

More Thoughts on a Pedagogy of the Vague

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Nakia Pope has written an intriguing essay arguing for the value of vagueness in education, pointing to William James as an excellent source for a pedagogy of the vague. Pope's central claim is that recognition of the vague serves to thicken experience. The author warns us that "Neglect of the vague not only limits the broad and expressive nature of teaching, but it also models a way of having experiences: this is a way that neglects the novel, thinning experience down to its bare substantial minimum." I agree with Pope that James offers us an excellent source for the concept of vagueness, and I find it intriguing to explore this concept's implications for education. I hope my response will contribute further to that exploration. I thank Pope for bringing James's work to our attention.

First let me recap what Pope has to say about a pedagogy of vagueness. Pope defines *vagueness* as "aspects of experience that are, at best, peripheral to our conscious lives." The vague is inarticulate, ineffable, transient, "those aspects of experiences which are uncertain, non-objective, and not immediately present." Pope uses the example of driving a car to help us understand the concept of vagueness, and points out that we do not pay attention to the engine of our car unless the engine starts acting up and becomes a problem for us. The engine is a vague, inarticulate part of our experience of driving unless we select to attend to it. This example does not work so well for me, in describing James's concept of vagueness. With Pope's description, I start to wonder, if the vague is that which we ignore or neglect to pay attention to, then if we attend to the vague, does not it stop being vague? The more I think about it, even the term *vague* becomes not so helpful to me, as James did not use that term for the focus in his own work, but instead focused on *experience* to develop his theories, and vagueness was described as a quality of experience. We can see this in Pope's essay with the line, "[v]agueness is a feature of experience—all and any experience." I do not think the sources Pope relies on to describe James's concept of vagueness. In particular James's psychology and his theory of consciousness take advantage of the places where James does the best job of helping us understand what he means. Different sources and a different metaphor are what I hope to contribute to this topic of discussion.

Pope points out that "vagueness is an ontological condition," and it is this lead that I will follow in my response for I think a discussion of James's ontology will help to further our understanding of vagueness. Rather than thinking about our cars and what we choose to be selectively conscious of as we are driving, let me introduce the metaphor of a fishing net. Our ontology and epistemology form the net we weave to help us catch up our experiences and make sense of them. Only our net is never big enough and never woven tight enough, and it can never catch up all that we experience. Some of what we experience stays in our net, like the fish caught in a fishing net, but much of what we experience overflows the net or falls back through the netting into the sea of experience, like the water that flows through a fishing net.

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James argues that the world we experience is more than we can describe.¹ “[C]oncrete reality and experience are richer, more dynamic, and thicker than can possibly be expressed by our concepts” (*APU*, Bernstein’s Introduction, xiv). James describes reality as genuinely continuous and active. “Reality is not a closed system; it is ontologically open” (*APU*, xxv). He describes our theories as incomplete, open, and imperfect. He shows how conceptual knowledge, although very valuable, stays on the surface of things. Conceptual knowledge is knowledge about things, it does not penetrate to the inner reality of things and it is not capable of capturing reality’s continuously changing nature. Our concepts just describe the fish we catch in our nets. “Concepts are only man-made extracts from the temporal flux” (*APU*, 99). So, we find for James that first concepts become a method, then a habit, and finally a tyranny. “Concepts, first employed to make things intelligible, are clung to even when they make them unintelligible” (*APU*, 99).

James describes in his final work, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, a relational ontology that he calls radical empiricism.² He argues that our immediate experience begins as a unity, not as separate entities. James calls this unity “primal stuff” or “pure experience,” the *thatness* of being, a stuff of which everything is composed. For him, experience has no inner duplicity. Experience just is, in its pure *thatness*. Experience is subjective *and* objective, it is private *and* public, it is internal *and* external, it is thought *and* thing. What we do with pure experience, when we categorize and separate it and create lines of order for it, is by way of addition, not subtraction to pure experience. Our immediate experiences always overflow concepts and logic, conjunctions and disjunctions. Our immediate experiences always overflow the net we try to use to catch up our experiences.

For James, “What really *exists* is not things made but things in the making” (*APU*, 117). “Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it” (*APU*, 96). Reality is nonrational, it is where things *happen*. Reality flows through our nets and back to the sea, while our nets manage to catch up some of our experiences, and our concepts try to make sense of the fish we catch in our nets. Vagueness points to all that is not caught in our fishing nets, all that slips through and goes on, unnamed. Vagueness is a descriptive term for *experience* that helps us notice there is more to experience than what we catch in our nets. James reminds us, we add to pure experience, by differentiating and distinguishing, but we always start with “sensible realities” that come to life “in the tissue of experience” (*RE*, 29). Knowledge “is *made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time” (*RE*, 29, emphasis in original). Or, put another way: “The instant field of the present is always experience in its ‘pure’ state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that*, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as someone’s opinion about fact” (*RE*, 36-37).

Because Pope relies on James’s psychology and his theory of consciousness to describe the concept of vagueness, he carries a weakness of James’s along in the essay’s discussion. James’s psychology has a strong individualistic focus, as does the field of psychology in general. James neglects the social, which Mead and

Dewey emphasized. We hear about “the individual’s wants, needs, and interests” and “the mind’s habits of attention” in Pope’s discussion at the expense of considering vagueness in relation to social context. If vagueness is what is unseen and unnoticed, it is others that help draw our attention to what is falling through and overflowing our nets. Others help draw our attention to the limits of our concepts and the tyranny they impose on our experiences.

Pope wants to point out what vagueness has to offer in terms of advantages in the classroom. The vague may “interrupt our habitual ways of experiencing by intruding on our consciousness.” Vagueness can “enrich our experiences” and serve “as a repository of novelty.” However, I do think it is worth our while to acknowledge the disadvantages of a pedagogy of vagueness. We can certainly imagine people worrying, will a curriculum that values vagueness lead us to incoherence, confusion, and chaos? Do not we seek to be more articulate and less vague so there will be less confusion and less chance of miscommunications? I start to hear the arguments for the value of standardized testing as a means of holding schools and teachers accountable for the formal curriculum, so parents can be assured their children will graduate from high school knowing how to read and write, and children will be guaranteed that they receive a quality education. In Pope’s discussion of the vagueness of the classroom experience, I begin to hear the arguments for making the hidden curriculum in schools visible and articulate, bringing it to our consciousness so we may critique it.

Yet, I agree with Pope about the value of a pedagogy of the vague. I agree with James, “that there is always more to the experience than one can codify.” And we all agree that since “all learning comes from experience, then all aspects of experience can contribute to that learning.” This includes those experiences that remain inarticulate and unnamed, because they have overflowed our fishing net. James would agree with the need to humbly acknowledge that which we have missed in our naming of our experiences, but I don’t think his goal in embracing this attitude of openness is “in order to miss as little as possible.” Rather, I think he wants to remind us that we will always miss when we cast our nets. We will never catch up all of our experiences. The good (and bad) news is that we can never get rid of the vague in our classrooms.

I wonder, is the classroom really a hostile place for the vague? Like Ohanian, I think good veteran teachers know that standardized tests do not catch up all that students learn in the classroom. They know that the curriculum overflows the tests and that the tests do not measure the full extent of their teaching. They also know that there are many ways to try to catch up students experiences and help give them meaning, and with every way they try, much experience will fall through and not be addressed. What can we do as teachers to encourage the vague in our classrooms? If we take the advice of some of our most creative people, they suggest:

1. Respect difference. Be interested and empathetic, listen to the material, so that we can attempt to understand difference rather than destroy it.
2. Reject forced choices, embrace multiplicity, and accept ambiguity and asymmetry.
3. Focus on the process.

4. Create open spaces by seeking new experiences and allowing ourselves to be divided and distracted at times.

5. Look for a bigger picture; develop a new and richer sense of complementarity and interdependence.³

James teaches us that we can never get rid of the vague in our classrooms. Pope helps to move us toward valuing the vague more, and for that I am grateful.

1. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1909/1977). This book will be cited as *APU* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912/1976). This book will be cited as *RE* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Barbara Thayer-Bacon with Charles Bacon, *Philosophy Applied to Education: Nurturing a Democratic Community in the Classroom* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 139.