Dewey’s Challenge to Teachers

Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy

Abstract

Given the serious social problems confronting Americans and others worldwide, the authors propose that Dewey’s 1932 challenge to teachers is worthy of reconsideration by educators at all levels. In times similar to our own, Dewey challenged teachers to cultivate students’ capacities to identify their happiness with what they can do to improve the conditions of others. At first glance, his challenge seems utopian. In order to justify their proposal for reconsideration, the authors explicate Dewey’s challenge by discussing two aspects of the thinking that lies behind it. These are 1) Dewey’s concept of ethical love and his argument that it is a means to social reform and 2) Dewey’s concept of happiness and his argument that ethical love is the means to happiness. The authors conclude that in an educational climate focused principally on helping students earn a living, we need to be, like Dewey, equally concerned with helping students have a life worth living.

In 1932, as America struggled to overcome the great economic depression and Hitler was taking power in Germany, Dewey issued a challenge to teachers. Based upon what he viewed as the principle by which to judge “the processes of education, formal and informal,” he urged teachers to embrace the following goal: “Education should create an interest in all persons in furthering the general good, so that they will find their own happiness realized in what they can do to improve the conditions of others” (LW 7: 243).

In setting this challenge to teachers, Dewey has in mind helping students develop their character in two ways. First, teachers should nurture students’ sensitivity to the impact of their speech and actions upon others. Second, they should cultivate students’ capacity to take the perspective of the “ideal spectator,” that is, to treat the interests of others impartially, with the same weight as their own (LW 7: 246). The first sort of character development is primarily affective. The second
focuses on detached reflection and is primarily cognitive. Although some researchers have taken up Dewey’s emphasis on developing students’ sensitivity to others by exploring what they call “social and emotional learning” (Elias, Parker, and Kash, 2008), much character education remains principally cognitive. This is true of moral theory and applied ethics courses taught at the college level that emphasize critical thinking skills as well as middle and high school courses that focus on discussion of moral dilemmas that arise in assigned novels and plays (see Pascarella and Terenzai, 2005; Simon, 2001).

In response to exclusive emphasis on the cognitive dimension of character development, we believe Dewey would argue that this approach is less satisfactory than a more integrated one. He might claim that because students can intelligently defend their moral point of view or carefully analyze a moral dilemma, it does not follow that they will persistently act on their more reflective judgments or pursue the actualization of their ideals when they encounter serious obstacles in their path. As Dewey noted, “no matter how elaborate and how rational is the object of thought, it is impotent unless it arouses desire” (LW 7: 187).

In sum, meeting Dewey’s challenge requires that teachers promote integration of feeling and thought or “integrity of character” (LW 7: 257). He urges teachers to nurture and blend these two aspects of personality that are often seen as disparate or antithetical to one another. This is obviously a daunting task. A sign perhaps, of the difficulty of, or lack of energy for, rethinking and evaluating current character education is the fact that at the 2009 American Educational Research Association Convention less than one half of one percent of the 2,000 presentations were devoted to it. That is, moral and character education appear to occupy very little space on the present educational research agenda. Nevertheless, given the enormity of the economic and political troubles that Americans face today, we believe that Dewey’s challenge to nurture students’ potential to “find their happiness realized in what they can do to improve the conditions of others” is worthy of serious reconsideration by teachers at all levels.

In 1932, Dewey did not give specifics about how teachers should meet this challenge. In view of the structure of his Lab School at the University of Chicago, it is likely that his strategy would focus on giving every student a share of communal work in order to strengthen his or her “social sense” (MW 1: 333). However, despite the obvious importance of strategies for implementing and accessing character education, the focus of our essay is not on particular methods or programs (for recent discussions of such programs, see Corrigan, Grove, Vincent, Chapman, and Walk, 2007; Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen, 1998; Nuccie and Narvaez, 2008; Noddings, 2002; Skillen, 1997). Instead, our focus is on Dewey’s challenge to teachers and its implication that time devoted to researching character and moral education should be equivalent to that currently devoted to researching how to raise students’ skill levels in areas like science, mathematics, and technology. To further explicate Dewey’s challenge as well as defend our view that his challenge deserves reconsideration, we focus on two features of the thinking undergirding it. These are

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1) Dewey’s concept of ethical love and his argument that it is an important means to furthering social reform and 2) his concept of happiness and his argument that ethical love is the means to the highest happiness. Before turning to these two aspects of Dewey’s thought, we highlight some parallels between Dewey’s world of the 1930s and our present situation.

**Dewey’s Challenging Times and Ours**

The day after the 2008 presidential election, an article in the *New York Times* reported that, based on exit-poll interviews, “nearly nine of every 10 Americans think the country is on the wrong track,” a figure that represents “the deepest expression of national pessimism in polling history.” The article concludes that President-elect Obama would take the helm of a country that is “weary of the past and wary of the future, gloomy about its place in the world, cynical about its government and desperate for some sense of deliverance” (Baker, 2008). The domestic climate described in the *New York Times* strongly parallels observations John Dewey made approximately 75 years earlier. In *A Common Faith*, published in 1934, Dewey wrote, “It is not difficult to make a severe indictment of existing social relations. It is enough to point to the war, jealousy, and fear that dominate the relations of one state to another; to the growing demoralization of the older ties of domestic life; to the staggering evidence of corruption and futility in politics, and to the egoism, brutality, and oppression that characterize economic activities” (LW 9: 49).

In an effort to bring about social reform, Dewey calls upon educators to cultivate students’ capacities to identify their happiness with what they can do to improve the conditions of others. What thinking forms the background of his challenge?

**Ethical Love As The Means to Social Reform**

Underlying Dewey’s challenge to teachers—and our first justification for our claim that it is worthy of reconsideration—is Dewey’s view of ethical love and its potential for social reform. We speak of “social reform” in the broad sense in which Dewey employed the phrase (LW 1: 307-308). For Dewey, social reform includes any changes in political, educational, economic, and family practices (and institutions) that lead to enriched experience for as many people as possible. Put otherwise, Dewey believes that the egoism, brutality, fear, and brutishness that mark many of our industrial society’s dealings and relations can be reduced through character education. His strategy rests upon an emotional aspect of character education that, as we have already noted, is often slighted by educators. Dewey’s primary means of reducing what, in the 1930s, he saw as a sense of hopelessness in the face of “immense forces” whose “workings and consequences” we have no power to affect is what he calls “ethical” love (LW 13: 176; LW 7: 259; EW 2: 250).

Dewey’s juxtaposition of “ethical” and “love” is unusual. We normally associate love with romance, sexual attraction, filial affection, and friendship. By contrast, we associate the ethical with self-constraint, the rights of others, principles
of conduct, and public approbation. Dewey recognizes these features of morality, but he adds another dimension to his conception of ethical behavior. Since he believes that all thinking rests upon feelings and emotions (Williams, 1982, p. 127), he maintains that ethics and love, reason and emotion, are not natural enemies but are mutually enhanced when working in a dynamic harmony (LW 10: 166). It follows that if people are going to both intelligently and persistently work to “improve the conditions of others,” and if they are going to display “strength of will” (LW 7: 190), they will need to fall in love with this objective. If they do fall in love with this ideal, they will organize their lives around it. They will continually be thinking about this objective in the way a lover continually thinks about his or her loved one. They will be devoted to this objective, make sacrifices in its service, and fully identify with it. This explains why Dewey argues that if we—and uppermost in his mind are educators—can cultivate the human capacity for ethical love, we stand our best chance of furthering the general good. He writes,

For in its ethical sense, love signifies completeness of devotion to the objects esteemed good. . . . It involves courage because an active and genuine interest nerves us to meet and overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of its realization. It includes wisdom or thoughtfulness because sympathy, concern for the welfare of all affected by conduct, is the surest guarantee for the exercise of consideration, for examination of a proposed line of conduct in all its bearings. (LW 7: 259)

Dewey’s call for “completeness of devotion to the objects esteemed good” may raise the specter of the 1930s and the German people’s devotion to Nazism. We certainly acknowledge that history offers many examples of people who have fully committed themselves to ideals or goals that have had horrific consequences for others. Dewey himself recognizes this when he points out that potentially positive human capacities can be used for deplorable ends. Referring to Hitler’s German Fascist state, Dewey observed that, for large numbers of people, Nazism took the form of “idealistic faith . . . of being engaged in creating a pattern for new institutions which the whole world will adopt in time” (LW 13: 88). In other words, Nazism appealed to some aspects of personality that Dewey views as the “better elements in human nature” (LW 13: 88), namely, our desire to cooperate, be creative, and serve some greater cause.

However, Dewey’s notion of ethical is not comprised solely of wholehearted devotion to a cause. It also includes “thoughtfulness” and “sympathy,” and these are important for Dewey because they guarantee concern for “the welfare of all affected by conduct” (LW 7: 259). In other words, love in its ethical sense has equally significant emotional and cognitive elements, both of which are involved in a harmonious and fruitful give and take. Ethical love brings purposeful, devoted “strength of will” into dialogue, that is, into a “cooperative interaction of . . . opposed energies,” with impartial reckoning of one’s actions upon others—“whether friends or strangers, fellow citizens or foreigners” (LW 10: 166; LW 7: 257). Thus, those who
are wholeheartedly devoted to totalitarian, authoritarian states or inhumane, intolerant practices do not exemplify what Dewey views as ethical love since they do not display interest in making what he describes as an impartial account of one’s actions upon others.

In addition, those who promote inhumane, intolerant practices are hardly intent on actualizing the sort of “objects esteemed good” that Dewey has in mind. What does Dewey mean by “objects esteemed good”? Most generally, Dewey means objects that promote social reform, that is, objects that promote the conditions that lead to richer, fuller, and more meaningful experiences for oneself as well as make such experiences more and more widely available to others. For Dewey, these goods are divisible into two main categories.

**Esteemed Objects that Promote Communication**

The first category includes objects that lead to better communication. Dewey has in mind more than the ability to share news and information. He is principally concerned with the consequences of our communications. He urges fostering communication that promotes social reform by increasing our ability to see the impact of our actions upon others. This goal of increased sensitivity to others explains Dewey’s praise for ethical love’s “thoughtfulness” and “sympathy.” These qualities increase our “concern for the welfare of all affected by conduct” and promote consideration of our proposed lines of conduct in all their bearings. The esteemed objects in this first category help break down the barriers of class, race, and national territories. In sum, this sort of communication is an expression of what Dewey calls ethical love because it promotes the kinds of interactions that he places at the center of democratic living (MW 9: 93).

**Esteemed Objects that Promote Things We Most Prize**

The second category of objects esteemed good, for Dewey, are practices that further “the things in civilization we most prize” (LW 9: 57). Among the goods Dewey believes we most prize are those that increase understanding of political, public, and private institutions, especially of the workings of commerce, education, and nature. Dewey also includes whatever improves and adds to the practices of the arts (literary, painterly, musical), the sciences, family life, and friendship (LW 9: 35).

A study of Dewey’s life offers concrete examples of objects that he esteemed good, ones that he tried to perfect, that he loved, and to which he fully devoted himself. Over a 40-year period of teaching, he researched, experimented, and wrote about ways to improve education. He spent the decade of the 1920s leading a movement to outlaw war. He tried to establish a third political party in the United States and was a founding member of the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the New School for Social Research. These efforts reflect his own devotion to improved social institutions and human practices with the end-in-view of enriched experience for the greatest number of people.
Ethical Love as the Means to the Highest Happiness

Also underlying Dewey’s challenge, and our second justification in support of our claim that it is worthy of reconsideration, is his conception of happiness and its relation to ethical love. According to Dewey, in addition to increased changes for social reform, the advantage of fostering ethical love among students is that it increases students’ chances for the highest happiness.

Dewey’s Conception of the Highest Happiness

At first glance, it seems that asking teachers to develop their students’ capacities for ethical love is utopian since it is totally out of step with the dominant view of happiness in our culture. Our students, like most Americans, typically identify happiness with wealth, popularity, and pleasures of various sorts. Although Dewey appreciates the importance of pleasures, he does not identify pleasure with happiness (LW 10: 23). The reason is that pleasures come and go and are dependent upon many circumstances that we cannot control. After all, as he observes, life is “unstable, uncannily unstable” (LW 1: 43). By contrast, Dewey argues that the most fulfilling happiness is “not at the mercy of circumstances” (LW 7: 302). It results from a steadfast commitment to one’s intelligently and wholeheartedly chosen ideals.

Thus, Dewey sees happiness not as something we gain from experiences, things like fame, amusement, or physical gratification. Rather, it is an attitude we bring to experience. It is a product of personal character and disposition. Whereas we cannot control the outcome of our actions or the pleasures we receive from various sorts of experiences, Dewey believes that we can control our disposition. This is why Dewey challenges teachers to focus on cultivating students’ social sympathies and capacity for collaborative work with others. Although our culture, through countless advertisements and enticements, cultivates the identification of happiness with what we can, individually, take from life, Dewey counsels teachers to cultivate in their students the disposition to identify happiness with what they can do to improve the conditions of others. More specifically, the dispositions or traits of personality that Dewey claims we need to cultivate if we are to be happy are stability of character and “braveness and equanimity of soul” (LW 7: 198).  

We grant that each of these traits seems difficult to develop. It can be difficult to achieve stability, braveness, and equanimity while managing the emotional roller coasters of life and overcoming our deeply rooted fears and anxieties. However, Dewey believes it is possible to surmount these barriers to happiness, and the key to doing this, for him, is ethical love. In the following sections, we explain what Dewey means by stability of character and braveness and equanimity of soul. We also explain why he believes that ethical love opens the door to these dispositions.

Stability of character. For Dewey, the life of someone who has stable character shows consistency and order. People with stable character do not act on their first impulses. Their lives, as a result, display “ordered richness” rather than episodic discontinuity (LW 14: 229). The life of a deeply happy person, for Dewey, has a nar-
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In short, someone with stable character has achieved a dynamic harmony amongst her various impulses and thoughts. She has developed a unified, yet growing, more and more widely interested self.

The means to achieving this dynamic unity, according to Dewey, is ethical love. Stability of character is the result of an individual having a vision of the person she wants to become, a person whose life reflects the ethically loved ideal, in other words, the objects esteemed good to which she has chosen to devote herself. Her stability comes about as she continually shapes her life in accordance with this vision.

**Braveness of soul.** What does Dewey mean by “braveness of soul?” In remarks at his 70th birthday, Dewey observed that one of the greatest obstacles to happiness is an all too present underlying fear of life and what it may bring (LW 5: 421). This generalized fear leads people to turn in on themselves or narrow their interests. It keeps them from continually growing and finding ways to an expanded self and more meaningful, fuller experiences. According to Dewey, the way to overcome this fear and develop braveness of soul is by nourishing fear’s opposite, namely, ethical love. More specifically, he encourages us to love and wholeheartedly embrace what we, after “using our thought to the utmost,” most value (LW 1: 314). When we do this, we so identify with what we value that we devote ourselves to it, a devotion that leads to broader interests as we continually explore ways to actualize our ideals. More specifically, the embrace of esteemed objects enables us to override worries about personal pain and death. We “lose” our limited self to “find” an expanded, more widely interested one (MW 9: 133; LW 10: 199), an expanded self that is no longer focused on protecting a narrow, frightened one.

Dewey’s belief in the power of ethical love to help us overcome fear is dramatically expressed in the lines he approvingly quotes from George Eliot’s novel, *Romola*, in both the 1908 and 1932 editions of the *Ethics*. In the passage that Dewey quotes, Eliot’s character refers to the “importance of much feeling for the rest of the world” and the ability to sacrifice for the ideal that we esteem good as the means to the fullest happiness. Eliot’s character declares:

> It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thought and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good. (MW 5: 274; LW 7: 199)

In Dewey’s admiration for Eliot’s character’s counsel about how to achieve happiness, we hear echoes of Dewey’s Protestant Christianity, echoes of the religious idea of our narrow selves being “vanquished” to find larger selves (LW 9: 15). However, Dewey secularizes the idea of being vanquished by urging us to submit to the demands of an esteemed ideal rather than the demands of a deity.
Aside from overcoming fears and allowing us to develop larger, more exploratory and open selves, what other consequences follow from nurturing ethical love and embracing an esteemed ideal? For Dewey, braveness of soul helps us see setbacks as inevitable but not to be regretted. It helps us see untoward events as new opportunities for experiencing the joys of growth as we consider ways to deal with these new challenges (LW 1: 49). As Dewey remarks in his popular 1930 essay, “What I Believe,” there is joy even in the midst of trouble and defeat “whenever life-experiences are treated as potential disclosures of meanings and values that are to be used as means to a fuller and more significant future experience” (LW 5: 272).

“Braveness of soul,” for Dewey, also helps us accept that, given the human condition, we cannot have everything we want (LW 7: 189). We accept the difficult choices we must make between competing goods. A person with braveness of soul is willing to give up important desires, as well as the present pleasures that the thought of their future satisfaction yields, in order to satisfy other desires that reflection reveals as more worthy. For example, a person with braveness of soul may sacrifice the desire to avoid risking her physical well being for the sake of working for the common good, for promoting democratic living and making more readily available to others the goods and practices that she finds most excellent in life. Otherwise put, braveness of soul means having what Dewey calls “strength of will”: being able to accept pain and hardship in pursuit of the common good (LW 7: 190).

**Equanimity of soul.** Regarding the importance of “equanimity of soul” as a component of happiness and a consequence of ethical love, we take Dewey to believe that a person who has equanimity of soul sees herself as in communion with rather than alienated from nature. She sees nature as the source of her own ability to love and further what she finds excellent in life. Her sense of continuity rather than alienation from nature enables her to experience peace in her activities or during her pursuit of the ideal that she has embraced and not just in brief moments of rest or during brief feelings of accomplishment (MW 14: 181). In short, a person with equanimity has respect for the universe “in which we live and have our being” (MW 14: 227). She appreciates both the uncertainties of nature and the ways nature cooperates with her, at least at times, in furthering and reconstructing her ideals.

Reflecting his own reverence for nature, Dewey offers the following advice. The way to finding unity with the world is by becoming more sensitive to our surroundings. We need to enlarge the self by opening to nature and trusting its rhythms and potential for idealization. Using an image of moonlight reflected on the water that is reminiscent of an image Wordsworth used in “The World Is Too Much With Us,” Dewey lyrically expresses his own experience of peace as feelings of belonging in the world. The conclusion of a poem that Dewey most likely composed in his 50s or 60s reads as follows:

Then rose the swelling moon  
And gently sought its magic way  
Across the waters. In a tune
Of silver’d silence merged the day
With night, earth with sky, the world and me.
Through the moonlight’s softly shining grey
By the magic of inaction beguiled
Life and death slept close reconciled (Dewey, 1979, p. 20)

In this poem, Dewey expresses his belief that we are often out of tune with nature. We are not moved by the ways in which what we see in the universe is ours. “There is no limit,” he writes, “to the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in and of themselves—that in the abstract—would be designated ‘ideal’ and ‘spiritual’” (LW 10: 35-36). In other words, if we can get in tune with the universe, then the objects esteemed good that can be promoted and the richer, fuller experiences that can be made more available to others are infinite. We have a chance to experience a harmony of self and world that enables us to keep on keeping on, to continue working to realize our ethically loved ideal, despite life’s inevitable defeats and frustrations. It is the sort of dynamic harmony and belonging that Dewey expressed in his poem as he gazed one night at a moonlit bay.

We interpret Dewey’s counsel to expand the self so that we feel unified with the world as a way of asking us to put aside our egos or narrow selves, and ethical love helps us do this. It helps us see that our effort to work intelligently on behalf of the goods we most esteem is not just our own idea or the idea of those in agreement with us. Our efforts in service of the common good are an expression of what is intelligent in nature. In the passage from Experience and Nature that John Herman Randall, Dewey’s student and longtime Columbia University colleague, calls “the most eloquent passage in Dewey’s most important book” (1940, p. 125). Dewey writes,

Men move between extremes. They conceive of themselves as gods, or feign a powerful and cunning god as an ally who bends the world to do their bidding and meet their wishes. Disillusioned, they disown the world that disappoints them; and hugging ideals to themselves as their own possession, stand in haughty aloofness apart from the hard course of events that pays so little heed to our hopes and aspirations. But a mind that has opened itself to experience . . . knows that its juvenile assumption of power and achievement is not a dream to be wholly forgotten. It implies a unity with the universe that is to be preserved. The belief, and the effort of thought and struggle which it inspires are also the doing of the universe, and they in some way, however slight, carry the universe forward. (LW 1: 313-314)

Dewey recognizes that in a post-Darwinian world, one without divine guarantees of the triumph of the better over the worse, it is easy to give up or conclude that, in pursuing our esteemed object, we are working fruitlessly on our own. We need to avoid despair or the cynicism reflected in Macbeth’s view that life is a tale told by an idiot (LW 10: 197) by being less egotistical and remembering that our
energy, hopes, and desires are expressions of the universe that has spawned us. Our ideals are not our “own possession.” We should know that they are also “the doing of the universe.” According to Dewey, a keen sense that devotion to our ideals is part of the doing of the universe yields the equanimity that is an important means to steady efforts on behalf of our ideals despite the obstacles and defeats that constantly shadow our quest.

With this fuller picture in mind of Dewey’s view of stable character and bravery and equanimity of soul, we can see why he views these as expressions of both ethical love and the happiness that accompanies it. Before concluding our essay, we briefly discuss some philosophic roots of Dewey’s views of ethical love and happiness as well as consider—plus offer a possible rejoinder to—a potential criticism of his challenge to teachers.

**Philosophic Roots of Dewey’s Views of Ethical Love and the Highest Happiness**

Although numerous philosophic strands are woven in Dewey’s thinking, with regard to his challenge to teachers, we briefly discuss two: the Classical Greek tradition and nineteenth-century Romanticism.

**Dewey’s Views of Ethical Love and Happiness as Rooted in the Classical Greek Tradition**

In arguing that intelligent and passionate devotion to furthering the general good (ethical love) is the means to the highest human happiness, Dewey is very much in the classical Greek tradition. For example, Socrates devotedly pursues his ideal of a democratic *polis* by living his life in accordance with his vision of responsible Athenian citizenship. In this respect, Socrates exemplifies a life shaped by ethical love. He also exemplifies the sort of happiness—the stability, courage, and equanimity—that Dewey claims will issue from ethical love. Despite what many might consider an unhappy life-ending, Socrates is calm and brave in the face of death because he believes that he has become the person he wants to be as the “gadfly” of Athens. Although out of step with many Athenian citizens, he believes he is in step with the proper ordering of the human soul and the true order of the universe (Plato, 1948, pp. 48-49). In sum, Socrates’ life is a case study of the fruits of ethical love and the ways in which it can promote social reform as well as individual fulfillment and happiness.

Like Dewey and Socrates, Aristotle also identifies ethical love—what he calls the exercise of the intellectual and practical virtues—with the highest happiness (1962, pp. 287-291). He also notes that most people (“the common run”) believe that happiness comes from pleasure, wealth, or honor (1962, p.6), and, like Dewey, he rejects pleasure, wealth, and honor as means to happiness. Also anticipating Dewey, one of the reasons Aristotle rejects these as means to happiness is because he believes that we are not in control of them. Their fruits can easily be taken from us.
Dewey’s Views of Ethical Love and Happiness as Rooted in Nineteenth-Century Romanticism

Dewey’s challenge to teachers reflects not only the influence of classical Greek views but also the influence of another important philosophic tradition, namely, nineteenth-century philosophic Romanticism. What Dewey inherits from this tradition is the view of the world as imperfect but growing, a dynamic organism capable of idealization and perfection. He also inherits the belief that reason is inadequate to reveal the nature of the world. One needs imagination and intuition as well. Dewey’s debt to this tradition is most pronounced in his charge to teachers to cultivate students’ natural sympathies for other people, all living things, and nature.

Many Dewey scholars have explicated the influence of Hegel’s nineteenth-century idealism on Dewey (see, e.g., Good, 2006). What is less explored is another nineteenth-century influence on Dewey, namely, the romanticism of John Stuart Mill. Dewey wrote extensively about Mill, and in Mill’s life and work Dewey may very well have seen a foreshadowing of himself, someone who found that a fulfilling and moral life requires the development of both thought and feeling. In ways that parallel Dewey’s own intellectual and spiritual history, Mill, when 22, found in Wordsworth’s poetry a way of cultivating his own “internal susceptibilities,” a cultivation that he came to realize was a crucial accompaniment to cultivation of the intellect (Mill, 1969/1873, pp. 88-91).

Mill foreshadows Dewey not only in valuing emotions alongside rationality but also in prefiguring Dewey’s notion of the “paradox” of happiness (Mill, 2001/1863, p.16; Dewey, LW 7: 246). In 1863, Mill writes, “paradoxical as it may be, the conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best chance of realizing such happiness as is attainable” (2001/1863, p. 16). In the 1932 Ethics, Dewey echoes Mill about the “paradox” of happiness. He observes that the most enduring happiness is secured when one does not make it an end-in-view and stops going after it directly (LW 7: 246). This is consistent with Dewey’s view of the role of ethical love in happiness. If we constantly focus on whether or not we are happy, we will hardly be able to fully embrace and devote ourselves to objects we esteem good. We will miss the joy and sense of fulfillment that such devotion yields. In other words, Dewey’s view of ethical love’s role in happiness implicitly counsels that the best way to achieve happiness is to forget about one’s own well-being and work to improve the conditions of others. He wants us to develop the habit of promoting and making more widely available what we find excellent in life so that the thought of doing so gives us pleasure and continues to motivate us into action (LW 9: 35). In 1863, a generation before Dewey, Mill made the same point:

[W]hen people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interest must be
Mill’s stress, in the above quotation, on the importance of cultivating “a fellow feeling with the collective interests of mankind” anticipates the belief at the center of Dewey’s conception of ethical love. In addition, Mill’s focus on the importance of expanding our interests is very much an anticipation of Dewey’s emphasis on expanding the self (and our interests) through creative devotion to objects esteemed good.

**A Potential Criticism of Dewey’s Challenge to Teachers: It is Based Upon a Flawed Conception of Human Nature**

Those who would reject Dewey’s challenge to teachers to help their students develop ethical love might claim that it is based on a flawed understanding of human nature, a too optimistic view of our capacity for sympathy for others to overcome narrow self-centeredness. One such critic is Reinhold Niebuhr. Writing in 1932, the same year that Dewey presented his challenge to teachers, Niebuhr criticizes Dewey and his followers for wanting to “save society by increasing the social and political intelligence of the general community through the agency of the school” (1932, p. 212). As opposed to Dewey, Niebuhr argues that change of social institutions requires force. Niebuhr writes, “Since reason is always, to some degree, the servant of interest in a social situation, social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone, as the educator and social scientist usually believes. Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power. That fact is not recognized by most of the educators . . . ” (pp. xiv-xv).

Those, who, like Niebuhr, charge Dewey with an overly optimistic view of our capacity for devotion to objects esteemed good might add to their argument by citing Jeremy Bentham’s analysis of human motivation. Bentham claims that the only motive we have for being considerate and helpful to others is believing that there is a strong chance of profiting by being so (1879, pp. 312-313).

**How Dewey Might Answer This Criticism**

Although Dewey is often said to lack a sense of the tragic in life and an understanding of humans’ capacity for cruelty and insensitivity to others (McDermott, 1991, xxxii; Rockefeller, 1993, pp. 486-487; West, 1993, p. 108), he does recognize that all of us have the potential to be narrowly self-centered and self-serving. As an example, in 1934 he clearly acknowledges the “staggering” corruption in politics and the widespread “brutality” and “oppression” in commerce (LW 9: 49). Nevertheless, he believes that, as social creatures, we also have a deep need for harmony with others and nature, a need that, at best, our current social institutions do not develop and, at worst, substantially frustrate or let atrophy. Dewey also believes that this
need for dynamic harmony with others and nature is the foundation of our desire to lead meaningful, expanding lives and to devote ourselves to ideals shared with others, including those from earlier and later generations.

In addition to pointing to our needs and capacities as social creatures, Dewey might respond by stressing that he does not hold, as critics like Niebuhr assume, that intelligent, responsible behavior is the result of simply appealing to reason or cultivating our ability to calculate and foresee consequences. As we have pointed out, Dewey argues forcefully that all the reasoning in the world will be fruitless as a force for social reform if it does not “stir” our emotions (MW 5: 231). Without such emotional commitment, reasons will, at best, result in half-hearted rather than wholehearted pursuit of esteemed ideals. This is why he insists that intelligent, responsible behavior is also dependent on an integrated approach to the development of character, on the cultivation of foresight and analysis as well as our “impulses toward affection, compassion and justice, equality and freedom” (LW 9: 54). Alongside cognitive development, such affection is crucial, for Dewey, if our culture is to foster highly skilled professionals who exhibit ethical love and a devotion to goods that can be widely and equitably shared.

**Conclusion**

The challenge with which Dewey confronts educators is a daunting one. Dewey wants teachers to cultivate students’ capacities for ethical love, that is, for devoting themselves to esteemed objects that they choose wisely and passionately. He argues that, as paradoxical as it sounds, this is not only the best way to bring about social reform but also the best way to increase students’ chances of gaining the fullest happiness. Unfortunately, in a culture that rewards competitiveness over cooperation and is increasingly colored by a global economy that is (to borrow Dewey’s terms) “brutal,” “oppressive,” and “egoistic,” nurturing the desire among students to promote the common welfare is far from easy. It not only is out of step with widely held cultural values, it is also out of step with a school culture that stresses high-stakes testing, work-place preparation, and a climate of “learn to earn” (Whipps, 2008, p. 59). Nevertheless, we have explicated the thinking underlying Dewey’s challenge to teachers, his conceptions of ethical love, social reform, and happiness, in order to justify our claim that his challenge is worthy of educators’ reconsideration.

In sum, in an era that pollsters say is characterized by cynicism, despair, and the deepest expression of pessimism in U.S. polling history, Dewey’s challenge gives educators hope that there is something they can do in their classrooms, schools, and universities to alter this climate. That is, Dewey offers an answer to the most important question facing educators today: How can we help our students both earn a living and shape a life worth living?"
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Notes

1. Those who believe that the development of cognitive skills is most important to moral conduct often argue that emotions get in the way of clear thinking. Emotions can, as William James pointed out, push aside all inclinations to careful reflection that might block the discharge of first impulses. “When any strong emotional state whatever is upon us the tendency is for no images but such as are congruous with it to come up” (1950/1890 p. 563). On the other hand, those who believe that our moral emotions are most important in ethical conduct argue that moral thinking is simply a rationalization for actions driven and controlled by emotion. (For an interpretation of moral conduct as primarily cognitive, see Kohlberg, 1969. For an interpretation of moral conduct as primarily emotive, see Ayer, 1946/1936, ch. 6; Haidt, 2001.)

2. The percentage of sessions focused on character education at the 2009 AERA Convention was confirmed in an email to the authors on April 24, 2009 by Angelle Stromeyer, AERA Program Assistant.

3. A little over one decade ago, Jim Garrison focused on this same important and often overlooked aspect of Dewey’s approach to teaching. Garrison lamented the lack of educational researchers’ attention to the need to train students’ feelings and emotions. He wrote, “Because we become what we love, because that is how people grow, educating eros to desire the greatest good with the greatest passion should be that aspect of education that receives the greatest attention. Ironically, the official curriculum, as well as most research on teaching ignores the passions altogether” (1997, p. 29).

4. Without meaning to imply that Dewey was a Marxist, since he was highly critical of Marx, we note that in this quote from Dewey’s A Common Faith, the adjectives Dewey chooses to characterize his own times echo language used by Marx and Engels in “The Communist Manifesto” to characterize industrial society in the mid-nineteenth century. Describing the distinguishing marks of modern capitalism, Marx and Engels write that, for veiled exploitation, “it [capitalism] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (1978/1848, p. 475). Given Dewey’s high praise for Edward Bellamy’s late nineteenth-century novel, Looking Backward (LW 9: 106), if we were to risk the dangers of labeling his political position, we would call Dewey a “socialist democrat” (for discussion of the difficulty of labeling Dewey’s politics, see Westbrook, 1991, pp. 429-430).

5. By using the word “soul” in this context, Dewey is aware that he risks confusing his readers because of traditional theories that view the soul as “inhabiting the body in an external way” (LW 1: 24). In contrast to these traditional meanings, Dewey uses the word “soul” to point to properties that characterize human beings rather than to some mysterious non-natural entity or force. He writes, “soul’ when freed from all traces of traditional materialistic animism denotes the qualities of psycho-physical activities as far as these are organized into unity” (LW 1: 223). In other words, people who have braveness and equanimity of soul display braveness and equanimity in all that they do. Their bravery or courage, their equanimity or temperance unify or color all that they do. These character traits, for Dewey, are also united or integrated; they inform one another. The unity of braveness and equanimity keeps bravery from becoming rashness and temperance from becoming passivity or over-accommodation.
Dewey’s emphasis on the importance of love and devotion to an esteemed object for overcoming fear and developing bravery has parallels in Viktor Frankl’s view of the power of finding meaning in life (1962). We have in mind Frankl’s idea that people who have found meaning or a strong goal in life will be brave and keep on pursuing their goal despite personal suffering and significant obstacles. One difference may be Dewey’s emphasis on the moral dimension of one’s objects of devotion, i.e., the importance of one’s goals needing to be chosen intelligently and wisely. We also note that the insightfulness of Dewey’s blend of cognitive and emotional strategies for overcoming fear becomes more apparent when compared to the ideas of contemporary “positive psychologists” like Martin Seligman and Jonathan Haidt. They both believe that our pessimism comes from a fear or “negativity bias” that serves the evolutionary function of alerting us to possible dangers, but this “bias,” they both claim, can lead to terrible unhappiness and, in its more extreme forms, is no longer appropriate in today’s environment. However, Seligman’s and Haidt’s strategy for overcoming pessimism and fear is primarily cognitive. They suggest that when we have a habit of forecasting bad consequences, we need to stop and look at the odds of disaster actually occurring or continuing indefinitely (Seligman, 2002, pp. 93-100 and Jonathan Haidt, 2006, pp. 37-39). Although Dewey, as we have pointed out, offers some cognitive strategies for overcoming fear and despair, like viewing untoward events as opportunities for growth, his emphasis on the emotional component of human motivation and activity is especially powerful. We say this because love is the opposite emotion of fear and, thus, to appeal to love to overcome fear makes great sense.

For an informative study of philosophic, theologic, and aesthetic romanticism, see Peckham (1970).

Dewey’s sensitivity to what he viewed as our deep need for harmony with others is loud and clear and repeated word-for-word in two of his early works on education. In 1897 and, again, in 1909 he wrote, “the child is born with a desire to give out, to do, and this means to serve” (EW 5: 64; MW 4: 275).

W. E. B. DuBois, in a talk he gave at Hampton Institute, uses similar language to challenge the Institute’s teachers in ways that very much anticipate Dewey’s 1932 challenge to teachers. In the summer of 1906, DuBois addressed the faculty at Hampton as follows: “I sincerely hope that you will ever be alert to select from your students those of talent and promise and impress them with the fact that life is more than living—that necessary as it is to earn a living, it is more necessary and important to earn a life: that is to do for the world—its thought, its aspiration, its human value—so much that the world will not always continue to ask if life is worth living” (1973, p.14). Dewey also uses similar language in the penultimate paragraph of Reconstruction in Philosophy. He writes, “when the liberating force of human capacity operates as a socially creative force, art will not be a luxury, a stranger to the daily occupations of making a living. Making a living economically speaking, will be at one with making a life that is worth living. And when the emotional force, the mystic force one might say of communication, of the miracle of shared life and shared experience is spontaneously felt, the hardness and crudeness of contemporary life will be bathed in the light that never was on land or sea” (MW 12: 201).

References


Stephen M. Fishman is Professor of Philosophy at The University of North Carolina, Charlotte.
Email: smfishma@uncc.edu

Lucille McCarthy is Professor of English at The University of Maryland, Baltimore County.
Email: mccarthy@umbc.edu