

Opposing Dualism and Remembering Responsibility

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In his essay, Aaron Schutz contrasts Dewey's approach to education with that of child-centered educators of the 1920s and 1960s, whom he calls "personalists" (presumably so they are not too easily dismissed). The contrast is analyzed by considering different attitudes toward "games" versus "play," adopted by Dewey and the personalists, respectively, where games have pre-defined goals and rules, and play has emergent goals and rules (if any). This contrast is vivified by George Dennison's comparison of boys playing Little League baseball and children engaging in a ball game spontaneously with friends.

In Schutz's analysis, the advocates of child-centered education of the 1920s, as well as the "free" or "alternative" schools of the 1960s, have a different approach to education than critics, such as John Dewey. In particular, Dewey is viewed as favoring education through participation in games, while personalists favor education by participation in play. In emphasizing education through "games" with preset rules, Dewey is seen as preparing children for work, bureaucratic life, and formal democracy, while personalists, in emphasizing "play," are seen as socializing for personal enjoyment, emergent community, and informal democracy. Dewey's criticism of child-centeredness is turned on its head, making him too adult-centered.

Schutz has written elsewhere about personalists, such as Margaret Naumberg and Caroline Pratt, and one can sympathize with his concern that their work not be summarily "erased" by Dewey's criticism. Nevertheless, for those familiar with Dewey, something seems to have gone quite wrong here. Dewey consistently opposed traditional adult-centered education, alienating work, and merely formal conceptions of democracy. Dewey was arguing primarily against dualistic, either/or thinking, such as adult-centered *versus* child-centered, work *versus* play, external *versus* internal control. His attitude was not the polar opposite of either child-centeredness *or* adult-centeredness, but critical of

such polarized thinking itself. This is because polarized thought tends to be overly general and dogmatic, leading one to ignore the details of the situation at hand. Rather than asking whether control should be internal or external, as though either the dancer or the dance should be in control, Dewey shifted the emphasis to finding how “dancers” (e.g., interactants) might discover ways of dancing together that are better coordinated and more meaningful, and more helpful in creating continuity and meaning in the future.

Let me relate these points to the relationship between work and play, and then to the closely related relationship between game and play. Kant thought it important to separate work and play in school so that schoolwork would not become frivolous by confusing it with play, and play not turn into drudgery.¹ I adopted exactly the opposite attitude when my daughter was young, seeking to blur the line between the two by “playing” together in activities that had longer-term value, while interpreting and modifying those activities in the light of her more immediately “playful” interests. I was appalled when she first entered public school and experienced a categorical division between enjoyable but meaningless “play,” and meaningful but unenjoyable “work,” and I believe Dewey’s attitude was similar. As he suggested, the principal difference between play and work lies in the *relatively* immediate or distant character of aims.² Since the difference is not categorical, it is quite possible to have shorter- and longer-term aims informing one another, so one can participate in activities that bring immediate satisfaction *and* have longer-term utility. Dewey did not emphasize work over play, or play over work, but sought to transform both in collaborative activity in which adults and children can find mutually meaningful and satisfying ways of interacting.

The relationship between play and games brings out another aspect of activity to do with the coordination of multiple interactants. One can see this by considering George Herbert Mead’s analysis of “Play, the Game, and the Generalized Other.”³ Mead is relevant here because he had a great influence on Dewey’s social thought, and I believe the two were on the same page in their analysis of play and games. For Mead, “play” involves “taking the role of the other,” as a child does when acting as “rider” to a broomstick’s “horsie,” or as

“teacher” to another child’s “student.” To be “play,” both perspectives have to enter into an activity, since one has to begin to act from an initial perspective, and then begin to respond to that emerging act from a different perspective, and then respond to that response, and so on, until the act is completed. The difference between “play” and “game,” in Mead’s analysis, is that games involve a more complex division of labor and are governed by more explicit rules and goals (as in Schutz’s analysis), which enables coordination among a larger set of interactants taking different roles. This is important because participating in a “game” can help develop the ability to perceive a situation from a third-person perspective, and not only from a first or second person perspective. In baseball, for example, one not only catches the ball and then throws it to the first baseman, taking into account the first baseman’s attitude so that s/he can catch it easily, but also considers this interaction in the light of its implications for the goal of the team as a whole. Three perspectives are involved when one is playing properly, not two.

The ability to adopt a third person point of view, that of the “generalized other,” is important because this is necessary for moral, scientific, and democratic conduct. For moral conduct, in the communal sense (as opposed to interpersonal “care,” which may be dyadic), one needs to adopt a public-spirited attitude, the attitude of *any* community member. Something similar is true in science, where one needs to focus on resolving doubt for any member of the community of inquirers, and not merely one’s own personal doubt, or that of an immediate interaction partner. A generalized attitude is also important politically, since citizens of a democracy need to learn to evaluate and act with regard to policies in the light of what is good for the public as a whole, and not merely for their own personal or local good. Neither Mead nor Dewey suggested that adopting a third person point of view means becoming blind to one’s own interests, or those of immediate interaction partners, however. This is pretty explicit in Dewey’s ethics, as well as in his conceptions of science and democracy.⁴

While I disagree with Schutz’s interpretation of Dewey, I sympathize with his effort to preserve some of the values emphasized by “personalist”

educators of the 1920s and 1960s. I do not think there is much doubt that the value of play, joy, spontaneity, and immediate community is under threat today, as work takes over more of social life and “workers” (including students) are exploited to increase the gains of a few. At the same time, I also think that Dewey’s criticism of reactive forms of child-centeredness remains important. For example, I recall visiting an “alternative” school in the 1960s where a child nearly burned down the classroom, and another was trying to brain a chicken with a stick, while the adults felt that they had no right to say anything because children are naturally good and adults corrupt. At another school, students were routinely dropping LSD, and some were sleeping with their teachers. These extreme cases suggest that all wasn’t sweetness and light in yesteryear’s alternative schooling, and that it is important to retain awareness of one’s public and adult responsibilities, while educating others to recognize theirs, as well.

1 Immanuel Kant, *Education* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1803/1960).

2 John Dewey, “Play and Work in the Curriculum,” in *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 194-206.

3 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 152-164.

4 John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1932); Dewey, *Democracy and Education*; John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1927).