sidney Hook, who visited Soviet Russia just one year later, Dewey is also sufficiently open and alert in his “cultivated naïveté” to be receptive to and concede signs of contradiction, paradox — “a sense of disparity” — in the many underlying sources of repression, the “secret police, inquisitions, arrests and deportations.”<sup>3</sup> He likewise finds disturbing the intellectual myopia and self-serving, miseducative power of communist propaganda, especially as it targets Russian youths. Genuine democracy, Dewey is again reminded, cannot be achieved through a top-down administered consent and mutuality where political and social ends are automatically taken to justify the means. There is also evidence that Dewey took all of these (tentative) impressions and insights with him to Mexico City in 1937 when he chaired the famous Trotsky Commission.

What I have tried to do briefly here is to suggest the possibility of fruitful grounds for conversation between EMP and cultivated naïveté, seeking “the best possible point of encounter,” even without the potential (or desirability) of ultimate convergence. As noted earlier, one of the major challenges here is that Dewey spends little time in his major works theoretically refining and developing his notion of cultivated naïveté, though Saito’s Cavellian critique of “Deweyan communication” suggests that doing so might have significantly enhanced his reflections on “creating democracy from within.” Still, one can, I think, find evidence of cultivated naïveté in Dewey’s personal accounts of his encounters with difference in his more secondary writings. Here, then, is perhaps a good starting place for conversation. In her thoughtful discussion of “Conversation Without Convergence,” Saito has already gotten us underway.

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1. The Japanese translation of Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* was published as *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* for this reason.

2. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 40.
3. John Dewey, "'Impressions' of Soviet Russia" in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1927–28*, vol. 3, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 211.