

EDUCATION AS GREEK *PAIDEIA*, CHINESE *XUÉ* (學), AND DEWEYAN GROWTH

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Introduction

The author Gore Vidal, while addressing an organization of primary school teachers, once remarked, “I have never met a boring 6-year-old, and I’ve never met an interesting 16-year-old. *What do you do to them?*”ⁱ Despite the humorous nature of this statement, I believe it is telling of a significant shortcoming in the American educational system. By the time our children have reached adolescence they have lost the underlying wonder and curiosity so essential to intellectual life. Our schools tend to err in one of two ways. Rather than stimulate our children’s imagination and foster their creative intelligence, our schools either stultify these native intellectual capacities in favor of rote memorization of brute facts or else drown them in relativism and namby-pamby political correctness. Though they often agree on little else, many of the most prominent names in educational theory point to the loss of imagination as the most glaring deficiency of Western educational systems. Liberals and conservatives alike tend toward this diagnosis, from which it is argued, as Allan Bloom put it in his *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987),

The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities, that makes it seem inconceivable that other ways are viable, that removes the sense that there is an outside.ⁱⁱ

This notion, that “other ways are viable” has been at the heart of many of the most exciting periods in intellectual history. It was the cornerstone of Greek dialectics, that play of fluctuations in meaning invented by the Sophists and rescued by Socrates.ⁱⁱⁱ It was the principle that returned the warring states of ancient China from the brink of total annihilation during the days of Confucius. It was the motivating force behind the

European enlightenment. And, it was the idea upon which the golden age of American thought – that period now commonly referred to as the American Renaissance – was founded.^{iv} Despite these lofty associations, however, this capacity to see “an outside,” as Bloom put it, seems to have been lost to subsequent generations as education has, time and again, returned to those tyrannical practices. I believe that if education in the 21st-century is to recover itself, we must discover a means of sustaining this most important of all freedoms, a freedom of the intellect in the face of mere factual knowledge, a freedom that may properly be called “wisdom.”^v

This was just what the American Renaissance philosophers tried to do. Thinkers like William James, George Santayana, Alfred North Whitehead and John Dewey all placed a premium on using creative intelligence to allow ideas to work for us. That they were unsuccessful in cementing this notion is likely more our failing than it is theirs. Lack of vision among our leaders and misinterpretation of these concepts among our literati have, by and large, kept American education an affair of mediocrity. As Ralph Waldo Emerson – the pioneer of the American Renaissance – once wrote “...colleges hate geniuses, just as convents hate saints.”^{vi} This simple aphorism sums up an antipathy toward the stagnant institutions of a traditional education, which characterized the work of the thinkers just mentioned. Indeed, Emerson’s 1837 address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard (now known under the title “The American Scholar”) is commonly held to be the intellectual equivalent of the United States’ declaration of independence – an independence from what had been a mostly European academic culture.

That address, coupled with his essay “Self-Reliance,” inspired American intellectuals to strike out on their own and forge new theories about education. Therein, Emerson

highlighted three pursuits of the truly “self-reliant” scholar’s education. These were, 1) to investigate and understand nature, which includes the scholar’s own mind and person, 2) to study “the mind of the Past” toward gaining new perspectives and getting “at the truth,” and, 3) to take action and interact with the world in order to avoid becoming a scholastic “recluse,” “disenfranchised” in intellectual “celibacy.” It was the last of these tasks, Emerson believed, that would help distinguish the American scholar from his academic forbears – who had ascended into the ivory towers built by the Enlightenment. It is also the underlying principle of that most American of philosophies – the school of thought known as pragmatism – and held sway over much of the philosophical landscape for nearly the next 100 years. Some of the brightest minds of recent history were weaned on it and could trace their intellectual genealogy back to Emerson’s call to arms.

Yet, this idea, that a successful education should consist in the study of nature, a familiarity with great literature and, most importantly, be intertwined with practical life was not really the novel innovation that it may have seemed. Its roots can be found in the Ancient world. In fact, precursors to this notion were quite prevalent in both the Western and Eastern traditions. In what follows, I will review what I believe to be two of the most obvious forerunners to this view of education which engendered the American Renaissance – viz. Greek *paideia* and Chinese *xué*. By locating Emerson’s three principles within these concepts, I believe it is possible to identify the power each has to produce intellectual awakenings as well as why it is that these awakenings have a tendency to stagnate – as I believe they have in contemporary American life. My attention will finally turn to John Dewey, who I believe best captured the spirit of the Emersonian ideal with “the keynote of his educational philosophy being that education is

not mere preparation for life but that it is life itself.”^{vii} I will explore how Dewey’s ideas reflected these earlier philosophies of education and the ways in which thinking about education as growth, *a là* Dewey, can supplement them for the future.

Education as Greek *Paideia*

Understanding what the concept of *paideia* meant in terms of Greek education is quite a daunting task. Nearly every Greek thinker has had something unique to say about the topic. Rather than attempt to reconstruct what any one particular philosopher had to say about *paideia*, something others here have done to a far more rigorous degree than I could aspire, I will limit myself to a treatment of what I take to be the most generic features of the concept.^{viii} My aim is not to endorse any single vision of *paideia*, but rather to show how its basic principles anticipated and inspired 19th-century American thinkers.

To begin with a most general description, *paideia* can be understood as a blanket term for the standards of a society, as well as the *process* by which those ideals are transferred. In this regard, the term refers to a lifelong *edification* that entails both what we call education *and* culture, a sort of “building up” of values. The gnomic expression, “As I grow old I continue being educated,” sums up this notion nicely.

One need not look very far to see that *paideia* was intimately tied to the study of nature for the early Greek philosophers. Even before Socrates was accused of studying things in the heavens and below the earth, sages like Thales and Pythagoras had taken great interest in understanding the underlying principles of nature. The followers of the latter famously codified this interest, Socrates (in spite of his protests) and Plato both relied upon naturalistic explanations in their work, and Aristotle, perhaps more than any

other, made nature the centerpiece of his thought. But, as Werner Jaeger has noted, the ancient Greeks, in general, always had “an innate sense of the natural,” wherein,

The concept of ‘nature,’ [...] was without doubt produced by their peculiar mentality. Long before they conceived it, they had looked at the world with the steady gaze that did not see any part of it as separate and cut off from the rest, but always as an element in a living whole, from which it derived its position and meaning.^{ix}

According to Jaeger, this “organic point of view” filtered into every aspect of Greek life, particularly education. This sentiment was echoed by Emerson with regard to the “schoolboy under the bending dome of day,” to whom it “is suggested that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy stirring in every vein.”^x

It is perhaps even more obvious that *paideia* depended heavily upon an expansive familiarity with the art and literature of the Greek tradition. The only contact with the concept that most people have today is in this capacity, which is still the basis of liberal arts education (“*humanitas*” being the Roman heir of Greek *paideia*) and is still found in the concept of an encyclopedia (*enkyklios paideia*, or “general education”). But, what has been lost in the interim is the importance of the *use* to which these works are to be put. This is what Aristotle insisted upon in Book II of his *Prior Analytics*. There he offered a description of a type of reasoning called *paradeigma*, which comes from the Greek *paradeiknunai* meaning literally to educate “alongside” (*para*) the “appropriate example” (*deiknunai*) in order to shed light on the present.^{xi} The appropriate use of the past to diagnose and treat the present was the cornerstone of successful political, poetic, and philosophical speeches in ancient Greece. This is evidenced in many of Plato’s dialogues, where Socrates often supplemented his elenchus with a quote from the Greek literary tradition. An education that stressed the empty study of classic literature without bearing

on how these works could be used to improve social and political life was something to which the Greeks never would have assented.

Emerson was in agreement with this emphasis on studying literature with a mind toward finding practical significance in the ideas of the past, with using the classics as diagnostic tools and as signposts for the future. As he put it,

Books are among the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? *They are for nothing but to inspire.* I had better to never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing of value is the *active* soul.^{xii}

But, the inspiration of the active soul should not be conflated with a mere incitement of the passions; nor should it be associated with a vulgar utilitarian egoism – which has often been the charge unfairly leveled against the school of pragmatism. Those who would confuse these two most often assume an ontological distinction between the forms of abstract ideas and the content of existential objects/events, a distinction which seems more the legacy of neo-Platonism and Scholasticism than it does the ancient Greeks.

Of the three principles espoused by Emerson, it is perhaps the third – *i.e.* that thought and action “fit” together and “reproduce one another” – which is oldest and most common among various Greek conceptions of *paideia*. This becomes evident when considering that, from the earliest accounts, the core of Greek moral life was *aretē*, or “excellence,” rather than piety. In order to fully appreciate the emphasis on skill implied by this concept, we English speakers may be better off using the term ‘*virtuosity*’ rather than the usual translation ‘*virtue*’ (a term injected with perhaps too much Christian chastity) when referring to the Greek moral ideal. Thus, to be an excellent person was to be a *virtuoso*, illustrated by the Homeric heroes Achilles and Odysseus. The *aretē* of each – the unparalleled physical prowess of Achilles and intellectual cunning of Odysseus – is

what raised each above other mortals. This type of potency was later *clearly* tied to the intellect in Socrates' famous dictum "to know the good is to do the good." And, in Aristotle's *Ethics*, we are told that reason is grounded in human experience and *theoria* and *praxis* are ultimately united in that most philosophical of tasks – "thinking about thinking."

All in all, it seems that Emerson's address was heavily inspired by the Greek notion of *paideia*. The question that remains is why these ideas did not have a more lasting effect on the American academy as it was that the rebirth Emerson's appeal fostered was even more short-lived than its modern and ancient predecessors. Before turning my attention to this issue, however, I should like to visit the ideas of a culture whose solidarity of intellectual tradition surpassed any Western society, *viz.* China.

Education as Chinese *Xué* [學]

It would be an understatement to say that education was important to the ancient Chinese. Even in its most ancient philosophically oriented text, the *Yi-jing*, which perhaps dates as far back as the 11th century B.C.E, there is a strong theme of devotion to learning. But, it was the venerated thinker Confucius who first raised the topic to the level of philosophic principle. The term he employed was *xué*, which is most often translated as learning. Yet, like its Greek counterpart, *paideia*, this concept requires a great deal of unpacking. To begin with, the Chinese character used to represent this idea depicts two hands reaching down through a horizontal line toward the symbol for child. Though the reasoning behind this etymology has been lost in the arcana of pre-history, one could speculate that the ambiguity was intentional, since the concept itself included both the idea of handing down knowledge to the young *and* reaching out to help them

achieve maturity. This obviates the similarities between *paideia* and *xué*; each denoted fostering development in the young, each connoted a transmission of culture.

Again, we can find much resonance between these conceptions of education and Emerson's three criteria. First, in the Eastern tradition, as in the Greek, self-realization involved a *cultivation* of both public and private virtues toward the mutual flourishing of an individual, her community, and the natural world. In the West, as we have seen, this continuity of human conduct and nature can be found in the thought of the pre-Socratics and is the underpinning for Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*. In the East, it can be found in the books of the "Four Confucian Classics" (*sì shū* 四書), which illustrate the intermingling of cosmology with morality in Chinese thinking.^{xiii} On the view common to each tradition, values are intrinsic to experience, *i.e.* they arise out of the interaction between humans and their surroundings, and are not derived from some divine or ethereal source. When this type of philosophical outlook emphasizes the continuity between individuals and their community it is known as 'humanism,' when it focuses on the connection between organisms and their environments it is typically called 'naturalism.'^{xiv} If one were to sum up the Greek, Chinese, and Emersonian world-views in one word, this would have to be it.

To illustrate how the Chinese would have agreed with Emerson on the importance of nature to formal study, one need look no further than the work known as *The Great Learning* (or *Da Xué*), which is one of those four Confucian Classics just mentioned. There, we are provided a logarithmic account of the steps one must take in order to attain harmony with the world. And, at its core is the directive to "investigate things."

There is also a strong correlation between the Chinese and Greeks with regard to the importance of cultural literacy. In book 17 of the *Analects* we find Confucius chiding his students for failing to find the practical importance of reading the classics. In his words,

Why is it, students, that none of you master the Book of Odes? [*Shijing*] The Odes can be a source of stimulation, can provide one with views, can contribute to sociability, and can be used to couch dissatisfactions. Close at home it can be used in the service of one's father, and at a distance at the service of one's ruler. And one can glean a rich vocabulary of flora and fauna from it.^{xv}

One can almost picture Socrates, standing in the agora, saying the same thing to his interlocutor about Homer and Hesiod.

But, the most interesting similarity between Chinese *xué* and the Emersonian program is one that is largely overlooked among sinologists. This involves a cluster of terms that David Hall and Roger Ames have shown round out the concept of *xué* and demonstrate the Confucian emphasis of thinking *through* tradition rather than thinking *about* it.^{xvi} On their account, *xué* is best understood as the type of learning that regards the “unmediated process of becoming aware.” In this way, we might say that *xué* involves experience, not that of raw sensory perception, but experience in the sense of having *an* experience or of being an *experienced* individual. The companion to this term in the Confucian system would have to be *sì* [思], which may be translated as “reflection.” On Hall and Ames' reading, *xué* and *sì* are equally essential components of Confucian education, wherein the reflective side involves critical interpretation and adaptation. As Confucius put it in the *Analects*, “Learning without reflecting leads to perplexity, reflecting without learning leads to perilous circumstances.”^{xvii} When these elements are realized in equal measure, Hall and Ames state, the student comes to understand or “realize.” This realization, which Confucius called *zhī* [知], carries with it both the intellectual sense of understanding and

the normative sense of understanding *others*. Again, the similarity between this idea and the Socratic equation of knowledge with virtue is striking. Hall and Ames continue their analysis by showing how these three elements relate to the core Confucian virtue of sincerity through a view of affirmation (*xìn*) as “being true to one’s word” [信]. However, one concept which Hall and Ames fail to treat in their analysis is that of *zhì* [智], or “wisdom,” which in the Confucian system should be understood as the kind of intelligence possessed by the sage, he who has reached the culmination of the process of education. This character is interesting insofar as it is etymologically related to the concept of realization/understanding just mentioned, with one addition: the symbol for speaking has been added and could perhaps suggest the duty of the sage to teach others.

Education as Deweyan Growth

As rich as these two ancient concepts are, it is not surprising that wherever they were encountered, intellectual life blossomed. What may be surprising in light of the preceding analysis, is that despite our repeated attempts, we once again find ourselves in need of intellectual reawakening. I have, up until now, refrained from treating the notion of Deweyan growth that was promised in the title of my essay. The reason for this is that I believe the way Dewey used the term growth, which held a specialized meaning in his thought, includes many of the facets central to the concepts already discussed. As Dewey put it in a letter to Clara Mitchell in 1895,

... the primary end of ‘education’ might be said to be (negatively) to hinder the growing-up of those obstacles, those mental barriers of imagery & feeling, which now shut off more or less almost every adult from nature and his fellows; or, positively, *to facilitate the greatest freedom (continuity, unity) of growth of nature through individual action into social action.*^{xviii}

I believe that this statement reveals an element in Dewey's view that could help advance earlier notions of education toward a more sustainable renaissance.

James Scott Johnston has catalogued at least three different ways in which Dewey discussed growth.^{xix} I would like to suggest that these three ways of growing correspond, at least roughly, with Emerson's three criteria. The first, called "organismic growth," has to do with the mutual interaction between an organism and its environment. This is the sense of growth humans share with all species, as in filling one's ecological/environmental role (or filling one's function well) that is called biological maturity. But it is the second and third ways of growing that offer hope for the future. The growth that comes from the fund of experience and habits that have been built up through inquiry, that which Johnston identifies as "the growth of judgments," offers a way of accommodating classical education without the loss of practical efficacy of which Emerson warned against. After all, if one makes use of the outcomes of one's own past inquiries in order to resolve new indeterminate situations, then it follows that using the outcome of the inquiries of one's forbears can only supplement this fund of experience. Newton's dictum about standing on the shoulders of giants comes to mind here, as does Dewey's own musings about being a link in the ongoing chain of human existence. Most importantly, though, is the sense of growth which Johnston calls "experiential."

To grow experientially is the byproduct of "judgmental growth" insofar as the use of this fund of experience allows for deeper and more robust future experiences. To illustrate, one could imagine a child, a university student, and a distinguished professor of art history standing in the Sistine Chapel, and while each has the same sensory

perception, it seems evident that the latter's experience would be a richer one, given the wealth of intellectual *and* experiential habits she has accumulated. As Johnston has put it,

To construct meaningful facts about the world is to expand the fund of meaning one has. To expand the fund of meaning one has is to enrich present and future experiences. Inquiry is the primary means by which growth is occasioned, and inquiry is a habit that is (and must be) developed, brought to bear on environmental and social situations. To develop this habit is precisely what is meant by education.^{xx}

Like Greek *paideia* and Chinese *xué*, growth as Dewey saw it was naturalistic insofar as it eradicated the supposed ontological distinction between abstract reason on the one hand and immediate experience on the other that has colored most of philosophy since the enlightenment. However, Deweyan growth accomplishes this feat by incorporating the terms of contemporary scientific inquiry – which ancient Greek and Chinese conceptions of education are ill-equipped to do (even if solely by virtue of their age). According to Dewey, inquiry, and *ipso facto* the growth that arises out of it, always already takes place in the *having* of an experience. So, where the ancient conceptions of education are ontologically naturalistic, in that they shared an “organic point of view,” Dewey's is both ontologically and methodologically naturalized.

So, it would seem that the crux of Dewey's philosophy – nicely summed up in the last line of that letter to Clara Mitchell – is that when education is at its best, it does not drive a wedge between the human and the non-human, but rather fosters our native talent for coping with the precariousness of nature through imagination. This may be an idea to which Bloom, Emerson, Confucius, and Aristotle could all assent. Understanding education in this way leads one to conclude that there is no terminus to the process of educational growth, but rather it is a continual pursuit whose only *telos* is more growth. In this way, a sustainable renaissance, in the sense of a continual process of birth and

rebirth, is perhaps attainable only once the Deweyan view of growth (as a continuum of means and ends) is incorporated into education.

NOTES:

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- ⁱ Recounted by Vidal in a May 15th, 2007 interview with Michael Silverblatt for the Lannan Foundation. <http://www.lannan.org/lf/rc/event/gore-vidal/> [my emphasis]
- ⁱⁱ Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987) pg. 249
- ⁱⁱⁱ cf. Santayana, George. *Animal Faith and Spiritual Life*. ed. by John Lachs (NY: Meredith, 1967) pg. 119
- ^{iv} Though this phrase refers to a period in U.S. intellectual history, I follow the standard (and arguably ethnocentric) in Americana studies with its usage. cf. F. O. Matthiessen. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. (NY: Oxford, 1941)
- ^v Cf. Whitehead, A.N. *The Aims of Education*. (NY: Macmillan, 1929) chpt. 3
- ^{vi} In a 1864 lecture entitled "Public and Private Education." Found in *Uncollected Lectures by Ralph Waldo Emerson: Reports of Lectures on American Life and Natural Religion, Reprinted from the Commonwealth*. ed. Gohdes, C.L.F. (NY: Rudge, 1932)
- ^{vii} This was the official declaration of the Phi Beta Kappa society upon Dewey's death. Found in a letter from Betsy K. Kidder on behalf of P.B.K. to Dewey's widow. *The Correspondence of John Dewey 1871-1952*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois, 2005) 1952.09.11 (16308)
- ^{viii} For a more detailed analysis of individual views of *paideia* see Jaeger, Werner. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (3 vols.). trans. Gilbert Highet. (NY: Oxford, 1945)
- ^{ix} Jaeger, (Vol. I) pg. xx
- ^x cf. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, Vol. I, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1904), pp. 41-63
- ^{xi} The underlying root, deik-/deig- also evolved into English "teach" and "token" and turns up in Latin as digit "finger" (originally meaning "pointer") and dic- "speak, say" of English "dictate" and "dictionary."
- ^{xii} Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, Vol. I, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1904), pp. 41-63
- ^{xiii} cf. Ames, Roger T. & Hall, David. *Thinking From the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.)
- ^{xiv} cf. Anton, John. *American Naturalism and Greek Philosophy*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005.)
- ^{xv} As translated in Hall & Ames. *Thinking Through Confucius*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987.)
- ^{xvi} Ibid.
- ^{xvii} Book 2, verse 15
- ^{xviii} Dewey, John.
"John Dewey to Clara I. Mitchell." *The Correspondence of John Dewey, Volume 1: 1871-1918*. (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2005) 1895.11.29 (00272) [my emphasis]
- ^{xix} cf. Johnston, James Scott. *Inquiry and Education: John Dewey and the Quest for Democracy*. (Albany: SUNY, 2006.)
- ^{xx} Ibid. pg. 111