

Is Impotence the Answer?

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Tyson Lewis's analysis of Alfred North Whitehead's educational theory read in conjunction with Giorgio Agamben's literary theory opens up an important space to consider the ongoing rhythmic nature of education, emphasizing the aesthetic aspects of learning above the more common discussion of content acquisition and skill production. While I think most of us can agree that there is a problem with an education that is limited to "mere retention and memorization of facts and performance of allotted tasks," what is novel about Lewis's approach is his epistemological claim that we learn rhythmically and that there is a significant aesthetic dimension to all learning.¹ I completely concur that we have gone too far in education toward content acquisition and production (exemplified by the high-stakes testing movement), however, I believe that Lewis pushes too far in the other direction, leaving us endlessly in aporia by withholding actualization in the world and thus, denying a fundamental condition of life that in itself propels growth — interaction with an environment.

I begin my analysis by affirming a point of commonality between my view and that of Lewis; namely, the importance of rhythm in learning. I appreciate Lewis's contention that learning does not take place in a uniform, straight path from not-knowing to knowing. Rather, as Lewis encapsulates by drawing on Whitehead, learning involves a series of unfolding rhythmic cycles of "freedom, discipline, and freedom nested within cycles of romance, precision, and generalization." Indeed, there is a rhythmic quality to learning as we push forward and pull back in a cyclic manner.

My discrepancy with Lewis becomes more pronounced as he moves to Agamben's literary theory in describing the rhythmic structure of poiesis. Distinct from praxis, which must be realized in the world, poiesis is a mode of production that conserves potentiality, resists fulfillment in the world of objects, and thus maintains a poetic nature of unrealized potential or im-potentiality. Agamben's notion of rhythm and messianic time consists of a simultaneous backward and forward movement in time that creates a rhythmic turning away from ultimate conclusion, perpetuating itself in what Lewis refers to as a paradox of finite infinity.

However, I believe that the nature of this rhythmic push and pull is an outgrowth of our integral relationship with the world and that Lewis does not adequately take this into account. By disavowing praxis as a "manifestation of a will that produces a concrete effect" in favor of retaining a relationship to the potentiality of existence,² I argue that Lewis creates a false enemy of potentiality. It is not concrete actualization and culmination in the world that stifles Whitehead's return to romance, but rather a thin notion of praxis that focuses solely on performance in the world at the expense of the organic aesthetic connection between an organism and an environment.

According to John Dewey's aesthetic theory, "every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives."³

Hence, the rhythmic pattern of learning is not simply an internal state of affairs moving self-sufficiently in a cyclical manner. On the contrary, what propels the experience forward is the meeting of the organism and the environment, as there is an inherent give and take that occurs in this medium of life, itself.

In relation to Lewis's own analogy with poetry, it is fruitful to consider the explicit connection Dewey makes between rhythm in art and our interaction with the world, as I find this more accurately reveals the "exact aesthetic dimension of education" than Lewis supports with his analogy. In his explanation of form and rhythm, Dewey shows how the patterns of resistance and struggle we engage in with the world become meaningful in art. For Dewey, form is the "operations of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment" (*AE*, 142). Form is not a property of the organism or world, but rather occurs in the *interaction* between the two. There is form in our interactions with the world and, likewise, in our interactions with art. After explaining that rhythm makes up the more specific aspects of form such as "checks, resistances, furtherances, [and] equilibria" that move an experience forward, he asserts, "There is rhythm in nature before poetry, painting, architecture and music exist. Were it not so, rhythm as an essential property of form would be merely superimposed upon material, not an operation through which material effects its own culmination in experience" (*AE*, 153). Hence, it is because of the rhythm within our interactions with the world that there is rhythm in poetry — likewise, the rhythm of learning is also a result of interaction with the world.

Unlike the ongoing nature of the messianic moment, Dewey's notion of experience yearns toward culmination, albeit not before it has a chance to develop fully through an organic relationship between the organism and environment. There is an important similarity between Dewey's notion of perception and messianic time in that final judgment is suspended, allowing for an intake and outgrowth of rhythm that is held together and ordered. As opposed to recognition, which arrests full and natural development by simply naming an object before it has a chance to be experienced aesthetically, Dewey tells us that perceiving follows its own natural progression toward eventual culmination. It is noteworthy that for both Agamben and Dewey, the messianic moment and the moment of perception, respectively, constitute rhythm. However, the major difference between the two views is that for Agamben messianic time is indefinite suspension, whereas Dewey's aesthetic experience eventually culminates once perception has run its course. "Until the artist is satisfied in perception with what he is doing, he continues shaping and reshaping. The making comes to an end when its result is experienced as good — and that experience comes not by mere intellectual and outside judgment but in direct perception" (*AE*, 51).

Despite the similarity between messianic time and the time of perception, the difference of conclusion (or lack thereof) is immense. Lewis offers that by resisting final culmination, potentiality is preserved and thus continues the messianic moment indefinitely. This becomes particularly significant when applied to learning, as Lewis says that the never-ending rhythmic flow more accurately describes what

it means to learn than a simple “forward progression marked by increased test scores or graduate degrees that [supposedly] signify the full actualization of the learner through measured progress.” While there is no doubt that this observation is true, it does not follow that we must accept perpetual impotence in order to avoid “the artificial constraints of linear chronologies with fixed deadlines and learning quotas.” We have another option that captures aspects of messianic time and poiesis, but also enables culmination in the world. Thus, by taking seriously Dewey’s robust notion of experience we come to realize that we do not have to rely on superficial measures of progress that pretend to signify full actualization of a learner. Rather, a learner can enact herself in the world through experience, engaging in a mode of praxis that is not thin and empty production, void of meaning and significance. Dewey’s model of aesthetic production allows for the critical role rhythmic development plays in learning, but also fosters rich engagement with the world, enabling moments of genuine culmination, while still cultivating growth.

What I take to be most important about learning for Lewis is that it retains the trace of freedom to be or not to be and by thus retaining the space of unrealized potential, learning stands to be rhythmically pushed forward “to new cycles through the recursive repetition of past cycles.” However, becoming through moments of intrinsic culmination does not impede the potential for new cycles of rhythmic learning. On the contrary, genuine culmination promotes further growth, as growth is already an inherent condition of life. Indeed, it is the aim of education to promote a rich quality of life through fostering aesthetic experiences (that is, experiences that maintain the integral relationship between the organism and the environment), as doing so ignites the potential of life itself. As Dewey states, “The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling.... Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life.”⁴

Thus, Lewis is right that the “fundamental enemy of arts-based education is ... [the] enemy of learning more generally” and that this enemy is precisely the failure of education to foster aesthetic, rhythmic turning. However, I believe that this rhythmic turning is an outgrowth of the integral relationship between an organism and the environment and that by precluding actualization in the world through moments of genuine culmination, we would be stifling the very connection that supports life itself and thus, the potentiality of growth that is inherent in all experience.

1. This claim is very much in line with the argument presented in Pradeep Dhillon, “Aesthetic Education,” in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, 2d ed., ed. Stephen Davies et al. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 114–17.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 68.

3. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934) (New York: Perigree, 2005), 45. This work will be cited in the text as *AE* for all subsequent references.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916) (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 51.