

Turnings: Toward an Agonistic Progressivism¹

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INTRODUCTION

It is remarkable just how many of our educational debates ultimately resolve into the same basic dilemma: should the student follow the direction of the teacher, or should the teacher follow the lead of the student? That we are tired of this distinction, and the labels “traditional” and “progressive” that typically mark it, does nothing to lessen its grip on us. While it might appear that this debate has finally ended, since a broadly progressive view does seem to have won the day in the majority of teacher education programs, this ignores the crucial fact that the traditional view seems alive and well in the schools themselves. As evidence for this I cite what I take to be an observable fact: at this very moment, thousands of small children are delightedly practicing classroom management techniques on their even smaller siblings. Whether we read this simply as an innocent rehearsal of the day’s events or, following Freud, as an active reworking of a trauma suffered passively, the upshot remains the same.² Whenever they play school, kids offer us their ingenuous read on schooling: school is the place where teachers give directions and students follow them. The emperor of progressive education appears to be, if not naked, at least scantily clad.

Indeed, if Hannah Arendt is right, this central dilemma of modern pedagogy is inseparable from the central dilemma of modernity itself: the crisis of authority.³ Because freedom and autonomy are central to who we are as moderns, and authority is central to education, every modern educational vision somewhere shows the strain of weaving these opposing concepts together. Progressive views tend to disavow authority, claiming that the direction of growth is supplied by the student. When the progressive teacher releases her grip, however, s/he often finds not distinctive individuals with robust projects, but conformists with consumer cravings. Authority then creeps back into such theories in concepts like the “best self.” Such concepts allow teachers to disregard a student’s manifest interests while still claiming to be following the student’s true interests. Thus we are back to a hierarchical pedagogy with the teacher claiming a superior vision of the good; only it is worse because it is disguised.⁴ Meanwhile, the traditionalist downplays the freedom and interest of the student, only to see teaching preempted by the twin tasks of classroom management and motivation.

Group dynamics tells us that whenever a system must contain conflicts which it cannot resolve, we should expect to find subgrouping.⁵ In education, we find administrators speaking for discipline and teachers speaking for freedom. Or the split recurs within the teaching corps itself, with seasoned teachers stressing skills while the newly minted call for meaning-making. We could take an even broader view and note, with Richard Rorty, how socialization tends to dominate the project of K–12 schooling while individuation gets pride of place in (nonvocational) higher

education.⁶ Since schools of education are precariously balanced between these worlds, this may help to explain the mystery of how teacher education programs can fervently embrace progressivism while still turning out lots of traditional teachers.

When theorists confront such a dichotomy, they typically try to rise above it. Thus, in *Experience and Education*, John Dewey summons and exorcizes extreme versions of traditionalism and progressivism in order to build a theory beyond such either-ors.⁷ Dewey proceeds, however, at such a high level of generality that he does not seem to give the genuine tensions between freedom and authority, individuation and socialization, their due.⁸ My strategy, in contrast, is to descend into the dichotomy and proceed dialectically. First, I examine how one important pedagogical concept gets pulled in opposite directions by the progressive-traditional split. Though the idea of motivational displacement is equally important to both Nel Noddings and Michael Oakeshott, they are divided over the crucial question: whose motivation must be displaced, that of the teacher or that of student? Then I consider two pedagogical traditions in which these different versions of motivational displacement seem to work in complex concert: that of Socratic dialogue and that of the Zen koan. Despite their cultural distance, it is possible to read these pedagogical forms as cousins, together outlining a genre that explodes the dichotomy, a genre we might call agonistic progressivism.

MOTIVATIONAL DISPLACEMENT IN NODDINGS AND OAKESHOTT

According to Noddings, at the heart of pedagogy is caring, and at the heart of caring are “engrossment and motivational displacement,” which together “characterize our consciousness when we care.” For Noddings, caring requires a fundamental perceptual shift in which another person and his or her situation come to occupy our full attention. Engrossment is that moment when “the soul empties itself out of all its own contents in order to receive the other.”⁹ Since our aims and motives must be included among such “soul contents,” this “constitutive engrossment and receptivity” entails a “consequent displacement of motivational energy.”¹⁰

Noddings offers the example of stopping to help a stranger with directions:

As a carer in [such an] encounter, I was attentive, but I also felt a desire to help the stranger in need. My consciousness was characterized by motivational displacement. Where a moment earlier I had my own projects in mind, I was now concerned with his project — finding his way on campus.¹¹

Noddings’s example captures how caring is often experienced as an interruption or a change of course. As I become receptive to another person in need, my own prior concerns evaporate and I begin to feel, instead, the pull of the other’s inclinations. One minute, I am cutting across the quad, bent to my own purposes, pursuing my own path. Suddenly, the stranger appears, and I am stopped in my tracks. Now the quad appears different, as a point along the stranger’s route. I may even walk part way with the stranger to ensure that a key turn is made. If a physicist were watching, s/he might well wonder what this new vector of concern was that entered into the equation and re-routed my course.

Now consider a more complicated and explicitly pedagogical example. Noddings asks us to imagine a teacher who loves mathematics and a pupil who hates it. Some

teachers might say: Tough, you have to learn it whether you like it or not. But this teacher thinks: “I must help this poor boy learn to love mathematics. Then he will do better at it.” This may sound like a noble aim, but Noddings argues that a caring teacher would proceed quite differently. The math-loving teacher “projects [her] own reality onto the student” or makes use of “evidence that intrinsic motivation is associated with higher achievement.” She turns the student into “an object of study and manipulation.”¹² She consults her own experience and the data, but she never really consults the student himself:

What matters to me, if I care, is that I find some reason, acceptable in his inner self, for learning the mathematics required of him or that he reject it boldly and honestly. How would it feel to hate mathematics?... When I think this way, I refuse to cast about for rewards that might pull him along. He must find his rewards. I do not begin with dazzling performances designed to intrigue him or to change his attitude. I begin as nearly as I can, with the view from his eyes: Mathematics is bleak, jumbled, scary, boring, boring, boring... What in the world could induce me to engage it? From that point on, we struggle together with it.¹³

For Noddings, then, beginnings are crucial in pedagogy, and what matters is that the teacher starts from the student’s perspective. In other words, good teaching is marked by that special form of pedagogical tact, that feeling for the interests and needs, situation and perspective, of the student. To achieve such sensitivity we must be willing to stop what we are doing, let go of our preconceived notions, and take in what the student wants. Though Noddings’s way of elaborating it is rich and distinctive, some version of this same ideal is found in all progressive theories. Now consider Oakeshott, who departs from this ideal in an interesting way.

In Oakeshott’s theory of liberal learning we find a kind of antiprogressive progressivism. By liberal learning, he means a communal, conversational engagement aiming to enable individuals to pursue “adventures in self-understanding.”¹⁴ Given this emphasis on learning as a relational process driven by students’ need to make sense of themselves, their lives, and their world, Oakeshott is arguably a kind of progressive educator. And indeed his theory is also structured around a kind of motivational displacement, but here is where what I am calling Oakeshott’s antiprogressivism comes in.

Central to Oakeshott’s vision of liberal learning is the idea that such learning does not take place just anywhere, but that we “have always recognized special places, occasions and circumstances deliberately designed for and devoted to learning” (*PL*, 23–4). For Oakeshott, both the school and the university are potential “places of learning.” The important contrast for him is not between higher and lower education but between liberal and instrumental learning. This contrast leads Oakeshott to one of his most startling claims, that places of liberal learning must be “sheltered enough from the demands of utility to be undistracted in their concern with these adventures and expressions of human self-understanding” (*PL*, 27). It is sentences like this that get Oakeshott in trouble. When he speaks of a sheltered space for pondering existential questions, we picture a leafy, secluded campus attended by highly privileged students, for who else has the luxury to leave the demands of utility behind? This reaction, though understandable, is misguided, as Oakeshott’s concern is not literal seclusion but separation from the instrumental attitude.

Under instrumentalism, all things appear as more and less efficient means to given ends. And we appear to ourselves under only one aspect, as “exploiters of the earth” (*PL*, 24 and *passim*). All of our utterances, however various, derive from a single language, the “language of appetite” (*PL*, 41). In suspending, or at least relativizing, this attitude, the place of liberal learning confronts the student with a threshold to cross. A student approaching the scene of learning is immediately met by a voice that says, in effect: this is *not* a place where the worth of every thing will be determined by its relevance to the interests you already have, nor one in which ideas that are “not up-to-date are considered worthless” (*PL*, 31).

Thus, Oakeshott’s call for a sheltered space is more complicated than it first appeared. In crossing this threshold the student is actually leaving shelter, the shelter of her existing self-understandings. As Oakeshott puts it, the liberal learner “lets go a mooring, and puts out to sea on a self-chosen but largely unforeseen course” (*PL*, 23). It is in order to undertake this voyage that the student needs the other kind of shelter: refuge from “the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants,” from “the muddle, the crudity, the sentimentality, the intellectual poverty and the emotional morass of ordinary life,” from the ceaseless “flow of seductive trivialities” and “repetition of slogans” (*PL*, 28, 30, and 41).

This also complicates our view of the many schools and colleges which pride themselves on being uncloistered, while never asking students to leave this first kind of shelter. Thus, one college promises a “purpose-centered education,” meaning that you can earn advanced standing for past professional experience and expect classes closely tailored to your vocational goals. Such instrumental learning has its place, but it falls short in a fundamental way. Not only do we need to learn how to get what we want more efficiently, but we also need a chance to reflect on what is worth wanting. In a truly purpose-centered, liberal education, the “learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may have happened to have acquired, . . . moved by intimations of what he has never dreamed . . . , invited to pursue satisfactions he has never yet imagined” (*PL*, 24).

Like Noddings, then, Oakeshott is especially concerned with pedagogical beginnings and with motivational displacement. For Oakeshott, though, it is the student’s motivations that must be displaced at the beginning of the learning process. The student begins by asking “what’s this good for?” and the teacher must resist answering. For the point is precisely that the student expand his or her sense of what might count as good. The texts, disciplines, and activities of learning have their own internal goods, which cannot be simply translated into the going rate. The teacher must find a way to deflect or defer this question without deflecting the student, who must be invited in. For it is only from the inside that a text or discipline, a distinctive mode of imagining, can be appraised. And this appraisal takes the form not of looking at it, but of looking through it, at everything.

Thus we now have two conditions for what might count as a truly progressive pedagogy, both of them forms of motivational displacement. The first requires a turning on the part of the teacher from her or his own needs and projects toward the person and the situation of the student. The second, almost a mirror image of the first,

requires a turning on the part of the student. Here the teacher not only avoids displacing her or his own motivations to align with those of the student, but also works to interrupt the student's initial motivations and reroute the student into a genuine educational encounter. How might these two kinds of motivational displacement come together in one pedagogy? I argue that just this fusion is found in the Socratic dialogues and Zen koans.

PEDAGOGICAL BEGINNINGS IN PLATO AND ZEN

Like Noddings and Oakeshott, Plato is interested in the interplay of motivations at the beginning of pedagogical encounters. Consider the opening of the *Meno*.¹⁵ Meno asks, "Can you tell me Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?"¹⁶ Notice how abruptly the dialogue begins, and that it is Meno posing questions to Socrates. In this respect, Socrates resembles the one-caring in Noddings's examples. We do not know what Socrates was doing before this moment. Perhaps Meno stops him on his way somewhere or pulls him out of one of his famous reveries. Even if Socrates was on the lookout for someone to press into dialogue, indeed even if he was looking for Meno himself, an important visitor from Thessaly and protégé of Gorgias,¹⁷ the point stands. Whatever Socrates was thinking about a moment before, he is now engrossed in Meno's opening gambit.

Whether Socrates has taken on Meno's motivations, however, is more complicated, and turns on the prior question: what does Meno want? The obvious answer is that he wants to know Socrates' opinion on the teachability of virtue. But why does he want to know? Is he truly curious and seeking insight from Socrates into how virtue is acquired? This is hard to square with Meno's later admission that he has given "very good speeches" on virtue on "a thousand occasions." Hyperbole aside, Meno does seem to have solidified his position on virtue and its teachability long before engaging Socrates.

Perhaps the hint of curiosity we hear in Meno's opening words concerns only Socrates' debating skills. Meno may be simply looking for an argument, a contest, a chance to show off. Notice how he poses his question: not "will you tell me?" but "can you tell me?" There is a note of challenge, one echoed a few lines later when Socrates declares his ignorance about the nature of virtue and Meno taunts: "But, Socrates, do you really not know what virtue is? Are we to report this to the folk back home about you?"¹⁸ On this reading, Meno, renowned for oratory in Thessaly, is challenging Socrates, the famous arguer of Athens, to a duel of words. When Meno lays out the various positions — that virtue is teachable, comes from practice, or is inborn — he is asking Socrates, in effect, to choose his weapon.

With Meno's motivations characterized more fully, it is less clear what it might mean to say that Socrates experiences motivational displacement in Noddings's sense. Do Meno's purposes become Socrates'? Should they? If we now turn to Socrates' response, we see that it is rather Meno whose motivations are displaced.

Socrates replies with a sarcastic speech about how all wisdom seems to have fled Athens for Thessaly since (1) one cannot know the attributes of a thing before

knowing what that thing is; (2) Meno must therefore already know what virtue is if he is inquiring into its teachability; whereas, (3) Socrates himself is “so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught” that he does not even know “what virtue itself is.”¹⁹ The following exchange then occurs:

M: Is this true about yourself, Socrates, that you don't even know what virtue is? Is this the report that we are to take home about you?

S: Not only that, you may also say that, to the best of my belief, I have never met anyone else who did know.

M: What! Didn't you meet Gorgias when he was here?

S: Yes.

M: And you still didn't think he knew?

S: I'm a forgetful sort of person, and I can't say just now what I thought at the time. Probably he did know, and I expect you know what he used to say about it. So remind me what it was, or tell me yourself if you will. No doubt you agree with him.

M: Yes, I do.

S: Then let's leave him out of it, since after all he isn't here. What do you yourself say virtue is?...

M: But there is no difficulty about it. First of all....²⁰

Here Meno begins his benighted quest to define virtue and the *elenchus* assumes its usual form: hapless interlocutor answers; Socrates questions and refutes. Recall that the dialogue opened with Meno asking Socrates about virtue's teachability. In just ten lines, Socrates has changed the topic and reversed their roles. Plato opens not with the *elenchus* proper but with the extraordinary maneuvers that establish it.

If Socrates had answered Meno's initial question, he would have had to defend a view. Instead, he admits ignorance and poses a dilemma: if one cannot know the qualities of a thing before one knows what essentially the thing is, then either Meno's question makes no sense or he thinks he knows what virtue is. At this point, Meno still had options: he could have challenged Socrates' prioritization of essences; joined Socrates in admitting confusion, begging him to defend a view for the sake of argument; or even challenged Socrates' disavowal of moral knowledge by asking how he makes decisions, chooses friends, and so on if he really has no conception of *arête*. Instead, Meno attempts the hopeless tactic of shaming Socrates for his ignorance. Avoiding this trap, Socrates finishes baiting his own: declaring that he has never met anyone who knew what virtue was, he dares Meno to become the first. Tempted, Meno tries one last gambit. Putting Gorgias forward as proxy, he challenges Socrates to defend an alternative to Gorgias' position. Again, Socrates refuses the bait. Citing his poor memory, he maneuvers Meno back into testifying. But Socrates does not want Meno testifying on another's behalf. The *elenchus* requires that you do not hide behind authority, but say only what “you yourself” believe. Thus, Socrates extracts Gorgias from the trap meant for Meno alone.

Thus, Socrates shows himself to be a master of a kind of pedagogical jujitsu. Meno came at Socrates with one question only to find himself thrown into answering another. If Socratic pedagogy is progressive, then, this is an agonistic progressivism, one that bridges the gap between Noddings and Oakeshott. As with Oakeshott, the

pedagogical encounter begins with a rerouting of the student's trajectory, an interruption of the student's tendency to view learning in light of purposes extrinsic to it. Yet, in his awareness that such a conversion must be effected and of how to effect it, Socrates also displays the pedagogical tact advocated by Noddings. Socrates works with what Meno offers and in light of what Meno needs.

Consider now another pedagogical tradition in which both kinds of motivational displacement work in concert. Central to Zen Buddhism is the doubly pedagogical, literary form known as the koan. Assigned to students as objects of meditation and study, koans also typically record a brief pedagogical exchange. Thought to be derived from the older tradition of the *mondo*, an extended, scripted dialogue, koans usually condense this to a single question and response. Novice approaches master with a question, master responds. Thus, the koan may be described as a form entirely devoted to the kinds of pedagogical beginnings we have been exploring.

Here is a koan recorded by Mumon Ekai in 1228, known as "Joshu's 'Wash Your Bowl'":

A monk said to Joshu, "I have just entered this monastery. Please teach me." "Have you eaten your rice porridge?" asked Joshu. "Yes I have," replied the monk. "Then you had better wash your bowl," said Joshu. With this the monk gained insight.²¹

Unlike Meno, this student wants to learn. Like Meno, however, he is stuffed full of ideas about what it means to be learned. Even though he has just entered the monastery, he believes he is ready to be enlightened, that enlightenment can be captured in words, and that this gift might come from the teacher. In line with this new genre we are laying out, we see the teacher has a double responsibility to turn toward the student and take in, quite finely, what lies behind his question and approach. But this is not to be a progressivism in which the teacher merely follows and facilitates the student's interest. What seems clear to Joshu is that the student has not yet even begun to develop a genuine interest in himself, where enlightenment is to be found, if at all. If the first, Noddingsesque motivational displacement (for we can assume that Joshu was engaged in *zazen*, reading of the sutras, or something of his own choosing before the monk barged in) is what enables this tactful diagnosis, the prognosis is that a second motivational displacement, of the student, must take place.

In the koans, the master's response is typically not an answer per se, but an action, an action that casts doubt on the student's mode of seeking and redirects his attention. When Joshu asks if the student has eaten his porridge, he is, on one level, simply turning the student's attention away from him, and back to the student himself and the rituals of everyday life. You are looking too far and too fast, Joshu implies, slow down and do not forget that the sacred may also be found in a bowl of rice porridge. After eating, comes washing up. Do not get ahead of yourself. On another level, Joshu is pointing out that the student is not really hungry for insight. Thus, Joshu's intervention can be read as directly parallel to Socrates': "Why do you ask me to ladle something out if you are already full?" Like Socrates, the Zen master executes a double motivational displacement. Turning toward the student — in order

to have some feel for the unique way in which this particular person has become stuck in his personal and difficult search for insight — the Zen master then uses this discernment to turn the student, to help him become unstuck.

CONCLUSION

I have approached the classic progressive-traditional problem from a fresh angle, outlining a third genre that I have called agonistic progressivism. Here, the teacher is a harsh taskmaster, but the task is a progressive one of facilitating the student's personal insight and self-cultivation. In the koans and the *elenchus*, teaching requires something like Noddings's motivational displacement, that special form of pedagogical tact, or feeling for the interests and needs, situation and perspective, of the student. But such tact serves to effect a second motivational displacement, in which the student's approach is shifted onto a vector more productive of genuine learning. The teacher turns toward the student in order to turn the student toward a new path, knowing that even when students lead, they may lead with a lack of clear or genuine interest. Thus, we can complicate the progressive mantra about following the interest and lead of the student by noting that (1) pedagogy is often about creating the conditions in which this interest can emerge; and (2) following the lead of students often takes the form of directly leading them.

1. My subtitle was inspired by feminist discussions of Hannah Arendt's interest in the place of *agon* in Greek ethics and politics, and in particular by Bonnie Honig's "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 135–166.

2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 8–11.

3. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1977), especially chaps. 3 and 5.

4. Thanks to David Blacker for help in sharpening this point.

5. For the psychoanalytic theory of splitting, see Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," in *The Writings of Melanie Klein, Volume 3: Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963* (New York: Free Press, 1975). For its application to subgrouping, see Warren G. Bennis and Herbert A. Shepard, "A Theory of Group Development," *Human Relations* 9, no. 4 (1956); and Leroy Wells, "The Group as a Whole: A Systemic Socioanalytic Perspective on Interpersonal and Group Relations," in *Groups in Context: A New Perspective on Group Dynamics*, eds. Jonathon Gilette and Marion McCollum (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

6. Richard Rorty, "Education as Socialization and as Individualization," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999). Here I endorse only Rorty's diagnosis, not his prognosis.

7. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

8. Paul Farber helped me articulate what remains unsatisfying in Dewey's otherwise laudable approach.

9. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 16.

10. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 57.

11. Noddings, *Challenge to Care*, 16.

12. Noddings, *Caring*, 15.

13. Ibid., 15–16.

14. Variations of this phrase appear throughout Michael Oakeshott, “A Place of Learning,” in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). This work will subsequently be cited as *PL*.

15. René Arcilla taught me how to read the *Meno* as a pedagogical text and highlighted the importance of the dialogue’s opening; also, his interest in the Zen koan as a pedagogical genre inspired mine.

16. Plato, “Meno,” trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Five Dialogues* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1981), 59 (70a).

17. Ibid., 67 (78d).

18. Ibid., 60 (71c).

19. Ibid., 59 (71a).

20. Plato, “Meno,” trans. W.K.C. Guthrie, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), trans. Guthrie, 354–5 (371c–e).

21. A.V. Grimstone, ed., *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, trans. Katsuki Sekida (New York: Weatherhill, 1977), 44.

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