

Abstract:

The influence of pragmatism – and of Dewey in particular – upon Lipman’s conception of the classroom Community of Inquiry is pervasive. The notion of the Community of Inquiry is directly attributable to Peirce, while Dewey maintained that inquiry should form the backbone of education in a democratic society, conceived of as an inquiring community. I explore the ways in which pragmatic conceptions of truth and meaning are embedded in the Community of Inquiry, as well as looking at its Deweyan moral and social commitments. I show that Peirce’s and Dewey’s notions of truth are in perfect alignment with the philosophical Community of Inquiry, as is Dewey’s tie between meaning and ideas that bring our inquiries to a satisfactory conclusion. The Deweyan notion that moral values are justified by their utility in solving problems in social life is also to be found in the Community of Inquiry, as arguably is his view that moral values are to be regarded as working values that face the tribunal of experience in much the same way as hypotheses in science. Again, the focus in the classroom on open inquiry into issues and problems, the active participation of the students in building upon one another’s ideas, the sense of shared responsibility, and the growth and development of the intellectual and social powers of the individual, all mirror Dewey’s pragmatic conception of democracy. Given this allegiance, it may be argued that the Community of Inquiry faces a pragmatic problem of its own. While it aims to be a philosophically open encounter with all kinds of issues and ideas, pragmatic conceptions are so constitutive of it that they may skew the pitch philosophically. I also address this issue.

Keywords: Lipman; pragmatism; dewey; truth; meaning; ethics; political philosophy

El pragmatismo y la comunidad de investigación

Resumen:

La influencia del pragmatismo - y de Dewey en particular- sobre la concepción de comunidad de investigación en el aula de Lipman es penetrante. La noción de la comunidad de investigación es directamente atribuible a Peirce, mientras que Dewey mantuvo que la investigación debería formar la espina dorsal de la educación en una sociedad democrática, concebida como una comunidad investigativa. Exploro las maneras en las cuales las concepciones pragmatistas de la verdad y del significado se encajan en la comunidad de investigación, así como considero sus compromisos deweyanos morales y sociales. Muestro que las nociones de Peirce y de Dewey de la verdad están en perfecta línea con la comunidad filosófica de investigación, al igual que el lazo establecido por Dewey entre el significado y las ideas que llevan nuestras investigaciones a una conclusión satisfactoria. La noción deweyana de que los valores morales son justificados por su utilidad en solucionar problemas en la vida social debe también ser encontrada en la comunidad de investigación, al igual que está su opinión de que los valores morales deben ser mirados como valores activos que hacen frente al tribunal de la experiencia casi de la misma forma que las hipótesis en ciencia. Una vez más el foco en el aula de la investigación abierta en cuestiones y problemas, la participación activa de los estudiantes en la construcción de sus ideas a partir de las ideas de sus colegas, el sentido de la responsabilidad compartida, y el crecimiento y el desarrollo de los poderes intelectuales y sociales del individuo, todo ello espeja el concepto pragmatista deweyano de democracia. Dada esta lealtad, puede ser argumentado que la comunidad de investigación hace frente a un problema pragmatista propio. Mientras afirma ser un encuentro filosófico abierto con toda clase de cuestiones e ideas, las concepciones pragmatistas le son tan constitutivas que pueden sesgar, filosóficamente, la mirada. También abordo esta cuestión.

Palabras clave: Lipman; pragmatismo; Dewey; verdad; significado; ética; filosofía política

Pragmatismo e a comunidade de investigação

Resumo:

A influência do pragmatismo – e de Dewey, particularmente – na concepção lipmaniana de comunidade de investigação é penetrante. A noção de Comunidade de Investigação é diretamente atribuída à Peirce, enquanto Dewey manteve que a investigação deveria formar a espinha dorsal da educação numa sociedade democrática, entendida como uma comunidade investigativa. Eu exploro as formas com as quais as concepções pragmatistas de verdade e significado estão inseridas na Comunidade de Investigação, tanto quanto considero seus compromissos morais e sociais. Mostro que as noções tanto de Peirce quanto de Dewey de verdade estão perfeitamente alinhadas à comunidade filosófica de investigação, tal como o enlaçamento deweyano entre significados e ideias, responsável por trazer nossas investigações a uma conclusão satisfatória. A noção deweyana de que os valores morais são justificados pela utilidade de resolverem problemas numa vida social também deve ser encontrada na Comunidade de Investigação, assim como é discutível seu ponto de vista segundo o qual os valores morais são para serem vistos como valores ativos que se colocam face ao tribunal da experiência quase como da mesma forma que as hipóteses científicas. Novamente, o foco na sala de aula na investigação de questões e problemas, a participação ativa dos estudantes na construção de suas ideias a partir da ideia de seus colegas, o sentido da responsabilidade compartilhada, e o crescimento e desenvolvimento da potência intelectual e social do indivíduo, tudo isso espelha o conceito pragmatista deweyano de democracia. Dada esta aliança, talvez possa ser argumentado que a Comunidade de Investigação encara os problemas do próprio pragmatismo. Enquanto ela pretende ser um encontro filosófico aberto com todos os tipos de questões e perguntas, os conceitos pragmatistas são tão constitutivos que talvez possam distorcer, filosoficamente, o olhar. Também discorro sobre esta questão.

Palavras-chave: Lipman; pragmatismo; Dewey; verdade; significado; ética; filosofia política

Introduction

Matthew Lipman conceived of Philosophy for Children as converting the classroom into a Community of Inquiry. The original source of this conception is said to be Charles Sanders Peirce's vision of the worldwide scientific community as a community of inquiry – although, so far as I can ascertain, Peirce never actually used the term.¹ A far more pervasive influence, however, is the treatment of both inquiry and community in the work of John Dewey.

Dewey thought that inquiry was so central to the development of effective thinking that Logic needed to be reconceived in the context of active and ongoing inquiry, freeing it from its dusty ancient and medieval formalisms and allying it with modern science.² For Dewey, this was not just a cause for reconstruction in Philosophy, but a matter of such great educational importance that he wrote a book for teachers, entitled *How We Think*, in which the general procedures of inquiry were laid out as a guide to reflective thought.³ The conception of thinking as inquiry also lies behind Dewey's later statement in *Democracy and Education* that "all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their *minds* are concerned...is to develop their ability to think."⁴ In other words, Dewey maintained that inquiry should form the backbone of modern education.

Dewey was well aware that the schools of his day did not put inquiry-based learning front and centre, but he argued that there is no other course if schools are to provide an education that befits democracy. Dewey defined education as the "reconstruction or reorganisation of experience,"⁵ and then tied it to inquiry,

¹ C.S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in Justus Buchler (ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 5-22.

² All reference to Dewey's works are to Jo Ann Boydston (ed.) *The Collected Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972-85). See *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Later Works, Vol. 12.

³ *How We Think*. Later Works, Vol. 8.

⁴ *Democracy and Education*, Middle Works, Vol. 9.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 159.

conceived of as experience in its reflective phases.⁶ His insistence on inquiry in educating for democracy thereby awarded it the leading role in preparing for democratic ways of life. Such experience is presumably what he primarily had mind when he claimed that democracy “is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”⁷ Conjoint inquiry is communicated experience in one of its most vital forms. And when Dewey elsewhere says that “[t]he clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy”⁸ we may take this aspect of communal life to be a leading implication. In sum, Dewey’s conception of democracy is that of an inquiring community, and he insisted that education should follow suit.

I mention these origins of the idea of a Community of Inquiry in Dewey and Peirce to draw attention to the influence of pragmatism on Lipman. While no educational program is devoid of philosophical commitments, the influence of pragmatism—and of Dewey in particular—upon Lipman’s work is sufficient to make an examination of the pragmatic philosophical commitments of the Community of Inquiry worthwhile. I will explore the extent to which pragmatic conceptions of truth and meaning are embedded in the Community of Inquiry, as well as briefly examining the Deweyan underpinnings of its moral and social commitments. To the degree to which it has these allegiances, the Community of Inquiry is likely to inherit both the strengths and the problems of pragmatism. In addition, however, it is arguable that it faces a pragmatic problem of its own. While the Community of Inquiry aims to be a philosophically open encounter with all kinds of issues and ideas, it is possible that pragmatic conceptions are so constitutive of it that they may skew the pitch philosophically. I will also address this issue.

1. Truth

The most succinct pragmatist account of truth is Peirce’s statement that truth is “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate...”⁹ or,

⁶ Ibid, p. 146ff.

⁷ Ibid, p. 83.

⁸ *The Public and its Problems*, Later Works, Vol. 2, p. 328.

⁹ C. S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” in Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.), *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 5 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1958), p. 451.

as Peirce elsewhere expresses it, truth is “the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief”.¹⁰ Clearly, this account of truth is of a piece with Peirce’s conception of the ongoing inquires of the scientific community, whose investigations ideally lead to truth at the end of the day.

In Dewey, we find the pragmatist account of truth recast as “warranted assertibility”. A handy early source for our purposes is Dewey’s second lecture on “The Problem of Truth” in 1911,¹¹ where he contrasts the pragmatic theory of truth with the correspondence and coherence theories, beginning with Plato’s identification of truth with being and Aristotle’s view that truth is a property of judgments or propositions.

For Plato, truth resides in an otherworldly reality of which the things of this world are but fleeting shadows. Truth therefore is not given to the senses, but can only be apprehended by the intellect as a result of philosophical inquiry. By contrast, Aristotle claims that truth is a correspondence between the terms of a proposition and those that exist in the subject-matter to which it refers, a proposition being true when the relations expressed by the proposition correspond to those of its referent and false when they do not. The attainment of truth requires a comparison of a proposition with non-propositional fact.

Dewey takes these two views to be the originals of the coherence and correspondence theories of truth and to exhibit their fatal flaws. Plato’s conception leads to the coherence theory because, on such a view, our conceptions reflect the truth only when they are expressible as general definitions that are self-consistent and devoid of counterexamples—as in the successful outcome of a Socratic inquiry. Yet because such definitions refer to independently existing external objects and must state that which is, mere internal coherence and consistency is not enough. Otherwise there is nothing to distinguish our conceptions from grand delusions. And that is “to make fancy the measure of reality”. The problem with the Aristotelian alternative, however, is that, in order to make it workable, we require a means of judging that a proposition actually corresponds to its subject-matter. This

¹⁰Ibid, p. 565.

¹¹ “The problem of truth,” Middle Works, Vol. 6, pp. 31-52.

problem cannot be solved simply by reference to other propositions to which the former corresponds, because that procedure would have to be repeated *ad infinitum*. In other words, we ultimately require propositions that directly correspond to non-propositional objects. Even then, argues Dewey, we have need of some vantage point from which to survey both proposition and object in order to judge of their correspondence.

While Dewey takes this to pave the way for the pragmatic alternative, he tells us that we must first consider the nature of a proposition. To put forward a proposition is not to assert a truth. Propositions differ from matters that are regarded as settled. When a statement conveys a proposition, it is put forward as something that there is some reason to believe—something inferred on the basis of reason or evidence that may be borne out when subject to further inquiry or test. That is to say, a proposition has the status of a hypothesis.

As a mere hypothesis, a proposition is not a truth. It becomes a truth when it has been proven true. This means that propositions are prospective in character and only become findings or truths as a result of inquiry. The search for truth therefore resides in the testing out of a proposition, and a statement is true if and only if its assertion is warranted.

To put the matter figuratively, we may say that just as a ship's compass-needle is a sign that is used for the purposes of navigation, so a proposition functions as a guide to inquiry. A ship's compass is accurate if it is a reliable instrument for navigation, and a proposition is true if it proves to be reliable in inquiry. Of both we may say that they are "tried and true".

Having briefly introduced Dewey and Peirce on truth, the question before us is what import, if any, has a pragmatic conception of truth for the classroom Community of Inquiry? To begin with, Peirce's account is tailor-made to suit the community of scientific inquirers, and so it is commonly supposed that it can be applied to the philosophical Community of Inquiry too—philosophical truths being those conclusions that the community of philosophical inquirers would eventually come to at the end of the day. But philosophy isn't science and schools are not research facilities. Might not an uncritical application of Peirce's ideas to the

educational context result in a quixotic conception of what we may reasonably aim at in the Community of Inquiry?

Etymologically, philosophy may be said to be the love of wisdom, and that includes a hankering after truth. Admittedly, it is now generally agreed that there is no such thing as Platonic truth for philosophers to discover, and much of what at one time was a matter of philosophical speculation has given way to the inquiries of science. Yet even when philosophers at their narrowest have portrayed philosophy as properly concerned only with conceptual analysis (i.e., with meaning) they have not abandoned the quest for truth, but merely restricted their attention to analytic truth. Even a philosopher like Wittgenstein, who in his later work attempts only to deliver us from linguistic misunderstanding, still aims to set us straight. So while there may be contention over what kind of truth philosophical inquiry can yield, there seems to be no escaping the fact that it aims to reveal truth.

Having said this, what prospect is there that elementary school students can come to grips with any such truths? By contrast with professional philosophers and research scientists, they and their teachers are not well versed in the field and lack the technical expertise required. All this may mean, however, is that classrooms of children engaged in philosophical inquiry cannot be expected to extend the boundaries of our philosophical knowledge any more than children engaged in scientific inquiry can be expected to increase our scientific knowledge. It does not affect the fact that children can engage in scientific and philosophical inquiry. Children's fledgling attempts to evaluate philosophical propositions, like their early efforts in testing scientific hypotheses, can be genuine enough. Their inquiries can be directed towards truth, even though they make no original contribution toward our scientific knowledge or philosophical understanding. After all, it is not *our* knowledge and understanding that they strive to increase, but their own.

This brings us to the connection between Dewey's notion of warranted assertibility and one of the most basic features of the Community of Inquiry—its focus on the giving of reasons. When students make statements, offer their opinions, or come up with suggestions, they can usually be regarded as putting forward propositions, to use Dewey's term, which they can be asked to justify. Attempts at

justification can gather support from others, but they can also be met with rejoinders, as well as by the airing of alternative possibilities or different points of view, all of which help to test out a proposition through the give-and-take of reasons. This is a truth-seeking process that obviously fits with Dewey's account. This is not to say that it *implies* his theory of truth, of course. The testing out of propositions through the examination of reasons and evidence is part-and-parcel of any inquiry process, and that fact, all by itself, could not provide a compelling argument for a pragmatic theory of truth.

Although nothing like logical implication is involved, the worry is this: Being pragmatic in its conception, the Community of Inquiry is likely to give succour to attendant notions of things like truth. Lipman plays a straight bat to the issue when he raises it in his novels for the classroom. In Episode 24 of *Lisa*, the correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth are slipped into the narrative, and just when Lisa seems to have the upper hand by saying "Our idea was true because it worked", both Tony and Mark counter, "No, it worked because it was true." While the text thereby leaves the matter open, the question is whether students working with this episode of *Lisa* are likely to be drawn to the pragmatic conception because of the practices in which they are engaged. While I don't have empirical evidence for this, making progress in discussion within the Community of Inquiry would quite naturally suggest to students that they would get to the truth of things if only they were able to persist long enough, so that the truth is that which will survive all the evidence and arguments that can be put to it in the Community of Inquiry. From there it is only a short step to a pragmatic conception of truth. This may not sound like much of a worry, but, as we will see, similar concerns can be raised about the Community of Inquiry when it comes to other respects in which it is the offspring of philosophical pragmatism.

2. Meaning

A convenient way of beginning to see how the Community of Inquiry owes a good deal to a pragmatic conception of meaning is to start with Dewey's way of rendering "an idea" in *How We Think*. There it plays an analogous role to propositions in his account of truth. Just as we entertain propositions, so we have

ideas about the meaning of things. A proposition becomes a truth only if it survives scrutiny, and an idea leads us to the meaning we were after only as it helps to bring our inquiries to a satisfactory conclusion.

Dewey reminds us that not knowing the meaning of something or suspecting that we have but a partial comprehension of it provides a reason to inquire. We want to understand whatever it is that we are inquiring into—that is, to more fully grasp its meaning. As we proceed, we entertain ideas in the hope that, when we work them through, they may resolve our difficulty. Such ideas are defined by their function. “Whatever in a doubtful situation or undecided issue helps us to form a judgment and to bring inference to a conclusion by means of anticipating a possible solution is an idea,” says Dewey, “and nothing else is.”¹² Ideas result in the meaning that we sought by leading to a conclusion or resolution that provides understanding.

To have an idea, as opposed to entertaining an idle fancy, is thus to be engaged in solving a problem or obtaining a result—a fact that has enormous educational implications, as Dewey is quick to point out. Citing a presumption still prevalent in school education today, Dewey says that “it is assumed too frequently that subject matter is understood when it has been stored in memory and can be reproduced upon demand.”¹³ Yet to understand a subject matter we need to know the meaning of it, and that requires us to have fleshed out the ideas we have of it by thinking them through. To think things through, in turn, is to inquire into them, and this happens only when there is a challenge to understanding, and not via the educational equivalent of the electronic transfer of files from one location to another.

The relevance of this to Philosophy for Children and the Community of Inquiry is obvious. As anyone acquainted with Lipman’s work knows, his classroom novels are written to be philosophically provocative. They are designed to stimulate students to ask open intellectual questions—questions through which students try to put their finger on something that they wish to understand. As students begin to answer their own questions, their thoughts and suggestions, views and opinions, conjectures and speculations—in short, their *ideas*—play the role that Dewey assigns

¹² *How We Think, Revised Edition*, Later Works, Vol. 8, p. 224.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 234.

to them. In all their variety, they are attempts to arrive at a judgment in a doubtful situation. In the Community of Inquiry they are regarded as tentative, as ideas for the community to consider, which means that they are open to scrutiny and contestation. Insofar as they stand up to the test of reason and evidence, however, such suggestions or ideas are understood to have real significance or import.

When we come down to it, there is more than a parallel between meaning and truth on such an account. To have an idea is, in effect, to entertain a proposition. And if a proposition proves true when subjected to scrutiny, it is also that which makes the most sense to us when all is said and done, and that which is taken to provide the understanding we were after. In this scheme of things, to say that inquiry is a search for truth *and* meaning is to point to the two sides of the one coin. From one point of view, inquiry undertakes to discover the truth of some matter. From another, it seeks the meaning or import of whatever signs or symptoms drew our attention to the problematic situation that led us to inquire in the first place.

If the Community of Inquiry's search for meaning, as for truth, is pragmatic in conception, then it is arguable that there is an inbuilt presumption in favour of a pragmatic conception of meaning when meaning itself becomes the topic of philosophical reflection. That would not be a worry if the Community of Inquiry were supposed to be an induction into philosophical pragmatism, but becomes more of a concern if it is supposed to be equally receptive to other philosophical schools and conceptions – which avowedly it is. The effect may turn out to be negligible, or it might not, as only careful and systematic study could reveal. But in the absence of evidence it is certainly not something to be swept under the carpet, or hidden behind a presumption to theoretical neutrality. Such a presumption in the methods of philosophy is at least as ancient as Socrates. Yet as everyone who has studied the early dialogues of Plato knows, Socrates' claim to have no substantive philosophical doctrines to offer should not be taken to imply that his methods come with no philosophical baggage. They do.

3. Ethics

On a pragmatic conception, moral values are justified by their utility in solving problems in social life. Given this, it is not surprising that Dewey argued for

moral values to be regarded as working values that face the tribunal of experience, being subject to modification or rejection in much the same way as hypotheses in experimental science. Only then, he claims, can we finally throw off outmoded conceptions of fixed and absolute rules and ends, and stop seeking moral assurance in such things as religion and time-honoured tradition, with their ways of knowing that belong to a pre-scientific view of knowledge and how we come by it.¹⁴

Dewey is a consequentialist. The idea that we should treat our values as working values, much in the way that research scientists treat their scientific conjectures as working hypotheses, urges us to assess our values in terms of their consequences for our lives rather than clinging to them come what may. He is also a believer in moral improvement. Such moral deliberation would assist us to find a path between the impossible peaks of absolutism and the quagmires of relativism, bringing a kind of rationality into play that made sense of the idea of moral progress. Cumulative knowledge of the connections between our policies and their consequences would be a continuing source of enlightenment, and could be used to assess our current values, allowing us to revise them when they were found wanting.

In light of all this, one may worry whether Dewey is able to distinguish moral consequences from prudential, economic or other ones that might be applied to the evaluation of action. What in his scheme of things could possibly make a consideration distinctively moral? To this, Dewey makes the following reply:

Moral deliberation differs from others not as a process of forming a judgment and arriving at knowledge but in the kind of value which is thought about. The value is technical, professional, economic, etc., as long as one thinks of it as something which one can aim at and attain by way of having, *possessing*; as something to be got or to be missed. Precisely the same object will have a moral value when it is thought of as making a difference to the self, of determining what one will *be*, instead of merely what one will *have*. . . . The choice at stake in a moral deliberation or evaluation is the worth of this and that kind of character and disposition.¹⁵

¹⁴ See *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Middle Works, Vol. 12 and *The Quest for Certainty*, Later Works, Vol. 4.

¹⁵ *Ethics, Revised Edition*, Later Works, Vol. 7, p. 274.

While moral philosophers tend to focus on either conduct or character, Dewey is here concerned with the connection between the two. He is saying that moral deliberation is distinctive because it is concerned with the kinds of traits and proclivities that are reinforced by this or that action and whether, upon reflection, they are the kinds of personal qualities that we would want.

Given this, moral deliberation can have value only if it has some effect upon the sort of people we become. The means by which it could have this effect are not immediately obvious, but perhaps this kind of self-reflection leads to the formation of secondary desires—desires to be inclined this way rather than that—and thereby makes possible a kind of self-determination that only a being with our meta-cognitive capacities could have.

Returning to the Community of Inquiry, we may first of all note that the exercise of students' moral judgment not only brings many aspects of their personal make-up into play, but also makes those traits objects of reflection. In reflecting upon their own proclivities, students cannot help but be engaged in Deweyan moral reflection, and thereby in self-formation. That is to say, in the moral consideration of character and conduct, students are brought to think about their own dispositions, and thus begin to grow into the kind of persons that they want to be upon reflection.

It is vital to note that in the Community of Inquiry this reflective process is not just an individual one. It occurs between people. It is in fact primarily intersubjective, and only secondarily a process that goes on in the individual. Vygotsky's doctrine that "all the higher mental functions originate as actual relations between human individuals" certainly applies here.¹⁶ But precisely because individuals' attitudes and values are subject to the thoughtful reflections of their peers, this process promotes socially desirable self-formation. Building upon the connection between moral deliberation and self-formation, we can say that learning to think about ourselves in the Community of Inquiry makes us into people who are more socially intelligent.

¹⁶ L.S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner and Ellen Souberman (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1978, p. 57.

It has sometimes been suggested that Dewey is a relativist, and occasionally, likewise, the Community of Inquiry has been charged with encouraging relativism. Both charges are mistaken and for the same reason. They equate the denial of absolutism with acquiescence in relativism, failing to see that inquiry provides a middle way. While it is avowedly fallible, inquiry is guided by reason and evidence in its search for truth. Another charge that might be made to stick, however, is that the Community of Inquiry is wedded to a pragmatic moral outlook – that it is likely to turn out ethical pragmatists rather than producing ethical relativists. This is not a complaint against pragmatism as such, of course, but the criticism that the Community of Inquiry skews the pitch philosophically. Educationally and morally speaking, the Community of Inquiry is concerned with self-formation through collaborative inquiry or reflective experience. While this might not, by itself, be expected to lead to ethical pragmatism, when it occurs within a Deweyan model of inquiry the tendency must surely be there. When students are used to inquiring into various opinions and points of view and evaluating them by their consequences, their ethical inquiries can be expected to follow suit. This means treating their ethical values and opinions as mere propositions or working values, to be evaluated by their consequences in one circumstance or another.

4. Political Philosophy

Little needs to be added to what was said in the Introduction in regard to the connection between Dewey's concept of democracy and the Community of Inquiry. Dewey equates democracy not with elected representative government, but with life in the inquiring community. He has in mind a community that is at once collaborative and inclusive, where everyone entitled to be heard and have their interests taken into account. The members of such a community thereby will be encouraged to vigorously contribute to building the community and to share responsibility for its growth and development. And the open interaction to be found in such a community is a great promoter of positive freedom. It liberates the powers of the individual and provides a source of human flourishing.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Democracy and Education*, Middle Works, Vol. 9, pp. 92-94.

That this is the guiding conception of the Community of Inquiry has already been shown. As Lipman makes clear in discussing the Community of Inquiry, “the notion of democracy as inquiry, when taken together with the classroom community as the seedbed of inquiry, is suggestive of the participatory democracy guided by intelligence espoused by Dewey.”¹⁸ The focus on inquiry, the active participation of the students in building upon one another’s ideas, the sense of shared responsibility, and the growth and development of the intellectual and social powers of the individual—all of this mirrors Dewey’s conception of democracy. Unlike life in the traditional classroom, the arrangements and procedures built into the Community of Inquiry are explicitly designed as an education for democracy.

An educational practice intended to be a seedbed of Deweyan democracy could hardly provide a neutral medium for inquiring into political ideas. It is possible for students in the Community of Inquiry to argue for other political philosophical ideals, of course, but only by either explicitly or covertly arguing against the very practices that enable them to give voice to those ideals. Such a pragmatic contradiction would not easily be countenanced by the members of that community, and the expression of such things as authoritarian or totalitarian ideals would be likely to meet with astonishment, not to mention stiff opposition. Politically speaking, that may be a good thing, but it indicates that the Community of Inquiry does not provide a level playing field when it comes to political philosophy.

5. The Myth of Neutrality

Is it possible to provide a successful rational argument against rationality? Seemingly, it is not. For the argument to succeed, it would have to be rational, and therefore self-defeating. This provides an example of a way of proceeding that cannot be turned against itself. Now, we have seen that the Community of Inquiry involves ways of proceeding inspired by pragmatic and largely Deweyan conceptions. Is it possible for the Community of Inquiry to turn against those conceptions? Unlike in the case of a rational rejection of rationality, it is a logical possibility. There would be no logical contradiction in the Community of Inquiry

¹⁸Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991), p. 252.

accepting a Platonic conception of truth, for example, or rejecting consequentialism in favour of a deontological approach to ethics. But there would be a tension in such outcomes that may amount to a pragmatic contradiction.

This is easy to see in the case of Deweyan democracy. The members of the Community of Inquiry could not reject the ideals of Deweyan democracy without abandoning the Community of Inquiry. If they were to persist in the practice while claiming to reject it, there may not be a formal contradiction—that is, something of the form $P \ \& \ \sim P$ —but it would involve such an obvious discrepancy between assertion and action that no one would take the claim seriously. So long as its members remain wedded to the Community of Inquiry, they are unable to assent to anything other than such democratic ideals on pain of committing a pragmatic contradiction.

Although the tension is less obvious in the other cases reviewed, it is there. We can imagine the Community of Inquiry coming to favour a deontological outlook in ethics, for example, insisting upon the importance of obeying ethical rules and duties, and totally abandoning the idea that the consequences of an action must be taken into account in deciding what it is morally appropriate to do. But then, following Kant, the members of the Community of Inquiry, as practical ethicists, would only ever need to ask one question: What if everyone were to do that? Given this, it would no longer make sense to inquire into the likely consequences of various possible courses of action in order to evaluate them. Yet evaluation of the live possibilities in a problem domain against criteria that are themselves open to debate is part-and-parcel of the Deweyan model of inquiry that is carried out over and over again in the Community of Inquiry. It should come as no surprise that this kind of process, with its origins in practical problem-solving and elementary scientific method, fits with Deweyan ethical consequentialism. One should expect consistency and goodness of fit between Dewey's ethical outlook and his insistence on inquiry. And something of that consistency may be expected to rub off on members of the Community of Inquiry.

The same can be said about truth and meaning. The Community of Inquiry is constantly coming up with propositions and ideas and testing them out. This is how

it tracks truth and constructs meaning. Given that this practice mirrors Dewey's pragmatic account of truth and meaning, it would be natural for theory to follow practice in the Community of Inquiry. Again, while there would be no logical contradiction in members of the Community of Inquiry coming to other theoretical conclusions about truth and meaning, there is no escaping the tension that would then exist between theory and practice.

Admittedly, the members of the classroom Community of Inquiry are unlikely to realise that they are carrying philosophical baggage just by virtue of the practices in which they are habitually engaged. Yet that doesn't unburden them. In fact, it makes it all the more likely that, if they are consistent with their practice and persist long enough, they will unwittingly end up with corresponding philosophical views. Of course, in many actual classroom communities of inquiry, students do not persist long enough or have sufficient philosophical direction to end up with any general theoretical positions. But the failure to formulate the theories that underlie the practice does not, as I say, mean that the Community of Inquiry labours unencumbered.

The idea that the Community of Inquiry provides a philosophically neutral means of engaging in philosophical inquiry is highly questionable, if not a myth. Does this mean that we need to reform the Community of Inquiry? If we can take steps to counteract the potential for inbuilt philosophical bias, then surely we should. What steps we might take must remain a matter for future deliberation, although I should say that mere awareness of the issue is at least a first step. It certainly does not follow that we should abandon the Community of Inquiry in favour of some other method, such as the Socratic one. The Socratic Method carries its own implicit philosophical presumptions. And that the Community of Inquiry is as near a philosophically neutral a way of engaging in philosophical inquiry as any other cannot easily be gainsaid.

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