

Indeterminateness and “Going Beyond”: Education, Dewey, and the Blues

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INTRODUCTION

On March 2, 1959, at Columbia Studios in New York, Miles Davis began recording *Kind of Blue*, an album that would leave a mark on the history of jazz. In his sextet, he strongly wanted two saxophonists: John Coltrane, who, in a few years, would revolutionize saxophone playing, and Julian “Cannonball” Adderley, a musician who was firmly grounded in the “classic” blues tradition. There is a story about the recording of the album that embodies two ways to think about the blues and jazz. I will use this story to address the first point of this essay.

The sextet was playing “All Blues,” the first piece on the second side of the album. When Coltrane finished playing his complex and tremendously innovative solo, Adderley, a bit polemically, asks Miles, “Hey, Miles, what music has John played?” And Miles, very coolly, replies, “Don’t you recognize it? It is blues!” Adderley comments, “Perhaps it *sounds* like the blues, but certainly *it is not* the blues.” Adderley’s comment hits the mark. Coltrane was changing the structure of the blues by going beyond its limits. In a sense, Coltrane’s music was grounded in the blues and went beyond the blues at the same time. What allowed Coltrane to do this, apart from his genius, was the adaptable nature of the blues itself. Some types of music do not allow for innovative developments because their “nature” is to maintain their own tradition. Jazz — and the blues — not only entail revolution but, in a sense, beg for revolution. This characteristic represents jazz’s first intersection with education: the endeavor of education, in a Deweyan perspective, is grounded in the question of “going beyond,” where the “beyond” is literally ungraspable. Education, paraphrasing a statement used by John Dewey to define thought, “involves a jump, a leap, a going beyond”¹ what is actually present. Such a jump is, in a sense, a break in the ongoing flow of experience that works as “an emancipation and enlargement of experience.”² The very concept of education, in Deweyan thought, involves a new beginning of experience; such new beginnings happen in an unpredictable manner. Thus, educational uncertainty is not determined only by the fact that we are not able to clarify in advance all the elements of the educational process. Rather, uncertainty is the very basis of education because education, which differs from learning and socialization,³ is intentionally directed toward uncertainty; education, in a sense, engenders uncertainty. Therefore, reliance on a fixed concept of education, in which secure methods produce expected outcomes, is the best way to betray education.

To make my second point, I must single out the main characteristic of the blues, namely, the blues scale. Everyone who has heard the blues most likely remembers its unique and unmistakable sound. You do not have to be a musician to recognize the blues. This uniqueness is due to the fourth note of the scale, which is called the “blue note.” Speaking from an “orthodox” perspective, the “blue note” is a “wrong”

note in two ways: (1) it is a note that should not be on that scale (that is, it is dissonant with the other notes of the scale) and (2) it is, literally, an undetermined note in the sense that it does not have an exact frequency. Instead, it swings — indeed, the best compliment you can give to a jazz musician is “you’ve got the swing.” The “right” way to play the “blue note” is to make it swing, and the best way to betray the blues is to catch the blue note and make it stable. Thus, we can even say that the “essence” of the blue note and, by extension, the essence of the blues lies exactly in its indeterminateness and being outside orthodoxy. This leads me back to my second point: education, in Deweyan thought, is grounded in indeterminateness. This is true because education is grounded on experience, which is what, in Deweyan thought, is *behind* knowledge. In several passages of his writings, Dewey highlights “the radical disparity of presence-in-experience and presence-in-knowing.”⁴ This “radical disparity” must be understood in all its upsetting force. Dewey regards experience as something that could never be encompassed by knowledge; in a sense, it is not that we have experience but, on the contrary, that experience has us.

Thus, linking my two points, I wish to argue that the Deweyan account of experience, in challenging the roots of knowledge and consciousness as something at our disposal, leads to a concept of education that is both grounded in and directed toward uncertainty. Such a concept of education must be understood as a jump into the indeterminate, a break in experience to allow new experience to evolve. I will begin with education’s indeterminateness.

EDUCATION’S INDETERMINATENESS

Let’s take a look at the following two passages:

The thing to be known does not present itself primarily as a matter of knowledge-and-ignorance at all. It occurs as a stimulus to action and as the source of certain undergoings.... Such presence in experience has of itself nothing to do with knowledge or consciousness; nothing that is in the sense of depending upon them, though it has everything to do with knowledge and consciousness in the sense that the latter depends upon prior experience of this non-cognitive sort.... The difficulties and tragedies of life, the stimuli to acquiring knowledge, lie in the *radical disparity* of presence-in-experience and presence-in-knowing.⁵

A persistent trait of every object in experience [is that] ... the visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen *decides what happens* in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped.⁶

In my view, these two statements do not sound like Dewey’s. The problem with them is that they seem to undermine not only the possibility and the usefulness of achieving knowledge about the world but also the very possibility of intelligent action. To the extent that there is a “radical disparity” between experience and knowledge and “what is unseen decides what happens in the seen,” it is difficult to understand why — and how — we should engage in the endeavor of reflective thought. As a result, education, which is grounded in what we could loosely refer to as personal and common efforts toward change, becomes very difficult to envision.

The difficulty lies in the fact that Dewey is adamant about putting not only a distance but also an unfillable gap between experience and knowledge, invisible and visible, and unseen and seen. Moreover, the former terms (experience, invisible, unseen) seem to decide the latter (knowledge, seen, visible), and the latter have no

means of grasping the former. The “radical disparity,” moreover, suggests that we do not have a progressive approach to the gap between knowledge and experience; that is, knowledge can gradually conquer the unknown territory of experience or experience gradually comes into the light of awareness and knowledge. In Dewey’s statement, knowledge (and consciousness) “depends upon prior experience of . . . [a] non-cognitive sort.” The problem is not only that noncognitive experience lays the foundations of knowledge/awareness; it is also that, remaining faithful to Dewey’s words, knowledge and consciousness will never be able to see their own foundations. Moreover, to the extent that it seems that we can have no education without awareness, it is difficult to understand the type of education we can have in a world in which what is out of our sight — “the invisible” — decides what happens in “the visible.”

In *Experience and Nature*, we are faced by what seems a “weak” understanding of education. In the pages devoted to the analysis of consciousness, Dewey states,

Consciousness is, literally, the difference in [the] process of making. Instruction and reproof that are not an idle flogging of the air involve an art of re-directing activity; given this redirection . . . there is emergence of change in meanings, or perception. There is here no question of priority or causal sequence; intentional change in direction of events is transforming change in the meaning of those events. We have at present little or no controlled art of securing that redirection of behavior that constitutes adequate perception or consciousness. That is, *we have little or no art of education in the fundamentals*, namely in the management of the organic attitudes which color the qualities of our conscious objects and acts. (*EN*, 316. emphasis added)

Paraphrasing Dewey, “the fundamentals” of living consist of “the management of the organic attitudes which color the qualities of our conscious objects and acts.” In such fundamentals, “we have little or no art of education.” Due to space limitations, I cannot analyze the concept of quality in the Deweyan understanding of experience here,⁷ but with my end in view, I wish to recall that Dewey conceived of quality as something as “the background and the control of every experience” and something that “is *had* immediately.”⁸ Thus, something that “is *had* immediately” is “the background and the control of every experience.” In this statement, we find a further confirmation of the fact that, as quoted above, “the visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen *decides what happens* in the seen.”

Returning to the previous passage from *Experience and Nature*, we find also the Deweyan — revolutionary — understanding of consciousness; our awareness emerges from the “process of making”: “consciousness is, literally, the difference in process of making.” In the beginning, we do not have awareness, but we have the “making.” As Gert Biesta and Nicholas Burbules note,

Dewey’s transactional approach . . . tries to account for the *point of contact* between the human organism and the world. For Dewey the human organism is always already “in touch” with reality However, while Dewey’s transactional approach implies that the organism is always “in touch” with its environment, this does not mean that reality simply reveals itself to the organism. One of the key ideas of Dewey’s pragmatism . . . is that reality only reveals itself as a result of the activities — the “doings” — of the organism.”⁹

Reiterating Biesta and Burbules’s argument, we see that, in the Deweyan account, human beings are embedded in the world in an ungraspable way. The result of our being-embedded-in-the-world is experience. Knowledge and consciousness have no direct access to such being-embedded-in-the-world, in which “the tangible,” as

quoted above, “rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped” (*EN*, 43). Our experience, then, is primarily “untouched” and “ungrasped.”

It may be useful to understand this ungraspable foundation of experience by referring to “the subconscious of human thinking,” about which Dewey states the following:

Apart from language, from imputed and inferred meaning, we continually engage in an immense multitude of immediate organic selections, rejections, welcomings, expulsions, appropriations, withdrawals, shrinkings, expansions, elations and dejections, attacks, wardings off, of the most minute, vibrantly delicate nature. We are not aware of the qualities of many or most of these acts; we do not objectively distinguish and identify them. Yet, they exist as feeling qualities, and have an enormous directive effect on our behavior.... Even our most highly intellectualized operations depend upon them as a “fringe” by which to guide our inferential movements.” (*EN*, 299–300)

The statement clearly notes that the first way in which we are embedded in the world is out of our control. This embeddedness depends on “an immense multitude of immediate organic selections” in which we “continually” engage. We may only imagine and feel such a multitude, which escapes clear identification. We feel that “something” happens in us by contact with environment. Such somethings are described by Dewey in terms of an indistinct and pugnacious bulk of activities that oppose, overlap, annul, and reinforce one another.¹⁰

We can see only the result of such magma when, by boiling over, it exerts a strong influence on behavior. Moreover, “even our most highly intellectualized operations depend upon them as a “fringe.” Dewey, in this statement, accomplishes the naturalization of unconscious that is, at the same time, the final evidence of how the unconscious is unattainable. Such unattainableness of the unconscious has nothing to do with something that is set down in it. It has to do, simply, with living because “where there is life, there are already eager and impassioned activities.”¹¹ Knowledge, awareness, consciousness, and inference emerge by — and depend upon — acts of a quality of which “we are not aware.”

This analysis of the background of awareness is not only limited to the statement above. We must remember that Dewey, in *How We Think*, speaks about thinking as “something that happens in us.” He is adamant in stating that “primarily, naturally, it is not *we* who think, in any actively responsible sense; thinking is rather something that happens in us.”¹² Dewey, in a sense, makes the upsetting point that a lack of awareness and control are the very heart of thought. The Deweyan challenge to the Western concept of an all-encompassing knowledge,¹³ grounded in consciousness, goes to the very roots of our relationship with thought and experience:

Consciousness, an idea, is that phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation. The current idealistic conception of consciousness as a power that modifies events is an inverted statement of this fact. To treat consciousness as a power accomplishing the change is but another instance of the common philosophic fallacy of converting an eventual function into an antecedent force or cause. Consciousness is the meaning of events in course of remaking; its “cause” is only the fact that this is one of the ways in which nature goes on. (*EN*, 308)

Undermining the understanding of consciousness as the basis of experience, Dewey, at the same time, undermines consciousness — and awareness — as the

power by which we can direct education. This is not to say, of course, that Dewey argues for a nihilistic or relativistic account of reflective thought and education. On the contrary, Dewey presents an ethic of finiteness that locates education at the core of our relationship with the world and nature, an ethic that also rejects in advance both the positivistic and harmonious interpretation of his work.¹⁴

EDUCATION AS JUMP

Up to this point, I have attempted to argue that Dewey, in his concepts of a “radical disparity” between experience and knowledge in which “the visible is set in the invisible and in the end what is in the unseen decides what happens in the seen” creates a gap between experience, on the one hand, and consciousness and knowledge, on the other. Such a gap may seem to undermine the very possibility of intelligent action and, in a sense, of education — certainly an absurd conclusion. Thus, in this section, I address the issue of how education and intelligent action can exist within the framework that I have presented. My claim, inspired by Jim Garrison’s argument about disrupting inadequate habits¹⁵ and Biesta’s “pedagogy of interruption,”¹⁶ is that education, paraphrasing Dewey on thinking, works as “a jump, a leap, a going beyond”¹⁷ what is actually given in experience. Such a jump is a jump into the unknown, into “possibilities not yet given” (NRP, 63) in the sense that such possibilities are *created* by the jump. Before the leap, such possibilities, literally, did not exist. I will begin with the definition of consciousness we find in *Experience and Nature*.

Here, Dewey defines “the apex of consciousness” as “the immediately precarious, the point of greatest immediate need. . . , its intense or focal mode” (EN, 312). Consciousness is also “the point of re-direction, of re-adaptation, re-organization” (EN, 312). Consciousness is the basis for intelligent action; it not only springs from and depends on experience, as argued in the last section, but it is also the point in which experience can be reframed. The apex of consciousness is, in a sense, the point, in our projection to the future, where we can begin a new experience. Dewey is adamant in stating how this occurs: “We live forward. . . ; we live in a world where changes are going on whose issue means our weal or woe; since every act of ours modifies these changes and hence is fraught with promise, or charged with hostile energies — what should experience be but a future implicated in a present!” (NRP, 12). Such living forward does not have the features of continuity and predictability but the features of leaps and interruptions. Through such leaps, we jump into a new territory of experience, which, in turn, will be the ungraspable ground for the emergence of new knowledge and new awareness. Awareness is thus the means by which we establish a new beginning of experience. Consequently, the process of remaking experience is continuous, and this continuity is achieved by recurring jumps into the unknown.

This is why Dewey states that “all thinking involves a risk. Certainty cannot be guaranteed in advance. The invasion of the unknown is of the nature of an adventure; we cannot be sure in advance.”¹⁸ Thus, consistent with Deweyan thought, we must

conceive of such an “invasion of the unknown” as an invasion provoked also by our decisions to move toward the unknown:

As a matter of fact, the pragmatic theory of intelligence means that the function of mind is to project new and more complex ends — to free experience from routine and from caprice. Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or in that of the existent state of society, but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson. (NRP, 63)

We move toward the unknown beginning with the action of interrupting the ongoing flow of experience; from then onward, we are able to gain new experience. Such an interruption marks an experience with the characters of irregularity and contingency, characters that are shared by experience and nature. Dewey emphatically states, “The ultimate evidence of genuine hazard, contingency, irregularity and indeterminateness in nature is thus found in the occurrence of thinking” (*EN*, 69). We see how world and nature are firmly marked by contingency; this is a recurring and urgent issue in Dewey’s thoughts. Thinking, which is an occurrence rather than a process, is in continuity with nature and, in virtue of this continuity, is likewise marked by “genuine hazard, contingency, irregularity and indeterminateness.”

The interplay between the world’s indeterminateness and humankind’s effort to clarify this indeterminateness — the relationship between the contingency that characterizes living and our endeavor to make such living stable and secure — strongly evokes the beauty, the risks, and the will to go beyond that characterize jazz and blues improvisation, not least because in living and in making music, we strive for and desire to go beyond what is already given. The work and talent of a blues musician lie in a precarious balance between maintaining the form of the song she or he is playing and renewing this song, going beyond it and, sometimes, betraying it. Every musician faces this task in an intimately personal way, constructing his or her own balance. Some are firmly grounded in the tradition, such as Cannonball Adderley, and some exceed the limits of what is considered “correct” at a given time, violating the boundaries of beauty and form as Coltrane did. This fragile balance and act of going beyond is also the root of living that Dewey has shown us so clearly. Through Dewey, indeed, we may conceive of education not so much as the attempt to understand and predict experience but as the means to create new, unpredictable experience. Education, like jazz improvisation, accomplishes its task when it produces something worthy *and* unexpected. Without radical newness, an education — like an improvisation — must find another name for itself.

Thus, on the one hand, Dewey revisits the alliance between man and nature; human beings are part of the universe and “the belief, and the effort of thought ... are also the doing of the universe” (NRP, 420). On the other hand, such an alliance is anything but irenic; it has “the character of contingency which [universe] possesses so integrally” (NRP, 46). Because “the realm of the practical is the region of change, and change is always contingent,”¹⁹ recovering the alliance with nature, the “inner harmony” with the environment,²⁰ is an endless and dangerous endeavor. Man “finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble.

The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable” (*EN*, 41). Additionally, human aims, in Deweyan reflection, are marked by uncertainty and circularity: “Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences. ‘Endless ends’ is a way of saying that there are no ends — that is no fixed self-enclosed finalities.”²¹

The continuity between thinking and nature is reinforced by the continuity — or the correspondence — between education and living. This correspondence between life and education must be understood as an emancipation, enlargement, or reconstruction of experience: “Education is life... Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; ... the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing.”²² Elsewhere, he writes,

Experience is not a rigid and closed thing; it is vital, and hence growing. When dominated by the past, by custom and routine, it is often opposed to the reasonable, the thoughtful. However, experience also includes the reflection that sets us free from the limiting influence of sense, appetite, and tradition... Indeed, the business of education might be defined as just such an emancipation and enlargement of experience.²³

Emancipating and enlarging experience, in Deweyan understanding, cannot be simple or safe. In the end, no one can know what such emancipation requires in terms of effort and pain or what will come to us from such emancipation. However, we know that without the effort of education, we can only undergo the unavoidable change of which experience consists. In a sense, the choice we have by education is between undergoing unknown changes and provoking unknown changes.

In this brief review, we can see that the Deweyan understanding of living clearly has two faces. On the one hand, it is a Sisyphean effort in a “precarious and perilous” world (*EN*, 42). On the other hand, living is an open affair in which the “juvenile assumption of power and achievement is not a dream to be wholly forgotten.”²⁴ It is, of course, misleading to attempt to understand Dewey by visiting only one side of the question. Thus, if we do not have any possibility of controlling experience or of foreseeing change, we have the possibility to enlarge and emancipate our experience, provoke change, and find new experiences by taking a knowing leap into the unknown.

1. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1910), 26.

2. *Ibid.*, 156.

3. Regarding the difference between education, learning and socialization, see Gert Biesta’s work, particularly, Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning. Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006); Gert J.J. Biesta, “The Education-Socialisation Conundrum or ‘Who Is Afraid of Education?’,” *Utbildning & Demokrati* 16, no. 3 (2007): 25–36; Gert J.J. Biesta, “Learner, Student, Speaker. Why It Matters How We Call Those We Teach,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 4 (2010): 540–552.

4. John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” in *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude*, John Dewey, Addison W. Moore, Harold Chapman Brown, George H. Mead, Boyd H. Bode, Henry Waldgrave, Stuart James, Hayden Tufts, Horace M. Kallen (New York: Henry Holt, 1917), 48. This work will be cited as NRP in the text for all subsequent references.

5. *Ibid.*, 47–48 (emphasis added).

6. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925; repr., London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929), 43. This work will be cited as *EN* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. On this issue, see the fundamental work of Richard J. Bernstein, "John Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience," *The Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 1 (1961): 5–14.
8. John Dewey, *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 70 (emphasis in original).
9. Gert J.J. Biesta and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 10 (emphasis in original).
10. Bruce Wilshire, in his 1993 essay, noted the dependency of what is conscious on something that is not conscious: "consciousness emerges only when there is some hesitation or some failure in habitual adjustments.... There is no reason to think that consciousness can predict which meanings will arise.... Consciousness cannot reliably predict even its own course.... Consciousness is conditioned within a matrix that is not itself conscious." Bruce Wilshire, "Body-Mind and Subconsciousness: Tragedy in Dewey's Life and Work," in *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture*, ed. John J. Stuhr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 264.
11. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 50.
12. Dewey, *How We Think*, 34 (emphasis in original).
13. On this issue, see Jim Garrison, "Dewey, Derrida and the 'Double Bind,'" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 3 (2003): 349–362; Gert J.J. Biesta, "How to Use Pragmatism Pragmatically?," *E&C/ Education & Culture* 25, no. 2 (2009): 34–45.
14. Regarding the lack of foundation in both positivistic and harmonious interpretations of Dewey, see James S. Johnston, "John Dewey and the Role of Scientific Method in Aesthetic Experience," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21, (2002): 1–15; Inna Semetsky, "On the Creative Logic of Education, or: Re-reading Dewey through the Lens of Complexity Science," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40, no. 1 (2008): 83–95; Stephen Toulmin, "Introduction" in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).
15. Jim Garrison, "A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 4 (1996): 429–451.
16. Gert J.J. Biesta, "What is at Stake in a Pedagogy of Interruption?," in *Philosophy of Education: Modern and Contemporary Ideas at Play*, eds. Tyson E. Lewis, Jaime G.A. Grinberg, and Megan Laverty (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2009); Gert J.J. Biesta, "No Education Without Hesitation: Exploring the Limits of Educational Relations," in *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia W. Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013): 1–13.
17. Dewey, *How We Think*, 26. Such "being beyond" is clearly expressed in a passage on learning quoted from *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900), 37: "Learning? certainly, but living primarily, and learning through and in relation to this living. When we take the life of the child centered and organized in this way, we do not find that he is first of all a listening being; quite the contrary.... He is already running over, spilling over, with activities of all kinds."
18. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; repr., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 174.
19. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation Between Knowledge and Action* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1929), 19.
20. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 17.
21. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct. An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 231.
22. John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *Journal of the National Education Association* 18, no.9 (1929): 295.
23. Dewey, *How We Think*, 156.
24. *Ibid.*, 420.