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PROMETHEUS DOUBLE-BOUND:  
EDUCATING THE SOCIAL INDIVIDUAL

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*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

— Walt Whitman

There is at least a superficial consensus in this country today that our system of education is in need of reform. “There is a crisis in our schools,” chant the newspapers, the politicians, the universities, and the people on the street. The *sorts* of reforms proposed, however, differ to an astonishing degree. Let us not *simply* add another proposal to the ever-growing list. Instead, let us first ask: what *is* this crisis of education? We are, after all, unlikely to find a solution to a problem which remains obscured by empty slogans of the sort that make for compelling news headlines and campaign planks. That such slogans are implemented at all, though, is telling as regards the complexity and scale of the problem with which we are faced. Sloganeering bespeaks a need for a kind of conceptual condensation, but fails in its task. Rather than condensing<sup>1</sup> the crisis in its profound complexity in the interest of facilitating understanding, the sloganeer discards the profundity in the interest of marketability. What results is vacuous, but catchy. An alternative to this is metaphor, which reorients a concept in such a way that its fundamental breadth, depth, and density are maintained. Metaphors allow us to delve into inquiry, whereas slogans call only for a ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ in response. Accordingly, this paper will offer a metaphor with which to approach the broadly apprehended failings of the American education system. From the vantage offered by this metaphor and with the aid of the pragmatic (primarily Deweyan) theory of education, I shall propose the incorporation of philosophy into curricula as a possible source of amelioration.

THE PROBLEMATIC OF CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION:  
A PROPOSED METAPHOR

Gregory Bateson, in an attempt to articulate a systematic etiology of schizophrenia, uncovers a paradigmatic pattern of communication in the family environments of diagnosed schizophrenics. He uses the term “double bind” to label this pattern.<sup>2</sup> The metaphorical weight of the double bind hypothesis lies not in its explanation of a particular psychosis, however, but in its assertion of the fundamental contextuality of the emergent pathology.<sup>3</sup> Schizophrenia,

Bateson claims, is a *symptom* of a traumatic social context, not an isolable phenomenon of individuals. The situation of the double bind is formulated as a blend of four communicative ingredients:

1. At least two persons who enter into repeated communication and whose relationship is intense and vital, e.g. parent and child.
2. A primary negative injunction with a threat of punishment, e.g. the parent tells his/her child, “Do not do *x* or I will punish you.”
3. A secondary injunction (often implicit) which conflicts with the primary one, e.g. “if you do not do *y* you will be punished, and *y* requires that *x* be done.”
4. A tertiary injunction that prohibits the child from critically articulating the conflict of the primary and secondary injunctions, e.g. “that’s life,” or “because I said so.”<sup>4</sup>

Such a situation is undeniably productive of an unshakable confusion. Severe, repeated experiences of this sort, Bateson claims, can cause a complete breakdown of the victimized individual’s ability to judge the meaning of any statement, including his/her own. At this point, the onset of clinical schizophrenia is immanent, and usually involves either a continual paranoid search for hidden meanings or a complete withdrawal from the communicative sphere.

The clinical use of the double bind theory is of little interest in this inquiry. I wish to appropriate metaphorically Bateson’s most significant insight of the theory, as noted later by John Weakland, one of Bateson’s collaborators: “. . .most fundamentally and generally our article was concerned with relationships between behavior and communication.”<sup>5</sup> As education concerns itself with both behavior and communication, and does so *by means* of communication, the double bind theory – which connects aberrations in the one with aberrations in the other – may be useful in describing the crisis of education which so presses itself upon our attention.

Bateson’s double bind theory has its beginning in the observation that communication must be viewed as multi-faceted and thoroughly determining of an interpersonal situation. For Bateson and his colleagues, words, voice, gesture, and context cease to be analytically separable in determining the message of any single communication.<sup>6</sup> The content of a message is simultaneously its grammar, its delivery, and its place in the complex and interlaced personal histories of the interlocutors. Insofar as the self is constituted through interaction, and as communication is a primary mode of human interaction, we are led to see that the style of communication is a key factor in determining the overriding

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character of the particular selves involved. If the prevailing style of communication is conducive to non-pathological interaction, then the persons who interact will be more able to develop a non-pathological character. Conversely, in a communicative situation such as that described by the double bind, in which the possibilities of communication are checked, the interactive habits of the persons involved will be influenced in such a way as to inhibit the development of the person as an interacting being. When Bateson's team approaches the family environments of diagnosed schizophrenics, they do so with a mind to discovering the patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication. The common messages they find are such that they stultify communication, blocking inquiry into the messages themselves. The 'victim' of the double bind is troubled not because he/she is confronted by a contradiction, but because he/she is precluded from articulating (communicating) his/her situation. His/Her interactions are barred from becoming the explicit content of his/her life and, as a result, he/she does not develop the habitual tools with which to reorient him/herself in the world.<sup>7</sup> Thus the difference between a mere contradiction and a double bind situation lies in the subject's ability to address the situation expressively and with influence.

#### THE EDUCATIONAL SITUATION AND THE SOCIAL INDIVIDUAL

An educational situation is irrevocably communicative, or in Deweyan terms: all learning is interacting. In the presence of a crisis of education, therefore, we simultaneously and correlatively confront a crisis of communication. Dewey writes, "[n]ot only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative."<sup>8</sup> This essential element of social life (and therefore of all human life) is for Dewey *given* in point of bare factuality, but the *quality* of communication is seen to vary remarkably in practice. It is the *quality* of communicating which must be subjected to a thoroughgoing critique if we are to ameliorate our pedagogical practices and institutions. Any critique of the system of education must therefore be a critique of communicative styles.

For Dewey the meaning of individuality in the social sphere has two aspects: that of the self who thinks and does and creates; and that of the customary self, who belongs and undergoes and uses. There is not for Dewey a purely individual consciousness nor an absolutely general social interest. Thus the individual is a personal agency within a shared tradition. Dewey accomplishes the bridging of the epistemological and political gaps set up by traditional interpretations of individualism with his identification of the social with the communicative and the educative.

What Dewey and Bateson press upon us is the realization that persons, as inherently social beings, maintain themselves and grow in their interaction with

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the world that constitutes them. Dewey, following James, terms this interaction ‘experience,’ while Bateson calls it communication. From Bateson we learn that the character of interpersonal communication can and does inform and direct a person’s development. From Dewey we learn this same lesson on a more inclusive scale: the developing character of a person is determined largely by the character of his interactions with the world at large, which is at once social and natural. If Dewey and Bateson are correct in this characterization of personhood, then it becomes clear that we should look for an inadequacy in the style of classroom interactions in our search for the nature of the crisis of education.

#### THE INSTITUTION OF EDUCATION: CURRICULUM AS SOCIAL CHARACTER

From the previous discussion it is evident that, above all, communication or experience *is*, i.e. *we find ourselves always in a world of interaction*. Further reflection tells us that in many instances our explicit interactions carry with them implicit, inchoate messages; and that both the explicit and the implicit work to inform our lives. This informing power of experience – its determining presence in life – is nothing more than the power of learning. For what else is learning but the forming and reforming of habits in interaction with the world? And what more than this is the life of human beings? When we identify learning as the subtle process of informing and being informed, we begin to see that a person learns not only information presented her but also the style of the presentation itself. Taken up in its broad sense, then, a person’s education appears multi-faceted, constitutive, and largely inarticulate in its fundamental character.

This simultaneity of the implicit and explicit in learning is the primary motivation for the development of a curriculum. Dewey notes that the educational institution arises as an outgrowth of the practical social endeavor of living as learning and growing.<sup>9</sup> He tells us that prior to institutionalization education happens, but only incidentally. In this incidental moment of development, society is uncritical and nondirecting: it is little more than a collection of proximate individuals. But when a society becomes for Dewey a *genuine* society, its members come to mutually interrelate in furtherance of a set of common interests. They thus become a *community* insofar as they direct their individual actions toward a shared purpose. At this stage, the interacting (which nevertheless occurs in the infantile society) is institutionalized to conform to the shared needs of the community. It is in this institutionalization that the simultaneity of interactive content and style motivates the development of a set of communicational standards and guidelines which emerge from the needs imposed by the community’s common purposes. These standards and their implementation form among other things,<sup>10</sup> a curriculum, which appears as the concrete practical embodiment of the community’s shared interests.

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It is this institutional embodiment – the curriculum and its implementation—which is problematic in the current crisis of education. In seeking a more precise formulation of the problem, there emerge three related questions: Firstly, what do we as a society see as our common purposes? Secondly, what purposes can be said to motivate the curricular standards with which our schools are now functioning? And lastly, how should our curricula be changed to reflect our common goals?

#### THE DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDE AND CLASSICAL AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

The American spirit is fundamentally informed by what John J. McDermott calls the reflective primitivism of frontier experience.<sup>11</sup> It is a tradition of experimental, creative, and libertarian temper. Professor McDermott writes, “from the very outset, the notions of growth, experiment, liberty, and amelioration have characterized inquiry in American life.”<sup>12</sup> American thought, as exemplified in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, James, and Dewey, recognizes and embraces contingency and possibility not as contradictories; but as the preconditions of joy, hope, and the power of human work. This vein of American thought is driven by an appreciation of novelty and of the utter value of individual and collective human effort. It resists finality and resignation in all its forms. It prizes the efficacy of knowledge and the authority of critique over prevalent states of affairs. With this fallibilist and ameliorative temperament comes a sense of individual and collective responsibility wherein Americans take their nation’s actions as their own. Thus, when the results of any action – collective or personal – do violence to the aforementioned national spirit, it is in keeping with this American spirit to criticize (often rather vocally) that action, rather than simply to bemoan its consequences.

The above characterization is far from idealistic, unless by idealism is meant the utter openness to error. We have erred and shall continue to do so. Today there is a far-reaching apprehension of error in the system of education. Only yesterday we saw a violation of the American spirit in policies which not only allow but produce racial segregation. And though the latter problem is far from solved, we at least recognize its presence and have acted towards its resolution. The spirit of amelioration and hope which courses through American veins is such that we take up the challenge of our errors. The civil rights movement, the Vietnam War era protests, and other public outcries such as the current ones concerning our system of education bespeak a common (if somewhat unfocused) revolutionary attitude.

It is through education that we must work to make this attitude available to all people if our spirit is to survive. American education must, if we wish to engender the spirit of utter possibility and real contingency, be such that the

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classroom is a place not of mere dissemination of information. Rather, the school should be an arena of critical openness to the transformative powers of experience...as Dewey states, “[progressive communities] endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own.”<sup>13</sup> If experiences are able to transform the world (as Dewey and James insist), we must aim our pedagogical energy toward the cultivation of those experiences which allow progress. Our curriculum should, then, have as its primary goal the engagement of students in their own lives. McDermott writes, “[h]elping our children to learn how to make relations is the central and most important task of pedagogy.”<sup>14</sup> In making relations, we forge “a distinctively personal presence in the doings and undergoings that constitute our experience,”<sup>15</sup> that is, we take ourselves up as a challenge. This challenge is the fundamental drive of the American spirit and thus the proper cultural aspiration of American education. The failing of our contemporary pedagogy is its rupturing of this challenge.

#### FEMINISM AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: THE BIND WE ARE IN

Scholars of Feminist and Critical Pedagogy propose to critique the many ways that students are prevented from realizing themselves as social/personal challenges. The marginalization of citizens on the basis of race, class, and gender emerges in these critiques as the exemplar of antidemocratic praxis. Scholastically, this marginalization takes the form of a systematic divorcing of the individual from her own possibilities. This happens through what Paulo Friere calls the “banking system of education,”<sup>16</sup> in which the student is viewed as a receptacle of the absolute wisdom of her teacher. She is to obtain information, to record it, and to recite it on demand, but not to involve her own personality in its facticity. Friere writes, “implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator.”<sup>17</sup> Divorced from an interactive approach to the world, the student is trained in passivity and thus refused the opportunity to see himself as a challenge. He is in something of a double bind: his communicative and experiential life in the world (his unique point of view) ceases to be a subject of communication. The relation of the material to the student’s individual selfhood is cut off at the source. He is blocked from self-critique, and indeed from critique in general. He is systematically dehumanized, over-determined, and disengaged from his life. Here we see that the style of pedagogical communication is such that it undermines the possibilities of communication itself.

How is a human being to react to this oppression? A mere glance at the apathetic, disenchanting character of the oppressed gives us our answer: they do

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not see themselves as potent, hopeful subjects, but as object-described but not describing, formed without forming, spoken of but themselves silenced. They become fatalistically resigned to their suffering, saying things like: “That’s the way it is...” and “so it goes...” and “it can’t be helped,” which signify the sort of acquiescence that is the end of the possibility of inquiring.

bell hooks writes of her experiences trying to subvert this resignation, “[i]t is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that [oppressive] situation.”<sup>18</sup> The lack of a theoretical context from which to examine one’s situation bespeaks a deficiency in even self-proclaimed critical disciplines. Even feminism, which explicitly concerns itself with the failings of patriarchal culture, creates its theories within a masculine language and a male-dominated cultural and academic environment. The question of the possibility of critique from within a situation which forbids critique is central here. We can see another burgeoning bind which has the following conflicting terms: (1) We must criticize or lose our sense of humanity, and (2) If we criticize we violate the status quo, i.e. we risk our cultural identity. It is only through acts of extreme courage that the double bind is avoided and critique made possible. Friere speaks of this courage, saying: “faith in people is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue.”<sup>19</sup> This faith must be cultivated if we are to avoid silence. The American spirit revolves around such a social and personal faith. Only through a secular faith in the power of thoughtful human action can the changes necessitated by an open-ended democratic process take place. A fruitful democratic pedagogy is accordingly one that avoids the double-binding consequences of silencing its students. It does so by engendering trust through the practice of trusting.

What shape does such pedagogy take? How do we teach ourselves to trust in the power of our own thought? What is the thought which takes *itself* as its object, which reflects upon its content and style? What is the attitude of the critical inquirer, whose worldly interactions are the basis for and subject of thought? How is critique to be both end and means? The above are pedagogical and philosophical questions. Their proposal and the inquiries that obtain from their posing are, as we shall see, the making or doing of philosophy.

#### THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISPOSITION

Philosophical questions are those for which we assume one stance or another to get along. Our histories tell us that some of these stances or viewpoints are more useful to their contexts than are others. Philosophy strives to find the best and most comprehensively useful stance through critical reflection on experience. The philosophers, then, are those persons for whom the taking of such a stand is a profound matter of *risking their lives*.<sup>20</sup> We all *have* philosophies, says William James,<sup>21</sup> which result from our acquaintance with the world through experience. The *philosophical* person distinguishes herself by posing to her

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experience the overt question: *how do I live my life, or what stands do I take, or what is my philosophy?*

This question is *the* question which any fruitful pedagogy seeks to elicit in its students. It is at once historical, viz. what is the character of my life, and moral, viz. how do I want to live in the world. As an historical question it requires us to unearth our situation by examining in their vagueness our precepts, inheritances, habits, and institutions. As a moral question, it requires us to see ourselves as ever within a process of self-revision. Taken together, these two aspects of the inquiry continually tug at one another. It is in and through this contending that all education happens. Furthermore, this question can neither arise of itself nor arise in a complete way demanding a complete answer. We can ask of life's character only from the vantage of the varying degrees of vagueness which constitute our lives.

The individual is a network of relations that have been forged through experience. Each encounter with the world creates, severs, or adjusts a part of this relational network. The *historical facts* of life are present in this hodge-podge of relations, but are yet only secondhand and impersonal; the relations become personal when she takes them up as her own, when she reweaves (i.e. interrelates) them into a fragile fabric. In this act of engagement, the individual embraces her history and begins to give her relations a distinctive style. What was at the outset merely her genetic and cultural inheritance becomes through this engagement a profoundly rich source of material for constructing and reconstructing herself in the world. When it is embraced, the cultural material presents itself as an immediate challenge and as a life-project. Here arises the moral aspect of the question: 'how do I live?'

The democratic pedagogy, which seeks constantly to allow its students to challenge and reshape their world, is thus a truly philosophical endeavor; it must cultivate the philosophically critical attitude toward self and society. As philosophical, it must be *itself* subjected to constant and varied critiques. It must not have a static curriculum, but must be a dynamic pedagogy which *relies* upon (rather than simply tolerating) the free play of points of view. The only communication which such a curriculum can justifiably disallow is that which prevents any member of the classroom from interacting. The only experiences that can be excluded are those which silence inquiry.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The double bind theory of Bateson *et.al.* has been used to demonstrate the anti-democratic quality of much of contemporary pedagogy. The incommunicable, inexpressible situation described by the theory has at least a seeming parallel in an educational system which forces information upon its students without allowing for their personal 'takes' to inform the choice of

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material or the style in which it is delivered. In this way, the student is alienated from her own process of learning and becomes much like the ‘victim’ of the double bind. It is no wonder then that today’s schools produce a large number of ill-informed, culturally disenfranchised, and apathetic graduates. (If, that is, they do indeed graduate) We hardly need ask *whether* our schools are institutions of alienation and oppression. But what must be addressed, and what this paper has been most concerned to explicate, are the *modes* of alienation and the possibilities of reform.

Philosophy provides the pedagogue with many tools with which to promote and redefine the process of education. The philosophical attitude of constant critique is not an easy one to adopt. It necessitates a profound awareness of the suffering of oneself and others and the refusal to take anything or anyone as final. It requires an extraordinary non-fatalistic trust in the efficacy of knowledge and a willingness to submit even one’s most cherished beliefs to scrutiny. But through philosophical inquiry the contradictions that a person lives with become the seeds of growth rather than the annihilation of self. Thus the philosophical person may say with Whitman that an acknowledged contradiction is the mark of the Promethean individual who finds herself engaged in the process of living. It is the unacknowledged contradictions, on the other hand, which work to undermine our personal and social growth. Rather than seeing ourselves as ‘large’ and ‘containing multitudes,’ the alienating strength of the double bind is creative of the sense of a self which is simple, small, and fundamentally impotent to shape himself and his world. To avoid such a situation we must trust with Dewey that “reflection is native and constant”<sup>22</sup> and take seriously the connected decree that every individual is uniquely capable of altering and being informed by his world. It is accordingly the task of democratic pedagogy to question and thus to empower, to teach and thus to be taught, to transgress and thus to progress.

#### NOTES

1. Condensation as a chemical process is simply a change in the presentation of the molecules involved. Their character is not *lost* entirely, but only takes on new relationships. Thus the molecules assume what is analogous to a new vantage without the loss of their identities.
  2. Gregory Bateson, et. al., “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” *Behavioral Science*, 1956: 1(4), pp. 251–264.
  3. Bateson’s initial interest in this work lay not in schizophrenia *per se*, but in communication theory. As a possible result of an aberrant communicative situation, schizophrenia provided an interesting phenomenon with which to begin.
  4. These ingredients are adapted from the aforementioned article. Bateson lists six, but for want of space I have combined several. The examples listed are my own.
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5. John Weakland, "Double Bind Theory by Self-Reflexive Hindsight," in *Double Bind: The Foundation of the Communicational Approach to the Family*, eds. Carlos E. Sluzki, Donald C. Ransom, (London: Grune and Stratton, Inc., 1976), p.309.
  6. Cf. Jay Haley, "Development of a Theory," in *Double Bind*, pp. 59–110.
  7. I would even go so far as to say that an interacting existence may be completely denied him/her. He/She is doing and undergoing, but not in such a way as to be transformative of his/her situation. Thus he/she is only a second-hand participant in his/her experiences.
  8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p.5.
  9. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 12–19.
  10. Such as civil and criminal laws, rites, rituals, economic systems, etc. The curriculum emerges as the most concrete means by which to transmit and maintain these and other societal institutions and values.
  11. See John J. McDermott, *Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 2 and following.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
  13. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 79.
  14. John J. McDermott, "What Education Can Be....," in *Thinking*, 1990: 9(3), p. 3.
  15. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
  16. Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 52ff.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
  18. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, New 1994), p. 74.
  19. Friere, p. 71.
  20. Merleau-Ponty tells us that in philosophy we are learning to look at the world and that in so doing, "We take our fate into our hands, we become responsible for our history through reflection, but equally by a decision on which we stake our life, and in both cases what is involved is a violent act that is validated by being performed." From Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. xx.
  21. See William James, *Pragmatism*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 7.
  22. John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, vol. II, ed. John J. McDermott, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 95.
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