

Dewey's Idea of Sympathy and the Development of the Ethical Self: A Japanese Perspective

Naoko Saito
University of Tokyo

INTRODUCTION: THE CLOSENESS VS. CLOSEDNESS TENSION OF A COMMUNITY

In contemporary American society, political philosophers and educators are currently discussing the importance of community and group bonds.¹ Their common, basic claim is usually that the creation and definition of the self requires a communal relationship. However, close community bonds always involve the danger of exclusiveness and parochialism, the suppression of individuality, or what I will call "closedness." An example is found in contemporary Japanese education. The development of individuality is one of the main officially stated goals of Japanese education today. However, the school-bully problem shows how difficult it is to maintain one's individuality within the close, intense bonds of a group. This example from Japan challenges American proponents of community who emphasize group cohesiveness over individuality. Is it possible to resolve the tension between the closeness and closedness of a community? How could anyone emphasize close bonds of community while valuing individuality and openness?

John Dewey's idea of sympathy as a quality of ethical human relationships within a community holds a key to resolving this tension. Dewey stresses the importance of social relationships in the cultivation of the self. He also emphasizes individuality. The challenge is to explain how the emphasis on social relationships can be combined with the emphasis on individuality without contradiction.

To answer this question, I refer to Dewey's notion of sympathy and its related notion of the poetic and imaginative eye. Sympathy as a quality of human relationships is a feature not much discussed. Deweyan scholars usually highlight social intelligence and communication as main features of Dewey's idea of democracy. When we think about how to resolve the tension between closeness and closedness, "social intelligence," "critical habits of mind," or "open communication" may be the first hints we get from Dewey. It is true that these traits have an important function in democratic communities. However, in order to remedy the negative outcomes of closedness of community and to transform people's mentality, "social intelligence" or openness is not enough. A more in depth examination of the nature of human relationships is required. Dewey, in fact, implicitly and explicitly touches upon this issue.

The poetic and imaginative eye is a notion derived from Dewey's descriptions of the teacher-student relationship. The poetic and imaginative eye of the teacher is an ethical and educational eye in the sense that it helps bring the actual condition of the student toward a new vision by reaching the depth of the student's self; it helps the development of the student's individuality. As a result, it helps transform a closed bond that lacks an ethical dimension into a relationship where individuality is enhanced and each self acquires an attitude of openness. Consequently, the poetic

and imaginative eye opens the group as a whole to more inclusive possibilities. I conclude that the poetic and imaginative eye, when used by the teacher, helps students resolve the tension between closedness and closeness of the community and create ethical human relationships.

This paper will first explore Dewey's philosophical and psychological definition of "intelligent sympathy." Then I argue that Dewey's notion of sympathy is not merely to be added to his cardinal notion of intelligence, as "intelligence plus sympathy," but that intelligent sympathy is rather a fused concept. I will attempt to explain this from a holistic perspective on human relationships that is based on the poetic and imaginative eye.

Through the example of the school-bully problem in Japanese schools, I will illustrate how Dewey's notion of sympathy provides a powerful way of looking at how closed bonds can be transformed into ethical human relationships, and the implications for Japanese educators. Illuminating Dewey's idea of sympathy can also give an insight into today's American proponents of community.

THE PROBLEM OF A CLOSED COMMUNITY:

THE SCHOOL-BULLY PROBLEM IN JAPANESE SCHOOLS

In contemporary Japan, one of the urgent tasks of educational reform is the development of individuality. In Japanese education, individuality is associated with assertiveness and uniqueness.² Development of individuality is important more than ever in our country, because increasingly, Japanese people come into daily contact with foreign individuals and cultures. In addition, the negative effects of current university entrance exam system have deprived students of opportunities to develop their individuality because they are busy memorizing to prepare for these exams. Many Japanese educators are struggling to figure out how to achieve this goal of development of individuality. However, it is not an easy task. The school-bully problem in Japanese schools illustrates this difficulty because a close group bond tends to hinder development of individuality.

School-bully behavior has been characterized as a "behavior of exclusion" toward someone different or strange.³ Oride points to the exclusive and closed nature of a group of students and the hierarchical order in a group as a part of the causes of the school-bully problem, which is intertwined with social issues characteristic of contemporary Japanese society and education. He characterizes human relationships within Japanese schools as those "being filled with a lack of trust," and expresses students' psyches as "alienated" and "apathetic." Oride proposes that adults should pay attention to "signs" of bully behavior shown by students in their daily relationships as the first step in solving this problem.⁴

As Oride points out, the school-bully problem is caused by a complex combination of factors. The hierarchical nature of traditional Japanese society is, he believes, an important factor. Others include the mechanisms of strict control in schools that suppress individuality. Whatever the causes, the nature of human relationships in a group of students associated with school-bully behavior can be characterized as closedness — that is, suppression of individuality and exclusiveness.

In Japan, sympathy and compassion are regarded as virtues in human relationships, which are elements of strong emotional ties to the group. However, the cruel and devastating nature of school-bully cases demonstrates how a close bond of community, under various influences, can become a closed bond, leading to unethical and unsympathetic human relationships. Japanese educators now face the need to transform a closed bond to a healthy, open community.

School-bully cases and Oride's analysis suggest that the closedness of a group involves some serious existential crisis that the selves of Japanese students face in contemporary society. The school-bully problem discloses the fact that conventional Japanese moral education cannot provide a solution. The questions to be addressed are how one's self *should* interact with other selves, and *how* educators can help students transform their ethical attitude toward others in this existential crisis.

The school-bully problem in Japan makes American proponents of community realize the necessity of reconsidering minutely the quality of "connectedness" or the "social bond": How should one relate to others in a community so that a close bond would not become a closed bond? It is here where Dewey's idea of sympathy seems to give some insights to teachers in searching for a solution from within micro human relationships in a classroom.

THE CONCEPT OF "INTELLIGENT SYMPATHY"

Sympathy is a phrase that Dewey frequently uses in his works. Dewey emphasizes the importance of sympathy as "the sole portions of the psychological structure or mechanism of a man which can be relied upon to work the identification of other's ends with one's own interests."⁵ However, he criticizes sympathy which is sentimental or exclusive, and puts an emphasis on impartiality of sympathy as follows:

To put ourselves in the place of others, to see things from the standpoint of their purposes and values, to humble, contrariwise, our own pretensions and claims till they reach the level they would assume in the eye of an impartial sympathetic observer, is the surest way to attain objectivity of moral knowledge.⁶

Dewey calls this notion of sympathy "intelligent sympathy." "[Intelligent sympathy] functions properly when used as a principle of reflection and insight, rather than of direct action. Intelligent sympathy widens and deepens concern for consequences."⁷

However, what does Dewey mean by "intelligent sympathy?" Dewey says, "to give way without thought to a kindly feeling is easy...the needed thing is to retain it in all its pristine intensity while directing it, as a precondition of action into channels of thought."⁸ But how can the self be intelligently impartial while maintaining the emotional intensity of closeness? It is not impossible to interpret his philosophical explanation of sympathy to "be emotionally sympathetic *and* be intelligent and impartial."

In practice, Dewey's idea of "intelligent sympathy" makes us question *how* "intelligent sympathy" can radically transform the closedness of a community and the exclusive attitude of a human being. Dewey's explanation of "intelligent

sympathy" is, however, not persuasive enough. How can educators transform the closed bonds of students into ethical ties if the concept of "intelligent sympathy" only means "being sympathetic and intelligent?"

Does Dewey provide a more holistic picture of "intelligent sympathy" than "intelligence plus sympathy?" One way to answer this question is to imagine "sympathetically" what kind of human relationship Dewey envisions by "intelligent sympathy" and how Dewey thinks it possible to achieve "intelligent sympathy" in actual, living human relationships. I will discuss this issue focusing on the "poetic and imaginative eye" as an essential feature of Dewey's vision of sympathetic human relationships, which I have derived from his descriptions of the teacher-student relationship.

RECONSIDERING "INTELLIGENT SYMPATHY" THROUGH THE POETIC AND IMAGINATIVE EYE

Dewey's philosophical and psychological basis of the self is characterized by the self-in-activity. The self is being created in its active interaction with its natural and social environment. In the practical application of Dewey's educational theory, activity and experience are the heart of the curriculum. However, we should not forget that Dewey is not merely a proponent of the active self. As a prerequisite and an essential phase of the activity, Dewey insists on the importance of *seeing* as an essential factor in the creation of communal relationships. In *The Child and Curriculum* he mentions the importance of the teacher's seeing the world of the child as an interpretive phase of activity.⁹

Dewey also suggests that the teacher has two eyes to interpret and guide the child. Westbrook explains this by citing the words of teachers at the Dewey School:

Like Alice, she must step with her children behind the looking glass and in this imaginative land she must see all things with their eyes and limited by their experience; but, in time of need, she must be able to recover her trained vision and from the realistic point of view of an adult supply the guide posts of knowledge and the skills of method.¹⁰

Westbrook sheds light on the importance of the teacher's imaginative eye, which brings the teacher's self into the child's world. The notion of the imaginative eye can be called "poetic and imaginative eye" because Dewey uses poetic language and images to explain the child's world. Dewey's own poetic eye toward the child's world suggests how the teacher can reach and construct the child's world imaginatively and poetically.¹¹

The question to be addressed is what kind of implication the teacher's poetic and imaginative eye could have in transforming a closed community bond, as in the school-bully case in Japanese schools.

THE POETIC AND IMAGINATIVE EYE AS AN ETHICAL EYE

Dewey's educational and religious writings suggest the ethical characters of the poetic and imaginative eye. First, the poetic and imaginative eye is a "prophetic" eye — that is, an eye for growth and possibility. In *The Child and Curriculum*, Dewey warns that we must not "confine our gaze" (CC, p. 191) and encourages us to "read the meaning of what we see in the child." The teacher's eye is poetic and imaginative and detects the seed of good in the child, as Dewey says:

Other acts and feelings are prophetic; they represent the dawning of flickering light that will shine steadily only in the far future. As regards them there is little at present to do but give them fair and full chance, waiting for the future for definite direction (CC, p. 193).

In a later work, *A Common Faith*, Dewey also explains;

These goods are there and yet they are relatively embryonic. Many persons are shut out from generous participation in them. There are forces at work that threaten and sap existent goods as well as prevent their expansion.¹²

These statements suggest that the poetic and imaginative eye of the teacher expands the horizon of the student's self beyond the visible to the unseen. According to Dewey, imagination is an ethical power. He says;

The new vision does not arise out of nothing, but emerges through seeing, in terms of possibilities, that is of imagination, old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating (CF, p. 34).

For the school-bully problem in Japanese schools where students' minds are closed and do not realize their own possibilities for the good, Dewey suggests that the teacher's imaginative and poetic eye helps develop each student toward the good.

Special implications for Japanese educators who try to transform a closed bond of a community to an ethical relationship is that Dewey enlarges and enriches the notion of openness. Democratic openness for Dewey is not merely outwardness in the usual sense. His notion of openness has another dimension related to the possibility for the betterment of the self, which is the development of individuality. Consequently, the poetic and imaginative eye helps the group as a whole become open to more inclusive possibilities.

Second, Dewey's educational and religious writings suggest the poetic and imaginative eye is an eye to "intervene into" the other's self, an ethical eye to participate in the construction of the good in the other. Borrowing from Santayana, Dewey characterizes the "intervening" nature of imagination as "one that completely interpenetrates all the elements of our being," as opposed to imagination "that only supervenes"(CF, p. 13). The intervening character of a poetic and imaginative eye connects the teacher's self to the student's self and serves as an eye to reach the other's existence.

When we think about how the teacher can help students develop an ethical self and transform closed bonds into ethical human relationships, the intervening nature of the teacher's poetic and imaginative eye is critical. Dewey provides us with a vision of the teacher who participates in the construction of the student's potential for the good by reaching the deepest level of the student's world, which "intelligent sympathy" alone does not fully explain.

This notion is especially useful in resolving the the school-bully problem and for creating ethical relationships in the classroom. The school-bully case is an example of a closed community. In the contemporary context of Japanese society it involves the existential crisis of the self. In this context especially, the "intervening" function of the poetic and imaginative eye of the teacher would be crucial to move significantly the student toward the good.

Although the discussion in this paper focuses on the teacher's poetic and imaginative eye to help the creation of the student's ethical self and an ethical

relationship of the group, it is not limited to the teacher's eye. The notion of the poetic and imaginative eye is applicable to anyone who is involved in the creation of an ethical human relationship.

THE FUSED NOTION OF INTELLIGENT SYMPATHY

Emphasizing the poetic and imaginative eye as an important aspect of Dewey's idea of sympathy is not intended to overshadow the significance of "intelligence." Rather, it makes us reconsider the very meaning of "intelligence"; for Dewey, the working of intelligence requires as its essential part the ethical function of the poetic and imaginative eye. The poetic and imaginative eye as an ethical eye suggests that "intelligent sympathy" is not an issue of keeping balance between being objective in a neutral sense *and* being sympathetic in an emotional sense. Intelligence and emotion are not independent of each other; they have to be fused, not added.¹³ In Dewey's own words, it is "the marriage of emotion with intelligence"(CF, p. 53).¹⁴

The fused notion of intelligent sympathy has various implications for Japanese educators who try to transform a closed bond to an ethical human relationship. First, on Japanese soil, being poetic could easily turn to being sentimental. For Dewey, however, being poetic and imaginative never means being romantic or utopian or separated from the reality of facts.

Second, the fused notion of "intelligent sympathy" based upon the poetic and imaginative eye could be a powerful notion for Japanese educators to gain a new perspective on sympathetic relationships in a community. Hilary Putnam, emphasizing Dewey's notion of "democratization of inquiry," says that "[democratization of inquiry] avoids relations of hierarchy and dependence."¹⁵ It is true that the pillar of Dewey's philosophy and ethics lies in his idea of "democratization of inquiry" or social intelligence. It is also true that in a closed bond of Japanese community, "democratization of inquiry" is the ultimate goal for Japanese educators.

However, in the Japanese context, being "rational" or "intelligent" is not as much a part of the traditional vocabulary as it is in western culture. When Japanese educators try to achieve "democratization of inquiry," a persuasive way to have Japanese educators appreciate the potential of Dewey's philosophy would be to illuminate his idea of intelligent sympathy from the viewpoint of the poetic and imaginative eye. "Be intelligently sympathetic!" is not a persuasive recommendation to Japanese educators.

Starting from sympathy and the poetic and imaginative eye is an effective way for Japanese educators to approach Dewey's idea of democracy because poetic sensitivity and "intervening in" an other's life is one good strain in Japanese education.¹⁶ In order to find a key to resolving the school-bully problem, starting from this good tradition would easily appeal to Japanese educators. Dewey's idea of intelligent sympathy, when observed from the viewpoint of the poetic and imaginative eye, could enrich this traditional notion of sympathy so that it would lead not to closed sentimentalism, but to open sympathy.

In other words, focusing on Dewey's idea of intelligent sympathy from a perspective of the poetic and imaginative eye is a "sympathetic" path to introduce

Japanese educators to Dewey's philosophy. If we can call the poetic and imaginative eye "a common ground" which Japanese educators and Dewey, an American philosopher, can share, then starting from this common ground is a more effective way to convey Dewey's idea of democracy to Japanese educators. In the past history of introducing Dewey's philosophy into Japanese education, this point has often been overlooked, and a vague notion of "intelligence" has been imported.

Dewey once visited Japan and criticized the Japanese for lacking "moral courage."¹⁷ To Japanese educators who face the school-bully problem, and those who struggle to accomplish the development of individuality in classrooms, developing "moral courage" still is a challenge. To them, Dewey would say, "Never forget the quality of human relationships in which individuality develops and social intelligence functions!"

CONCLUSION

The application of philosophy from one culture to another is always problematic. The history of transporting Dewey's educational philosophy to Japanese education after World War II demonstrates this difficulty, especially the difficulty of translating philosophical words. It should also be remembered that "using" Dewey's idea of intelligent sympathy in the Japanese classroom cannot directly and immediately solve such serious issues as the school-bully problem. It will take time to transform the quality of human relationships embedded in a culture and to create a new vision of the Japanese individual.

This paper attempted to overcome this difficulty by finding some common ground on which one culture might be able to learn from another, by illuminating Dewey's philosophy from a perspective which is more accessible to Japanese educators. It is hoped that this approach will be helpful not only for Japanese educators to transform closed bonds into ethical human relationships, but also for American proponents of community to tap into the potential of Dewey's idea of sympathy as a quality of human relationships in a democratic community.

1. Robert Putnam, "The Prosperous Community," *American Prospect* (Spring 1993): 35-42; Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

2. Katagiri says that the governmental statement issued in 1985, which highlights the importance of individuality, plays a critical role in the current popular trend toward individuality. However, he points out that the concept of individuality in Japan is ambiguous and incoherent both among teachers and in official documents. (Yoshio Katagiri, "Nihon ni Okeru 'Kosei' to Kyoiku-Sobyō" ("Outline of 'Individuality' in Japan") in *Illusion of Individuality, Kyoikugaku-Nenpo*, vol. 4, ed. Hisato Morita, et al. (Tokyo: Seiri Shobo, 1995.)

3. Kenji Oride, "Konnan wo Kakaeru Kodomotachi: Ijime/jisatsu no Kakudo Kara" ("Children in Difficulty and School Reform: The School-bully and Suicide Problems"), paper delivered at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Japan Society for the Study of Education, Tokyo, Japan, 25 August 1995, 12.

4. *Ibid.*, 10.

5. John Dewey, *Ethics 1908*, in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 128.

6. John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc., 1980), 130.

7. *Ibid.*, 170.

8. *Ibid.*, 163.

9. John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, in *The School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum*, ed. Philip W. Jackson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 191-92. Hereafter cited as CC in the text and footnotes.

10. Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966), 312, in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 101.

11. This is evident not only his later work on aesthetics, but also in his earlier educational works such as *The School and Society* (1900) and *The Child and Curriculum* (1902). Dewey also depicts the child's inner world in a poetic and imaginative way. His description represents the teacher's eye which creatively and imaginatively interprets the child's world. For example, he expresses the signs which can be detected in the activities and feelings of the child as "the dawning of flickering light that will shine steadily only in the far future (CC, p. 192) and the child's tendencies as "germinating seed or the opening bud" (CC, p. 194). He also writes about his own observation of the children in the Dewey School. For example, a child writes in geography class as follows; "the water...pulled the calcium out of the rocks" and "it [a solution] tore out the calcium and carried it on to the sea." Dewey calls these expressions "poetic as well as 'scientific'" because "the child has a clear image and has a personal feeling for the realities imagined." (*The School and Society*, in *The School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum*, ed. Philip W. Jackson, 57).

12. John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 35. (Hereafter cited as CF in the text.)

13. I acknowledge credit to Hilary Putnam who suggested to me that the "fused notion" was an appropriate phrase to express Dewey's concept of "intelligent sympathy."

14. In another project, the author is conducting further a philosophical investigation of the fused notion of intelligent sympathy.

15. Hilary Putnam, "The Importance of Nonscientific Knowledge," (Paper presented at Pierre Bayle Lecture, at Rotterdam, 19 November 1995).

16. Minoru Murai, a Japanese educational philosopher, in *Kyoiku ni Okeru Tafu to Tenda Umorebi wo Okosu (Toughness and Tenderness in Education: Recovering Traditional Fire)* (Tokyo: Kokudo-sha, 1992), illuminates "poetic" and "tender-minded" educators in the Japanese tradition. Makoto Tsumori, a Japanese psychologist and a principal of the school for mentally disadvantaged children, emphasizes the importance of an adult being with children and absorbing him/herself into the children's worlds. (Makoto Tsumori, *Kodomo no Sekai wo Do Miruka: Koi to Sono Imi (How to See Children's Worlds: Children's Behaviors and Their Meanings)* (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1987).

17. John Dewey and Alice Chapman Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, ed. Evelyn Dewey (New York: E. P. Dutton Company, 1920), 169.