

Integrating Philosophies of Mind and of Education

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John McDowell's *Mind and World* is a bold, wide-ranging book.¹ Dr. Cunningham uses it as a point of departure to suggest the importance of certain themes in Critical Theory to both philosophy of mind and philosophy of education. I would like to clarify some of the background issues and assumptions that make Dr. Cunningham's proposal plausible. The basic issue turns on this observation: if our individual minds are specifically *human* minds in large part due to our social upbringing, then we need to attend to the influence of pervasive social practices on our upbringing, and hence on the development of our individual, specifically human minds. If John McDowell has recently advocated a social account of the conceptual abilities that make us distinctively human, Dr. Cunningham points out that this kind of account requires us to attend to the powerful influences of capitalism on our socialization.

Dr. Cunningham notes that most contemporary philosophy of mind has had little interest in, and little of interest to say to, philosophers of education. This disinterest is not simply the result of reductionist programs in philosophy of mind.² It results from focusing on "propositional attitudes," on how to understand the semantics and the ascription of specific contents to an individual's fear that *x*, or hope that *y*, or belief that *z*, where the "content" of a "propositional attitude" is to be specified by whatever sentential complement completes a "that ..." clause in such a psychological context. In particular, the disinterest of mainstream philosophy of mind in matters of education results from an inherited Cartesianism, according to which such mental contents can or ought to be fully analyzed in terms of an individual's mental states. Undergirding this Cartesian individualism is a long-standing dichotomy in theory of knowledge, according to which any social or historical account of the human mind (that is, constructivism in the broad sense adopted by Cunningham) must entail rejecting realism, the commonsense belief that the objects and events we observe around us exist and have characteristics that do not depend on what we say, think, or believe about them. Conversely, it has been supposed that the only way to defend realism is to uphold a thoroughly individualist account of the human mind and its knowledge. Though profoundly influential from the Enlightenment onward, this dichotomy is specious. Realism about the objects of human knowledge is consistent with constructivism about human knowledge.³ John McDowell recognizes this.⁴ Indeed, this insight shows some of his allegiance to the Hegelian tradition, for Hegel was the first philosopher to recognize this important point, a point that runs through American pragmatism (especially Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey), and was most recently and clearly articulated by Frederick L. Will.⁵

This Cartesian individualism is undergirded by another dichotomy, pervasive since the Enlightenment, that reason and tradition are distinct and incompatible resources; since tradition is a social phenomenon, reason must be and is an

individual phenomenon, otherwise it could not assess or critique tradition. This dichotomy and the supposition on which it rests are also specious, as McDowell notes, as Hegel originally held, and as Frederick Will has argued most recently.⁶ This point has been touched on recently in philosophy of mind by Tyler Burge, who points out that in many cases, the contents of individual thoughts (and other propositional attitudes) can only be properly understood by recognizing how individuals rely on social standards of meaning and other intellectual social norms in formulating, assessing, or revising their own propositional attitudes.⁷ More broadly, the constructivist point is that most of the important concepts in terms of which we formulate and consider our own thoughts are *learned* and inherited from collective commonsense or specialized (technical or scientific) social forms of inquiry. This is why philosophers of education have taken constructivism (in the broad sense) for granted, at least since G.E. Lessing's *Education of the Human Race*.⁸ To put the point more precisely, as Thomas Green does: Education is a matter of acquiring norms.⁹ The norms we acquire through education run the gamut from norms of grammar and linguistic usage, including all explicit forms of classification, to etiquette, ethics, and methods of intellectual inquiry across the disciplines, including the sciences. As Peirce remarked: "Every physicist, and every chemist, and, in short, every master of any department of experimental science, has his mind molded by his life in the laboratory to a degree that is little expected."¹⁰ The same holds for graduate training programs in any field, including philosophy.¹¹ This is not to say that the objects of human knowledge in the sciences and other disciplines are human constructs. It is to say that the concepts, techniques, and procedures of disciplined intellectual inquiry are normative human constructs. When those constructs work well, they do inform us about actual features of the objects investigated.¹²

An important theme in McDowell's account of the spontaneity of human thought comes directly from Kant, and was adopted by Hegel. Kant contends that freedom is a rational idea that is constitutive — indeed definitive — of our conceiving of ourselves as agents. Only rational spontaneity enables us to appeal to principles of inference and to make rational judgments, both of which are normative because each rational subject considers for him- or herself whether available evidence and principles of inference warrant a judgment or conclusion. In the theoretical domain of knowledge, *having* adequate evidence or proof requires *taking* that evidence or proof to be adequate; in the practical domain of deliberation and action, *having* adequate grounds for action requires *taking* those grounds to be adequate. We *act* only insofar as we take ourselves to have reasons, even in cases of acting on desires, where we must take those desires as appropriate and adequate reasons to act. Otherwise we abdicate rational considerations and absent ourselves from what McDowell (following Wilfrid Sellars) calls "the space of reasons" and merely behave. In that case, as Henry Allison notes, "[o]ne is a patient rather than an agent, or at least that is how one takes oneself."¹³ To put the point in terms borrowed from McDowell, in such cases we provide ourselves only excuses and exculpations, but not reasons or justifications, for acting or believing as we do.¹⁴

Kant's concept of rational spontaneity opposes empiricist accounts of beliefs and desires as merely causal products of environmental stimuli, and it opposes

empiricist accounts of action, according to which we act on whatever desires are (literally) “strongest.” This focuses the significance of Dr. Cunningham’s plea for the educational importance of critical theory and cultural criticism. We think and act rationally only insofar as we judge the merits of whatever case is before us. Judging the merits of a case is something each of us must learn to do, and it is a prime goal of education to facilitate this learning. Many of the most important results of education concern, not the mastery of factual knowledge, but intellectual skills and abilities, in a word, mature judgment. Mature judgment involves the ability to discern and define the basic parameters of a problem, to distinguish relevant from irrelevant and more relevant from less relevant considerations bearing on a problem, to recognize and to formulate important questions and sub-questions that must be answered in order to resolve a problem, to determine proper lines of inquiry to answer those questions, to identify historical or social factors that lead people to formulate questions or answers in particular ways, to think critically about the formulation or reformulation of the issues, to consider carefully the evidence, arguments, or other considerations for and against proposed solutions, to accommodate as well as possible the competing considerations bearing on the issue, through these reflections and inquiries to resolve a problem, and ultimately to organize and to present these considerations clearly and comprehensively to all interested parties.

These qualities of judgment are cardinal intellectual virtues. They are central to any branch of intellectual inquiry, and indeed to any intelligent inquiry in any of life’s many activities, whether professional, commercial, political, or personal. These qualities of judgment must be studied, learned, and practiced. They are socially acquired character traits and intellectual skills that are absolutely fundamental to individual autonomy.¹⁵ As philosophers of education we know this in our hearts, as educators we endeavor — certainly we ought to endeavor — to inculcate this in and through our teaching.¹⁶ In doing so, we are opposed by the increasingly hectic pace of the workplace, at whatever level we or our students are or shall be employed, and to the increasingly urgent, simplistic, and seductive urgings of mass media advertising, which subvert both the development and exercise of judgment by appealing as directly and insistently as possible to broad-based, base desires, whether for sex, power, or for social status. We *can* take ourselves to be, and act as nothing more than, loci of particular sets of beliefs and desires. Our commercial society pressures and tempts us ever more into this abdication of autonomy.¹⁷

Dr. Cunningham proposes that we educators follow the lead of Critical Theory of art to counteract these commercial pressures and tendencies. The relevant point was well put by the Critical Theorist Herbert Marcuse. He contended that art has a liberating potential simply because works of art have “aesthetic form” because they transform an expressed content into a self-contained whole, namely into a work of art.¹⁸ As self-contained wholes, works of art are not part of the continuum of means and ends typical of contemporary commercial society. Experiencing art removes the audience from immediate engagement with reality. Marcuse calls this “aesthetic sublimation” (*AD*, 7). In viewing a work of art, one disengages or “sublimates” one’s immediate needs, wants, and activities — whatever one does in everyday life — and appreciates the work of art. Hence the experience of works of art subverts the

institutionalization of instrumental reason (*AD*, 7). Marcuse states: “Art is committed to that perception of the world which alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society — it is committed to an emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason (*AD*, 9).” This subversion of instrumental reason by art brings with it a hopeful affirmation of life (*AD*, 7). Art affirms life because it is committed to the “deep affirmation of the Life Instincts in their fight against instinctual and social oppression” (*AD*, 11). This affirmation and its subversion of instrumental reason and the means/ends continuum of everyday life enable people to question and assess the validity of dominant social norms and their institutionalization (*AD*, 9). Art is inherently a dissenting voice. Indeed, Marcuse contends, “[t]he aesthetic transformation becomes a vehicle of recognition and indictment” (*AD*, 9).

While I am sympathetic to this account of the nature, value, and strategic social significance of art, I must agree with Dewey that the sense of self-sufficient completeness found in aesthetic experience is not unique to art; it can be found in any and every kind of endeavor in which we can identify having *an* experience.¹⁹ On the other hand, neither the arts nor our experience of them are immune to the relentless pressures of commercialization and media hype.²⁰ In reply to Dr. Cunningham’s proposal, I must concur with Tom Green, who notes that neither education nor philosophy of education can provide means for radical social transformation.²¹ However, an intelligent and sensitive philosophy of education, such as Green’s, can help us better to recall and to understand what we as educators do and must do, so as to encourage and facilitate the critical appreciation of norms and the self-critical appreciation of our acquisition, use, assessment, and revision of norms — including those norms urged upon us by commerce and its media. Thus I concur with Dr. Cunningham and will defend to the death the centrality of the arts in any education, and I join him in urging educators to attend to the critique of mass media. Fortunately, such critique can be and has been incorporated into and even mandated for elementary and middle-school curricula in over a dozen states in the United States, in Canada, and in several Western European countries.²²

1. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

2. Such as the work of Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness: a Contemporary Introduction to Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). For a good critique of contemporary materialism in philosophy of mind, see David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

3. The constructivist supposition to the contrary is well put by Thelma Z. Lavine: “The distinguishing feature of interpretationism, from the German Enlightenment through American pragmatism to mid-twentieth century *Wissenssoziologie* is an affirmation of the activity of mind as a constituent element in the object of knowledge. Common to all of these philosophical movements... is the epistemological principle that mind does not apprehend an object which is given to it in completed form, but that through its activity of providing an interpretation or conferring meaning or imposing structure, mind in some measure constitutes or ‘creates’ the object known”; Thelma Z. Lavine, “Knowledge as Interpretation: An Historical Survey,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10 (1949-50): 526-40, and 11 (1950-51): 88-103; 526). Hegel, pragmatic realists such as Peirce, Dewey, Will, and now John McDowell, contend that empirical knowledge must be interpretive in order to *recreate*, not to create, the object known.

4. John McDowell, *Mind and World, passim* (he sets up this issue on pp. 3-9); this is the positive point of his proposal to transcend the repeated oscillations between various forms of “the given” in empirical knowledge (which offers an account of content and truth, but no adequate account of justification) and “coherentism” (which offers an account of justification, but sacrifices any plausible account of content and truth), taken together with his recognition that so much of our conceptual and intellectual resources — which are crucial for formulating and justifying our cognitive claims — are inherited from our cultural and intellectual traditions (see the references given below in note 6).

5. See Kenneth R. Westphal, *Hegel's Epistemological Realism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 1, 62-64, 67, 155-88. For a brief presentation of some key points, see Kenneth R. Westphal, “Harris, Hegel, and the Truth about Truth,” in *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Reappraisal*, ed. G. Browning, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), 23-29; and Kenneth R. Westphal, “Hegel,” in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Ernest Sosa and Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 167-70; Frederick Will, *Pragmatism and Realism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), chaps. 3-5. Only recently have analytic epistemologists recognized that social accounts of human knowledge can be consistent with realism; see the contributions by Alston, Kitcher, Longino, and Solomon in *Socializing Epistemology*, ed. Frederick Schmitt (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994).

6. John McDowell, *Mind and World*, 84-85, 98-99, 126, 184-87 and Will, *Pragmatism and Realism*, chap. 6. In a word, the assumption that reason must be independent of tradition in order to assess it ascribes nothing less than divine powers to human reason and disregards the possibility of and prospects for internal criticism and self-criticism. On this latter, see Kenneth R. Westphal, “Hegel's Solution to the Dilemma of the Criterion,” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader*, ed. Jon Stewart (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 76-91; or much more briefly, Kenneth R. Westphal, “Dialectic (Hegel),” in Sosa and Dancy, *A Companion to Epistemology*, 98-99.

7. Burge has written a long series of essays on this theme. One representative piece is “Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 12 (1986): 697-720, which contains references to some related articles. The harsh reception of his work by traditional individualists in philosophy of mind shows how tenacious is the effect of the dichotomies identified here. The basic line of response by individualist philosophers of mind has been to define into existence a “narrow” notion of mental content which includes all and only those aspects of propositional attitudes that are independent of an individual's social and physical environment. This move directly parallels Descartes' defining sensing in the “strict” sense as whatever he *seems* to perceive (Meditation 2).

8. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (Berlin: 1780).

9. Thomas Green, *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience* (South Bend, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1999).

10. “What Pragmatism Is” (1905), in *Collected Papers*, ed. C. Hartshorn & P. Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-35), vol. 4:272, §111; quoted by Frederick L. Will, *Pragmatism and Realism*, 182.

11. This is important for understanding the perpetuation of the specious dichotomies criticized here. Here it is philosophers of mind who have much to learn from philosophers of education, though I doubt they will rush to do so. A concerted effort to redirect philosophers' attention to root philosophical concerns with education is made by *Philosophers on Education*, ed. Amélie Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998). Also see *Women's Philosophies of Education: Thinking Through Our Mothers*, ed. Connie Titone and Karren Maloney (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill-Prentice-Hall, 1999).

12. See Will, *Pragmatism and Realism*, chap. 5. For a good recent discussion of constructivism in science, see Jan Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

13. Henry Allison, “We can act only under the Idea of Freedom,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 71, no. 2 (1997): 39-50, 44.

14. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 13.

15. John Dewey clearly recognized the importance of mature judgment for individual autonomy: “If a man's actions are not guided by thoughtful conclusions, then they are guided by inconsiderate impulse, unbalanced appetite, caprice, or the circumstances of the moment. To cultivate unhindered, unreflective external activity is to foster enslavement, for it leaves the person at the mercy of appetite, sense, and circumstance”; John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1933), 4. To be sure, Dewey advocates the integration of affect and intellect, and as an ardent philosopher of education, he recognized

that achieving mature judgment and individual autonomy is a collective undertaking. Another noteworthy book contending that communal resources are required to develop and exercise individual autonomy is Philip Pettit, *Common Mind: An Essay on Psychology, Society, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

16. However, as teachers we too have succumbed to many pressures toward simplifying and routinizing our assessment of student performance in ways that not only do not assess mature judgment, but indeed tend to thwart its development. Many standard methods for assessing student performance must be reconsidered and revised. See Randall R. Curren, "Coercion and the Ethics of Grading and Testing," in *Ethics in Education*, ed. David E.W. Fenner (New York: Garland, 1999), 199-221.

17. Both McDowell (*Mind and World*, 117-18) and Cunningham appeal to Marx's graphic description of the grinding toil of early manufacturing. While such working conditions still can be found in various economies (including sweatshops in North America), in Western Europe and North America this kind of grinding toil is no longer the main problem posed by our commercial economies to proper human development. As John Kenneth Gallbraith noted in a recent interview broadcast on "Morning Edition," National Public Radio [U.S.] 16 October 1998, one of the most impressive and welcome recent achievements of Western economies is the liberation of the vast majority of our populations from grinding manual labor. The main problems posed by our commercial economies are the more diffuse — though very pervasive and influential — kinds noted (very briefly) here. Also see Green, *Voices*, chap. 5, esp. 131-40.

18. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 8. This text will be cited as *AD* for all subsequent references.

19. See Kenneth R. Westphal, "Hegel, Formalism, and Robert Turner's Ceramic Art," *Jahrbuch für Hegelforschung* 3 (1997): 259-83 and John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; reprint, New York: Capricorn, 1958), chap. 3.

20. See Adrian Piper, "Critical Hegemony and Aesthetic Acculturation," *Nous* 19, no. 1 (1985): 29-40.

21. Green, *Voices*, 10-15, 30-31.

22. There are many groups now working in this area; the key word used on the World Wide Web is "media literacy." A current overview of media literacy curricula in the United States is provided by Kathleen Tyner, *Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1998). A good book on the effects of media violence is Dianne Levin, *Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture* (Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). More information is available online from the National Association for the Education of Young Children <NAEYC; www.naeyc.org> the Center for Media Literacy <www.medialit.org/CML> the Ontario Media Literacy Center <www.angelfire.com/ms/Media_Literacy> and Educators for Social Responsibility <www.esrnational.org> Two other important sites accessible through the Center for Media Literacy's site are the Media Literacy Online Project (University of Oregon) and the Jesuit Communications Project (University of Toronto).