

A Common Ground: How McDowell's Recourse to Hegelianism Indicates the Potential for a Rapprochement Between Philosophies of Mind and Education

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We might be forgiven for wondering whether or not contemporary philosophy of education and philosophy of mind could have any areas of interest in common. For philosophy of mind, especially when it is associated with the field of cognitive science, seems to subscribe to biologically reductionist models of mind and realist models of epistemology.¹ And, biological reductionism identifies the study of mind with that of the physical and mental properties of individual organisms and with their mental behavior. By contrast, philosophy of education overwhelmingly accepts the validity of certain constructivist models of knowledge: models which describe human knowing as the process by which humans, participating in their history and society, act on and so give meaning to their world. And according to these constructivist models, the proper objects of epistemological study are the social and cultural tools employed by humans in the act of knowing.² When it comes to the study of epistemology, then, these two fields of philosophy do not seem even to agree as to what the subject matter of the study of knowledge should be.

As the work of philosopher of mind, John McDowell, illustrates, however, that field has of late started to evidence a greater openness to the constructivist view of knowledge, with results that are salutary for philosophy of education. For instance, when McDowell, in *Mind and World*, defends the constructivist model of knowledge from empiricist charges that it denies the existence of a real world, he draws on the insights of certain antecedents to constructivist thought from the Left wing of the Hegelian tradition.³ In so doing, *Mind and World* has the perhaps unintended but beneficial effect of reemphasizing a critical imperative entailed by social versions of constructivism: that philosophy of education confronts the problem of how to maintain human forms of knowing in conditions of capitalist society and by extension mass culture.

Before proceeding with an analysis of the argument in *Mind and World* and its implications for philosophy of education, it will be necessary to clarify for readers the sense in which the term "constructivism" is being used in this essay. For the term has both a narrow and broad application.

In its narrow sense, constructivism is a psychological theory of learning derived from the combining of Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology, Lev Vygotsky's notion of the dialectical interplay between thought and symbol in concept development, and the work of semiotic interactionists such as Howard Gardner and Nelson Goodman.⁴ While constructivism as a psychological theory of learning is cognizant of the role played by cultural influences and social processes in any developmental theory of epistemology, its study tends to concentrate on the development of

individual subjects in relation to these influences — not on the cultural influences or social processes themselves.

A broader sense of constructivism — the one with which this essay is concerned — has been taken up by theorists in the fields of literature and arts education. This is the sense of constructivism derived from theorists who have concentrated their studies on historical and social forces as contributions to the formation of mind and knowledge. Philosopher of education Maxine Greene refers to this broader sense of constructivism when she declares her intention to focus on:

a whole variety of streams that have fed into what is now called constructivism: currents of thought since the days of the great romantics with *their* distinctive concern for the role played by human mind or consciousness or spirit in sense-making by means of transactions with the impinging world. [These currents of thought] have clustered into an attack on objectivity, on instrumental rationality, or disembodied abstract ways of defining meaning — usually against an empty sky. Existentialism, phenomenology, interpretivism, experientialism, certain modes of idealism: These have been the sources of constructivist thinking.⁵

Chief among the romantic, phenomenological, and idealist sources of constructivism is the Hegelian tradition, the tradition which McDowell employs to defend his constructivist model of mind from empiricist charges that it advocates a notion of knowledge as detached from experience in and of a “real world.”

McDowell’s stated aim, at the beginning of *Mind and World*, “is to suggest that Kant should still have a central place in our discussion of the way thought bears on reality” (*MW*, 3). By the end of the same work, however, McDowell seems also to be arguing that a place of equal importance in this discussion should be reserved for proponents of what is admittedly a broadly defined version of the Hegelian tradition — proponents such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Marx (*MW*, 114-19). Of importance to McDowell is the Hegelian critique of empiricism, though not because that critique serves as an idealist ground for the rejection of empirical reality. On the contrary, the Hegelian critique of empiricism allows McDowell to reject what he sees as the empiricist myth that our experience is ultimately of a “given” — a brute material capable of making an “impression” on our senses, thereby causing experience, while remaining unchanged by our capacity to conceptualize or understand that experience — while at the same time maintaining that human knowledge is rooted in our experience in the material world and not merely the “theoretical” knowledge of a “passive observer” (*MW*, 9-10, 117).

From the Hegelian perspective, argues McDowell, it will not do for empiricism simply to describe objective reality as a “given” beyond the purview of human conception. To do so is to reduce human subjects to the status of animals for whom attention is directed solely by perception, and the world to an environment, to which the subject can only adapt. McDowell’s response to empiricism is that while empirical experience must entail a sensitivity to an environment whose impressions register on the senses, those impressions have a conceptual content, allowing rational minds the unbounded capacity to understand, to interpret, and to inform the content of that environment as a world (*MW*, 24-66). That is, for McDowell the capacity of humans for conceptualization allows them to transform reality from an environment to which they must respond into a world upon which they may act.

To show that the empirical experience of conceptual beings can only be understood in Hegelian terms, McDowell cites Gadamer's description of the difference between the experience of humans and other animals, according to which animals, as nonconceptual beings, experience empirical reality as the environment of their particular species. That is, animals are biologically preconditioned to respond to some elements of empirical reality as obstacles, and to the rest as opportunities for survival. By contrast, argues Gadamer, conceptual human beings experience a world (*MW*, 115-16).

When he says that conceptual beings experience a world, Gadamer seems to mean, and McDowell to interpret him as meaning, that, as conceptual beings, humans experience empirical reality as having a logic of its own, that is, a logic demanding more of humans than the activation of certain biological imperatives associated with survival, a logic demanding that the full range of human conceptual capacities be brought into play. What is at play in human experience, is the conceptual recreation of empirical reality as humanity's "second nature" or world (*MW*, 115).

But, for Gadamer to mean that empirical reality has a logic of its own is not for him to imply that its recreation as a second nature or world is indifferent to humans. Rather, Gadamer is arguing that as the world which conceptual beings inhabit, the recreated logic of external reality informs and gives imaginative shape to human desires so that their satisfaction is no longer predetermined by "immediate biological forces" (*MW*, 115).

Citing Gadamer again, McDowell proceeds to describe second nature or world as the condition of human freedom in the world. Having been freed from "immediate biological imperatives" of brute animals — and with them, the need to produce behavior — humans are capable of that "free, distanced orientation" that brings "full-fledged" intentional action on the scene. Writes McDowell, "the picture of full-fledged subjectivity that is in play here is not a picture of that dubiously intelligible kind of thing, an observer and thinker that does not act in the world it observes and thinks about" (*MW*, 117). Quite the opposite, the possession of a second nature allows humans to act in the world as moral beings, seeking by their actions to achieve a more humane condition, and as imaginative beings, seeking, in the parlance of Karl Marx, to recreate the world "according to the laws of beauty."⁶ For McDowell, then, Gadamer distinguishes between animal and human knowledge by according to humans a constructivist model of human knowing. That is, human knowing differs from that of animals in that, while animals know only the obstacles and opportunities offered by their perceptual environment, human knowledge entails the ability to construct a world conceptually in accordance with moral and aesthetic laws, which are formulated and transmitted by processes that are both social and historical.

Having used Gadamer to characterize the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual beings in constructivist terms, McDowell employs Marx to describe how ideology — especially market ideology — seeks to reconstitute the two. Writes McDowell:

Gadamer's account of how a merely animal life, lived in an environment, differs from a properly human life, lived in the world, coincides strikingly with some of what Marx says in his 1844 manuscript on alienated labor... For Marx, of course, a properly human life is nothing if not active: it involves the productive making over of "nature," the sensuous exterior world... Marx complains memorably of a dehumanization of humanity in wage slavery. The part of human life that should be most expressive of humanity, namely, productive activity, is reduced to the condition of merely animal life, the meeting of merely biological needs. And although it is freedom that gives its distinctively human character to human life, wage slavery restricts freedom to the merely animal aspects of what are thus only incidentally human lives. "Man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself an animal in his human functions" (*MW*, 117).

In other words, Marx is commenting on how a life of wage slavery renders the experience of commodity consumption into a given, to which there can be no realistic alternatives. True, there may be choices about which products to consume, but not about whether human experience should be about something other than the acquisition of commodities. Thus, under conditions of wage slavery, the experience of truly "human functions" — culture, literature, and the arts — is reduced to that of a diversion from the drudgery of everyday life. Its imaginative function, that of articulating alternative realities, the knowledge of which renders life under the status quo intolerable, becomes as inaccessible to laborers as it does to brute beasts.

Of course, McDowell should have gone on to include Marx's analysis of how the social consequences of a society organized around wage labor — those deriving from the necessity of combining "practical and political education" for the masses with their increasing impoverishment — would achieve the social goal of art.⁷ That is, according to Marx, wage labor would result in a raised consciousness on the part of workers of capitalism's contradictions, and the realization of the revolutionary alternatives which are also expressed in the culture, literature, and the arts. Noting Marx's analysis of the consciousness raising effects of nineteenth century wage slavery would have afforded McDowell the opportunity to show how the failure of Marx's analysis occasions the need for a later branch of the Hegelian tradition, one that arises to explain how capitalism has been able to neutralize the consciousness raising effects of its own contradictions and thus to maintain its conflation of animal and human life — how capitalism has been able to create the illusion that life under conditions of a more affluent twentieth century consumer society dominated by mass culture is a perceptual given, that is, something that is beyond the power of human agency to change.

Faced with the capacity of capitalism to neutralize revolutionary consciousness, this later branch of Hegelian thought struggles with the manner in which capitalism employs mass culture to achieve this neutralization. Further, it marks a return of Marxist and liberal thought to a reconsideration of art and literature and of their capacity to articulate imaginative alternatives to capitalist experience. Such thinking has pervaded much continental critical theory, certainly that represented by the work of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, as well as adjuncts such as Walter Benjamin, and Eric Fromm.⁸ On this side of the Atlantic similar diagnoses of literature as being problematic under conditions of modernity have been explored by critics such as Geoffrey Hartman.⁹ But, the two theorists who best capture the

capacity of the arts to act as a critique of the capitalist reduction of its version of empirical reality to a given, and of the kind of education required to apprehend this critique in conditions of mass culture, are the Frankfurt School critic Theodor Adorno and the Anglo-American literary critic, Northrop Frye.

Both Adorno and Frye are concerned that under contemporary circumstances, literature and the arts should be experienced as rejecting empirical reality and its representation for the figurative articulation of a possible or ideal world. And, as such, both theorists have been construed as having sold out to liberal idealism. Thus, Frye has been accused by fellow critics of eschewing the hard and necessary work of articulating literature's relevance and connection to contemporary society. Instead, they argue, his criticism seeks only to slot literary works into the mythic or imaginary categories of a world that could exist only in the mind of a liberal idealist.¹⁰ Likewise, Adorno has been criticized by many critics from the left on the ground that his theoretical pessimism — indicated, for example, by his claim that the truth value of art resides in its formal expression of suffering, not its advocacy of progressive politics — precludes the possibility of progressive political struggle.¹¹

But, if Adorno and Frye insist that literature and the arts stand in opposition to empirical reality, they do so in order that literature and the arts should be understood as critiquing ideology and its conflation of empirical reality with contemporary social conditions. Thus, both critics describe literary and artistic works as monads; that is, artworks are monads in that, while not representing the world, they contain the entirety of its history's and society's productive relations within their forms.¹² And the world which each art work, as monad, contains is properly seen not to correspond to any actual historical condition of society so much as it does to the humane ideal which the productive capacities of every society have been perverted by class interest to suppress.

Far from simply slotting literary works into empty mythical categories, then, Frye's criticism calls for the study of literary myth so that the reader can engage each literary work as a site of a dialectic, one carried out between contemporary ideology and the whole of human society's potential to be more than any ideology says it can be. That is, Frye sees all mythic conventions and traditions — that is, all of the story shapes out of which humans construct their world — operating in every work of art.¹³ But, within each work, literary myths operate in a slightly different way so as to adapt to the historical conditions in which each work was created.¹⁴ As the meeting place of mythology and contemporary ideology, each literary work has the effect not simply of rendering myths into more plausible forms but also of rendering contemporary familiar representations of the way things simply are strange, even fanciful. Read as figures of imaginative fancy — that is, centripetally — familiar representations can be seen to form associations with less familiar literary images, and so to participate in a mythic or ideal world which is broader than, but at the same time active in, the world conceived in terms of contemporary social conditions.¹⁵ Similarly, if Adorno has been accused of ignoring the relation of art to history for the study of its form, it is because his accusers have failed to recognize how, as a statement of its formal difference from contemporary society, the artwork exposes

the formal relations inherent in contemporary reality and the narrow administrative ends to which they have been harnessed. In so doing, argues Adorno, the artwork employs those same formal relations in the articulation of human ends more broadly construed.¹⁶

For both Frye and Adorno, then, the study of literary myth and aesthetic form in literature and the arts is not so much an escape from reality as it is a necessary prerequisite to appreciating the manner in which literature and the arts question the formal or mythic assumptions out of which contemporary reality is constructed. This questioning is carried out by juxtaposing contemporary reality so called with the wider human perspective contained in literature and the arts, a perspective which contemporary ideology excludes as alien, or simply unrealistic. And it is this questioning that frees human consciousness from passive acceptance of commodity forms which pass for the shape of things as they truly are.

That it has become increasingly imperative in contemporary society for criticism to take literature and the arts as rejecting empirical reality, however, is due, Frye and Adorno contend, not only to the rise of capitalism, but also to capitalism's co-optation of cultural experience through the mass media into that of a "mass culture."¹⁷ According to Adorno and Frye, mass culture — Adorno calls it the "culture industry" — conditions audiences through the fixation of its conventions in the unconscious mind. Mass culture achieves this fixation through the ubiquity and monotonous repetition of its presentations; its movies, hits, and advertising jingles become the background noise out of which the individual's responses to everyday existence are fashioned.¹⁸ And lest individuals ignore this avalanche of stimuli, mass culture speeds up its presentation, the effect of this acceleration being that the viewer or listener is unconsciously compelled to follow the narrative line of the song or program, while, at the same time, not being able to consciously assimilate what it is that she has been forced to follow.¹⁹ The effect of this co-optation of attention is that the few standardized narrative conventions that mass culture employs — and there are frighteningly few — come to be *the* familiar ways of representing experience.

Of course, mass culture does allow for innovations in, and parodies of, the conventions that it presents to its mass audience. Increasingly graphic representations of violence and sexual activity, the immediacy of journalistic documentary, montage, and the self parody engaged in by shows such as the Simpsons and Seinfeld, are a few contemporary innovations that come to mind. But, as Adorno pointed out, under the culture industry each "new effect" is invariably presented either within familiar narrative contexts or in isolation from the avant-garde contexts that might have rendered them into a challenge to the narrative forms of the culture industry.²⁰ The result is that when viewers and listeners try to make sense of the culture industry's "innovations," they will relate them to the narrative conventions with which the culture industry has familiarized them. And that is the point of everything that the culture industry gives us: to render forms familiar without our having to do any work to grasp them. All we as a mass audience have to do is consume them, as we do advertisements. Because, according to Frye and Adorno,

that is to what the culture industry tries to reduce the whole of contemporary experience.²¹ Under such a conflation of experience and commodity form, the only choice left to individuals is which of the culture industry's commodities they will consume. The possibility of doing something less passive is simply not entertained. A telling vindication of this analysis was witnessed in the recent American debate over whether or not public health care should be expanded to something approaching universality. In that debate, the forces in favor of keeping health care private defined citizenship in terms of the wherewithal to buy and freedom solely in terms of consumer choice.

For Frye and Adorno, the only resistance to indoctrination by the culture industry is in what Max Weber calls "continuous education."²² That is, the cultivation of literary myth or form entails not only the development of familiarity with aesthetic conventions but also an habituation in responding to that formal capacity in works to render those conventions unfamiliar yet again, and with them, those aspects of experience of which we had come to be sure. In so doing, works give expression to elements of our world that actual conditions of society simply do not encompass.

Thus, argues Adorno, does an education in literature and the arts show us the objective form of what human society is capable of achieving, thereby effecting the change in our consciousness that might lead to the recreation of our contemporary reality.²³ Thus, argues Frye, can educated respondents to literature and the arts participate in the constant and imaginative recreation of the world — their birthright as conceptual beings who live in a world.²⁴ Thus, does an education in literature and the arts resist the tendency of mass culture to reduce the world to what, in the Gadamerian parlance invoked by McDowell, might be called a consumer environment in which the dictates of commodity markets define the obstacles and opportunities available in contemporary experience.

Of course, in this postmodern — maybe post-postmodern — environment of contemporary educational theory, even the radicalism of Frye and Adorno might seem rather passé. Surely, it could be argued, the decentering perspectives of post-structuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, and identity politics provide sufficient insight into a contemporary society determined to dehumanize and disenfranchise those individuals who do not belong to the dominant class, gender, or race. But literary and arts education as conceived by Frye and Adorno reminds us that even the most revolutionary images and insights can be co-opted by advertising and mass culture. The remedy to such co-optation, they argue, is (at least in part) literary and artistic practices that concern themselves with integrity of form: practices that capture insights and images in literary and aesthetic forms for their own sake, not simply to sell something. But, in an age of universal consumerism, the products of such practices must turn their backs on easy communicability and, in their solitary rejection of contemporary society, contain a world of possibilities which contemporary society cannot tolerate.

Thus, in their images of suffering, angst, and alienation, do the works of the contemporary avant-garde express their rejection of a society that has rejected and

marginalized so many of its citizens and their solidarity with the dispossessed in pursuit of an emancipatory ideal abandoned by consumer society. For both Frye and Adorno, it is this avant-garde image of solidarity in discord — what Frye calls the “story” of the “loss and regaining of *identity*” and Adorno calls the “utopia that is silently contained in [culture’s] decline” — which the educated imagination must apprehend as resonating in the whole of literature and the arts, and which gives us the resources to overcome attempts by capitalist society to conflate the experience of humans with that of mere brutes.²⁵

In *Mind and World*, philosopher of mind McDowell, illustrates how the embrace of constructivism, broadly construed, entails the recognition that the project of knowing in a human manner is problematic. Thus, we have seen him introduce proponents of the Hegelian tradition — Gadamer and Marx — to show that if certain social influences render human knowing and experience different from that of other animals, there are also social influences involved with the development of capitalism which work to conflate their knowledge and experience. In his deployment of the Marxist critique of wage slavery, then, McDowell alerts us to the Left Hegelian imperative that constructivism must be cognizant of the ongoing struggle between capitalism and the human attempt to construct a world set apart from an animal environment. In so doing, he, perhaps inadvertently, requires that constructivists in philosophy of education turn their attention to two other proponents of the Hegelian tradition — Frye and Adorno — who are concerned with literature and the arts education as a remedy to the reification of mind by mass culture. Thus, in McDowell, do philosophy of mind and education find common ground.

1. See, for example, Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness: A Contemporary Introduction to Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) and Barry Loewer and Georges Rey, eds., *Meaning in Mind: Fodor and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

2. Catherine T. Fosnot, ed., *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 9-11.

3. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 111. This book will be cited as *MW* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Catherine T. Fosnot, “Constructivism: A Psychological Theory of Learning,” in Fosnot, *Constructivism*, 11-29.

5. Maxine Greene, “A Constructivist Perspective on Teaching and Learning in the Arts,” in Fosnot, *Constructivism*, 121.

6. David McLellan, trans., *Karl Marx: The Early Texts* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 140, cited in McDowell, *Mind and World*, 119.

7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Essential Works of Marxism*, ed. Arthur P. Mendel (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 22-25.

8. George Friedmann, ed., *The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 13-26.

9. Geoffrey Hartman, “Ghostlier Demarcations,” in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 109-32.

10. E. James Cunningham, “Northrop Frye and the Educational Responsibilities of Contemporary Criticism,” Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1998, 1-62.

11. Zoltan Tar, *The Frankfurt School: The Critical Theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno* (New York: John Wiley, 1977), xv.
12. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 257-60 and Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 121-22.
13. Frye, *Anatomy*, 50-1.
14. *Ibid.* 51-52.
15. Northrop Frye, *On Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 126-28.
16. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 201-3.
17. Cunningham, "Northrop Frye," 203-33.
18. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 136-37 and Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 147.
19. Horkheimer et al., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 126-27 and Northrop Frye, "The Dialectic of Belief and Vision," in *Northrop Frye: Myth and Metaphor, Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, ed. Robert Denham (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 94-95.
20. Horkheimer et al., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 128.
21. Horkheimer et al., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 161-67 and Frye, *Anatomy*, 350.
22. Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York; Seabury Press, 1876), 195.
23. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 345.
24. Frye, *Critical Path*, 174.
25. Frye, *On Education*, 137 and Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 72.