John Dewey's Idea of Imagination in Philosophy and Education

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Despite the importance which Dewey attached to "the image" and to "imagination" in various discussions on the reconstruction of experience, surprisingly little attention has been given to this subject in writings on Dewey. Beginning with his *Psychology* in 1887, continuing in lectures and writings on educational psychology, philosophy of education, and ethics in the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century, in 1934 "imagination" works its way into Dewey's discussion of the transformation of material as artistic activity in *Art as Experience* and in conceiving of the self as an ideal in *A Common Faith*. The aim of the present essay is to show that, for Dewey, imagination is not a rare activity engaged in only by so-called "creative people." Rather, it is common to us all as a vehicle of learning, by which possibilities we determine to bring new realities into existence. The question is not whether we possess the ability to imagine; it is to find ways of enlarging the scope in which our imagination plays and works and to make more substantial the actualities that our imagination makes possible.

In his *Psychology*, Dewey treats imagination as a stage of knowledge. The following language is characteristic of Dewey while under the spell of philosophical Idealism: "It [imagination] is the transition from the particular stage to the universal. . . . Imagination deals with the universal in its particular manifestation, or with the particular as embodying some ideal meaning, some universal element."[1] By 1896, in a syllabus for a course in educational psychology, the language of Idealism is replaced by an interest in characterizing imagination at work in particular situations. Instead of imagination standing as the bridge between particular and universal, it is now the "mean term between ignorance and realization, between alien material and comprehension in self. It is the mental machinery."[2] Dewey considers imagination to be a power in action, at work in bringing to mind "new, or hitherto foreign" elements in poetry, art, or science.[3] He is no

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Journal of Aesthetic Education, Vol. 25, No. 4, Winter 1991

longer interested in finding the role of imagination in philosophical Idealism. In the syllabus, Dewey maintains something which is to become an essential proposition in his writings on the place of imagination in education: it is the idea that imagination is "a power of realization, not of making [the] real artificial."[4] In his lectures on psychological topics of 1901, Dewey makes the same point in this way: "It is the power rather of realizing what is not present than of making up anything which is unreal."[5] To spell this out further, the question whether that which imagination "makes up" is "unreal," or whether it leads to a realization of that which is not present, is an empirical question, to be settled by action that tries out the mind's image in further experience.

Perhaps Dewey's boldest generalization, based on the idea that imagination is the power of "realizing what is not present," comes in lectures in the philosophy of education given in 1896: "All building up of experience takes place through the image."[6] In these lectures, as in his syllabus on educational psychology, he refers to the image as "the exact corresponding" of the transition from nonrealization to realization, as a middle term between no learning and learning.[7] It is important to note here that the forming of images is an activity that must take place at all ages in life if learning is to take place; the difference between imagination in childhood and in adulthood lies in (1) differences in experience between children and adults and (2) the differences in powers, or abilities, in "developmental ages" of children and adults. Dewey thinks that, while young children are unable to have certain kinds of images, adults apparently have lost certain powers that they possessed as children. Thus the question is not, Which are "more imaginative," adults or children? It is, What are the powers of imagination at various ages; and in what ways are we enabled to take action with these several powers?

Moving as it does to build up experience, the working of imagination is a fertile way of explicating the sense in which Dewey considers thinking itself to be a kind of activity whose ideas lack their most complete fulfillment until further action—which thinking calls for—is tried out. "Every image," Dewey says, "tends, sooner or later to reflect itself in actual doing, because it is itself a partial doing."[8] We may connect this tendency of imagery—to *do* something—with Dewey's general notion that ideas are not complete until the action which they call for brings their suggested reality to pass. The essential place of the image as doing, in relation to the activity of children, comes out in a passage in which Dewey likens images to "the motor power of an idea. With a little child the idea, or image, tends to show itself in action."[9] At another place in the same lectures, Dewey refers to the "psychological principle that every thought, idea, or suggestion tends to be acted on at once; tends to find some sort of motor outlet."[10] Here imagery in children is presented as an example of a "psychological principle."

Students of philosophical Pragmatism will recall Charles S. Peirce's statement about Alexander Bain's characterization of an idea as "that upon which a man is prepared to act." Peirce said that, from Bain's definition, "pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary."[11] Dewey's portrayal of ideas as images-of-things-that-might-be, which require action to determine whether the "might-be" can be transformed into an "is," tends to be congruent with the conception of ideas that Peirce has in mind. Dewey may be said to go further than Peirce, however, inasmuch as action is needed if we are to know what the idea *means*. It is as if the meaning of an idea is found, not in "that upon which a man is *prepared* to act," but in the action *actually taken* to try out the idea. Put differently, to "show itself in action" means, for Dewey, not merely that the idea "appears" in action, but that the idea needs action in order for the idea to be "shown" for what it is. Yet what it is in action, by virtue of the action taken, is a different appearance from the one which the idea showed prior to the action. The idea carried forth by the action is transformed, or reconstructed; the idea is not "in" what is reconstructed as an independent entity; rather, as part of the experience as reconstructed, it is now a different reality. The idea functions much as an element which is transformed, along with others, into a chemical compound. The reality—H_2O—means that the hydrogen and oxygen are different—as transformed into water—from what they were prior to the transformation. Or, to take a different example, the sculptor's idea of a man thinking: once that idea has been rendered into the reality of a bronze statue, the idea has been transformed. It is now different from its earlier reality in the sculptor's mind.

As an illustration of the way in which Dewey compares the kinds of imagery that he thinks children possess in different periods of development, we shall briefly summarize what he calls the "play period" (age three to seven), and the "games period" (age seven to adolescence). In the first, Dewey says, "the control of experience and of conduct by images . . . operate through the immediate interest which they possess." In the second, children form images "of more remote considerations," doing things in reference to ends which lie ahead of them.[12] In play, children let images have their way with them, with little sense of the consequences of acting on them; their minds are taken over by the images in the sense that actions "taken" are the images as "given" to the reality which is the child's world. In the play period, the child's action "shows itself" in reality in the most immediate way—for its own sake, in itself. While images in all stages of development tend to "show themselves," in the play period they do so virtually untouched by any sense of further ends. By contrast, to participate in games, children need to have possible consequences in mind as they take action: in hide-and-seek, for example, the aim is not merely the immediate

enjoyment of hiding—for its own sake—but to hide so that one is difficult to find.

To turn from the general proposition that the child's image tends to "show itself in action" to the meaning of the proposition for education, we find Dewey saying, "Let the child begin by trying to do something, by getting at the thing, object, or result: and then his training on the side of skill necessary to reach this result will come along with the doing, and will seem real, instead of mechanical and routine."[13] It should be made clear that what the child is trying to do, "by getting at the thing, object," is to gain the skill necessary for transforming an image into something different from the image itself, for making something which "will seem real." This is not to deny that the *image* possesses reality, but to claim that the child tends to act "on" or "with" the image in mind. As Dewey says, in reference to what he calls "imaged activity": "The image relates to something future but the image is not anything future."[14] The image has an effect on the course of action taken and in turn may be transformed by that very action. By acting, a reality different from the image may be brought into existence, one which "seems real" in comparison with the image. When Dewey calls imagination "the power rather of realizing what is not present than of making up anything which is unreal,"[15] he thinks of the image as looking in two directions: one, to the reality from which the image has come; another, to the reality toward which the image is tending—the reality as transformed by the action taken. In the first direction, the image itself already has realized something which is not present—that from which the image has come; at the same time, something else which is not present—the reality toward which the image is tending—has not yet been actualized. Dewey puts it this way: "On the side of its origin the image is a making over of past experiences, and on the side of its function it tends to expand into a new one."[16] In other lectures, Dewey states this idea more succinctly, characterizing the activity of learning in terms of imagery: "All learning is carried on through the medium of imagery."[17] He continues, "The whole work of instruction can be stated . . . in . . . the terminology of the formation and movement of images in the pupil's mind."[18]

The place of imagery in transforming experience in general, and in learning and instruction as they are pursued in schools in particular, was extended to discussions of ethics. To put it simply, the reality that activity strives to make—growing out of past experience toward a reality not yet present—is a desired reality, wanted but not yet actualized. In 1901 lectures on ethics, Dewey says, "The image is the self-consciousness of the desire."[19] And in 1898 lectures on ethics Dewey contrasts image with sensation: "[The image] represents the direction in which activity is moving, while the sensation represents a consciousness of what *has* been reached. It tells us the direction from which activity is moving."[20] This is a complement to the dis-

cussion just above, on the image as looking in two directions. What is added is the idea that the *first* "something which is not present"—which the image now stands for—is what sensation had been conscious of; what *had* been the object of sensation is *now* that whence the image has come. The *second* "something which is not present" looks away from the first and toward the desired. As image, it is *of* a reality not yet actualized. Dewey continues, in the passage just quoted: "So far as we refer a value backward, so far as we are thinking of it with reference to its origin, it is sensation. It is image as we are thinking of it with reference to what we are going to do—not the object that we had, but the object that we want to get."[21]

Forming an image and working to actualize it may be taken from the standpoint of *intellect* at work; or it may be taken from the standpoint of making desired objects and striving to gain them, a matter of *ethics*. Thus "intellectual" and "ethical" undertakings are not different undertakings; they are two sides of one undertaking, or two ways of looking at the same undertaking. The image, Dewey insists, is not a copy of a sensation or a feeling; it is sensation or feeling transformed in the direction of an end desired. This is a different standpoint from which the "motor power of an idea" may be understood, because the image is formed as one is engaged in moving the experience forward in a definite way. Dewey says, "Now this image of the end, the feeling given content, represents experience adapted to defining the direction of movement. Instead of being the mere sense of where we are going, or what we are going on, it is the definite statement of that direction through bringing to bear one's past experience or habits."[22] In forming a "sense of where we are going," the image strives to control conduct—which is to actualize itself, as we have seen already. And this is so, both in the child at play and in the sculptor at work. "The ultimate value of the image is the control it gives over actions."[23]

At one place in his lectures on ethics, Dewey puts the relationship between the "psychological" (or the "intellectual") and the "ethical" dimensions of imagination in this way: "The ideal (which is in a sense the ethical counterpart of the image), while it relates to something future, is itself a present, existent fact. It is an activity which has its significance through standing for some other activity not as yet realized."[24] In these lines, it is apparent also that forming and striving to actualize the image constitute a continuous activity: imagining and taking action are not different kinds of experience, but phases in a continuing stream of experience.

Three observations crucial to understanding Dewey's way of relating imagination to the reconstruction of experience may be made. The first is the necessity for conduct, for taking action, in order for images to "reflect themselves," to "show themselves in action." The second is the inescapable union of the intellectual activity of imagination with ethical considerations. Striving to reconstruct experience by actualizing ends not yet lived by is at

once an intellectual and an ethical undertaking. Again, this is so for the child at play, whose images "take over" and shape the activity that is the child's desire; it is so, also, for the sculptor, whose image gives shape to the sculpture, which turns out to be what the sculptor desires. A third observation, not apparent in the approach we have taken so far, is the necessity for images to be formed in a social context. "Individual minds" arise only in contexts in which other minds exist. This is so inasmuch as the images we form arise in the context of living, which requires the presence of others, in terms of whom one's earliest images originate. Among the things responded to are other human beings in certain relationships of living, and from perceptions of these the child and the sculptor form their images. The meanings of these, to be found out by showing themselves in action, are inescapably social meanings. Thus the new, or transformed, experience which comes about by such action is a social experience.

The necessity for imagination to do its work in a social context was perhaps so much a given for Dewey that he did not make as much of it as he did of the close relationship of imagination and action in any and every instance of reconstructing experience, and of imagination as an ethical enterprise seeking to bring ends to actualization. Even so, in his 1901 lectures on psychology and education, he characterizes the "play period" as one in which the child is "making acquaintance with the people around him" and goes on to say that "the mental side [of this period] is the development of fancy or imagination."[25] A succinct statement from *School and Society* directly connects the activity of imagination with instruction and learning: "The imagination is the medium in which the child lives."[26] What is true of the child is no less true of the adult as artist, as we have maintained in the example of the sculptor. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey says this of the transformation of experience as embodied in works of art: "Possibilities are embodied in works of art that are not elsewhere actualized; this *embodiment* is the best evidence that can be found of the true nature of imagination."[27] Here a work of art puts us in mind of what Dewey earlier called the child's image as "tending to show itself in action."

While not all of us become sculptors or painters, we do become selves. In *A Common Faith* Dewey's claim that "*all* possibilities reach us through the imagination" again brings our attention to the possibilities in children's images, especially as he characterizes "the *whole* self" as "an ideal, an imaginative projection."[28] While we are all selves—in some sense—in our imaginations we may bring to mind an image of self that strives to determine a wholeness of life that exceeds the reality of the selves we now are. Our selves look beyond our present way of being in aiming to make a *different* reality "show itself in action." In a variety of ways, Dewey reminds us that children, artists, and the rest of us live in a medium of imagination.

NOTES

1. EW, 2:175. Citations from the collected works of John Dewey, edited by JoAnn Boydston and published by the Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1990, are abbreviated as follows: *Early Works*, EW; *Middle Works*, MW; *Later Works*, LW.
2. EW, 5:315.
3. EW, 5:317.
4. EW, 5:315.
5. LW, 17:242.
6. "Lectures in the Philosophy of Education, 1896," unpublished stenographic account in the Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, p. 136.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 140.
9. LW, 17:332.
10. LW, 17:263.
11. Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 19.
12. *Lectures in the Philosophy of Education: 1899*, ed. Reginald D. Archambault (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 150.
13. LW, 17:297.
14. *Lectures on Ethics, 1900-1901*, ed. Donald F. Koch (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 179.
15. LW, 17:242.
16. "Lectures in the Philosophy of Education, 1896," p. 157.
17. *Lectures in the Philosophy of Education: 1899*, p. 324.
18. Ibid.
19. *Lectures on Ethics, 1900-1901*, p. 171.
20. *Lectures on Psychological and Political Ethics: 1898*, ed. Donald F. Koch (New York: Hafner Press, 1976), p. 56.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 64.
23. *Lectures on Ethics: 1900-1901*, p. 123.
24. Ibid., p. 179.
25. LW, 17:260, 261.
26. MW, 1:38.
27. *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), p. 268.
28. *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), pp. 43, 19.