

Reading Butler with Dewey (*and Vice Versa?*)

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Upon reading Sarah McGough's essay, I was immediately reminded of Jim Garrison's "Dewey, Derrida, and the 'Double Bind.'" Garrison began,

Explicating the texts of Derrida is exhausting enough; doing the same for the often misunderstood texts of Dewey multiplies the difficulty. Combining them so as to reflect each critically in the mirror of the 'other' seems almost foolhardy; like fools, I rush in.¹

In his "rush," one of the things that Garrison demonstrates is that it is proper to include Dewey in sympathetic dialogue with poststructuralists or even to cast Dewey as a poststructuralist himself. Being as "foolish" as Garrison is no mean trick, but McGough pulls it off in fine style.

My response consists of two somewhat distinct parts. First, McGough and I both celebrate the antifoundationalism in Dewey's work. McGough wants to argue that since Dewey is a lot like Butler, they can profitably be read together. I agree. However, I think it is more accurate to argue that Butler is a lot like Dewey and, further, that Dewey's antifoundationalism is more robust than Butler's. Second, I wish to support this claim by proposing additional considerations of the practical, educational implications of McGough's "reading." McGough presents a strong discussion of the ways that Dewey and Butler can be read together and promises to highlight some educational implications that follow from her reading. But here she provides only a general discussion about students learning to reflect and the spaces that classrooms can provide. These matters deserve more attention as well as a different kind of attention. It is important to consider *how* Dewey and Butler might go about creating spaces and moments for reflection. I believe Dewey's approach is simply better.

WHOSE ANTIFOUNDATIONALISM?

There is more than one instance in which McGough "rescues" Dewey with Butler but later suggests it was not necessary or even desirable. In her discussion of power, for example, she claims that Dewey "seems" to uphold power as something to be wielded at will by an agent. She then admits, "within Dewey's own words," his notion of power is pretty close to Butler's.

Such backtracking especially weakens her argument in support of Dewey's embrace of a "core of abiding habits," which he "seems to cherish" and which serves as a normative ideal of identity. The weakness of her argument is twofold. First, McGough admits that Dewey does not really "cherish" this core, for he admits that it may change over time. Further, Dewey sees that change as both inevitable and desirable. He decries fixity throughout his work, finding it contrary to the scientific spirit:

In recognizing, however, that fixation of intellectual content is a pre-condition of effective action, we must not overlook the modification that comes with the advance of thinking into more critical forms. At the outset, fixity is taken as the rightful possession of the ideas

themselves; it belongs to them and is their “essence.” As the scientific spirit develops, we see that it is we who lend fixity to the ideas, and that this loan is for a purpose to which the meaning of the ideas is accommodated. Fixity ceases to be a matter of intrinsic structure of ideas, and becomes an affair of security in using them.²

Contrary to McGough’s argument, Dewey does not require Butler’s urging “to recognize the need to forego our efforts to maintain stable categories of self-identity.”

Although McGough is correct to claim that Dewey has in mind a “core of abiding habits...necessary for enacting freedom,” she does not tell us what those habits are, which is key. Basically, Dewey promotes two kinds of intimately related habits. First, there are habits of mind, what Robert Westbrook dubbed “cognitive virtues.”³ These cognitive virtues — carefulness, thoroughness, continuity, and thoughtfulness — are the habits required of the scientific method and reflection. Second, there are societal values required for democracy. Some of the values that Dewey points out specifically are effective liberty, equality, opportunity for personal growth, and active sharing of the wealth of cultural resources and the contribution to their further enrichment.⁴ To the extent that the ideals Dewey promotes may be fundamental to the creation of the social context within which the individual habits may develop by which the misrecognition and the misrepresentation of rigid categories of self-identity can occur, how far should we goad Dewey away from them?

That these habits may not be “explosive” enough is a fault McGough initially finds with Dewey, but she is forced to backtrack again, rightly pointing out that, unlike Butler, “pragmatism can offer a justification for which reworkings of habit and which instances of political change are good.” Dewey discusses in great length ideals of democracy upon which to base decisions about political change toward some ideal of good. While he rejects any fixed ideal, Dewey is willing to hold “good” still, if only momentarily, a project Butler has yet to take on.

THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a Butlerian perspective, helping students to think in ways different from their extant subjective positions would involve either (1) providing them the opportunity to be immersed in alternative discourses that would provide them with alternative subjectivities, or (2) engaging in parodic representations of their core beliefs in order to denaturalize their taken for granted views about the world. But it is difficult to see how either of these options might be applied to teaching in most spaces. Immersion experiences lasting long enough to achieve the desired effect are costly and difficult to arrange. Parody of students’ core beliefs is likely to be ineffective or counterproductive, hardening students’ subjectivities instead of destabilizing them towards reflection.⁵ Parody is also likely to draw the wrath of parents and administrators, resulting in the silencing of progressive teachers, who are already in too short supply.

Butler’s notion of parodic representation remains abstract and requires considerable elaboration to be of practical use to teachers. A short list of the many questions that arise includes the following: What are the discourses of injustice at work in

particular classrooms and communities? How can we assure that teachers will be prepared to reveal these discourses? How might teachers appropriate elements of these discourses in parodic ways? Are there developmental issues that need to be considered regarding students' age and their ability to interpret irony and parody? Given that parody, especially Butler's famous example of dressing in drag, in schools will typically be periodic and short-lasting, might it only be seen as comedy to students and, therefore, be counterproductive?⁶ How far can teachers go in challenging unjust discourses?

From a Deweyan perspective, "habits" and "transactional realism" provide a far more practical, fruitful, and defensible framework for teachers seeking to disrupt unjust discourse. Indeed, what McGough describes — "cultivating and refining reflection" or "overtly discussing systems of oppression...in order to guide student...engaging with others and changing themselves" — sounds much more Deweyan than Butlerian. McGough refers, in all but name, to Dewey's notion of "hitches," wherein he argues that while a subject is certainly shaped by habits and often led mechanically by them, this need not be the case. Moments occur when habits are raised to the conscious attention of the subject. In such moments, reflection, even upon one's most deeply socialized habits, can occur.⁷

While "practical" is often read as less political, less transgressive, less transformative, it need not be. There will be a practical aspect to any transgressive teaching. Also, I do not necessarily wish to deny the merits of Butlerian practices to denaturalize subjective positions leading to unjust behaviors. Teachers can and have engaged in parody. A recent article in *Rethinking Schools* deals with a student who let his principal know he planned to cross-dress at school. Fearing for the student's well-being, but unwilling to prohibit the act, the principal called a faculty meeting to discuss how to protect the student from bigoted assault and proactively support his freedom simultaneously. Four male teachers came to school the next day in drag.⁸ Such gestures require not only a description of their occurrence but also deep consideration of the practical question of how to make the most of them as pedagogical moments. Pedagogy in this vein is a matter of reflexivity. Here Dewey answers the question of what to do in schools better than Butler. In the end, Butler needs Dewey more than Dewey needs Butler.

1. James Garrison, "Dewey, Derrida, and the 'Double Bind,'" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 3 (2003): 349.

2. John Dewey, "Some Stages of Logical Thought," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1901*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 157.

3. Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

4. John E. Petrovic, "Dewey is a Philistine and Other Grave Misreadings," *Oxford Review of Education* 24, no. 4 (1998): 513–520.

5. John E. Petrovic and Jerry Rosiek, "Pedagogical Implications of Theories of Subjectivity for the Disruption of Heteronormativity: Dewey v. Butler" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, Kansas City, Mo., 5 November 2004).

6. Given Butler's focus on disrupting heteronormative discourse, this question seems particularly relevant.
7. John E. Petrovic and Jerry Rosiek, "Disrupting the Heteronormative Subjectivities of Christian Pre-service Teachers: A Deweyan Prolegomenon," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 36, no. 2 (2003): 161–169.
8. Carol Michaels Foresta, "Dressing Up," *Rethinking Schools* 18, no. 2 (2003): 43–44.