Intelligence and the Unexpected: Considering Dewey's Tragic Sense

Andrea English
Mount Saint Vincent University

Does intelligence entail that we will move forward, that we will progress as individuals and as a society? In his essay, "Intelligence for More than One," Carl Anders Säfström gives an important account of intelligence as a democratic idea that has relevance for how we think about intelligence in education today. Something of concern in Säfström's account, however, is the argument that John Dewey's method of intelligence is a means by which we progress toward democratic ideals such as equality and justice. Underlying his argument, as I see it, seems to be the connection between three ideas: "intelligence," "control," and "the new." Specifically, Säfström explains in various ways that the method of intelligence is a means by which we gain control over our future. He implies further that on account of that control we create the new, that is, create equality and justice insofar as these things are not present in society.

There is no doubt that behind Dewey's idea of intelligence there is an idea of the human being as a creative force, a force that can, as Säfström states, "create something new and unforeseen." However, what is missing in Säfström's argument (though not necessarily excluded by it), and what I would like to draw out here, is an account of the new as *unexpected*. The unexpected, for Dewey, plays an essential role in reflective intelligence, not as the new *that we create*, but as the new and unfamiliar *that encounters us,* and throws us off course, telling us that we *do not* have control. Thus, in this brief response, I suggest that there is a different connection between "intelligence," "control," and "the new" that can be drawn out in Dewey's theory of the method of intelligence. Specifically, I examine how the new as *unexpected* connects to our failure to control our individual and social futures. I contend that a more complete account of intelligence must visit what has been called "the tragic sense of life"[1]: the idea that the contingency of life hinders us from control or even accurate foresight in our attempts to interact with the world, and that our experience of the world is fraught with frustration, doubt, or difficulty arising from our encounters with the unexpected.

The first place I would like to turn to in this discussion is Dewey's theory of experience underlying his notion of intelligence as a method. The unexpected in Dewey's account of our experience of the world — something new that is unforeseen and unforeseeable — is essential because it points us to what we do not know, do not yet understand, or cannot yet do. Experience, for Dewey, means not just *doing* something in the world, but also *undergoing* or *suffering* the world on account of enduring the unexpected and unfamiliar.[2] For Dewey, we think and learn on account of our encounters with the unexpected and unfamiliar. These encounters bring us into uncertain "indeterminate" situations, situations of doubt in which we ask ourselves, what went wrong? what should I do to move on?[3] Since we cannot ever

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fully foresee every possible consequence of our actions, we cannot prevent ourselves from being interrupted by the unexpected, from landing in uncertain situations, and thereby falling into a state of doubt or confusion. Such moments of uncertainty and doubt are part of our experience; they point to the fact that discontinuity and negativity (as I have stated elsewhere[4]) are constitutive of experience.

The idea of the unexpected and unforeseen that encounters us in our experience is essential to Dewey's understanding of the method of intelligence. This brings me to my second point, namely that the method of intelligence must be viewed as experimental: it is an experiment of interaction with a world that has become uncertain and has brought us into doubt. The experimental side of Dewey's notion of the method of intelligence is reflected strongly in this thought: "Experimental method takes honest account of the fact of contingency by consciously propounding and defining a *problem* as the basis from which action proceeds.… [It] thus *teaches* us how to deal with doubt."[5] We can say that the experimental method of action has its pragmatic tenor in the fact that it views doubt as a productive moment in the development of new ways out of difficulties arising from our encounters with the unexpected. This doubt, which accompanies individuals in every attempt at trying something new, cannot be ignored or denied, nor cherished in a skeptical fashion; rather, "we are to cultivate it," as a method of intelligence.[6]

Thus, intelligence means not simply a look forward, but a look back on what went wrong, what we did not have control over, what blindsided us. From the viewpoint of the "tragic sense of life" we must consider the fact that taking such a reflective look back at what happened to us, what defied our expectations, does not ensure progress toward our aims or ideals the next time we try. As Dewey, in his 1940 text "Time and Individuality," states:

> Development and evolution have historically been eulogistically interpreted. They have been thought of as necessarily proceeding from the lower to the higher, from the relatively worse to the relatively better. But this property was read in from outside moral and theological preoccupations. The real issue is …: Is what happens simply a spatial rearrangement of what existed previously or does it involve something qualitatively new? From this point of view, cancer is as genuinely a physiological development as is growth in vigor; criminals as well as heroes are a social development; the emergence of totalitarian states is a social evolution out of constitutional states independently of whether we like or approve them.[7]

Although Dewey has been criticized for not having a radical conception of evil, his thoughts here suggest a view of human beings as capable of undemocratic and inhumane developments, at times even despite our best attempts to prevent them, as a society. In conclusion, we cannot assume that by means of the method of intelligence we will make an unrelenting march toward the *better*, toward democratic ideals. It is true that Dewey has faith in the human capacity to learn by the method of intelligence, which thereby at least *attempts* to guide our own future by anticipating certain consequences of action — and perhaps this is what Säfström seeks to emphasize in his conception of Dewey's method. Yet, even though we can and should learn from the past, the world in some sense, as Dewey says, always

remains "opaque," "a mystery … the source of development both creative and degenerative."[8] To account for such opaqueness in a notion of democratic intelligence, we must consciously consider and openly discuss the role of the unexpected in individual and social experience.

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1. For more on this concept and its connections to Dewey, see, for example, Sydney Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Nicholas Burbules, "The Tragic Sense of Education," *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 4 (1990): 469–479; and Naoko Saito, *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). An opposing argument can be found in Raymond D. Boisvert, "The Nemesis of Necessity: Tragedy's Challenge to Deweyan Pragmatism," in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism*, ed. Casey Haskins (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 151–168. However, Saito gives a strong argument against Boisvert's view that Dewey does not adequately take into consideration the tragic sense of life. Although I do not take up the discussion of these authors in detail in this short response, the points I draw out here find resonance with the above authors, who see moments of a tragic sense in Dewey's understanding of education.

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* in *The Middle Works,* vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 147

3. See, for example, Dewey's discussion of indeterminate situations in, John Dewey, *How We Think,* in *The Middle Works*, vol. 6, Ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985); and John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston(Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

4. For example, see Dietrich Benner and Andrea English, "Critique and Negativity: Toward the Pluralisation of Critique in Educational Practice, Theory and Research," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 3 (2004): 409–428; Andrea English, "Interrupted Experiences: Reflection, Listening and Negativity in the Practice of Teaching," *Learning Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2007): 133–142; Andrea English, "Negativity, Experience and Transformation: Educational Possibilities at the Margins of Experience: Insights from the German Tradition of Philosophy of Education," in *Education and the Kyoto School of Philosophy*, eds. Paul Standish and Naoko Saito (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Publishers, 2012).

5. John Dewey and John Childs, "The Underlying Philosophy of Education," in *John Dewey, Essays and How We Think,* in *The Later Works*, vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 95.

6. Ibid.

7. John Dewey, "Time and Individuality," in *John Dewey: Essays, Reviews and Miscellany*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 108f.

8. Ibid., 112.

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