

On the Learning of Responsibility: A Conversation between Carol Gilligan and John Dewey

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Y'know, a home is the birthplace of memory but I'm wondering is it too late for us, almost?
How're we gonna dig out the old memories and replace them with new?...What's a *surprise*
but just something you didn't know replacing something you believed.¹

The problematics of the question of responsibility has been a life long quest for me. Its roots are deeply instilled in the early days of childhood and while I will not exactly pinpoint the moment I inherited this quest, I will state that its importance still holds firmly to my being. As a mother of two teenaged children and as a teacher educator, I find the notion of responsibility to be particularly salient. I hope my children will become responsible adults and my students responsible teachers. But what exactly does this mean? And what does it entail? How is it learned and taught? And when and to whom is responsibility owed?

I first began to frame my questions about responsibility philosophically when I read Maxine Greene's essay on "Wide-Awakeness and the Moral Life."² While I intuitively already knew that the notion of responsibility was embedded in conduct, Maxine's powerful essay helped inspire a new journey, a direction, from which to examine this question. To me, responsibility is problematic since we typically associate it with what we "ought" to do as parents, spouses, lovers, teachers, and friends. We associate it with expectations that must be met to demonstrate commitment and obligation and perhaps love.

However, when we approach responsibility from this perspective we tend to become entangled in a web of frustration, resentment, perhaps anger which result in a move away from those who are the recipient of our "responsibility." I wonder, is there another way to conceive of the notion of responsibility? And if so, how is it learned and what does it look like in the every day? As in the past, whenever I begin a new query for understanding, I turn to John Dewey, who typically explicates the parts of the problem so eloquently for me. So, I begin the conversation there.

For Dewey, ideas of responsibility and freedom are the pinnacle of the problem of conduct. In *Ethics*, he states, "[t]he ethical problems connected with the fact of selfhood culminate in the ideas of responsibility and freedom."³ Regarding responsibility in *Ethics*, Dewey is concerned with the development of responsibility as a relational process, in other words, how it is learned and how it modifies future conduct. He says that social demands, approvals, and condemnation are important factors that bring about traits in a self that have moral significance and value. He uses the simple example of a child who snatches food because he is hungry to explain how responsibility is learned. For discussion purposes, I will call this dynamic of learning responsibility that Dewey explicates, "the relation of responsibility" (*ET*, 319).

In this situation, a hungry child snatches food. For the sake of argument, we can assume that the act is "innocent" regarding intentionality and therefore the act itself

would have no moral import since its wrongfulness is unknown to the child. This simple situation resembles, in nature, a myriad of situations in which we find ourselves engaging in conduct that is wrongful or hurtful yet we are unaware of the implications it may have for the other. The other, in this case the parents, may regard this situation as an opportunity for character building since it provides the child the opportunity to learn something about himself that is undesirable. If the situation were to be left unattended, the child would not have the opportunity to learn about his actions and would therefore be unable to modify his conduct in a future situation. The idea of being held accountable by another is essential in Dewey's example for he sees this as "an important safeguard and directive force of growth" (*ET*, 339).

In examining Dewey's relation of responsibility we can see that it consists of two parts that inform each other. On the one side is the person who uses praise, blame, reward or punishment as a means of modifying the behavior of the other. For the sake of discussion we can call this person the teacher. Dewey says the teacher's behaviors are important because they are used to produce a change in attitude in the learner. The intellectual change in the attitude of the "learner" comes to recognize the meanings of his own actions. And it is from the teacher that the learner comes to understand the meaning of his actions and comes to recognize the relation between his own actions and what these actions mean with respect to the teacher. For Dewey, we hold a person responsible or accountable for his or her actions in order for that person to become responsible towards us and others. Furthermore, Dewey states that the one who holds the other accountable, the teacher, must make these demands in a manner such that it holds the greatest possibility for the development of responsiveness in the learner. Otherwise the learner may turn away from the opportunity to learn something about himself. Lastly, Dewey informs us that the learner bears responsibility in this relation as well and that the learner's responsibility lies in the development of good habit and the change of bad tendencies.

Dewey's relation of responsibility is important and helps us understand one meaning of the Latin derivation of responsibility, *responsabilis*, which means to require an answer as in an expectation or obligation to account for something.⁴ Yet, I find Dewey's "relation of responsibility" troublesome and incomplete. In thinking about his simple situation several questions come to mind. These questions are concerned with the circumstances that surround the situation itself. Was this problem of snatching food merely a problem of manners at the dinner table? Did the snatching of food have other implications, such as less food for hungry siblings? With regards to the child, why is this child's hunger left unattended? Why does the child feel compelled to snatch food rather than simply ask his parents for food? To me these circumstances are important and have implications about what else is learned by the child when the parents assert the judgment that snatching food is greedy. It seems to me that something is left out.

A second problem concerns, not the situation of food snatching itself, but rather with Dewey's future reference to the learning of responsibility. In referring to the child in *Ethics*, Dewey states that, "the question of whether he might when he acted have acted differently from the way in which he did act is irrelevant" (*ET*, 337). The

question, for Dewey, is not the immediate situation but whether or not the child is capable of acting differently next time. It is the practical importance of effecting changes in human character that makes responsibility important to Dewey. While I agree that one importance of learning responsibility is for the purpose of guiding future conduct, this says little about responsibility in the present condition and neglects others ways of thinking about the capacity to respond.

Furthermore, a third problem arises for me with the simplicity of the situation that Dewey uses to demonstrate the relation of responsibility. The learning of responsibility frequently arises in far more complex social situations than Dewey's simple example presents. In *Ethics* and *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey offers more complex social situations to examine the notion of social responsibility. In these examples, he raises the question of social obligation and responsibility with respect to those individuals who may be harmed by our inadequate social institutions. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey is concerned with the penal system and our coming to grips with the social reality of our complicity in a society that allows conditions to exist that participate in the shaping of criminal behaviors in others.⁵ In *Ethics*, he is concerned with the role that emotions may play as we sit in judgment of such wrongdoing and our obligations in our role in helping the other learn something about themselves (*ET*, 326-27).

Yet, in *Ethics*, Dewey defines responsibility, derived from the Latin *responsum*,⁶ as responsiveness in which we meet the needs and claims of others, to the obligations *implicit in the position we hold* (*ET*, 338, italics added). However, Dewey does not offer a deeper conversation about this concept of responsibility and its nature within the immediacy of the moment in our intimate relationships such as those that exist between man and woman, teacher and learner, parent and child, or friend and friend.

But what are these obligations that are implicit in the position we hold as we stand in relation to others in social situations? And how can we know and meet the claims of others? To examine these questions I turn to emotions and feelings that erupt in situations we experience in the every day. Typically, when we describe emotions or feelings we do so in terms of sensory sensations such as a blood rush, a tingling across our skin or an increase in heart rate. But these descriptions are problematic, incomplete, and partial for they locate emotions as situated and constructed internally and suggest that emotions form independent of encounters with others. But emotions are always "about" something; there is necessarily an object of our emotions. Therefore, emotions and feelings must be identified and described, or assigned meaning, in terms of a situation between self and other. For Dewey, emotions and feelings are found when there is a certain tension or conflict between the intellectual and the feeling reaction in a situation. For him, it *is* the conflict of at least two habits that are lacking completeness in thought and feeling. In this mutual incompleteness, we experience an alternation of tension that will continue until the situation is resolved. The tension, characterized by the emotion that is being stirred up, "is due precisely to the fact that the given situation is thrown into relief over and against the ideal situation. In other words, the new situation is accentuated by its contrast to the ideal situation."⁷ My argument then is that if

emotions are public constructions then we bear responsibility for these shared constructions in ourselves and in the other. Hurt, pain, joy, and anger are feelings that we co-construct with the other. They are feelings the other co-constructs with us. As a result, we must ask ourselves how do we engage in responsible conduct, *in the moment*, when we come face to face with others who may experience hurt, pain, or sorrow as a consequence of our actions. How do we hold ourselves accountable to respond in these moments? And what responsibility do we hold for ourselves when we experience these feelings as a consequence of the actions of the other?

To some degree Dewey indirectly addresses this question of responsibility in *Ethics* when he discusses the importance of caring for the self. Indeed this is an obligation that one has to one's self. In fact, Dewey calls this a "moral duty" to one's self. Furthermore, he tells us that to care for the other at the detriment of one's self can be "suicidal." I agree wholeheartedly as this may result in the loss of one's sense of self. Still, even for Dewey, the "real moral question is what *kind* of self is being developed, furthered and formed" (*ET*, 324). This concern with the kind of self that one is becoming has to do with the conduct of the self in relation to the other. Dewey is raising an important question. But a broad range of meanings can exist between caring for the self at the expense of the other and caring for the other at the expense of the self. There is something in between selfishness and selflessness. But what does it look like in everyday life? And what informs it? To respond to these questions I turn to Carol Gilligan's, *In A Different Voice*.

In *In A Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan recounts the painful journey of growth that some women undergo as they wrestle with the problem of an unplanned pregnancy. In this work, she articulates three moral voices, one of selfishness, one of selflessness, and a third voice, a voice located in the space of the in-between. As Gilligan's narration in this work unfolds we hear the stories of women caught in relationships with men who render them invisible, women who struggle with feelings of victimization and powerlessness. As we listen to the voices in Gilligan's first two perspectives, we can begin to hear the construction of the women's problem in dichotomous terms.⁸

In the first perspective that is articulated in this research, the women begin by casting the problem of the unplanned pregnancy as one rooted in the need for self-protection. They feel the need to protect themselves from the men in their lives and from others by whom they feel victimized. The self becomes the object of concern. The issue, for these women, is one of survival, caring for themselves and not hurting themselves. As Gilligan states, the focus in this perspective is on taking care of one's self *because one feels that one is alone*.⁹ In these women's voices we hear their feelings of powerlessness to affect the world, disappointment with relationships, and a feeling of disconnection from others. The self experiences increasing differentiation from the world (*DV*, 74). To survive the emptiness and helplessness, self-preservation drives the decision-making process and becomes the focus in life. Decisions deemed "right" are based on competing interests for the self without concern for others and is motivated by immediate needs of the self and survival of the current situation and the accompanying feelings of oppression.

Yet, while it appears that some of the women resolve their conflict by examining the facts of “what’s best for them,” this choice becomes disrupted by feelings of selfishness; a selfishness grounded in self-interest disconnected from others. Furthermore, they begin to perceive this self protection as doing violence to the other. This “doing violence” generates a new problem for these women and subsequently they begin to recast the problem in terms of the other. Intuitively knowing that caring for the other at the expense of the self can be “suicidal” the women instead frame this “caring for the other” within the belief that by caring for the other they will in turn be cared for. Decision-making in this perspective emanates from the equilibration of the identification of feminine goodness (the capacity for caring for the other) with self-sacrifice which in turn imposes “restrictions on the direct expression of the self” and a move away from the self. Concern for the feelings of others imposes a deference to them; a deference that conceals the woman’s vulnerability and duplicity as her action is a choice for survival, that is, maintaining the relationship with the hope that she will be cared for in return (*DV*, 80). But in the absence of feeling cared for, these women once again are left with feelings of victimization and worthlessness which result in a move away from the other and constriction of the self. In addition, feeling subjected to judgments made and enforced by men on whose protection and support they depend, fear impedes the women from taking a stand.

As a result the dichotomous construction of the problem and its resolution cast as a choice to be made between caring for the self or caring for the other fails to inform the decision. The women find themselves caught between feeling selfish and feeling selfless. To whom they are responsible remains unresolved. Consequently, the tension in the situation drives the women either toward a premature decision or a snap judgment that precludes further learning or in the case of others a continuation of inquiry for a feasible and responsible resolution.

As a result of a continued inquiry, some of the women in Gilligan’s third perspective begin to reconstruct their past by re-evaluating what it means to be a good person. Initially the inquiry delves into the questions about male support and protection or its failing, but then the focus of inquiry begins to turn to the woman’s search for honesty within herself, of what the situation *means* for her (*DV*, 72). Gilligan traces the thinking these women undergo as they begin to reconsider the relationship *between* self and other which reveals their learning feelings of self worth (*DV*, 82, italics added). It is *in* this learning that their problem becomes transformed from a dichotomous construction to a situational one in which selfishness and selflessness become like flip sides of one coin. No longer feeling that their resolution must render violence to self or other, the women begin to develop feelings of safety within themselves and grow capable of responding to the situation at hand and as a result become open to learning the truth of who they want to be. It is in this feeling of safety that is held, if you will, by feelings of self worth that these women become capable of discovering themselves as well as discovering the other. In other words, the women develop feelings of safety and self worth that in a sense, serve as tools that inform a language of response-ability towards themselves and the other.¹⁰ This tool that characterizes a learned language of feeling has the capacity to shift former feelings of powerlessness and victimization that accompany the unequal

distribution of power in hierarchical relationships to feelings of empowerment that facilitate understanding of self and other in difficult situations that oftentimes feel victimizing but are not necessarily so.

In this same work, Gilligan identifies two languages that emerge from this group of women. One language, the language of rights, is embedded in the notion of autonomy, but an autonomy that is interdependent and involves a network of care of self and other. The object of care or worry about the welfare of self and other is to minimize hurt, injury, and violence. In this language is a concern for the fair and equal treatment of all subjects guided by questions about the meaning of justice. The central tenet of this justice is worth, worth of self and other within a situation. In the case of the self, justice is concerned with one's moral duty to care for one's self, and when one includes one's self within an ethic of worth, the moral duty to care for one's self emerges. In the exercise of this moral duty (the duty to one's self), the vulnerability of getting hurt created by the assertion of the self becomes less threatened in the relationship. As a result of diminished feelings of danger that are everpresent in relationships, the concept of relationships and responsibility is able to change from a bond based on dependency to a dynamic of interdependence. The diminished danger of the situation and the ensuing shift provide the space of the in-between where they can take risks with their vulnerability since while they know they may be hurt, they also have the comfort of knowing they will not be destroyed by this hurt. They find comfort and the ability to take risks in seeing the other, feeling protecting humanity of self and of the other by minimizing violence.' It is within this comfort of knowing, that the women create the ability to take risks in seeing the other and feeling the humanity of the other, and as a result act to protect the humanity of the self and the other by minimizing violence.

The second language Gilligan articulates is one of responsibility that guides conduct towards accountability to self and responsiveness to the other. This language is embedded in notions of goodness and shifts the hierarchical ordering or power within relations from one that commits violence to the self or to the other in response to unequal distributions of power to one that is inclusive of equal persons (*DV*, 173). The central tenet of the language of responsibility is the responsibility to minimize hurt for all parties. In the dynamics of these two languages meanings become interwoven to reveal a softened boundary between self and other, a boundary where oppression has no home.

What Gilligan's work offers is an extended meaning of responsibility embedded in a language of intersubjectivity informed by interdependent meanings that embrace goodness and that foster an ethic of worth inclusive of self and other. In this insightful work, an exciting language of the "in between" has emerged that celebrates the re-creation of a self with the other. It is also a language that brings forth a deeper understanding of the question of what it means to be educated and what it means to be responsible.

Gilligan's first two perspectives provide insight into what is at stake for us while living in a world in which we oftentimes feel powerless. Yet while current tragedies such as the destruction of the World Trade Centers and another impending war in the

Middle East loom large, as a teacher educator I am far more worried about the “smaller” issues facing young children in classrooms that have become political battlegrounds where the weapons are curriculum standards. And even more pressing are the nagging problems of poverty, homelessness, and abuse that do violence to the children who sit in our classrooms. Too often, my students express their feelings of helplessness in the face of just too many expectations. Gilligan’s work helps me here because her work reminds me that we are not helpless and that it is in remaining connected to ourselves and to the other that we can be our best. Like a flashing neon sign on Forty-Second St., Gilligan’s work reminds me about what is at stake in our classrooms when situations are viewed by teachers as oppositionally constructed between themselves and their students. In this paradigm, the teacher may find herself caught between the choices of meeting her own needs as a teacher, achieving her view of successful teaching, delivering her beliefs about what is important versus meeting the needs of the student that may not be readily apparent.

As teachers, when we think about successful learning in our classrooms we tend to be asked to think about outcomes. We strive for a comfortable atmosphere without conflict and ambiguity, in which our students demonstrate these outcomes through various assessment tools we implement. When our students seem to be relaxed and taking information in easily, we assess our classroom as working. Yet often frustration and resistance cast a dark cloud of confusion in our classrooms. Our students actively resist us and learning, by refusing to do homework or by not participating. They seem to reject what we have to offer. Sometimes their resistance takes the form of “acting out.” Other times frustration takes over, students crumple up papers, and insist this is work they cannot do. Some things just seem out of reach for them. As teachers we tend to retreat from such situations. Often we leave our classrooms wondering if we have done enough, done it right, or maybe even question our students’ capabilities. We do not want these situations in our classrooms. We respond to the situations as situations that need to be dealt with and rectified.

But classrooms are places of ambiguity and contingency and Dewey’s work tells us that the process of learning, inquiry, *is* fraught with tension. Understanding that inquiry is bumpy, unsettled, and filled with discomfort offers a different lens from which to view our classrooms. It tells us that our expectation for a smooth ride is mistaken and that it is in the vicissitudes of our classroom that education is alive. In looking through this lens an important question emerges: how do we, as teachers, confront this ambiguity in our students, in our classrooms and in ourselves? How do we live with this discomfort? Gilligan’s third perspective and her language of rights and responsibility provide insight into how as teachers we can live in our classroom and how we can promote a place of the “in between” where oppression has no home; a place where are classrooms can be birthplaces of memory and surprise.

1. Joyce Carol Oates, *Foxfire* (New York: Plume, 1993), 222, 181.

2. Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 42-52.

3. John Dewey, *Ethics* (Henry Holt, 1932), 319. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *ET*.

4. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 1543.
5. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (Toronto: Random House, 1922), 20-21.
6. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 1543.
7. John Dewey, "The Emotional Aspect of Volition," in *Lectures on Psychological and Political Ethics: 1898, John Dewey*, ed. Donald F. Koch (New York: Hafner Press, 1976) 110-15. Also see John Dewey's essay, "The Theory of Emotion," in *The Early Works of John Dewey 1882-1898*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967) 152-88.
8. For a more detailed interpretation of Carol Gilligan's work see Colette Gosselin, "In A Different Voice and the Transformative Experience: A Deweyan Perspective," *Educational Theory* 53, no. 1 (2003): 91-106.
9. Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 75. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *DV*.
10. I owe this idea of tools to one of my graduate students, Kristie DeSantis, who persistently pushes for tools in teacher education to guide conduct and foster self-awareness and protection that will help teachers understand what triggers emotions.