

A Different Difference?

René V. Arcilla
New York University

It is always a pleasure to encounter new work by Jim Garrison, one of our leading Deweyan philosophers of education. For years, he has been carefully explaining to us how Dewey's thinking hangs together as a coherent whole and holds its own with contemporary intellectual currents. Indeed, after reading Garrison, it is hard to avoid the wry sense that the history of Western thought is just a series of trial-and-error mutations on the way to the fittest philosophy of them all.

In this essay, Garrison extends his Deweyan approach to the challenge of "dialogues across differences." He derives from this perspective a theory of creative listening, focusing in particular on listening to another's emotions. I think the theory is an appealing one and I shall not contest its substance or pragmatist credentials. My more modest aim is simply to raise some questions about the framework of assumptions on which the central problem is based. Speaking in cautionary rather than polemical tones, I shall suggest that the kind of attentiveness to difference that Garrison supports, and that has inspired so much postmodernist and multiculturalist criticism and exhortation, needs to watch out it is not blind to our widening class divisions.

Garrison weaves strands of James, Peirce, and Dewey into an elegant conception of how we listen to others and of why it is good that we venture to listen to very different others. After establishing that "listening is about understanding what we hear," he notes that "listening is attentive hearing," and that "attention is always selective." According to the previously mentioned pragmatists, our selections proceed from prejudices — always energy-saving, sometimes stifling — that are rooted in habits. These habits, more than any single instance of judgment, govern our conduct across time and thus "constitute the core of self-identity." In this sense, with all their idiosyncrasies, habits are the most individual thing about us. At the same time, they are shaped by and continuous with the "customs of the culture in whose social practices we participate." Our individuality, marked by particular prejudices, merges with membership in a culture such that "members of different cultures acquire different patterns of selective attention and habitual response to the world."

I generally listen to the world, then, with my individual pattern of interests attuning me to a social one. When I encounter a member of another culture who expresses something apparently uninteresting or unintelligible, why, then, should I keep on listening? Garrison argues that I should because my own growth depends on me reflectively possessing my habits rather than letting myself be unconsciously possessed by them. The best way to do this is to subject those habits to novel, unaccustomed challenges. And the best way to develop the habit of critical examination in particular is to shake up my prejudices by trying to understand others who have significantly different, even conflicting, perspectives on the world.

The reason I listen to others from different cultures is so that I can learn new ways of understanding the world, and criticize and change the old, thus taking responsibility for my prejudiced self. This is the potential gain. But there is a risk: “because habits constitute the self, breaking a habit involves breaking one’s self-identity. This is the deepest reason dialogues across difference are as difficult as they are dangerous. Sometimes such dialogues simply cannot, or at least should not, occur.” Garrison illuminates why some aversion is understandable; he encourages us to seek out difference as a path to growth, but he acknowledges that, in order to develop itself, a core of the habitual self must be preserved. In some cases, others may so threaten my identity that I need to limit my listening.

Awareness of the risks informs Garrison’s appreciation of the harmful effects of not being properly listened to. Being dismissed parallels having an important part of one’s habitual self heard and understood in a demeaning fashion. Just as I may suffer from listening to how another redescribes me, I can cause suffering by failing to listen sensitively enough to another and so misaddressing him or her. Contemplating these risks dampens our enthusiasm for listening — but it also gives us another reason to try to listen intently when we encounter strangers from a different culture. We should do so not only because we stand to grow, but also to avoid giving unnecessary pain.

As I mentioned at the outset, rather than taking issue with this pragmatist conception of listening, I would like to examine its motivating problem. Garrison does not spell it out because, I imagine, he thinks it is obvious and uncontroversial. It might run: we need to do a better job of listening in “dialogues across differences.” Presumably, his pragmatist conception will aid us.

If I have gotten this right, then Garrison needs to explain more fully why his account is superior to other available accounts of listening. Why could not a mimetic theory of listening actually help us more in practicing listening? Would not a critical hearing of the Levinasian idea of respecting otherness have strengthened the case for the usefulness of Garrison’s conception? But my main critical response concerns the limits of focusing so intently on “difference.” What does this term mean exactly? Garrison expresses interest in “dialogues across many differences in identity such as culture, race, and ethnicity,” and in the end concentrates on gender. This pluralism quickly starts to blur, however, as throughout the essay he alternates between “dialogues across differences” and “dialogues across difference.” If I can hazard being misheard, does “difference” really cover all the “differences” that count?

Consider class. Presumably, those of us who worry about unequal forms of treatment built into differences in race, religion, and sexual orientation are concerned about class, too. As Garrison demonstrates, we try to subvert the former set of inequalities by engaging in dialogues across their associated differences, showing that these differences are in fact not so obstructive or threatening as to justify the inequalities. But does it make sense to try to tear down class inequalities by engaging in dialogues across class? Is the problem here one of listening?

The central challenge in the previous set of dialogues is to respect the other’s identity, especially his or her differences from us. The Levinasians appear to take

this to an extreme, enjoining us to revere the other's very unintelligibility. Garrison, more commonsensically, believes that respect for who the other is grows out of understanding that person; nevertheless, no such understanding can be adequate if it does not link the other's differences from us to his or her moral autonomy. In either case, our dialogues across differences are supposed to protect the latter from homogenizing whitewash. Yet who would want to protect class identity?

I am not suggesting that shelf-stockers ought to have the same tastes and manners as psychiatrists. But to reduce class struggle to scruples about "classism" is the worst sort of mystification that capital would love to perpetuate. Few things could better cement the Republican grip on the electorate than continued perceptions that ordinary working-class Americans are being disrespected by a liberal, cosmopolitan elite. Imagine, though, that Democrats somehow succeed in dispelling this picture, and in establishing themselves as the party that promotes respect for class differences. Would that not equally put a smile on the bourgeois's face? As long as we encourage people to treat class difference as something akin to gender or ethnic difference, we promote class corporatism and serve ruling interests. The point of any progressive philosophy of education should not be to respect and thus naturalize class, but to abolish it.

I am also not suggesting that class should take precedence over other social wrongs such as racism or heterosexism. Such claims and disputes would kill the left more surely than the most reactionary repressions. A meaningful left will be populist or not at all. That said, in our attempts to do justice to a variety of social antagonisms, we should be careful not to let class slip too far into the background. Take Garrison's story of the administrator and the teachers. I have no reason to doubt his analysis that the new teacher was humiliated by her administrator and senior colleagues because she is female. But is not part of the problem, too, the defensiveness of the other teachers who might be wary of having more labor extracted from them? Is it not all-too-predictable that when they push back, the administrator might want to steer their anger towards their new colleague and make a big show of taking their side? I would suggest that this is a familiar enough story of how class tensions detonate sexist attacks. If we are committed to preventing the latter, we need to keep the former in view.

We should reconsider the stress we have placed on respecting "difference" during the past two decades. Capital has gone on the offensive in astonishingly brazen fashion, hardly bothering to disguise its latest imperial adventures and assault on the last girders of the welfare state. It seems certain it can dress up economic disparities and antagonisms as cultural differences that call merely for more dialogue. I know my sense of urgency is carrying me away here and I trust my emotional expressions will not be misheard as in any way belittling the achievements of what Richard Rorty has called the "cultural left."¹ The very fact that I can ground that trust on Garrison's support of close listening, not to mention the work that many, many others have done to admonish us to talk more respectfully across our differences, demonstrates the importance of the problematic he takes up. But as any pragmatist knows, importance is relative to changing circumstance. In the face

of the new rush to divide and exploit us, has not the time come to emphasize more our common interest in collective defense?

1. See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).