Moral Education and the Dangers of Dramatic Rehearsal

Kathy Hytten
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

In his thoughtful essay, "Care Ethics, John Dewey's 'Dramatic Rehearsal,' and Moral Education," Maurice Hamington makes a convincing case that Dewey's ideas nicely complement care ethics, particularly in reminding educators that we need to develop and nurture habits of care in schools. Hamington describes care ethics well, showing the ways in which care theorists foreground connection, compassion, emotion, relationship, and context above abstract considerations of rules, principles, and rights. He also thoughtfully characterizes how Dewey's beliefs about context, emotion, ends–in–view, relationships, and extended temporal horizons resonate with, and enrich, care theory. Throughout the first two thirds of his essay, I found myself agreeing with almost all that he offers, and appreciating the very clear and accessible way he frames his argument. I also loved how he extols the virtues of imagination, aesthetics, and embodied forms of knowing, as these are all too uncommon in the discourse of education, including philosophy of education. Yet it is when Hamington calls for dramatic rehearsal as a means to develop empathic understanding that I am left with more questions than answers, actually one of the marks of a provocative essay. While I agree wholeheartedly that performance methods in the classroom have great promise in helping us to meaningfully engage with the worldviews of Others, I worry that dramatic rehearsal, or character acting, as a technique has a number of potential dangers, especially when we do not have a clear sense of the ends to which we act as the Other.

In describing the ethical dimensions of embodying and performing the Other, Dwight Conquergood argues that performance is always a moral act, and one that is fraught with complex ethical ambiguities, challenges, and tensions. In his now classic piece (at least within the field of performance studies), "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," he works through the question of how we enter respectful and ethical relationships with the Other in performance, whether on stage, in classrooms, or in other public spaces.[1] While highlighting the powerful potential of performance to help us better understand the Other (as well as ourselves), he argues that good intentions, an open heart, and empathic imagination are not enough when seeking to express cultural worlds and experiences that are far different from our own. Indeed, there are many ways to perform the Other that are morally suspect and deeply problematic. The dangers include colonizing, trivializing, exoticizing, and sensationalizing, as well as presuming to truly know and understand the Other and their thoughts and intentions.

As I reflect on Maurice Hamington's thoughtful essay, I appreciate both his call for more embodied, performative, and aesthetic forms of engagement and knowing, and am troubled by the potential ethical pitfalls of dramatic rehearsal as a central technique for developing habits of empathy and caring. In describing character or method acting, Hamington argues that it involves embodying the Other, not simply

memorizing lines they might speak, but adopting their personality and creating a backstory to better understand their context and motivations, and then responding to others and circumstances "in character." Certainly there are echoes of Dewey in this approach, as it points to the interconnections among the self, context, and environment as they influence our actions in the world, and consequently, our moral decision making. There is no doubt such method acting can provide for us a window into the worlds of others and can help us to cultivate moral imagination. It can also potentially help us to develop understanding and empathy. But these outcomes are neither inevitable nor likely, especially without careful attention to the ethics of performance, a clear sense of the goals and aims of performing the Other, and sufficient background information and research to begin to understand the realities of the Other. Indeed, one of the goals of method acting is to represent the Other as best as we can, not to create the most "moral version" of that Other, or to attribute the noblest motivations to that Other.

Conquergood describes four dangers, or ethical pitfalls, in performing the Other that are particularly troublesome: the custodian's rip off, the enthusiast's infatuation, the curator's exhibitionism, and the skeptic's copout. He visually aligns these dangers along intersecting axes on a "moral map," which is basically a square divided into four boxes. The vertical axis represents the tension between commitment and detachment, while the horizontal axis maps a binary between identity and difference. He writes that "the extreme points of both sets of continua represent 'dangerous shores' to be navigated, binary oppositions to be transcended" ("Performing," 5). The custodian's rip off marks a location of detachment from the subject coupled with a colonizing attraction toward the other, as well as a perceived sense of shared identity. He offers a sacrilegious performance of a native American dance, above the objection of tribal elders, as an example. The enthusiast's infatuation involves a sense of commitment toward the Other, but yet naive, superficial, and trivial performances that elide the distinctiveness of that Other in a show of facile identification. On the opposite extreme in terms of identity, the curator's exhibitionism involves performing the other as exotically and often primitively different, sensationalizing their lives and aiming to "astonish rather than understand" ("Performing," 7). Such a performance holds the Other at too great an aesthetic, political, and social distance, thus denying "to the other membership in the same moral community as ourselves" ("Performing," 7). Finally, the skeptic's cop out, at the pole of detachment and difference, is the land of nihilism and incapacitating cynicism. Here we refuse to perform anyone who doesn't share our cultural background, thus foreclosing the possibility of ever performing the Other sensitively, and at the same time, concurrently curtailing any meaningful dialogue across lines of difference.

Conquergood argues that these tensions always exist in performing the Other and that responsible, moral performance involves always keeping these extreme possibilities in mind, and in tensive relation. He offers a fifth performative stance, centered in the middle of these poles, as the most moral position we can take as performers. He calls this dialogic performance, one that brings "together different

10.47925/2010.129

voices, worldviews, values systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another" ("Performing," 9). The goal is not empathy or even primarily understanding, but rather to open up conversation, including conversation about our own taken for granted assumptions about the world and about morality itself. This space of dialogic performance seems rather different to me than character acting, a technique that seems fraught with the ethical pitfalls that Conquergood outlines. It is possible that Hamington has in mind a vision of more nuanced and careful dialogic performance, yet his one example is not fleshed out enough to understand the role he imagines performance playing in the development of morality.

Hamington ends his provocative essay by suggesting that one of the most interesting discussions in regard to using dramatic rehearsal as a classroom technique is "who to portray." While indeed interesting, an admittedly facile answer is, it depends. As he suggests, no doubt embodying individuals with high moral repute might help us to better come to know how and why they make certain choices, and it may even help us to "internalize and replicate" admirable ethical virtues. Yet it is unclear to me toward what ends we might ask students to inhabit one of the pilots who crashed into the World Trade Center, especially without a deep and sophisticated study of the culture from which those pilots hail. Moreover, I have a hard time imagining how creating a performance around such a devastatingly violent act helps us to better understand moral decision making, or to create the habits of caring, connection, and responsiveness called for, implicitly and explicitly, by both Dewey and care theorists. This is not to say that such a performance does not have educative potential, surely it does, especially when coupled with the kind of deep and systemic reflection that Hamington suggests would "enrich the imaginative processes." Rather, it seems important that we teach students how to perform responsibly and ethically, calls that I do not think are inherent or necessary to character acting as a technique.

Ultimately, I very much appreciate Hamington's turn toward performance as a way of knowing, and as a way of potentially developing habits of moral connectivity and caring. The performance studies literature is rich with theories and practices for overcoming the gulf between mind and body and for learning to perform our identities differently, especially in ways that open up transformative moral possibilities. Augusto Boal's body of work is especially valuable in rooting habits of acting differently in our bodies, not just in our reflection.[2] In his forum theater, he asks participants to perform moral dilemmas and scenarios from their experience, and for others (spect-actors) to enter the scene and do something different. Here the practice of acting differently is felt in the body, not simply talked about, a literal "rehearsal for the revolution." If this is the type of careful and complex performance that Hamington has in mind, then I wholeheartedly agree that it is a great way to help develop habits of moral imagination and caring.

1. Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance* 5, no. 2 (1985). This work will be cited as "Performing" for all subsequent citations.

10.47925/2010.129

2. See, for example, Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Urizen Books, 1970); *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1992); and *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (London: Routledge, 1995).

10.47925/2010.129