

Toward a Pedagogy of the Vague

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Few distinct philosophical movements are as explicit in their educational concerns as the uniquely American movement of pragmatism. Education lies at the center of most pragmatist discourse. John Dewey stands as the most prominent articulator of the educational concerns of American philosophy. He was not the only pragmatist, however. Nor was he the only pragmatist to be concerned with education.

In particular, the work of William James bears pedagogical fruit. James's work, written largely at the turn of the century, reaches beyond his own time. John McDermott points out that "we can say that the philosophy of William James acts as a vestibule to much of twentieth-century life."¹ James's work foreshadows developments in psychology and social science as well as Dewey's own work in pragmatism and education. James himself was not as explicitly concerned with the formal means of education as was Dewey. His only works expressly devoted to the subject were *Talks to Teachers* and *Talks to Students*. Mainly, these are simply recapitulations and different takes on his own work in psychology. Despite this lack of explicit focus, James presents us with ideas and attitudes that are pedagogically pregnant.

One such idea is the notion of the vague. James sees ideas about the vague, the inchoate, as central to his own task. "It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention."² The centrality and richness of the Jamesean notion of the vague has been pointed out by other readers of his work. In his book *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, William Gavin comments, citing the passage above, that "As early as James's first book-length work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), it is evident that the theme of vagueness, so important in his personal confrontation with death, has become a major element of his view of the fragile human self."³ In this essay, I agree with Gavin that vagueness is central to James's overall philosophical work. I will attempt, with acknowledged reservation, to articulate some of what James's means when he refers to the vague. I will do so with special attention to the pedagogical content of the notion, in a Jamesean attempt to "thicken" the discussion. Finally, I will make a limited attempt to point out ways in which the "reinstatement of the vague" into discussions of pedagogy has real, positive effects on the way in which we view teaching, learning, and classroom interaction.

THE VAGUE AND EXPERIENCE

The center of James's work is experience. This also includes aspects of experience that are, at best, peripheral to our conscious lives. "Inarticulate," he mentions in the *Principles*, referring to aspects of experience that are "felt" but not seen or held in direct focus. He discusses certain religious experiences as "Ineffable" and "transient" in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁴ He discusses "risk" in "The

Will to Believe” and makes much of “possibility” throughout the seminal work, *Pragmatism*.⁵ Clearly, much of James’s philosophical and psychological concern lies with those aspects of experience which are uncertain, non-objective, and not immediately present.⁶

What, then, of the vague? We can see its importance to James, but from where does that importance arise? What about experience makes parts of it vague and inarticulate? Why do those parts matter to us? Why do they matter to discussions of pedagogy?

First, it must be noted that vagueness is not some metaphysical category or object for James. Nor, even is it an abstract concept, per se. The vague is not a thing at all; it is not The Vague—standing as some mysterious Entity Which Cannot Be Named. Vagueness is a feature of experience—all and any experience. In all our varied and multifaceted transactions with the world there are aspects that are unseen, unnoticed, unlooked for, and excluded entirely. As such, vagueness is an ontological condition. If all experiences are to some degree vague, then coming to terms with that vagueness is a necessary task in our lives. We cannot escape it, nor should we even try. Instead, we should own up to this vagueness; it is a part of our existence. Indeed, it is the part from which we can draw to enrich, liven, and thicken our experiences.

Before we advance too far, we must discuss why vagueness is a part of our experience. If things—experiences—are not had vaguely at least some of the time, then the other moral, existential, and pedagogical aspects of the vague do not follow. James situates vagueness in features of our psychology—in how we have our experiences. Experience is vague because we are selective sorts of creatures. We are embodied, limited, finite individuals who cannot apprehend all the world has to offer. Thus, we select features of experience as valuable based on our physiology, desires, ends, and previous experiences. James makes selection a central feature of our consciousness, and outlines it in the section in the *Principles* known as “The Stream of Thought.” Consciousness involves layers of selection, narrowing the effluent river of experience into a manageable stream suited to our practical interests.

“Accentuation and emphasis are part of every perception we have,” James tells us.⁷ Indeed, perception itself is an act of accentuation. Our sensory apparatus is itself limited, only able to see certain wavelengths of light, or hear a certain range of sound. The narrowing of the world begins with the organs we use to transact with the world. But the selection continues. “We notice only those sensations which are signs to us of *things* which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us.”⁸ Even after we narrow experience down via our limited perception, we select even further in accordance with our interest, either practical or aesthetic. We notice only those features of experience which seem to be of use to us at the time; these are ones that seem relevant to our ongoing problems, needs, wants, and ends. The engine of my automobile is certainly a marvel of engineering, a complex mechanism with intricate workings. This engine is part of my daily life, as I drive my car about everyday. It only becomes a part of my experience, however, when it becomes problematic for me. If it fails to start on a cold morning, or makes an unusual sound as I am driving,

then it certainly enters into my experience, as I am now acutely conscious of my engine and its problems. Similarly, the engine could be of aesthetic interest to someone—a mechanic perhaps. This is the individual who enjoys the intricacy of the machine, who appreciates its workings in ways I do not. The engine interests them, enters into their experience, in a way different from the way in which it enters mine. But it is still selected by consciousness to be part of that experience, either out of a definite problem, a practical need, or an aesthetic interest.⁹

“The mind chooses to suit itself,” James says.¹⁰ It selects elements, particular perceptions, as important based on the individual’s wants, needs, and interests. These are codified in the mind as “habits of attention.”¹¹ These habits extend broadly, perhaps to all human beings, in regards to what we take to be the basic aspects of the world. “Taking human experience in a general way, the choosings of different men are to a great extent the same.”¹² Here, James is merely saying that the world and our physiology demands the same things of most of us—nutrition, health, and safety. Simply put, our interests, wants, and needs are somewhat stable over the course of time. We all need to eat, to stay warm, and to generally transact with the world in ways free of harm. Even our aesthetic interests, while certainly malleable, do collect themselves into habits of perceiving. James uses the example of the entomologist who, because of past experiences of study based on an interest, is able to discern things about insects which escape us laypersons. The entomologist has built habits of attention which direct his perception so as to regard certain features of insects which those without those habits do not notice.

We are certainly selective creatures. James reminds us that a component of selection is the willful ignoring of other features or options which are present. “But we do far more than emphasize things, and unite some, and keep others apart. We actually *ignore* most of the things before us.”¹³ It is not as if my engine is not there when I drive along, but I certainly ignore it. It is unimportant, marginal, secondary. My mind is on other things. This is a necessary component of consciousness; not every aspect of the world is relevant to our needs and ends. James is not critical of this ignorance. He simply wants us to realize that it occurs. This realization is vital, because it involves our personal realization that we *actively* participate in the selection of the world. It is not just a matter of physiology or mental processes that are beyond our control. If we see selection as an act of choice, then a recognition and cultivation of the vague is also within our choosing.

Not only are we creatures that ignore, but we are creatures that are ignorant. It is a simple truism to say we cannot and do not know everything. Our epistemological limitedness contributes to the vague. While we select some things as part of our consciousness, there are others that are just off the table, not able to be selected because they are not even within the fringe of consciousness. By following our flights of consciousness we may be able to perch upon new objects of consciousness. There are times, however, when objects intrude upon our consciousness unawares. We are surprised, taken aback. All will not fit within our field of vision. As James says in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” “possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and...things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be

ambiguous.”¹⁴ If what we do not know is considered as part of the vague, then the importance of considering the vague cannot be overstated.

The fact that we are limited and selective creatures—that we “murder” those parts of the world which do not suit our interests, has existential import. It is a vital feature of our human existence, not just in our understanding of our own consciousness, but in how we live our lives. If we are selective creatures, then there are aspects of the world which we do not select. There are features unattended to, opportunities missed, and roads not taken. Simply put, the existential thrust of James’s views on selectivity and the vague is that *there are parts of our own experiences that we do not objectify*. There is more to experience than our ordinary sensory and immediate objective reckoning of it. That more is what James speaks of when he refers to the vague.

The unattended to becomes vital to our situation in several ways. First, the vague may interrupt our habitual ways of experiencing by intruding upon our consciousness. The unlooked for becomes vital as problems develop. As a matter of habit, I pay minimal attention to the sounds of my engine. It is there, within the experience, but not part of the experience in any significant way. But if there is a problem, it too may be there, in an unusual sound or a hesitant start. Frequently it is ignored. But the vague, non-objective parts of experience can intrude upon us, as is the case when that strange sound in my engine suddenly becomes a thrown belt. The intrusive character of the vague exhibits itself exactly when the vague ceases to be marginal and becomes central. Our habits of attention, while practically necessary, frequently blind us to areas of our own experiences that could serve as indicators or warnings of future problems. The vague demonstrates its existential import when it intrudes upon the ways in which we normally have experiences.

Second, the vague in experience can enrich those experiences. The vague areas of experience can serve to give flavor and color to those experiences. This is perhaps the most important existential consequence of James’s work on the vague. What has become familiar due to our particular selective choices and habits can easily become unfamiliar if we let it. I think I know, back and forth, how the drive to my father’s house looks. I have driven that dusty, coquina road countless times—past the initial stand of pines, past the fields of soybeans, around the slight bend where my cousin’s house sits, and on up the driveway. But, coming home late one night as a full red moon hangs atop the pines, then flows across the soybeans, the familiar becomes infused with new elements. The unlooked for can certainly be intrusive, but it can be so in beautiful ways. Thus, it makes the oft-had and shabbily treated experiences that constitute much of our lives live and breathe again. This is another intrusion of the vague, as the unheralded elements of experience make themselves known. Focus is vital and necessary, but we cannot let it blind us to what experience has to offer. McDermott makes this point better than most. “For the most part we live our lives focally, that is, within a familiar range of experiences rendered clear to us by our conceptual systems or simply accepted by habituation. Ideally, this focus opens outward, reaching toward a fringe of experiences, often vague and inarticulate but subtly continuous and profoundly meaningful.”¹⁵

James gives us the possibility that there is more to experience than what we apprehend and this more is vital to our existential condition. The vague within experience can point us away from problems or clue us in to these problems before they make themselves acute. More importantly, the vague serves as a repository of new experiences, allowing us to have experiences apart from those habitually selected as important. This holds true even if we have had similar experiences previously. As McDermott points out, it is possible to live with a sense of the vague. We can cultivate an appreciation for the aspects of experience that we are not immediately able to objectify. If we believe the vague is not only an important element in the thought of James, but also an important existential and ontological thread within human life, then we must turn to questions about the ways in which we treat our experiences as persons, members of communities, and players in institutions. Gavin does a superb job pointing out the importance of the vague in art and medicine.¹⁶ We can also apply James's appreciation of the vague to questions of education.

TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF THE VAGUE

The real question is, of course, what sort of cash-value (to use a phrase of James) does a discussion of the vague have for pedagogy. In general terms, the vague is rich in pedagogical content. If we acknowledge, as James and later Dewey do, that all learning comes from experience, then all aspects of experience can contribute to that learning. The vague and difficult to classify elements of experience are no exception. The subtle, nuanced, and hard to define sounds of my engine can inform me that the engine needs servicing. They can inform one who is more interested (that is, able to discern elements of experience that I cannot), even more. The pedagogical aspects of experience are enhanced when one realizes that there is always more to the experience than one can codify. With this realization can come an attitude involving both ignorance and openness. We see ourselves as ignorant because we know there are things in any given experience which we have missed. We then can have an open attitude—a pragmatic attitude, for James—in order to miss as little as possible.

If we see formal schooling as a unique sort of experience, then the same sorts of assertions apply. First, we begin by realizing that formal schooling is an experience designed for learning, but is not the only learning experience. One's life can be informed by experiences outside of the classroom, experiences rich in pedagogical content and recognition of the vague. Pedagogy is not the province of school alone; pedagogy is the province of all experience.

Formal schooling has the unique opportunity to be a certain type of experience, however. It is an experience exclusively and explicitly devoted to pedagogy. As such, it is a set of experiences that are used to frame other experiences. It can shape one's general attitude toward experiences and pedagogy for a lifetime. When the explicit learning experiences are treated in particular ways, the implicit attitudes that can come to regard experience as pedagogical are shaped. The way in which the vague aspects of experience are treated in the classroom shape how one treats them in life.

The classroom is seemingly a hostile place for the vague, especially in contemporary American education. Standardization, measurement, and systemization are moves away from the recognition of the importance of the vague. This is not to say that standards and quantitative analyses do not have their place in schooling. They are essential in the cultivation of habits, which James regards as central to education.¹⁷ There is a place for such things, but they cannot be regarded as the defining feature of pedagogy. The understandable desire for easily demonstrable results leads to an emphasis on the aspects of schooling that can easily be measured—answers on multiple choice tests, attendance, per-pupil-expenditures, or properly formatted lesson plans. This focus shifts attention away from the less quantifiable. What is valued is what can be measured; what remains is the vague and inarticulate.

The reinstatement of the vague involves the recognition that knowledge is always provisional, always incomplete. Not all knowledge is easily measurable. If there are areas of experience that are unattended to, and those areas can intrude upon our ordinary experiences, then new and different knowledge is always a possibility. There are always marginal voices, unlooked for details, and overlooked meanings. An attitude that appreciates the vague is sensitive to the transitive and constructive character of knowledge. Standardization marks knowledge as finished, canonized, or complete. This is antithetical to James's project, as it serves to deaden our sensitivity to the vague. Everything is easily processed, codified, and measured; what cannot be processed is ignored. Our system becomes a closed one. The vague is written off.

Closely associated with the standardization of knowledge, represented in formal schooling as curriculum, is the standardization of technique. Setting aside for the moment the thorny but important debate between those who see pedagogy as a matter of transmission of knowledge and those who view knowledge as constructed, we can still discuss the vague. Even if we grant that knowledge is and ought to be transmitted in formal school settings, there are ways of so doing which show sensitivity to the vague. The classroom is a complex set of experiences, each of which has its own vague aspects. More is taught in a classroom than curriculum, and James's points about the vague reinforce this important realization. James reminds us that each classroom, each student, each interaction has its own peculiarities, its own set of problems and solutions. Increased emphasis on performance on standardized tests, on "time-on-task," and on teacher productivity limits the teacher's ability to delve into the vague as the moment arises. Flexibility is lost. Teachable moments cannot be pursued. Difficult to measure, but vital, aspects of education such as emotional growth are neglected. Recognition of vagueness in the classroom would remind us that not everything important is easily measurable, while the attempt to standardize technique neglects the vagueness of the classroom experience.

Those involved with formal systems of education recognize this, although they do not often put it the same way as James. Some, however, put it in a very Jamesean way. Susan Ohanian, in a short article entitled "The Tantalizing Vagueness of Teaching" recognizes some very Jamesean points. She recognizes that the best

teachers are the ones who acknowledge the vagueness of experience, particularly within the classroom experience. She writes “Remember that the most wonderful joys of teaching happen in the blink of an eye and are often unplanned and unexpected. You can miss their importance and lose their sustenance if your eyes are glassily fixed on the objective you promised your principal you’d deliver that day.”¹⁸ In this simple yet beautiful statement, she recognizes the essential place of the vague in teaching. From the vague comes those joys; that is what makes them “unplanned” and “unexpected.” Equally important is the fact that she mentions “sustenance.” Those unexpected joys are what make teaching meaningful. They are the meat and bread of the education experience. Recognition of the vague serves to thicken experience. Experiences are richer when the vague is considered, as Gavin points out. “For James, that characterization or attitude toward life will be most significant when it is most inclusive, which incorporates most completely the richness encountered in experience.”¹⁹ Ohanian says of teaching what James and Gavin say about experience in general.

Ohanian also recognizes the danger to an appreciation of the vague brought by an increasing desire to measure all aspects of the profession. “Some administrators label this move to standardize teaching as a clarion call for excellence. A lot of us veteran teachers see it as in ultimately catastrophic worship of systems at the expense of people.”²⁰ She recognizes that systems inherently standardize; they deal with experience with labels and structures. While focus, labeling, measurement, and standardization all have their place, we must be careful not to neglect the vague—the unstandardizable, that which lies beyond labels. Neglect of the vague not only limits the broad and expressive nature of teaching, but it also models a way for having experiences; this is a way that neglects the novel, thinning experience down to its bare substantial minimum. Ohanian recognizes this. The conclusion of her essay, echoing Robert Frost, can be seen as a call to teachers to reinstate the vague within the classroom. “We must talk, not of time on task but of the tantalizing vagueness and the lumps in the throat, the poetry and true purpose of our calling.”²¹ James, no doubt, would agree.

This essay has been a brief attempt to show what James means when he discusses the vague, and how such a discussion is relevant to discussions of pedagogy and classroom teaching. I have attempted to show that James’s views on vagueness are derived from his views on the selectivity of consciousness. Because we are selective creatures, we do not attend to every aspect of our experience. There are elements that are left out. Thus, experience is richer, vaguer, than our everyday consciousness of it. This vagueness has existential import. Overlooked elements of experience can intrude upon us, sometimes in destructive ways. Often, however, the vague aspects of experience can be a source of beauty, fulfillment, and growth. Taken into discussions of pedagogy and classroom teaching, an appreciation for the vague serves as a counter an increasing emphasis on those things which are easily measured and quantified. This standardization makes a cultivation of the vague more difficult. This, in turn, leads to a spiritual impoverishment of both students and teachers. A discussion of the vague forces us to look at what such standardization costs us, and offers us hope for a thick, rich, substantial pedagogy.

1. John J. McDermott, "Life is in the Transitions: Radical Empiricism and Contemporary Concerns," in *The Culture of Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 1976). 100.
2. William James, "The Stream of Thought," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 45.
3. William Joseph Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 17.
4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 380-81.
5. William James, "The Will to Believe," in McDermott, *Writings of William James*, 717-35 and William James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
6. For a much more detailed discussion of how the vague winds its way through James's writing, see Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*.
7. William James, *Psychology—The Briefer Course* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1985). 37.
8. *Ibid.*, 38.
9. I do not want to over-dichotomize here, nor limit the selection of experience to two reasons. Nuances and shades of selection exist, as do the reasons for such selections.
10. James, *Psychology*, 39.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 41.
13. *Ibid.*, 37.
14. William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in McDermott, *Writings of William James*, 591.
15. McDermott, "Life is in the Transitions," 106. Here, McDermott also touches upon another Jamesian concept rich in pedagogical potential — the fringe, which is the vague area of relations that exist between an object of consciousness and other parts of experience.
16. See Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, 139-80.
17. William James, *Talks to Teachers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1907). 32-41.
18. Susan Ohanian, "The Tantalizing Vagueness of Teaching," *Learning* 86, (July/August 1986): 16-17.
19. Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, 18.
20. Ohanian, "The Tantalizing Vagueness of Teaching." 16.
21. *Ibid.*, 17.