
2010 PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION INTRODUCTION:
THE TALE OF THE CROOKED CORN

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One never quite knows where one will perchance awaken. As it happened, I was awakened at the Bergamo Retreat Center just outside Dayton, OH, by a kind but blushing Marianist. I had somehow ended up quite disrobed one morning in the courtyard fountain just as the annual meeting of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society had begun. Since I, the honorable Quinton Christopher Gregory, am a philosopher scholar myself, I kindly asked the red faced nun for my cast off clothing and joined the group. As the content of the conference itself will become germane momentarily, I will dispense with its description save to say that it was a philosophical and revelrous crowd, generous to a fault.

When the conference had concluded, I was sent forth with kind words and many partial bottles of liquid libation left over from the previous evening. Luckily I had found in my pocket a signed contract for one Quinton Christopher Gregory to begin service the next week as Home School Coordinator for Mingo county in picturesque south-western West Virginia. Assuming that I was indeed the very same Quinton Christopher Gregory, luckily matching the car keys in my pocket with an older model Ford Fiesta with North Dakota plates in the parking lot, and wishing that my memory would return so much as to give me a clue as to how I ended up driving a Ford Fiesta with North Dakota plates, I departed.

As I set off across wonderful Ohio, having attained incredible philosophical thirst at the most engaging conference, I partook, perhaps unwisely, of the beverages in my possession as I progressed from west to east, turning dogleggedly right in Huntington and immediately losing my way among the hills and hollows, the road (or perhaps merely myself) becoming more circumambulatory as I went.

The countryside itself was wild and beautiful, lush with the faint hint of the coming fall. Majestic oaks, fine maples and red spruce greeted me as I shakily made my way into the wilderness. Of a sudden I came upon perhaps the ugliest clearing I had ever witnessed. Someone had denuded the landscape in the most haphazard fashion, leaving intact stumps and piles of unearthed rock scattered about, only to replace the natural beauty with row after row—and not too straight at that—of discombobulated corn. Amazed at the petulance of such an attack on the raw beauty of nature, I lurched to a stop and catapulted myself into the winding rows, aghast at the destruction. And then, behind me...

“Whaterydoin, ya retard?” I rounded to see a wizened old farmer in obfuscated overalls, leaning on a hoe. “Get outta my corn.” I complied due to my certainty that this was indeed not my corn, though the certainty that it belonged to this disheveled agrarian had not been established.

“I would prefer that you not use such language to describe a kind but itinerant stranger,” I replied cautiously but sincerely.

“Didn’t mean nothin’ by it,” he said unconvincingly. “Merely descriptive term that seemed to apply in this case.”

“I suppose, sir,” I retorted, “that you have certain knowledge of the provenance of the term? I just came from a conference where they were discussing that very matter.”

“Leonard P. Ayers, you moron,” he said curtly. “Everybody knows that.”

“I would appreciate your cessation of derogatory monikers,” I said equally curtly.

“Didn’t mean nothin’ by it,” he said. “Merely descriptive. Any idiot knows that.” He paused a moment. “Didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

“I recently heard a wonderful presentation on the subject by President Robert Osgood,” I parried, “at the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society. His very salient point was that by categorizing and applying mechanical efficiencies to the subjects of education, the individual needs of the students are trampled in the process and we create a system of academic ghettos from which no student can escape truly educated.”

“This Osgood person said this, did he?” the farmer replied. “Sounds like he never planted no corn.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I plant fields, I plant rows, and yes I plant individual corn plants. Just don’t have the energy or time to look after every one. Some die, most live. Calculus of expenditure for return.”

“But people are not plants,” I replied.

“I s’pect you ain’t met enough people,” said the farmer. I continued.

“And it certainly does not look like you have not expended a great deal of energy here in any case. It is all quite ugly, with stumps and stones, carved hatchetwise from the pristine surroundings.”

“You ever tried to dig out a stump? You’re welcome to it. I just plant around, and what lives lives, what dies dies. And besides, can’t eat beauty. People aren’t much different. Gotta play the numbers. Ayers knew that. He was just tryin’ to better the numbers.”

“How do you know so much about Ayers?” I inquired.

“Knew him” was the reply.

“You certainly cannot be of an age to have known the man!” I incredulated. Why, this farmer didn’t look a day over sixty-four.

“I preserve pretty well, I s’pect. Knew all them progressives in my young days, fightin’ for wimmen’s votin’ rights, tryin’ to keep children out of the factories where they could make a livin’, colored rights and such. He was just tryin’ to help. Easy to criticize looking through the back window.”

“I believe the term ‘colored is...’

“Didn’t mean nothin’ by it,” the farmer interrupted.

“Interestingly enough,” I interjected, “the essence of the response given to Professor Osgood by the eminent Dr. Natasha Levinson, a quite impressive woman with an alluring accent, was that seen in a progressive context, Ayers was indeed well meaning but misguided in outcome. Osgood and Levinson still agreed, however, that a systematic approach tends to plow over individuals in the race for efficiency. Many of us suffer from one learning disability or another.”

“Is this what this is all about, them Eldies?” the farmer asked energetically.

“Eldlies?” I asked. I was quite confused.

“Them learning disabled you was talking about,” the farmer replied. Eldies.” I disliked his derogatory tone of voice, and I voiced the opinion as vociferously as I could.

“Didn’t mean nothin’ by it. You gotta call people somethin’,” he replied, “and sooner or later words become dee-rogatory if folks want ‘em to be. That’s just how people is.”

“But they do not *have* to be,” I replied. “Why, the estimable Professor Frank Fitch took on this very point at the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society”

“Sounds like one of them made up organizations to me,” the farmer smirked.

“I assure you the organization is very real and philosophically robust. Dr. Fitch took on the charge that we cannot in essence change humanity’s proclivity to derogation. He quite accurately pointed out that though the progressives did not achieve all they intended, they certainly have changed many things for the better. Simply putting people into easily dismissed categories with terminology such as ‘retarded’ allows us too easily to dismiss them, and indeed for them to dismiss themselves. The only way for us to avoid

the problem is to avoid the segregation, both linguistically and physically. To give up hope is to lose before the game begins.”

“Sounds like one of them *hippies* I heard tell of,” the farmer spat. “Didn’t mean nothin’ by it, of course. If all this educatin’ furfural was so important, why didn’t our blessed Founding Fathers stick it in the connytution. Or them progressives. They changed the dang thing willy nilly, back and forth, back in the day.”

“Why, curiously enough, that problem was ably explicated by the honorable Benjamin H. Welsh at the aforementioned conference. It seems that though many of the individual states dealt with the matter, the architects of the federal government failed to include mention of an educational system. Welsh seemed to indicate this was tantamount to an abrogation of their duty. In whatever case, this vacuum opened the floodgates for diverse solutions such as Ayers’.”

“Don’t know if I like your tone of voice about old Ayers,” the farmer scolded. “He was a nice enough man. Just wanted to get the stragglers up to speed.”

“I assure you I did not mean anything by it. But Professor Welsh pointed out that those called laggards or stragglers were often in fact the downtrodden in ethnicity and economy. They may in many cases have not had the educational deficiencies in questions. Why, even today, all manner of school systems are being treated such that the ideal of equal education for all voiced by some of our founders, why... founders.” Yes, what wit I have. The farmer, however, was unimpressed.

“Ain’t no way to change it,” the farmer replied, “life is a race and the swift beat everybody else. Don’t matter why you win if you come out ahead. If they try to keep you down, you just gotta race harder and maybe trip up a few folks up front.”

“My good man,” I retorted, “why must we see life as a race? Certainly the adventure of life is a journey that is reward in itself. I believe this was the point of the linguistically blessed Bruce Novak himself...”

“At this fictional conference of yourn, I imagine,” snorted the farmer.

“At the serendipitous conference, yes,” I defended. “Novak ably and with wonderfully labyrinthine syntax pointed out that children are engaged in the growth of wisdom, and we must educate them to discover, not to dominate. Your corn, after all, is not in a race. You do not merely harvest the tallest and dispose of the rest. All has its value.”

“True, true enough,” the farmer said. “I suppose the more manure you put on anything, the taller it grows. I bet my corn would grow a sight if you

stuck around a bit longer. Now, you tell me what wisdom is, pefesser, and I may let you try some of my corn.”

“Ah, now you have entered my bailiwick,” I eagerly replied. “Wisdom is the use of reason and compassion concomitantly, as an old philosophy professor of mine used to say.

“Now, what’s reasonable—there’s a question,” the farmer said slyly. “You tell me what would be reasonable if a possum was to get into my corn?”

“I am not a partisan of violence,” said I, “but if some sort of fencing was not to work, I believe it would be reasonable to trap and in last resort dispose of the creature.”

“Sounds like you might be quite reasonable for a farmer,” said the farmer, “but you’d make a lousy possum. Reasons is different dependin’ on who you are and what you want. Problem is we’re all stuck together. Just like that educatin’. Everybody’s doin’ what they think is reasonable, but other folks don’t agree. Anybody at the con-feerence talk about that?”

“In fact,” I was able to retort, “a certain Professor Sheron Fraser-Burgess, who hails from the fine state of Indiana, did point out that difficulty. It seems that many school systems run by the dominant group confuse their reason with reason itself, for which you, now I do see, rightly chastise me. I do suppose if this was brought to people’s minds, though, that educational systems could account for this sort of prejudice. Why, the dominant group could intentionally encourage minority viewpoints.”

“Good luck is all I can say,” the farmer scoffed. “Don’t seem like people can keep much on their mind very long before they’s on to somethin’ else. Change of fashion, not of function.”

“Much hard work is needed, yes; setbacks abound, but we cannot just abandon all efforts, much as in your farming endeavor. Professor Kathleen Knight Abowitz discussed just such a problem, though my memories of the event are admittedly hazy due to exuberant liquid refreshment. She makes the acknowledgment that pragmatistic endeavors are fraught with the danger of one’s own biases, but glories in the triumphs of community organizing. The small, when gathered together, can alter the course of the truly gargantuan. Why, successes abound to prove the endeavor is not in vain. It takes only vigilance by locally involved citizens.”

“Human beins ain’t too good at vigilance,” the farmer replied. “Sooner or later you come in a circle.”

“So we should never try?” asked I. “Why, I myself am on my way to engage in the practice of education in your very fine Mingo County, where I shall organize the teaching of reading, writing, arithmetic and a host of other disciplines.”

“You teach them *mingos* to read, write and figger, and they’ll just read trash, write trashier and figger out how to screw their neighbor.”

“Why sir, do you have such a low opinion of the fine people of Mingo County,” I asked.

“Didn’t mean nothin’ by it. Dry county. Holdovers from them progressives you seem to be so in romance with.”

“Why, the lack of alcohol in a county is indeed a backward direction from progress!” I exclaimed with more than a modicum of concern.

“We’re of a mind on that one, sir,” the farmer replied.

This prospect, I will admit, put a damper on my prospective employment. One never should be stingy with the benefit of the doubt, however. “I will certainly not merely teach reading for reading’s sake,” I rejoined. I will engage the students in a dialogue which engages them in the very turmoil of life, as the honorable Thomas Falk has argued. Literacy can unloose the chains of mental bondage when properly couched in Socratic, thoroughly questioning practice, not mere indoctrination into a simple skill or singular way of thinking.”

“Don’t know how many ways you’re going to get them *mingos* to think in,” said the farmer. “One would be a mighty fine start.”

“Once again,” I said, “We must try. The advantage of the home school system is that the teacher-student relationship has hope of being a real relationship tailored to the individual, not an assembly line.”

“Suppose that depends on what teachers you get,” replied the farmer. “I suppose many of ‘em don’t have bona fides like *yourn*.” (I’m quite sure I disliked the tone of his voice here.) “And anyway, can’t educate ‘em all that way, as I said before. Don’t have time ner energy ner the money fer it. Wanna educate a lotta folks, gotta do it in rows, not pots. And supposin’ you have the gumption, what are you going to do with them *mingos*?”

“I have been contemplating that very thing, sir, on my cross country trip from the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society. The veritable and wonderfully bow-tie-clad Dr. Joseph Watras endeavored to show us the distinct options between the educator William Torrey Harris, who advocated taking students through a progression of perception from isolated facts to transcendental understanding, and one John Dewey—who the entire group seemed very fond of—who believed young children should be engaged personally in the comprehensive scientific method from early on in very hands-on ways. As I have always been very fond of the philosopher Hegel, on whom Harris built his ideas, I may opt for that system.”

“Never was fond of Hegel much, myself,” the farmer mused. The revelation that this humble agrarian even knew the name of the wondrous German took me back for a moment.

“How, sir, do you know of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel?” I had to inquire.

“Harvard man,” said the farmer. “What did you take me for?”

“Why, your demeanor suggested a, hmmm... less lofty alma mater,” I said hesitantly, not wishing to offend. “What brought you to this location?”

“Can’t a man want an honest job? I swear, if you professors was in charge, nobody’d have one, just all be sittin’ around contemplatin’ junebugs. That’s why our good Harvard President, Charlie Eliot, wanted universities run by level headed businessmen instead of crackpot teachers with no mind on how to run things.”

“I believe I heard that name at the conference,” I reacted, surprised to say the least. “Benjamin Ashby Johnson was comparing Eliot’s ideas, which seem to have triumphed in our current day, with the thoughts of a gentleman by the name of Thorstein Veblen, who would quite disagree with your position.”

“Knew him, too,” said the farmer. “Nice enough; naïve as hell. Gotta have money to run a university, and the last thing a professor knows how to do is how to make money. That’s why then end up teachin’ to begin with, isn’t it?”

“I must admit,” I had to admit, “that when I came to the end of my studies it seemed the only option discernable. But certainly there is a danger in assuming the university is merely a business.”

“Don’t see why not,” the farmer replied. “Everybody there’s gettin’ paid, and everybody they get out of there will hopefully end up getting’ paid. There’s a lot of places where the college is the biggest factory in town. They got to be responsible.”

“The concept, I believe, is called ‘regional stewardship.’ A Mr. Timothy Leahy Simpson was discussing it. It seems to be your idea, articulated in the form of regional stewardship, that schools are beholden to the communities around them to such a degree that the university is not doing its job unless it serves the needs of the area around it.”

“Sounds practical to me,” said the farmer.

“Practical, yes, but it gets back to the whole reason for education,” I replied. “Professor Simpson points out that when we see this stewardship idea in only economic terms, it undercuts education as mind-expanding, creating people who can not just get a job, but challenge the currency of thought and participate in society in myriad ways beyond egoistic economy.”

“Like welfare?” the farmer jested. “You professors need to do something that we all can use. All you do is sit around and study stuff like the inverse relation between moon phases and jaywalkin’ arrests.”

“Ah, you should have gone to the last discussion I was able to attend before departing Dayton,” I said. “Two most excellent gentlemen, Kurt Stenhagen and Bryan Warnick, proffered a reconciliation between those who believe that university research should only bear on practical matters and those who desire to seek knowledge not only to test the limits of accepted knowledge but for the sheer joy of it as well. The gentlemen wisely recommended a heterogeneous alliance of searchers after truth. Apparently this conflict can be traced all the way back to the venerable Greeks.”

“I doubt we’ll be solving it today, then,” said the farmer. “Don’t you eggheads ever solve *anything* at these conventions of yours?”

“I suppose,” I offered, “that one never solves what one fails to attempt. In fact, Stenhagen and Warnick incorporated a study on Chinese, Japanese and American attitudes on education that I found potentially uprooting for educational theory. I hope to return next year to grapple with such things once again. Challenges must not be averted. Though you might lose a harvest, you still plant, do you not? If no corn, then no cornbread.”

“Cornbread’s for children and fools,” sniffed the farmer. “Real men need stiffer matter.”

“I do not get your meaning,” I said quizzically.

“I suppose since you’re a perfesser of some sort, the gov’ment wouldn’t have you,” said the farmer, slipping a jug out from behind a stump. I must admit that I was curious. He took a cork from the large receptacle and drank deep, then offered me the jug.

“Why, I am a bit thirsty after my long sojourn.” As I contemplated the jugness of the jug and the emptiness that made possible the jugness of the jug, as old Heidegger would say, the liquid caressed my throat. I felt my countenance change in a number of appreciated ways. The farmer smiled.

I somehow lost track of time. I never did remember how I came hence from North Dakota. I do not know the fate of the Ford Fiesta. I never did make it to Mingo County. But I did realize that the cornfield was indeed beautiful after all.
