EDITORIAL

Dead Thoughts and False Dichotomies

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John Maynard Keynes once remarked that we live our lives guided by the thoughts of some long-dead academic scribbler and that the world lives by little else. I do not know whether that is true as a general rule, but in education, as in economics, it is more true than false. Past thought becomes maxim and maxim guides present action. We are rarely in a position to rethink whatever we are engaged in, not only for lack of time and the pressing nature of what we face, but also because we lack the capacity to rethink in just this or that area where it is immediately needed. We may lack the skill. We may lack the knowledge. We may lack the acquaintance with the complex context. And we may lack the understanding of what we and our predecessors have been taking for granted. We may also lack the imagination to get outside of the intellectual cage in which we find ourselves.

Much of this issue of the *Journal of Educational Thought* is taken up with reflections on the difficulty of getting outside of the dead thoughts which have held us in thrall. Most of these dead thoughts are connected with dichotomies in educational thinking. Here are a few: normal/abnormal, thought/action, truth/indoctrination, policy/practice. Each of these is treated in an article in this issue of JET.

For example, we have dead thoughts concerning the classification of children and how we relate to them in our lives and in our schools – essentially we partition children into the normal and the abnormal. For the normal we have certain ways of working and for the abnormal we have a different range of ways, or else we abandon the ways or the children entirely.

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And we have dead thoughts concerning how we partition the world of thought and action. Historically we saw education as relating solely to the former, to the development of the capacity to think. Today, we see education as primarily bridging the previous dichotomy. Thought is seen as a kind of action and as a consequence our new dichotomy is between activity and passivity, diminishing the role of thought as such.

We also have dead thoughts concerning the relationship of indoctrination to learning. In an era in which teachers believe they are conveying all and only the truth, the question of indoctrination cannot arise. But in an era like our own in which we now assume that most of what we teach is not so much true as racially, or sociologically, or politically, or ideologically, or ethnically biased, then all education can seem to be a form of indoctrination. So all education becomes suspect. Clearly something has gone wrong here but it is hard to get beyond our present dead thoughts to think again.

And we have dead thoughts concerning policy and practice in our schools and universities. We often live in despair with the assumption that we cannot, in the end, implement and maintain any new and better policy and so transform practice.

We have to think again about how we relate to those children (and by extension those adults) who are strikingly different from the norm and who press against the limits of our understanding. These could be of many different kinds: the physically handicapped in our classrooms, say those without hands or who cannot run and jump with the others; or perhaps those who do not or cannot talk; or perhaps those who do not or cannot read and write; or those who are perpetually disruptive in any social setting; or, perhaps have some wasting disease or potentially fatal condition. In the integrated classrooms of our day these things are commonplace as are the difficulties for classmates and teachers to cope with these differences.

In mediaeval thought it was commonplace both for the population at large, as well as the learned few, to read the world, seeing signs and portents from God in every event or action, human or inhuman. We no longer read the world in that sense and have forgotten how to do so. If we read the world today, we generally read it for its clues to the natural order of things.

Though even such talk of reading the world in this sense is difficult for us.

Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine reintroduce the notion of reading in a grander sense than that of merely decoding words on a printed page, or of the natural order of things. And their sense has room, once again, for the world of signs and symbols and portents in the life of a child in a classroom. One might well deplore the tendency, as they do, of medicine and educational psychology to name and label the differences which children bring to their being-in-the-world, especially their being in the classroom, as if this naming carried with it a general solution to their ills. And one ought to deplore, as they do, the mechanical application of "diagnosis and treatment" of educational ills to an individual child, especially when this rarely if ever goes beyond the mere naming. And so one ought to seek wider contexts in which to view the life of the learning child and that of the helping pedagogue. Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine help us to do that in their highly original piece "Whatever Happens to Him Happens to Us: Reading Coyote Reading the World."

Perhaps no dead thought has had more impact on education than the aristocratic separation of thought and action, a separation which can be traced back at least to Plato who inherited it from thousands of years of earlier Egyptian and Greek partitioning of the world. Aristocrats thought. Slaves or peasants or artisans worked. Thought, especially abstract thought, was good, work was bad. Aristocrats, or masters, were good. Slaves, peasants, or villains were bad. There are remnants today in words like "villain" meaning scoundrel, "villainous," "villainy" which derive from "vilain," "villein," or peasant or serf.

Schooling in the West was largely based on an aristocratic curriculum recognizable to Plato, maintained through Roman schools and sustained by the Christian Church throughout the middle ages. This curriculum presupposed master/slave separation of thought and action, the masterly goodness of doing things with the mind and the badness of doing things with the hands. The seven liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) represented the refined and abstract modes of thought. These were the arts or sciences which could be pursued for their own sake and which

were taken to form a discipline for the mind. For most of the last 2500 years we could not imagine an education that could consist of anything else. Anything else would be a form of apprenticeship, at best a mechanical following of the traditions or actions of others; at worst a bad aping of the previous practical achievements of past generations. The central educational notion was that the worthwhile things for the child of an aristocrat to learn, except the arts of war, ought to have no direct application and so were things learned for their own sake, at best as an exercise for the mind, at worst a mindless recollection of useless arts and sciences.

The first to challenge this separation of thought and work, of thought and practical action, was the aristocrat St. Benedict, who founded the Benedictine order just as the Roman Empire was in free fall (529) in the early middle ages. Although he may not have intended it, as his order was essentially designed for work and contemplation, his monks became scholars as well as workers. For the first time in human history, thought and action, thinking and working, were both seen as ways to glorify God, a tradition which passed down to the Puritans and which made the 17th century developments in natural science possible.

Nietzsche suggests that the effect of the Christian revolt in the Roman Empire was to replace the aristocratic ethical judgments of master morality, good/bad with the essentially plebeian or slave morality of good and evil. The Benedictine combination of the goodness of thought and the goodness of work, was the decisive step beyond both good and bad and good and evil, a step taken which Nietzsche did not notice. The era in which we presently live, the era of the interrogation of Nature *par excellence*, owes its possibility to this combination of the virtues of the master and the virtues of the slave. Since the scientific revolution, which essentially combined both the goodness of thought with the goodness of working with hands in the same individual, we have lived beyond both dichotomies good/bad, and good/evil and needed no Zarathustra to guide us. The Benedictine advance and the rise of the Interrogation of Nature to dominance made the democratic human possible, the essence of which for the French Revolution, for Marx, and for John Dewey was a happy combination of the aristocrat and the slave or peasant or artisan

– the "aristopeasant" or perhaps better, the "aristosan." The education of the citizenry at large was now to combine the highest ideals of scholarship with the highest ideals of practice, the ideals which inform the learned professions found in the universities in our own day.

Like Benedict, the framers of the French Revolution, and Marx, John Dewey engaged in a sustained attack on the dualism which separates thought from action. Dewey traces this separation back at least to Plato, where it appears as a natural manifestation of a social order in which the thinkers did no manual work and the workers did no thinking. But its embodiment in North American education in the last century tended to miss the new ideals on both ends. It "dumbed" down the ideals of the liberal arts. And it failed to produce master carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, or auto-mechanics either.

Carson and Rowlands article, "A Critical Assessment of Dewey's Attack on Dualism" looks at Dewey's own words as he puts the case for overcoming the educational effects of Platonic idealism, the dichotomy between thought and action. They conclude that Dewey's own picture was unduly restrictive and the consequences of his being taken seriously is that the educational effects of his influence are that "considerations of beauty, intellectual elegance, imagination, the pleasures derived from cultural pursuits, the mysteries of our spiritual side, and even our capacity to engage in mathematics, logic, science, language, art, and other cultural domains beyond ... a crude behavioral and materialistic level seems greatly diminished."

The truth/indoctrination dichotomy in which we presently believe as a specimen of dead thought poses a potential dilemma for serious educators in our time. We wish to convey the truth but we also believe that our knowledge is only tentative, relative, and not final. What then do we teach? If we teach as if we are simply conveying the truth, we do not do justice to the tentative nature of our knowledge, or claims to knowledge. Can we not be accused of merely indoctrinating? And if we teach from the vantage point of the relativity or tentativeness of our knowledge, why should anybody master what we wish to teach, since it has nothing to do with truth?

The problem with this dichotomy, as with most dichotomies is that the case for both poles is overstated and so are presented as misunderstood. The possibility of truth, of course, presupposes an enormous complex of propositions taken for granted. Most of these are never in question at any one time, though some may be from time to time. As Wittgenstein suggests, the possibility of truth, that is of sentences which can be either true or false, presupposes that there are an enormous number of thoughts expressible as sentences which we take for granted and treat as certain, which therefore lie outside the realm of truth and falsehood. This is the realm of metaphysics, in Collingwood's characterization, the realm of those thoughts which we absolutely presuppose and which are not the answers to any prior questions.

To believe that it is now raining, or will rain in ten minutes, or has rained ten minutes ago presupposes an enormous complex of things taken for granted. But what is taken for granted, while presupposed, is not ideology because the questions which such things taken for granted cause to arise can be determined to be true or false by comparison with the world.

To believe, however, that the communist world revolution is inevitable, presupposes a picture of the world which already has aspects of ideology imbedded in such a way that no implications can be empirically tested and found wanting. Neither does a view of the superiority of a particular race or group over all others. Or of the special truth of a particular religion. The reason that this is so is that there can be nothing which counts as evidence against the particular apparent proposition. It, like absolute presuppositions in general, is guarded from doubt. That is, there can be nothing for a believer which counts against the truth of the sentence which asserts racial superiority, or of the inevitability of communist revolution, or of the truth of a given religion. Such sentences do not have, like the sentence that it is now raining, both a true and false pole. And that is because such sentences, in their proper contexts, are themselves not empirical but entirely presuppositional. In "An 'Indoctrination Dilemma' in Teacher Education," David Boote looks closely at this indocrtination dilemma in the context of teacher education.

I will say nothing about the policy/practice dichotomy, leaving its analysis as an exercise for the reader. But Scott Tunison's

article on "Instructional Supervision: The Policy-Practice Rift" is a fine analysis of the issues in which an empirical look at the rift is taken in the context of a particular school system.

Dead thoughts and false dichotomies in educational theory and practice are alive and well. Our authors are on the cutting edge of those who are trying to move us beyond them to living thought and the elimination of such dichotomies.

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