Toward a Programmatic Pragmatism: A Response to Naoko Saito

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Naoko Saito has made a good case for emphasising the ‘tragic’ dimension within Dewey’s pragmatism. My response suggests ways in which Saito has not gone far enough. She does not adequately move beyond ‘procedural pragmatism’ to a ‘programmatic pragmatism’ which offers substantive articulations about the human good. In addition, her emphasis on ‘Emersonian perfectionism’ is misguided. Both the language of ‘perfectionism’ and the figure of Emerson are unsuitable for the project she intends. Speaking more concretely of a ‘tragic–comic meliorism’ allied to the novelist Hawthorne, it is suggested, provides a more fruitful path.

Documenting the proliferation of fast food establishments on US campuses, the New York Times quoted one satisfied undergraduate as being delighted with all the choices. Her previous campus only had ‘a Roy Rogers and some sandwiches’. She was especially appreciative of the lunch area with its 13 television screens. Not only could she choose from a variety of fast food outlets, but she could ‘watch Sally Jesse Raphael, too’ (Applebome, 1995, p. 30). Sitting in front of a TV monitor, satisfying the body’s need for hunger, being almost fully self-contained, the student represents a phenomenon we could call, amending slightly Robert Putnam’s famous title, ‘eating alone’ (see Putnam, 2000). This student, beneficiary of at least 13 years of schooling in a country that is proudly democratic, could easily stand as a model for what Dewey calls ‘the lost individual’, isolated, disconnected, attracted by the ideals of speed rather than nutrition, self-sufficiency rather than sociality, and sensational TV talk-shows over serious academic subjects. The marriage of education and democracy was supposed to result in a natural aristocracy, not to eventuate in lost individuals.

Working within the tradition of Dewey, Naoko Saito worries that schooling has not done much to counter the ‘crisis of the lost individual in his battle against degenerative aspects of modern democracy; selfish individualism, liberalism at the mercy of the market economy, and the erosion of the public sphere — invisible but penetrating forces that deprive us of our sense of being a centre in the whole’ (Saito, 2002, p. 165). She also worries that one way of reading Dewey, that associated with...
progressive education, fails to offer much in the way of antidotes. She prefers to highlight a ‘recessive’ (p. 178) strand in Dewey’s corpus, using it as a general framework for envisioning an education that will counter contemporary nihilistic tendencies and foster a harmonious democratic state.

Central to this effort is the need for discovering and exploiting the ‘tragic’ dimension in Dewey’s thought. Educational policy built on the assumption that clear planning and efficient organisation can resolve instructional shortcomings is itself a misguided, flawed view. It is ‘troubled neither by the aching sense of unattainability nor by the recognition of the ultimate incommensurability of values. In other words, the sense of the tragic’ (p. 147). Maximal faith in the efficacy of methodologies, combined with minimal appreciation for how irrecusable and ineluctable are the difficulties which inevitably emerge, dissipates ‘the power to criticize and reconstruct our existing condition’. It also lessens sensitivity to ‘the invisible and silent, to what cannot be readily expressed or presented’ (ibid.). Such limitations flatten and thin out our ethical lives. They are symptoms of ‘nihilism and cynicism’ (ibid.).

Saito’s point is well taken. An educational theory based on a spurious optimism is bound to eventuate in disillusionment. The ‘lost individual’ of concern to Dewey was adrift with ‘no sure anchorage’ because ‘traditional objects of loyalty’ had come to be ‘hollow or openly repudiated’ (Dewey, 1929, p. 67). What I would call a ‘procedural pragmatism’, confident that application of the scientific method to social and educational spheres would resolve ills with successes parallel to those associated with medicine and technology, eventually had to admit the more intractable nature of the difficulties associated with mass education in democratic societies. The resultant disappointment can readily give rise to the sort of cynicism and scepticism which worry Saito (p. 163). But, as she indicates, procedural pragmatism is but one way of mining the riches in Dewey. There is also the recessive, ‘tragic’ dimension, as minimally exploited as it is maximally poised to re-institute objects of loyalty in a measured and realistic manner, thus inoculating us against the sense of ‘isolation, separation and loss, which are at the heart of the contemporary crisis of democracy?’ (ibid.).

So far so good. Democratic institutions are fragile plants requiring constant work to keep them vibrant. When we get into the details of tragic pragmatism as Saito explains it, however, certain difficulties emerge. There are several key prongs to her reconstruction of Deweyan philosophy. The first centres on the importance of ‘habit reconstruction’. The second draws on a parallel between Emerson and Dewey, particularly the former’s notion of a ‘perfectionism that refuses final perfectibility’ (p. 166). These prongs underpin the attempt at incorporating a tragic dimension within the Deweyan framework. In what I have called ‘procedural pragmatism’ (where a focus on planning ‘is troubled neither by the aching sense of unattainability nor by the recognition of the ultimate incommensurability of values’) the sense of the tragic ‘disappears from the picture’ (p. 147). A chastened educational theory,
sensitive to the tragic dimension, could revivify faith in democratic possibilities while minimising both the rigidity of fixed, inherited and unchangeable ends, on the one hand, and the sheer openness of relativism which leads to cynicism and nihilism, on the other.

While Saito’s efforts are commendable, two areas in particular stand out as in need of further transformation: (a) moving more boldly beyond procedural pragmatism toward the concrete elaboration of a ‘programmatic pragmatism’; and (b) giving up on the idea of using Emerson as the best source for helping integrate tragedy and pragmatism.

I TOWARD A PROGRAMMATIC PRAGMATISM

Saito is quite right to stress the importance of ‘habit reconstruction’ as both central to Dewey’s approach and important in any rethinking of the relation between pragmatism and education. Her means of dealing with habits, however, are at once too cerebral and too procedural. When Dewey claims, as Saito quotes him, that humans are creatures of habits, neither of reason nor of instinct, she is fastening onto a key element in Deweyan anthropology. Humans are neither cogitating machines, nor are they Skinnerian subjects, fully manipulable by schedules of operant conditioning. Humans are embodied, encultured creatures, aiming, at their best, to live out humane, reasonable lives. As embodied creatures, it is not enough for them to ‘think’ in certain ways for behaviour to be changed. This is a key notion for educators to grasp. Because of the intellectual nature of their field, educators tend, in practice, to separate mind from body and think that if the mind can be persuaded, the body will come along automatically. But inculcation of habits, habit formation as well as habit reconstruction, is important precisely because knowing and acting are not at all automatically linked. Situated between the two we find practices, drills, repetitions, a range of inculcated activities that help certain impulses become second nature, while marginalising others.

Saito’s way of dealing with habits is good as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. The whole issue of habits has to be considered within a fully embodied, not just a noetic context. Her quotations from Dewey indicate how he understands impulses to be ‘redirected by intelligence’ (p. 156). But this is way too thin an approach to habit construction and reconstruction. There is no separate mind dictating to a passive body. Habituation, practice, discipline, embodied activities in other words, are crucial if certain habits are to be cultivated. Educators, in particular, have to be aware of this as they work to guide their charges, providing them with the sorts of habits which will allow genuine constructive freedom of ability when the schooling process is over.

This explicit recognition of embodiedness can readily be grafted onto Saito’s analysis, making it more concretely applicable to actual educational settings. The next concern about her analysis of habits raises a more serious issue about the need for even more radical reconstruction of the Deweyan corpus. Reconstructive growth, as she rightly points out,
cannot, in the Deweyan framework, ‘be contained by fixed ends’ (p. 157). ‘Such a progressive growth’, she contends, ‘is an essential condition for the healthy, flexible reconstruction of a democratic society’ (p. 150). The question to be raised here is whether Saito’s analysis has given us adequate guidance for identifying the middle ground between fixed ends and no ends at all. Saito admits that one standard objection to Dewey has been the question ‘growth towards what?’ (p. 150). Unfortunately, she falls short of adequately dealing with this question. She points out that Dewey’s critics ‘share the assumption that the ends of growth should be supported by a moral source beyond the natural and empirical realm’ (p. 152). This is not quite right. It minimises the the real objection and distracts from the real question.

The real issue is not that of ends derived from possibilities within a particular context versus ends imposed from some supposed external realm. The issue is whether the slogan of growth as an end in itself is adequate as a guide for concrete educational practices. It is one thing to deny that there is such a thing as an ‘absolute or intrinsic good’ or to reject some fixed ‘moral foundation to be relied on as the ultimate source of the good’ (p. 160). It is quite another to leave the question of ‘growth toward what’ unanswered in any meaningful way.

Saito does offer a few terminological hints. She speaks of ‘trans-actional holism’ as providing the circumstances within which growing takes place. ‘Endless ending’, she claims, ‘does not mean the abrogation of the quest for good growth’ (p. 160). In place of fixed, external ends, Dewey’s pragmatism allows for ‘directive criteria’ which function ‘to drive and guide humans towards the better’ (p. 161). These are positive steps, but they remain, in Saito’s analysis, empty honorific slogans. Seeking ‘good’ growth is not an aim unique to pragmatists. What counts as the ‘good’ in growth is what has to be explored. Contemporary pragmatists face the specific challenge of going beyond honorific slogans for which all sorts of content can be imagined. In their place they need to formulate more precise, substantive, articulations of ‘directive criteria’. The fear of fixed external ends should no longer lead pragmatists to take refuge in vague words like ‘good’ and ‘better’. Such a refuge means that procedural pragmatism, in practice, gives no real guidance.

Richard Rorty offers an instructive example when he distinguishes between ‘socialization’ and ‘individualization’ in formulating ideals for lower level and university education respectively. Defending, to some degree, the reform proposals made by E. D. Hirsch in his Cultural Literacy, Rorty points out that the role of socialisation is an important one for lower level education. ‘For any society has the right to expect that, whatever else happens in the course of adolescence, the schools will inculcate most of what is generally believed’ (Rorty, 1999, p. 116). Here is a specific suggestion for what counts as ‘good’ growth. It does not come down from some Platonic realm of forms, but rather emerges from the present context. Dewey might, Rorty readily admits, have been wary of an educational system focused solely on the piling up of information, but in our time some emphasis on inculcating a shared cultural heritage
is important. Why? Our age is different from that of Dewey. ‘But I doubt that it ever occurred to Dewey that a day would come when students could graduate from an American high school not knowing who came first, Plato or Shakespeare, Napoleon or Lincoln, Frederick Douglass or Martin Luther King Jr’ (ibid., p. 121). Rorty’s defence of Hirsch and his explicit formulation of directive criteria that grow out of contemporary conditions indicate how, in a concrete sense, it is only a programmatic pragmatism, one that has moved beyond incantations about ‘holism’, ‘growth’, the ‘good’ and the ‘better’ that will actually have an opportunity to alter the habits of the next generation.

Dewey’s open-ended praise for growth had an important polemical aim. He was reacting, properly, to a dangerous limiting tendency: identifying a narrow and often external aim as the single goal of education specifically and, more generally, of moral development as a whole. But when we pay close attention to character training, to habit reconstruction, one important limitation of the Deweyan position immediately surfaces. Habits in the concrete rather than in the abstract are inextricably allied to certain substantive understandings of the human good. Dewey admits as much in Moral Principles in Education when he begins by reminding his audience that ‘the society of which the child is to be a member is, in the United States, a democratic and progressive society’ (Dewey, 1909, p. 270). With this as a yardstick, Dewey can determine that certain teaching methods cultivate inappropriate habits. ‘We fail to recognize how essentially individualistic the latter methods are, and how unconsciously, yet certainly and effectively, they react into the child’s ways of judging and acting’ (ibid., p. 275).¹

Dewey’s claims about ‘growth’ as the only end of moral development must, therefore, be complemented by some programmatic content in his successors. There may be disagreement about that content, but such disagreements should not paralyse contemporary pragmatists into remaining on the overly vague level of ‘good’ ‘growth’ and ‘better’. Educators in the classroom need to have some concrete sense of what constitutes good growth, of what is actually better for human flourishing. Simply repeating the master’s mantra about ‘growth’ is unsatisfactory for twenty-first century Deweyans. It was a wonderful chainsaw for clearing the forest of antiquated trees. But, like most chainsaws, it is not very helpful for planting and cultivating.

II BEYOND EMERSONIAN PERFECTIONISM

Finally, a few comments on the topic of a ‘tragic’ pragmatism. Saito is quite correct that here is an area where much reconstructive work is needed. A thinker like Dewey, committed to reform and thereby to the plasticity of surrounding conditions, was, quite understandably, not pre-occupied with the ineluctable and irrecusable in the nature of things, an ineluctability too quickly fastened upon by enemies of reform. Still, contemporary pragmatists have some duty and opportunity to take a more balanced approach. Saito rightly recognises how a world without
the ‘dimension of tragedy’ can readily be associated with a ‘nihilism sufficient to undo democracy’ (pp. 147–148). Saito seems to use ‘nihilism’ to mean a general lack of commitment to any particular cluster of ideals. Democratic institutions would have a hard time enduring without some shared embrace of just such enduring ideals. The ideals, individually, might always be up for reformulation or tinkering (think of how the notion of ‘freedom’ gradually expanded to included females and former slaves), but there must be some guiding set of ideals, if only to distinguish a democratic community from an aristocratic or a despotic one.

The tragic dimension also provides sobering reminders about limitations and frustrations. Such a tempering is fully in line with the ameliorative, fallibilist approach suggested by Dewey. Keeping in mind the ‘aching sense of unattainability’ or the awareness of the ‘ultimate incommensurability of values’, to employ appropriate phrases of Saito, helps prevent disillusion and the consequent cynicism that can accompany reform programmes not chastened by the tragic temperament. Not surprisingly, Saito identifies the ‘lack of the tragic’ as the ‘crisis of our times’ (p. 149). This may be a bit of an exaggeration, but it is certainly true that the lack of the tragic is a lacuna within pragmatism, one which needs to be addressed by contemporary pragmatists.

Whether Saito’s approach to filling this lacuna, aligning Dewey with Emersonian ‘perfectionism without perfection’, is the best strategy, though, remains questionable. There is something to be said for recognising the inherent tension between ‘the attainment and unattainment of democracy’ (p. 170). Worrying only about the ways in which our efforts fall short could easily lead us to a quiescence that would stultify any attempts at reform. Keeping in mind the constant tacking between attainment and unattainment allows us to keep striving for change and improvement while remaining chastened and sobered by the thought that many of our efforts will fall short. Borrowing terminology from Cavell, Saito identifies ‘Emersonian perfectionism’ as the attitude which, if married to Deweyan philosophy, will give birth to a suitably tragic pragmatism. ‘Emersonian perfectionism’ locates human perfection in the ‘ordinary’, a view that contrasts it sharply with ‘the teleological form of Greek perfectionism’ (p. 146). The revised perfectionism is a constantly renewed process, a ‘perfectionism that refuses final perfectibility’ (p. 166).

Seeking strands in Dewey that are comfortable with a tragic sensibility is a much needed project. Recognising, as Saito does, that the best sources for this recessive dimension are his religious and aesthetic writings (p. 164) is quite correct. Whether the language of perfectionism, however qualified, offers the most fruitful opportunity for eliciting a tragic dimension in Dewey’s thought, and whether Emerson is the best source to pair up with Dewey, are, however, open questions.

The language of perfectionism derives from a particular theological context, that of Protestant America in the nineteenth century. ‘Perfectionism’, no matter how we guard against its most exuberant connotations, is always going to maintain a decidedly anti-tragic dimension. The whole point of classical tragedy lies precisely in the recognition...
of inherent human fallibility, in our vulnerability to events not of our own making, in the frailty and dependence which is our permanent lot. It does not in the least suggest that with concerted effort of our own, supplemented by divine grace, we can overcome the condition of being a flawed sinner. ‘Perfectibility without perfection’ may help diminish the impact of perfectionism, but the real need is to move beyond that sort of formulation altogether. Why not simply accept the embodied, enculturated vulnerability that is our lot, and speak in terms of the tragic–comic situatedness of human life? ‘Perfectionism’, no matter how qualified, will always carry the connotation of a major break with the past, an ascent to the status of being a new person who has escaped from a former status as frail and fallen. What ‘perfectionism without perfection’ does is simply to put off the final destination in an asymptotic way. It does not significantly change the transformationist theology that is at its root. Tragic–comic meliorism, on the other hand, allows more ready recognition that the very solutions, the very improvements to yesterday’s problems may well lead to the difficulties that have to be faced by tomorrow’s generation.

The language of ‘perfectionism’ is only one problem with Saito’s attempt at developing a vibrant tragic pragmatism. In general, linking Dewey with Emerson moves in a direction unfriendly to an embrace of the tragic dimension. Emerson, his genius and felicity of expression notwithstanding, urges us toward a view of things which is not Deweyan in several important ways:

1. the individual is privileged as source of insight, not the community of inquiry moving toward warranted assertions;¹
2. pluralism is marginalized since, ultimately, everything can be resolved into a wonderfully embracing Unity;¹
3. there is in Emerson a strong suggestion that situational obstacles are temporary and can bend to human will.¹

If we wish to complement Dewey by pairing him with a figure from the American Renaissance, then Hawthorne would be a much better choice. For it is Hawthorne who has a deep sense of the tragic rooted down to the marrow of his bones. When it comes to the constraints over which we have no control, to burdens for which we did not ask, to the inseparable mixture of good and evil in every reformist programme, to the flaws in our condition and limitations in the nature of things which make our improvements temporary and fragmented, there is no greater teacher than Hawthorne. Emerson might seem the more natural pairing, since he too was a philosopher, but Hawthorne is the more important complement in bringing out the recessive tragic sensibility in Dewey’s thought.

Saito has provided a good beginning for re-thinking Deweyan pragmatism in ways that will make a difference both in education and democracy. Her steps away from a procedural pragmatism are still, to my mind at least, too timid. Embracing a more explicitly programmatic
pragmatism, avoiding vague, incantatory labels, and exploring the contributions a Hawthorne can make would, to my mind again, offer a real, substantive change to prevailing views within the Deweyan community.

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NOTES
2. ‘The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions . . . When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or absence is all we can affirm’ (Emerson, 1982, p.390).
3. ‘Let us build altars to the Blessed Unity which holds nature and souls in perfect solution, and compels every atom to serve an universal end’ (from ‘Fate’, in Emerson, 1982, p.390).
4. ‘Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient’ (from ‘Nature’, in Emerson, 1982, p.80).

REFERENCES