Book Review

The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson

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In *The Gleam of Light*, Naoko Saito argues that educational thinking is at an impasse. On the one hand, there are educational thinkers who deny the very possibility of finding a common foundation upon which to generate shared concepts that can guide educational practice. Taken to an extreme, this type of thinking can lead to the brink of nihilism. On the other hand, there are educational thinkers who assert that the only route to improved practice is through a return to foundational works from the past. This way of thinking leads to arrested development and a premature closing of educational possibilities. To find our way out of this impasse, Saito urges us to reconsider—and so reconstruct—John Dewey’s notion of growth. A reconstructed understanding of growth will avoid “antifoundationalism or a reactionary turn to absolutism and the quest for certainty in democracy and education” (9).

Before launching into this project, Saito offers an overview of how Dewey’s notion of growth has been interpreted. This chapter persuasively argues that ways of interpreting growth have been unhelpfully dominated by an overly scientific reading of intelligence. By reading intelligence this way, interpreters have prematurely narrowed Dewey’s philosophy of education. These interpreters have located Dewey’s thought between the totalizing explanatory frameworks of Hegel and Darwin. As such, they keep Dewey’s philosophy of education within the strict confines of the either/or of foundationalism/antifoundationalism. Saito urges us to see our way out of this either/or and towards a more expansive view of growth.
A way out of this either/or, so Saito argues, is to place Dewey’s notion of growth in conversation with the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in particular, with Stanley Cavell’s reading of Emerson. Saito introduces Cavell’s Emerson through Cavell’s idea of Emersonian moral perfectionism (EMP). EMP, as Saito understands it, is a framework that leads to self-transformation. Given this understanding, Saito focuses on Emerson’s idea of the attained and unattained/unattainable self. As Saito understands it, Emerson’s idea can be understood as follows: The self as it realizes, through an encounter with a friend, a “friendly text,” that it is not the self that it could be, feels a sense of shame at its current constitution. This sense of shame then compels the self to undertake an education that leads to growth and development. This growth is not bound to a fixed end state; rather the self’s idea(l) of growth changes at every stage of its development. Having established that this is growth in EMP, Saito begins reading Dewey’s understanding of growth from this perspective. She places excerpts from Dewey’s writing next to excerpts from Emerson’s writing in order to establish a conversation. While doing this Saito also contests Cavell’s reluctance to place Dewey in conversation with Emerson. Cavell’s reluctance is motivated by his sense that in this conversation Dewey always gains and Emerson always loses. Saito is convinced that she can have this conversation without repressing Emerson’s unique voice. She is tenacious in her commitment to this conversation, and what she achieves through it is notable. Not only does she reconstruct Dewey’s notion of growth, pointing a way out of the impasse described above, but Saito also clearly shows the importance of Emerson in Dewey’s thought. Her analysis challenges and inspires—Emerson would say provokes—educational thinkers to revisit Emerson as a serious and powerful educational thinker. Finally, Saito is a champion for Stanley Cavell’s work, and I see this as particularly promising. Cavell’s potential for educational thinking is staggering. Unfortunately, I think Cavell’s potential—and by extension Emerson’s—for education remains underexplored by Saito’s current book.

Although Ralph Waldo Emerson is clearly a forerunner to Dewey’s progressive thought, and although bringing the thought of these thinkers together does lead to a broader understanding of Dewey’s concept of growth, I am not sure if it is necessary to introduce Cavell’s Emerson to do this work. Dewey’s work, when combined with Emerson’s thinking, has within it the resources to combat the narrow readings that lead to the impasse described above. Cavell himself recognizes that Dewey has a perfectionist strand in his work when he writes that Dewey’s “tireless combating of two forms of moralism” (these are the same one’s listed above in the impasse Saito describes) “constitutes Dewey as some sort of perfectionist—though surely not an Emersonian one.”1 It is my contention that Saito can bring these two thinkers together without Cavell’s thought and accomplish everything that she set out to accomplish in this book. More importantly, in using Cavell to argue for Dewey with Emerson, she fails to fully appreciate the reasons why Cavell chooses to distance Dewey from Emerson. In the rest of this review I wish to chal-
lenge Saito—in the spirit of perfectionist friendship—to reconsider the educative potential of EMP that remains unexplored when EMP is used to buttress Dewey’s notion of growth.

Saito focuses on only two reasons that Cavell gives for distancing Emerson from Dewey and so cannot fully address Cavell’s insistence on keeping this distance. Because of this Saito succumbs to what amounts to Cavell’s main reason for distancing Emerson from Dewey: Dewey—and by extension pragmatism—gains from the encounter with Emerson, but the unsettling force of Emerson’s thought becomes lost.

Cavell repeatedly stresses that the key difference between Emerson and Dewey is in how they respond to skepticism. In the essay that Saito focuses most on, “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?,” Cavell writes, “…neither James nor Dewey seems to take the threat of skepticism seriously….Pragmatism seems designed to refuse to take skepticism seriously, as it refuses—in Dewey’s, if not always in James’s case—to take metaphysical distinctions seriously.” He repeats the same charge in Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, the sourcebook for Saito’s reading of EMP. In this work he writes, “For Dewey the philosophical interpretation of experience was cause for taking up scientific measures against old dualisms, refusing separation. For Emerson the philosophical interpretation of experience makes it a cause for mourning, assigning to philosophy the work of accepting the separation of the world, as of a child.” In this passage Saito focuses on the idea of scientific measures—showing, correctly, that Dewey’s understanding of science or method is more flexible than a narrow positivistic reading allows for—and so neglects an important term: separation. Emerson recognizes the force of the threat of skepticism; he feels that the world that he lives in may not be, may be separate from, the world that he thinks. This recognition—according to Cavell—is what separates Dewey from Emerson. Saito does not acknowledge this. I find this particularly troubling given that Cavell considers EMP a “continuation of the chapters in moral philosophy that constitute Part 3 of The Claim of Reason.” When one sees EMP in this way—as Stanley Bates does in his essay on EMP—skepticism—and not just the tension between the attained and unattainable self—is central to understanding Cavell’s Emerson.

Skepticism is important to Cavell because Cavell believes that attempts to deny skepticism or attempts to overcome skepticism lead to a denial of finitude or a denial of the human. Philosophers who do not deny the threat of skepticism—Wittgenstein, Emerson and Thoreau are key figures for Cavell here—recognize the importance of speaking and writing in ways that keep metaphysical distinctions in play (acknowledging them; feeling their seduction, while not yet being seduced); writing that acknowledges the uncanniness of our ordinary modes of speaking; as if our words—to paraphrase Wittgenstein—can go lost when we don’t see metaphysical distinctions as seductive (that is, when we either assent to them or try avoiding them altogether). The attempt to bridge this distinction, to overcome the metaphysical dualism between mind and world once and for all in order to
gain the surety that allows us to get on with work (the work of growth, the work of self-development, the work of practical power) is a move of avoidance that denies the uncanniness of the ordinary. Richard Eldridge puts it this way, “we wish for more—more mastery, more grounding, more surety—from the ordinary. Yet the ordinary...remains the only scene for our lives as such subjects. We are hence in relation to the ordinary both at home and not at home.” One can feel this uncanny sense of homing and homelessness in Emerson’s language. Reading “Experience,” I am struck by Emerson’s pairing of casual/cause, casualty/causality. He seems to be arguing that causality doesn’t work the way we think it does. The death of his son leaves no impact; it does not cause anything. If something this significant does not cause anything, then it is impossible to have faith in causality. And yet this cannot be the case, because we do learn, we do change, things do affect us. But how? “We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual.” Emerson claims that we cannot experience moments of learning, though we learn (this echoes the second paragraph of “Experience” with its intercalated days), and we cannot learn from experience in any straightforward, or immediate, or non-oblique, way (his inability to grieve for the loss of his son). This leads to Sharon Cameron’s observation that for Emerson: “Events assume meaning (that is, connection) in the present, then, at tremendous cost. For our relation to meaning...is in the form of fatality.” This way of reading “Experience”—one that acknowledges separation and the threat of skepticism—stands in strong contrast to Saito’s reading of the same essay.

According to Saito, “Experience” is an essay that shows Emerson transcending the tragic. This way of reading doesn’t acknowledge the threat of skepticism; rather, in denying its strength (by achieving transcendence) it stands as what Cavell would call a denial of finitude or a denial of the human. Saito argues that Emerson is initially crushed by the death of his child (she proves this by quoting a letter written a day after Waldo’s death and a journal entry written two months after the child’s death) but when it comes time to write “Experience” two years later, his “tone changes” and his “sense of the tragic” is “metamorphosed, toward a quiet resolve” (133). In a parallel way, Saito argues that “Experience” begins with a skeptical question and “Emerson concludes his essay with a scene of awakening: ‘I am at first appraised....’ This is the moment of the rebirth” (159). Both ways of seeing this essay are factually and interpretively wrong. Two weeks after his son dies, Emerson writes to Caroline Sturgis, “I chiefly grieve that I cannot grieve; that this fact takes no more deep hold than other facts, is as dreamlike as they...” It is not the case that Emerson uses writing as a way to transcend the tragic, moving from grief to quiet resolve. Emerson is plagued by the separation he feels between the world as he feels he should feel it and the world as he does feels it. This begins at least two weeks after the death of his son and is not tidily resolved in the essay “Experience.” Again, the line that Saito quotes as the conclusion of “Experience” happens ten paragraphs before the essay’s conclusion. The actual conclusion (composed of lines that form a touchstone in Cavell’s understanding of EMP) reads,
I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I think. I observe that difference and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy…Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.¹⁴

This conclusion is a far cry from overcoming skepticism through rebirth. No, this conclusion reasserts Emerson’s troubled relationship between knowing and experience. Instead of offering the reader this Emerson—the Emerson who feels the threat of skepticism; Cavell’s Emerson—Saito’s Emerson is tame. He is able to use philosophy as a means to overcoming grief and tragedy and so attains his next self (a self that Saito writes will itself need to be developed in the light of another idea[l] of selfhood). His genius has been transformed into practical power; he is victorious; he is—what Cavell would call—a pragmatist.

This Emerson is not Cavell’s Emerson. For Cavell, Emerson’s voice has still not been heard, because he, “calls for is something we do not want to hear.”¹⁵ What he calls for, and what EMP calls for, is an education that acknowledges the threat of skepticism and avoids the seductive call to transcend the tragic. Acknowledging the threat of skepticism would mean accepting that we are prone to disclaim responsibility for our world, our language and our education, because we secretly feel that the “discrepancy” between our mind and the world is too much to overcome.¹⁶ When we do not acknowledge this feeling, we lose sight of the fact that for Cavell skepticism is a continuous threat, not something that can be overcome or transcended. The educational implications of this are staggering. Taking EMP seriously means taking responsibility for creating a shared world of meaning even in the face of the very real threat that we will not succeed. To succeed would mean seeing how the lives of others—especially the lives of students who are coming to terms with their life in language—“drift between their own inexpressiveness and my inaccuracy in responding to them.”¹⁷ When a teacher sees this way, she will see that what she may have hitherto considered an error or a misstep on the part of a student may point to her own limitations. This way of teaching always feels the threat of the tragic as a real threat, and sees education not as a means to overcoming this threat, but as a means to expanding our powers of articulation and our ability to respond to others. An education for articulation and responsiveness—as difficult and uncertain as it may be—seems to be closer to the education that Cavell’s thought calls for.

Notes

2. The difference between their writing styles and their differing treatment of the “recalcitrant child.”
5. Ibid., xx.
7. See Saito’s description of Dewey: “In his rejection of the inner psyche as separate from the outer world, Dewey aims to build an antidualistic, holistic view of the world” (71). She here—as she does elsewhere—seems to be agreeing with Cavell that Dewey’s thought is not representative of EMP because it denies the possibility of separation; it avoids the uncanniness of the ordinary. And yet, because Saito does not recognize the importance that skepticism plays in EMP, she takes this description of Dewey’s thought to keep Dewey and Emerson in conversation.
10. “We do not know today whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered, that much was accomplished….Some heavenly days must have been intercalated somewhere.”
12. Ibid., 22.

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