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20 Education and Responsiveness
On the Agency of Intersubjectivity

Human agency is the new frontier of contemporary philosophy. You may have noticed it already—that the Berlin Wall of the determinism/free-will dichotomy will soon be coming down, and a new paradigm of human action will sprout from seeds both new and long dormant. There have been hints of the impending cataclysm already: the work of Antonio Damasio in neuroscience,[1] Thomas Metzinger and Alicia Juarrero in the philosophy of the self,[2] Ananta Giri in development ethics,[3] and François Jullien along with David Hall and Roger Ames in comparative philosophy. We've taken it for granted for so long—despite the best efforts of compatibilist philosophers, we've lulled ourselves into believing that we can have it only one of two ways—that either we choose or we merely appear to choose, supernaturalism or robotics. The former is incoherent, and the latter is too chilling to take seriously when our own phenomenological experience separates us far enough from its plausibility that we are comfortable keeping it out of mind. In human robotics there could be only discomfort, especially for the humanist philosopher who relies on genuine human decisions when formulating the barest of propositions, the imperative to believe.

This essay will not bring the wall down single-handedly. It will, however, endeavor to carve out a chink, generate a crack that branches as it spreads. My approach will be from the narrow subject of transitivity as a linguistic feature. Transitivity, which implies at least one kind of agency, is a nice starting point because in this narrow field the eventual complications already begin to show themselves, but in a manageable sphere.

The heart of education is the student–teacher relationship, which can be construed in a number of ways. In François Jullien's *Detour and Access,* he identifies Confucius' style of education as relying on indirection: "The ideal of Confucian speech is not to promote dialogue but to imitate nature's indirect manner of operation" (p. 202).[4] This reluctance to enter into dialogue appears to be in direct conflict with the Socratic method, often lauded

as the paragon of Western education. Socrates used dialogue in an attempt to access universal truths that everyone had encountered but could not immediately recollect. Confucius, Jullien argues, attempts to incite reflection in the student with the purpose of assisting the student to comport to the demands of circumstance (p. 213). Jullien cites Fan Chi's comparison of a teacher to falling rain: "which, without anyone knowing, makes everything grow" (p. 202). By contrast, the heart of the Socratic relationship is the guidance of the teacher.

It is often noted that the root of the English word "education" is the Latin *educare*, cognate with *educere,* both having connotations of "to lead," hence the English word "educe," to draw forward. This perspective on education implies two important things: (1) that the teacher knows where the student needs to go, and (2) that the teacher knows the way to the student's destination. This very active role of a teacher in education is revealed also in the grammatical designation of "to educate" as a transitive verb.

Syntactic monotransitivity, as linguists call it, refers to the characteristic of some verbs to indicate a transfer of action from an agent to an object, or patient. Common examples are "to throw" and "to touch." The linguists Paul Hopper and Sandra Thompson[5] fleshed out the concept of transitivity by identifying ten components of it, each lying on a continuum, that together could allow one to identify the effectiveness with which an action is transferred to an object/patient, in other words, the *level* of transitivity. The components they identify are participants, kinesis, aspect, punctuality, volitionality, affirmation, mode, agency, affectedness of the object, and individuation of the object. It turns out that there is one aspect of transitivity that this nearly exhaustive examination does not consider, and that is the agency of the patient. Etymologically, "patient" indicates passivity, but is the recipient of action always passive?

In what follows, I will attempt to draw out a few implications with regard to the education of a recipient of action who is active rather than passive. In the process of doing so, I will need to introduce a novel term and a novel use of an obscure term, "intertransitivity" and "numismatism." I shall begin with the numismatic.

Imagine a blank screen. Appearing on the screen are four circles of identical size. In each of two of the circles is an image of a person's head—a man in one and a woman in the other. In each of the other two circles are images of a plant in one and a building in the other. These four images, you come to realize, are faces of coins of undetermined nations. Because they are unfamiliar to you and the denominations are not apparent, it is impossible to pair up the sides as they appear on the actual coins. The task is impossible because it is of the nature of coins that the two sides, while attached, cannot, under normal circumstances, be viewed simultaneously, and because the conditions of their unity are entirely contingent. There is

no way while viewing one side to be privy to the contents of the other side or to deduce the connection.

This intriguing feature of coins is an appropriate metaphor for intersubjective experience. The term "coin" is a single one that refers to an object with two discrete perspectives. Many intersubjective experiences also have a single term that refers to two isomorphic but experientially distinct perspectives, such as "commerce" and "exchange." Each of these terms can be broken down into two perspectives, each described by a distinct term. For "commerce," there is "buying" and "selling"; and for "exchange," there is "giving" and "receiving." In form, these two perspectives are identical, each an agent of a commercial transaction. Experientially, however, they are quite the opposite: one selling, with all of the concerns and expectations that selling entails; and one buying, with very different concerns and expectations.

Often, the intersubjective experience does not have a distinct term to identify it and instead borrows one of the opposing terms, such as "lending," "parenting," teaching," and "leading." Each of these terms implies an opposing pair. In these instances, the experience differential is more readily apparent. A lender has a borrower, a parent has a child, a teacher has a student, and a leader has a follower—each with a particular perspective. In rare instances, a single lexical root captures not only the experience but both sides of it as well. An example is "employment." An employer employs an employee.

Whether coming in three distinct terms, coming in a pair in which one does double duty, or coming singly, in which one covers all three, numismatic terms convey the sense of a single experience that is apprehended from two radically different perspectives. Take as an example the delivery of a conference paper. It is intersubjective in that it involves the listener on one side and the speaker on the other. In an obvious sense it can be singly conceived as a conference talk. This term "conference talk" is itself perspective-free and does not describe the experience of any single person. And yet it cannot be understood unless at least two subjects are participating in the experience from radically different perspectives. It is, after all, a very different experience to be standing in front of a group of people offering ideas and sitting as one of a group trying to grasp new ideas. Because these two radically different perspectives are unified in the talk, one can refer to the entire experience as numismatic, coin-like, in nature.

You have probably noticed that these terms describing numismatic experience have different levels of transitivity. For instance, a conference talk involves ditransitivity: two objects, one of which is indirect—"The speaker delivers the paper to the listener." Some are more obviously monotransitive, as in "X employs Y." In none of these, however, is there a patient in the strictest sense of the term—as a passive recipient of action. Some experiences involving two people do have an agent acting on a patient,

such as a nurse dressing or bathing a comatose person in a hospital—here a patient in two senses. But such cases would not be intersubjective.

Intersubjective experience expands the sense of transitivity to a point that traditional conceptions of "transitive" do not capture. The indirect object in the case of ditransitivity is not an object at all but an agent with an integral part in the experience. To say that I buy someone a book, however, is not in the least misleading, because it is understood that the object being bought is the book and not the person. The case of monotransitivity is more ambiguous.

The structures of the sentences "X teaches Y" and "X touches Y" are identical and analyzed grammatically as S-V-O, with the "object" in the case of "teaches" sometimes called a "patient" in reference to he or she being animate. But isn't a student, in the most meaningful sense of the term, more than just animate? Isn't a student, after all, an active agent of experience? To describe the agent-verb-agent construction of intersubjective experience, I have coined the term "intertransitivity." In an intertransitive construction, action is predicated on both sides of the verb, not in the sense of bidirectionality, but in the sense that in order for the delivering agent's goal to be realized, the receiving agent must play a cooperative role.

Try to develop a list of intertransitive verbs—verbs in which the recipient of the action *must* play a cooperative role for the verb to be meaningfully carried out under its normal sense: to lead, to question, to marry, to promote, to scold, to help, to kiss, to love. For each of these verbs, if the recipient of action is noncompliant, the action itself becomes meaningless in the normal sense of the verb. This is unlike the case with other transitive verbs, such as to touch, to emulate, to see, to sentence, and to divorce, all of which can be effected with full force on a noncompliant recipient. The notion of intertransitivity becomes especially interesting in cases that at first appear to be merely transitive, such as to marry, to scold, to love, and to oppress. In legalistic terms, marriage can be conducted on a monotransitive basis only; but to be fully meaningful, it has to be intertransitive. Gandhi discovered that the same goes for oppression.[6] A people cannot be oppressed if they refuse to be a party to oppression; if they retain their agency, they can be imprisoned but not oppressed. Try scolding a child who refuses to accept blame, or try helping someone who does not wish to be helped. Immediately, you realize that intertransitivity requires mutual agency, and recognizing this can have practical advantages.[7]

Education is an interesting case. Here is a numismatic experience with a typical transitive construction of X educates Y, in which one gets the distinct impression of a subject acting on a patient. It helps to refer to the Latin root to bring out the intertransitivity: X is leading Y, and for it to be meaningful, Y has to take an active part by following. Socrates could accept this, but Confucius, according to Jullien, would not be satisfied at stopping here. For Confucius, the active role of the intertransitive follower

must indeed be active, to the point that the so-called follower must take the initiative.

The Responsiveness of the Agent as Object

A transitive verb carries the action from the subject to the object, or patient. An intertransitive verb identifies an intersubjective, or numismatic, experience with an action that involves two agents in an isomorphic but experientially distinct relationship of mutuality. The relationship differential accounts for the transitive nature of the action, as if it were being carried over from one to the other. The agency of the object (of the receiving agent), however, complicates this description. In Confucian education, the receiving agent is not merely compliant: he or she is the instigator. Learning for Confucius is pragmatically prior to teaching; following is pragmatically prior to leading. How can we make better sense of this?

In Jullien's examination of Chinese poetics in *Detour and Access,* he identifies allusive incitement (*xing*) as the most important, and characteristically Chinese, trope in the tradition. Unlike symbolic representation, which presents a specific idea by way of reference to a specific object, allusive incitement uses reference to generalized features of the world to evoke nonspecific emotions in the reader. According to Jullien, the achievement of this effect relies as much on the reader as on the poet. The reader must (1) achieve a state of quietude, (2) be receptive (he calls it "inner availability") to the incitement, and (3) reflect on it (p. 156). As a result, the reader's interiority opens up to the landscape and to a web of emotional associations. Finally, "the mind is not led to see but moves as it pleases" (p. 190). This is the height of Chinese poetics, as well as the height of Confucian education.

An easy way to understand this kind of poetics, perhaps, is by thinking of the difference between realistic and abstract painting. Whereas realist painting is taking you in a specific direction, abstract painting sets you off through associations that you yourself bring to the painting. In this sense, traditional Chinese ink-wash painting, which has been criticized as cartoon-like by those expecting realism, is more akin to abstract painting than to realist painting. As in Chinese poetry, the allusions run deep, and so someone steeped in the tradition and open to the literary and artistic allusions that are presented is able to achieve a level of receptiveness that allows for the emotional incitement to take affect. This is unlike Western expressionism and other modernist and postmodernist expressions of aesthetic emotion in which the artist emotes with the purpose of expressing particular emotions. The Chinese painter and poet allude and incite, and the viewer or reader responds spontaneously. The painter and poet's job is to raise a scaffolding of richly but subtly evocative form and syntax within which the viewers or readers move according to their own predispositions.

The Chinese term *xiuxing* is often rendered into English as "self-cultivation." Whereas the Chinese means literally to build, improve, or repair one's behavior, the horticultural metaphor in the English (but absent from the Chinese) is serendipitously appropriate and demonstrates to us that our own tradition is not devoid of the important idea that education can be viewed as cooperative. Like "to educate," the term "to cultivate" also goes back to Latin and meant originally what it still means today—to foster the growth of something. How does this term fit with the notions of numismatic experience and intertransitivity? On the surface, it seems unrelated. If I am fostering the growth of the philodendron on my desk in Michigan, I don't normally take the philodendron to be an agent engaged in an intersubjective experience with me. But why don't I? Is it because the philodendron is not a person and therefore incapable of agency? Where does the ontological boundary of agency lie? What about a dog—is it capable of agency? If so, what does a dog bring to the experience that a philodendron does not? A dog, if you allow, brings a mind, and a mind brings intention, and intention brings directionality through desire, impulse, choice—whatever mental characteristics you would like to attribute to the dog.

I would like to suggest, contrary to much of the last 130 years of Western philosophy, that the most fundamental aspect of agency is not intentionality but sensitivity.[8] A shift in emphasis from intentionality to sensitivity provides a nice limit case from which to conceive education. In the cultivation of my philodendron, the philodendron is not a static, inanimate object. Rather, it has its own vectors of growth and a concomitant sensitivity to its surroundings. In its proper place in nature, it would not need to enter into a relationship with me at all and would be able to realize its full potential through natural interactions with its environment, most of which are beyond our normal ken. In the impoverished environment of my office, however, I must enter into an intersubjective relationship with it by fostering its growth. What is necessary for this fostering to occur successfully is that the philodendron itself must bring to the experience that vector for growth and that sensitivity to allow my fostering it to have its intended effect. In fact, my fostering is but a tiny part of its growth, and most of its poietic interactions are produced by the plant itself. I humor myself by thinking that most of the work is done by me and that the plant is a passive recipient of my largesse. And although I curse those plants that aren't appropriately sensitive to my overtures, of course the mistake is mine.

Responsive Education

The conclusion that I am heading toward is not that students need to be coddled like hothouse orchids but that, in any meaningful sense of the word "education," they bring to the experience their own vectors of growth and sensitivity. The educational experience is numismatic. Although a teacher and student are in the same room together and discussing the same mate-

rial, their perspectives on the experience are radically different. First, there is a practical power differential—the teacher can affect the student, positively or negatively, in ways that the student cannot reciprocate. Second, there is an authority differential—the teacher is in a position to pronounce right or wrong, and often, unfortunately, this is parasitic on the power differential. Third, there is a knowledge differential—the student's knowledge base is scant, while the teacher's, one would hope, is broad and deep. Fourth, there is an incentive differential—the teacher is there to earn a living, and the student is there to get a grade.

The verb "to educate" is intertransitive. Rather than involving a teacher who is transferring information to a passive student, the student must be an active agent in the interaction. In an ideal setting, according to Jullien's Confucius, not only must the receiving agent be active, but he or she must initiate the experience for it to be meaningful.

Now for the kicker: in a modern educational environment the numismatism and intertransitivity of the educational experience that are so intimately related actually conspire against each other. The numismatic differentials of the contemporary classroom strip the student of that motive agency, of the sensitivity and the vector for growth that education aspires to meet and foster. The student becomes more interested in the grade than in learning. The student defers to the teacher's vast knowledge rather than exploring on his own. The student sits quietly so as not to offend the teacher. The teacher works as little as possible so as to get a paycheck while still holding on to his or her job. An originally intertransitive experience is reduced by intangible, and often unnoticed, numismatic differentials to mere monotransitivity.

And so the challenge of teachers today is to bridge the numismatic differentials in order to renew the latent receptivity of the student and foster the growth that is there waiting to blossom. This recognition of the importance of agency in the student–teacher relationship lays a large part of the educational responsibility on the student, to be sure. In addition, it challenges the educator and administrators of the educational systems to do their utmost to foster this agency and allow it to develop along its natural patterns of growth.

Conclusion

"Agency" is a term in need of redefinition. It is not practical to say that because of its Aristotelian or Cartesian ontological connotations it can be dispensed with altogether. One cannot deny the phenomenological individual or the individual's actions. Even in a Deweyan transactional world, we have to be able to speak of the actions performed by A, in which case A is ascribed at least minimal agency—and therefore responsibility. The path to redefining agency in such a way that it conforms to the current physics/metaphysics is to imbue it first with the notion of sensitivity. Sen-

sitivity brings both agent and world together through an internal priming (occurring phylogenetically—as with an infant—and historically) that readies the agent to be able to receive further information from the environment and to use that input to respond appropriately. Sensitivity plus a sufficiently complex responsiveness (as in Juarrero), dispenses with the need for supernatural freedom and provides a dynamic path to action and responsibility that await further delineation.

Notes

1. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Motion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harvest Books, 2000). See also idem, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Quill, 1995).

2. Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Alicia Juarrero, *Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behavior as a Complex System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

3. Ananta Giri, *Conversations and Transformations: Toward a New Ethics of Self and Society* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002).

4. François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 2000).

5. Paul. J. Hopper and Sandra Thompson, "Transitivity in Grammar and Discourse," *Language* 56.2 (1980): 251–299.

6. Epictetus and other students of oppression have said much the same over the centuries, e.g., *The Encheiridion* 1.

7. Some borderline cases are: to blame, to criticize, and to praise—all of which, while requiring the receiving agent's compliance in direct address, can still involve meaningful statements to a third party without the receiving agent's cooperation.

8. Sensitivity and responsiveness are mutually reinforcing—the need for responsiveness drives the cultivation of sensitivity, and heightened sensitivity allows for a high level of responsiveness.