Reconciliatory Empathy Amidst Wild Emotions: Gandhian Nonviolence and Dewey's Conception of Growth

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INTRODUCTION

Wild emotions can be scary for many educators, especially those of us who teach about issues such as sexuality, gender, and race. A colleague who teaches science recently remarked that she could *never* teach the things we do because she is afraid of the intense and "uncontrollable" anger a topic such as sexuality might provoke. She leaned closer and emphasized, *never*. While those of us who do venture into these emotionally charged conversations often have strategies for responding to the emergence of wild emotions such as despair and sorrow, and for how to forestall violent ones such as anger, the received wisdom seems to encourage us to control and move past emotive expressions to return to the safety of rational discussion. I fear this is a mistake. For example, in a currently popular text about social injustice, the authors encourage students to investigate their negative emotional reactions because they can be used as proof that the course material is invalid.[1] While they suggest we must tame our wild emotions in order to get on to the more essential intellectual work of rational normative inquiry, I worry that this approach misses the mark. Instead of avoiding them, we should take our inquiry directly into exploring even what seem to be the wildest of emotions in the social justice classroom. Instead of being roadblocks to growth, they are essential aspects of it.

My argument turns on Dewey's discussion of growth, a concept that is underutilized in the philosophical underpinnings of social justice education. In what follows, I will discuss how Dewey's conception of growth involves both cognition *and* emotion; the two are inseparable. Likewise, growth involves both individual *and* communal development, something that may appear impossible in the midst of emotional power clashes. Because Dewey didn't offer enough detail about how growth is possible even amidst violent

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power struggles, I link Deweyan growth to Gandhian nonviolence. A focus on nonviolence offers us resources for conceptualizing how emotion, growth, and power intersect. It also provides a lens through which we can re-examine our tendencies to avoid engaging with emotion; not doing so may contribute to supporting the oppressive dynamics we seek to disrupt. The argument develops in three sections. In the first, I summarize Dewey's conception of growth. In the second, I introduce key philosophical aspects of Gandhian nonviolence and tie them back to Deweyan growth and our focus on power and social justice. In conclusion, I then turn to an example of the sort of skills and capacities that support engaging with emotion to inspire growth.

DEWEY AND GROWTH

While many have criticized growth for its seeming inability to offer normative guidance[2] (and hence it could not be a lynchpin for social justice education), it is essential to understand that growth is both social and normative. It points to our abilities to adapt to and make change in the world, to be able to continue to develop our skills at adaptation and problem solving, and to do so within the context of creating the conditions for *others* to grow also. This last aspect anchors growth normatively to creating conditions in which all can grow; it underwrites Dewey's conception of a "great community" in which members freely associate and communicate with one another to resolve social problems and simultaneously support individual growth, even across group memberships, such as those associated with race and class, or those such as religion or political affiliation that involve seemingly incommensurable ideological commitments:

> From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of

> a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully connected with other groups.[3]

Dewey argues that a group must develop the capacities of each of its members, but again, because members co-exist in other groups, we must also find ways to harmonize our group memberships such that one group's practices do not inhibit the growth of the members of other groups: " … It demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully connected with other groups."[4] Focusing on growth, then, requires a substantive commitment to creating socially just spaces because individual growth cannot be built upon and sustained by oppressive power relations. Conditions that inhibit the growth of individuals in oppressed groups reduce their capacities to engage in effective reconstruction of and responses to the problems they face. Our collective abilities to grow are thus inhibited.

Dewey's conception is open to the critique that creating such conditions is difficult if not impossible when different normative conceptions of the good collide, especially across differences in power. Rather than threatening growth, though, the way forward may be exactly where many of us fear to go: Growth entails an engagement with what we may perceive to be wild and dangerous emotions. Dewey understands emotions as part of our capacity to respond to the challenges we face in the world; they help us negotiate and respond to the world around us. To understand why, we now turn to Dewey's theory of emotion.

DEWEY ON EMOTION

While Dewey's writings on emotion are brief,[5] they offer a conception

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of emotion that is being verified in current research.[6] Reconstructing work on emotions by Darwin, James, and Mead, Dewey rejects the notion that emotions can be understood as internal to individual agents. Instead, they are a complex hybrid of internal cognitive and physical processes that are also transactions with our surrounding environments. For Dewey, "emotions are aspects of ongoing patterns of action through which an organism successfully negotiates its biosocial world."[7] Furthermore, emotions are *intentional* in that they are directed at something, and it is important to stress, they involve cognition: [8] "[T]he full emotional experience ... is always 'about' or 'toward' something; it is 'at' or 'on account of' something, and this prepositional reference is an integral phase of the single pulse of emotion."[9] Dewey argues that we don't truly feel singular emotions, thus, "experience is emotional but there are no separate things called emotions in it."[10] Instead, we experience them as part of a complex whole that remains in flux. Feelings collide with one another and, moreover, they interact with our judgments, too. All of this transpires in a complex social world, so we cannot divorce feelings from the myriad socially learned concepts and norms that help us make sense of and impact our emotional experiences. Dina Mendonça captures this dynamic well. Emotional experience:

> [i]s intimately connected to the way the situation is perceived and understood, and the way the array of feelings and events tells a story. Even though the richness of an emotional situation makes it such that it is impossible to describe it properly with words as to fully capture it, we label situations with names of emotion. For example, we say, "it was a sad situation," or "it was an exhilarating situation."[11]

Mendonça argues that one implication of Dewey's conception of emotion is that we can understand them as being subject to revision as the situation in which they arise unfolds. Thus, rather than being stuck in places unmanageable, and perhaps seemingly impossible, for inquiry, wildly negative emotional reactions in classrooms are transactions, and they can be altered by the very experience of being, thinking, and acting in relation with others in the social space. As Jim Garrison emphasizes, though, having an emotion is an *ongoing*

process. Rather than conceiving of this dynamic as linear, Dewey's powerful conception pushes us to envision emotions as part of an unbroken cycle rather than a linear experience. Our judgments and actions influence our emotions, and our emotions influence our judgments and subsequent actions. All of these dynamics also happen within complex social fields that involve past and present experiences, habits, and conceptual resources.

I want to focus on one aspect of this complexity. Many philosophers of emotion[12] have suggested that emotions have a narrative structure, that they are impacted by the stories we tell about a given situation. Dewey argued this as well: "All emotions are qualifications of a drama and they change as the drama develops."[13] The last part, again, is important because it pushes us to understand emotions as being multidirectional transactions, part of circles of experience that include cognition and action, too. We can examine our stories while we also examine our emotions themselves and, importantly, the very exploration of these stories and emotions within social spheres can alter the dynamics of our emotions and the stories in which they are embedded. This is a helpful place to raise issues of power and social justice. As Garrison argues, our emotions also have politics. They are impacted by the stories we tell ourselves about topics like sexuality and race. Thus we have to analyze, "not only emotional expression, but also the context wherein they are emitted along with the interpretation and response of others."[14]

Within the context of social justice classrooms, then, we find a range of power experiences whereby agents bring different stories about issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality into conversations. Krueger reminds us that for Dewey, a story about something like sexuality "must already be colored with an affective quality; it must already be perceived *as* fearful. … it must be given with an affective valence in order to explain how it is that we respond to it the way that we do."[15] For example, when people of Color express emotion or even counter-narratives to dominant understandings of race, they are often read by whites as angry and dangerous, and the white emotional reaction to people of Color is informed by the racial stories that whites inherit and bring into the encounter.

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While she doesn't ground her analysis within a Deweyan conception of emotions, Sara Ahmed's discussion of disgust and its relationship to power and issues such as sexuality and race is spot on here: "Emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others … Emotions ... produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects."[16] For example, heteronormativity produces conditions that help heterosexual bodies experience comfort and belonging. In contrast, "Queer subjects, when faced by the 'comforts' of heterosexuality may feel uncomfortable (the body does not 'sink into' a space that has already taken its shape)."[17] These dynamics, of course, are what has driven the move to tame wild emotions in the classroom because we may seek to avoid conflict and to keep classroom analysis focused on rational or "academic" inquiry. We also may desire to give space for alternative stories to emerge and to privilege the often marginalized emotional experiences of those who are targeted by oppression; we may silence and limit the emotional expression of privileged speakers. While managing productive conversation and creating spaces to disrupt unjust power imbalances are essentially important aims, doing so in rich ways that also support the conditions for individual and collective growth may require direct engagement with the details of emotion in its rich fecundity.

To make what I mean clear, *pace* Garrison, I return our focus to Dewey's conception of emotion, action, and cognition as an unbroken circle. If emotions are partly cognitive, then we can impact them by analyzing the stories about sexuality and morality, for example, that students bring into discussion spaces. Likewise, to make change in cognition, we can also bring our attention to emotions. Likewise, we can also offer students opportunities to take actions that alter their thinking and emotions, too, as these are all aspects of an unbroken cycle of experience. This brings us to the philosophy of nonviolence: its conceptual and strategic resources are focused simultaneously on all three aspects of this cycle, and they point us toward how to conceptualize

responding to wild emotions in ways that focus on growth.

Gandhian Nonviolence

As anyone who has spent time reading Dewey can attest, understanding his conceptual resources can be difficult because language may not keep pace with the philosophical work he pushes it to do. We find that same dynamic when trying to understand the notion of nonviolence because it is an imperfect and somewhat misleading translation of the Sanskrit word *ahimsa,* which is the negative of *himsa,* the intention to do harm.[18] Michael Nagler explains that, "in Sanskrit abstract nouns often name a fundamental positive quality indirectly, by negating its opposite."[19] The negation was used to express the inability of language to capture the complexity of fundamental concepts: "*Ahimsa* is not really a negative term, as to our ears *nonviolence* decidedly is. *Ahimsa* suggests something profoundly positive, which would not be possible to name directly."[20] In an attempt to offer a more direct and helpful term, Gandhi offered nonviolence as *satyagraha*, which roughly means "clinging to the truth." In an echo of the fallibilism of pragmatists such as Dewey and Peirce, Gandhi recognizes that there is a profound limitation on our access to truth, and his conception of nonviolence, or *satyagraha*, embraces this fallibilism. Moreover, for Gandhi, to engage in a struggle over an issue of injustice is to engage in an act of inquiry. This holds even for the most violent of clashes. Violence itself is a struggle over truth.[21] This is essential to our exploration because it brings our attention to one important aspect of our three-part cycle; it links nonviolence to inquiry.

We find a focus on action here as well, similar to Dewey's position, that while we may be open to further inquiry, we must act now on our provisional ends-in-view. Likewise, Gandhi suggests we should engage with others on matters of injustice even if we may be proven wrong in the future. We act as if our own beliefs were true while also holding on to the possibility of error. Gandhian nonviolence is thus grounded in inquiry with the other, even before the other is able or willing to join in that inquiry. In his description of Gand-

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hian nonviolent inquiry, Robert Holmes explains the position well:

> The aim, then, becomes to find the truth. Prevailing over the other is not the objective. Nothing morally worthwhile is gained if you prevail but were wrong to do so. One strives to engage the other in a way that maximizes the possibility that the truth will eventually emerge, whatever it may be, and whomever it may favor. … You cannot justifiably kill other people at the same time you acknowledge that they may be acting with a significant measure of the truth whose realization it is your aim to foster.[22]

All of this has bearing on the problem we're facing — how to engage with wild emotions amidst differences of power within social justice classrooms — but perhaps the most pressing aspect of Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha* is the way that means and ends unite through a simultaneous focus on emotion. When groups are divided over normative issues, those with less power can seek to create a shared project of inquiry with those with more power by seeking to establish a shared emotional connection of empathy. Despite popular misconceptions, the aim of nonviolent action is not merely to make change, it is also to build a relationship across power and difference to engage in shared inquiry. That connection turns on compassionate, emotional connection. *Satyagraha* involves bringing empathy to our inquiry with others, even those with whom we have deep disagreements because of what we consider to be their oppressive uses of power. "When *Satyagraha* works, it doesn't change one party's position, it changes the *relationship* between parties. Once they have 'seen' the situation from our point of view, those who once were our opponents move closer to us in spirit. This is integrative power."[23] Thus there's a deep desire to change the relationships amongst people, and in keeping with Dewey's theory of transaction, both parties are changed by the interaction.

Thus, Gandhian nonviolence focuses on intertwining three aspects of experience - (1) emotion, (2) inquiry, and (3) action - while focusing on oppressive social structures and interpersonal dynamics. To return us to the issue of growth, let us push further into the way emotion plays a part in *satyagraha* and

look at a detail that may be the least obvious candidate for contributing to understanding Deweyan growth and power relationships: purposeful suffering. Gandhi specifically used suffering as a tool for engaging with those with more social and institutional power, to build empathy and to begin the process of inquiry to lead to socially just change. In this last section, I argue that we can reconstruct the notion of purposeful suffering to help us position it within growth.

RECONCILIATORY EMPATHY AND NONVIOLENT GROWTH

One of the most famous strategies associated with nonviolent resistance is inviting suffering by putting actors in physical proximity to danger. "The nonviolent actor is deliberately seeking to manifest the pain that others are trying not to see. So in his or her case, the pain is not just something to put up with along the way; it's a part of the point."[24] As Gandhi put it: "Things of fundamental importance to the people are not secured by reason alone but have to be purchased with their suffering … if you want something really important to be done you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also."[25] As a result, we find famous situations where nonviolent agents purposefully withstand violence while peacefully demonstrating in protest. For example, the Vaikom Temple Road *Satyagraha* in 1924-5 arose in response to unjust conditions: The Dalits, or "untouchables," were forbidden from using the temple road because their impurity threatened to contaminate the Brahmins, the privileged class. In a protest that lasted months, the Dalits and their supporters blocked the temple road and repeatedly endured beatings, yet they maintained the protest throughout the monsoon season in which flood waters rose to as high as their shoulders. Their efforts famously resulted in a peaceful change in institutional policy; the road was opened to all. This aspect of nonviolence may not appear to be relevant to a socially just educational project, but I argue we can reconstruct the strategy of taking on suffering in order to situate it within our conception of growth and emotion.

I must stress I am *not* advocating that educators place themselves in

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situations where they may experience physical harm. Instead, the aim is to empathize with those in the majority position who may be engaging in practices or holding beliefs that sustain injustices such as racism and heterosexism. Empathizing should not be mistaken for condoning. One can empathize and *not* approve. Like the nonviolent actor who stands in front of a violent other, the aim is to awaken empathy by connecting emotionally with the experience of the other, even one who is in a privileged position. The aim here is to engage and to make an emotional link between the person in power and the emotional suffering of those who experience oppression. The educator symbolically embodies suffering but does so in such a way that also honors the emotional life of all others in the social space. The aim isn't just to emote, however: We return to the Deweyan cycle of emotion as well as Gandhi's call to bring the other into inquiry in order to explore the stories that inform our emotional experiences. For example, one source for direction is what Michalinos Zembylas describes as reconciliatory or strategic empathy.

Zembylas argues the act of empathizing with another forges a relation between the two parties based on a vision of shared humanity. "The major function of reconciliatory empathy is participating in shared reflective engagement with the other's emotional life that is, realizing that the other is like me and should be invited in a renewed relationship, despite the troubled knowledge he or she carries. Finding commonality through identification with the other is perhaps the most difficult and yet profound step in his or her rehumanization."[26] This means that teachers must work through the paradox of engaging with both what we can understand as perpetrators and victims of injustice (though those categories are, of course, much more complex and nuanced as we engage with multiple aspects of our social identities.) Zembylas suggests that, "teachers must create the kind of environment of trust that allows emotions of woundedness, no matter where they come from, to be worked through."[27] Of course, there are no easy ways to engage, and the emotional exploration can be too difficult for many students, unwelcome, and may even result in a withdrawal: I posit these dynamics may happen even if educators fail to engage with emotions, perhaps even more so.

As Gandhian *satyagraha* demonstrates, engaging with emotion across fundamental differences can be a source of engagement rather than of disconnection. Building on Dewey, I suggest engaging with emotion is not merely a strategy to be able to get back to the "real" work of rational inquiry. Instead, it is part of the very fabric of growth itself. In a move that may be counterintuitive to so much of what academic training pushes educators to do, I suggest that focusing on emotional interactions, even before they are understood cognitively, may help social justice educators reach the common ground of empathy that they can then draw upon to build cognitive understandings and even agreements. If social justice educators and students make commitments to this sort of emotional engagement, remaining in emotional *and* rational co-inquiry, the history of *satyagraha* demonstrates they may be able to overcome the seemingly dangerous rifts that make engaging with topics like those associated with social justice so fraught with frustration, fear, and danger.

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