The Gleam of Light

Naoko Saito, Stanley Cavell

Published by Fordham University Press

Saito, Naoko and Stanley Cavell.
The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63624
"Education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself." As this statement of Dewey represents, growth in his evolutionary view of the world is the contingent and endlessly evolving natural process. It takes place in the interaction of an organism and its environment without relying on the eternal resting point outside that process. This is the essence of Dewey’s idea of progressive growth. How can we save this challenging worldview from a persistent voice of anxiety that asks, “Growth towards what?” and from the stigma of optimism filled with trust in power and progress? In view of the common ground between Emerson and Dewey, does Emerson help Dewey respond to these questions? In the project of rereading Dewey in light of EMP, the task is to articulate further the Emersonian “ethical import” implied in the natural process of growth. This is to be done by showing a richer metaphysics of growth with an Emersonian sense of the attained and unattained perfection.

As an initial attempt, this chapter reexamines Dewey’s idea of habit reconstruction. It presents his Emersonian view of ends for growth,
and even gestures toward an Emersonian holistic view of growth in ever-expanding circles.

**Habit Reconstruction: Growth as Transactional Holism**

Dewey says: “Man is a creature of habit, not of reason nor yet of instinct.” Habit is Dewey’s fundamental tool for understanding human nature and the basis for growth (HNC, 51). It represents his Darwinian functional theory of “active adjustments” as they are achieved by means of the interaction of an organism and its environment (DE, 52). Dewey’s idea of habit is not mere habituation as “accommodation,” but habituation as active control of the environment (51–52). While he rejects the idea of “repetition” as the essence of habit (HNC, 66), Dewey considers some mechanism or pattern to be indispensable to habit (51). Habit as social custom, or “the form of life,” is the basis for the formation of individual habits, which Dewey calls “secondary and acquired” (43, 65). The latter, however, modify the former by a distinct force. This interactive modification of habits is the mechanism of habit reconstruction—a gradual transformation of culture and society from within.

There are two specific aspects of habit reconstruction: impulse and intelligence. Impulse is the innate tendency that plants the seed of novelty and breaks the grasp of old custom. Dewey defines the function of impulse as follows: “Impulses are pivots upon which the reorganization of activities turn, they are agencies of deviation, for giving new directions to old habits and changing their quality” (67). There is, however, a catch. Although impulse is a natural source of novelty, it is only the beginning of the new habit. As soon as it comes into the world, it is under the influence of the preexisting habits of social relationships. In this sense, impulse is an acquired novelty; as Dewey says, “Impulses, although first in time are never primary; in fact they are secondary and dependent” (65). Therefore, impulses must be redirected by the function of intelligence, that is, the responsibility “to observe, to recall, to forecast,” and the courage “to go deeper than either tradition or immediate impulse goes” (118). Through the guid-
ance of intelligence, impulse becomes “incarnated in objective habit” (62). Impulse and intelligence are not metaphysical distinctions but functional ones in the cycle of habit reconstruction. The following statement recapitulates the point:

Thought is born as the twin of impulses in every moment of impeded habit. But unless it is nurtured, it speedily dies, and habit and instinct continue their civil warfare. (118)

The mechanism of habit reconstruction encapsulates Dewey’s antidualistic, holistic view of growth. It represents his battle against the “privacies of inner life” that are so much a part of Cartesian rationalism and British empiricism (9). It also reflects his opposition to instinct theories, including those of Freudian psychoanalysis that were popular in his day. Alan Ryan argues that Dewey’s aversion to the introspective emotion is derived from his early experience with Puritanism. Dewey fears the “moral pathology” of “a sickly introspection” (HNC, 109, 140). Thus, in his theory of habit reconstruction, Dewey flatly rejects the concept of “separate instincts” (104) or any substantial “psychic causes” (106), and tries to return human nature to “the public open out-of-doors air and light of day” (6).

In his rejection of the inner psyche as separate from the outer world, Dewey aims to build an antidualistic, holistic view of the world. Dewey’s views on nature, Thomas M. Alexander tells us, are based upon the principles of continuity, transaction, and potentiality within the medium of the situation, which makes possible his claim about the relationship between nature and experience. Dewey, he argues, presents a rich concept of experience “in” nature. Russell B. Goodman also defends Dewey’s view of a “deeper and richer intercourse” of experience and nature in which “experience itself reveals an objective world.” As these scholars point out, Dewey’s views on the transactional relationship between man and world are basic to his naturalism and represent his holistic view of the universe, his attempt to overcome the subject-object dualism. As Dewey says:

In experience, human relations, institutions, and traditions are as much a part of the nature in which and by which we live as is the physical world. Nature . . . is in us and we are in and of it.
In this holistic view of the world, Dewey’s idea of habit reconstruction is filled with apparently paradoxical concepts that create the image of his merely wavering between, or even obscuring, the distinction between opposites: the inner and the outer, mind and body, subject and object. On the one hand, for example, an impulse that originates in our natural and biological disposition is a kind of inner urge originated in each individual being. Yet, on the other hand, an impulse is anything but a subjective feeling or a mind composed of sense data. Impulses manifest themselves as “active tendencies” in observable, shared public situations (HNC, 144). Thus, he says: “‘It thinks’ is a truer psychological statement than ‘I’ think.” (216). In this regard, Dewey has a behavioral tendency, though not in the sense of the reductionist behaviorism of B. F. Skinner or J. B. Watson. Rather, Dewey is a social behaviorist like G. H. Mead. Dewey’s behavioral theory of habit reconstruction falls also under the influence of Frederick M. Alexander’s physiological approach, an approach that strives to unite body and mind.8

The truth is that Dewey tries to speak in the middle ground between the in and out in his situational, decentralized, and developmental concept of human nature. In place of an either-or way of thinking9, Dewey presents an alternative, holistic worldview in “a middle term” (HNC, 51). Indeed, this pragmatic wisdom, as Israel Scheffler suggests, is the unique contribution of Peirce’s idea that “we begin in the middle of things.”10 In his idea of habit reconstruction, Dewey tries to capture the “intermediate” realm (EE, 17) between mind and body, stability and change, the old and the new, conservation and renovation, dependence and independence, formation and deviation. In his idea of the “middle” or “intermediate,” however, Dewey does not posit a static middle point between two static opposites; he instead envisions a path of development rather than a series of fixed points. This is a continuous regeneration of a moving middle in an ongoing transaction between ever-changing factors. The path of the middle is a historical and progressive stream of time within the context of practice, what Dewey calls “events.”11 It is in this distinctive sense that we might call Dewey’s view of the universe transac-
It is the worldview of pragmatism that we always start, live, and grow in the middle—in the process of interaction and in an intermediate, indeterminate situation. It is this transactional holism that constitutes Dewey’s naturalistic idea of growth, and that reinforces its common ground with EMP—the mechanism for the reconstruction of culture from within, a reconstruction made possible by the interaction of the novel impulses of the young and established habits of adults. A change that takes place through habit reconstruction is not a radical revolution nor the destruction of the old; rather it is a gradual renewal of habits from within the culture. It is “reconstructive growth” (HNC, 68). Since habit reconstruction is always taking place in the middle, the reconstructive process of growth is best understood as a participle perfection—as “perfecting” (200).

Reconstructive growth in this middle ground, however, does not mean opportunism or non-commitment. Sharing Cavell’s idea of the criticism of democracy from within as it is found in EMP, Dewey’s transactional holism is permeated by the Emersonian spirit of non-conformity and criticism. For example, in his Emersonian voice, Dewey criticizes the “inert stupid quality of current customs” that suppresses the plasticity of the young (47). It is particularly demonstrative in his claim of treasuring the innovative impulse of the young as the essential condition of habit reconstruction—a reflection of his solidarity with Emerson’s “respect for immaturity” (DE, 57).

**Dewey’s Emersonian View of Ends**

Dewey’s Emersonian spirit of nonconformity is supported by and supports his thorough refusal to be contained by fixed ends. Dewey, with Emerson, reconstructs the concept of ends in opposition to the classical Greek teleology—the teleology of “fixed, eternal ends” (HNC, 159).

This naturalistic idea of habit reconstruction is not unlike Aristotle’s functional and action-oriented view of human nature—the view that moral virtue is acquired as a second nature through habit and
practice. Dewey also agrees with Aristotle that contingency and particularity are an integral part of nature; in this respect they share a “pluralistic” view of the universe (EN, 48). Despite these similarities, however, Dewey criticizes Aristotle’s (and Plato’s) concept of telos as final cause, with its accompanying mentality of “the craving for the passage of change into rest, of the contingent, mixed and wandering into the composed and total” (78). In Dewey’s view, it was Aristotle who gave credibility to the Western idea of perfection as a complete, fixed, end-state of self-realization (HNC, 154–55):

In Aristotle this conception of an end which exhausts all realization and excludes all potentiality appears as a definition of the highest excellence. It of necessity excludes all want and struggle and all dependencies. It is neither practical nor social. Nothing is left but self-revolving, self-sufficing thought engaged in contemplating its own sufficiency. (122)

The way Dewey criticizes the fixed end of perfection is reminiscent of the way Cavell distinguishes Emersonian perfectionism from Plato’s teleological perfectionism.

Dewey calls this view the Greek “love of perfection” (EN, 162) and criticizes it for the following reasons. First, in his view, Greek perfectionism and its teleology are “fatalistic.” It involves “a limiting position, a point or goal of culminating stoppage, as well as an initial starting point” (279–80). It molds a pessimistic temperament that tends toward the view “every endeavor [one] makes is bound to turn out a failure compared with what should be done, that every attained satisfaction is forever bound to be only a disappointment” (HNC, 199). Second, the Greek view of perfection is hierarchical, with a distinction between a lower realm of contingent and unstable nature, and the highest realm of contemplation in “pure and unalloyed finality” (EN, 89, 192). The former stage is merely a point from which to climb toward the latter. A dichotomy between “knowing and doing” is created as a result (HNC, 130). On the path toward perfection, the elements of the temporal and accidental in nature are to be gradually eliminated as obstacles to the achievement of the highest
end, as “recalcitrant, obdurate factors” (88–89). As a result, Dewey feels, what is significant in the ongoing process of the here and now is excluded from the picture of perfection. “[S]truggle, suffering and defeat” in natural human life are viewed as limits to human perfection (88). Thus, he says:

We long, amid a troubled world, for perfect being. We forget that what gives meaning to the notion of perfection is the events that create longing, and that, apart from them, a “perfect” world would mean just an unchanging brute existential thing. (58)

As in EMP, in which the natural sense of shame plays a crucial role, there is a strong sense that the negative phases of our experience are a significant source for our drive for human perfection. Hence, he declares: “Happiness is not something to be sought for, but is something now attained, even in the midst of pain and trouble” (HNC, 182). Third, Dewey thinks that the Aristotelian view of perfection creates a “deficiency” model of development that views the immature child as being “incomplete” and “imperfect” in the context of the faultless perfect state of “sufficiency” (EN, 48, 78, 84, 162). A sharp dichotomy is produced between the immature and mature. Dewey thinks that the significance of perfection can never be measured against a perfected state, but is solely experienced and communicated through the ongoing process of perfecting.

In place of Greek perfection and teleology, Dewey presents an alternative concept of an end that aligns with Emerson’s perfectionism. This is his idea of the means–ends relationship as a fruit of his transactional holism. In Dewey’s view, a distinction between means and ends is not metaphysical, but functional. They are “two names for the same reality,” a reality which is composed of the series of “intermediate acts” (HNC, 28). Ends function as a means by serving as the perspective from which we anticipate the next act. In turn, a means is the name for the next immediate action to be taken as “a temporary end” (DE, 113). “Means are means; they are intermediates, middle terms” (HNC 28). Ends are being reconstructed at each moment of action. “Ends grow.” They are not static points, and cannot be “lo-
located at one place only” (AE, 63). Rather, ends are “ends-in-view” that represent a whole series of acts (HNC, 155; EN, 88): “the terminal outcome when anticipated . . . becomes an end-in-view, an aim, purpose, a prediction usable as a plan in shaping the course of events” (EN, 86). Dewey’s idea of the means-ends relationship is a mark of growth as growing in the middle.18

Dewey’s idea of the means-ends relationship supports the direction of rereading Deweyan growth in the light of EMP. He reconstructs the concept of end as being pluralistic and dynamic, ends loyal to the Emersonian view of perfection. As with Cavell’s Emersonian idea of the endless attainment of the unattained self, Dewey’s transactional holism claims that “nothing in nature is exclusively final” (EN, 99). He transforms the concept of end from a mere finishing point to a tentative, consummatory closure that simultaneously constitutes a new beginning, opening “a further state of affairs” (85). “A natural end” is not a “de facto boundary” (86) but a “fulfilling close” (AE, 62). Ends liberate one action for the next; they do not contain it. Hence, Dewey says: “Every closure is an awakening, and every awakening settles something” (174). Thus, paradoxically, “[e]nds are literally endless” (HNC, 159); ends are open-ended. Dewey’s view of ends resonates with Cavell’s remark that “‘having ‘a’ self is a process of moving to, and from next,’” and that “each state of the self is final.”19 Dewey, along with Cavell and Emerson, proposes the concept of end in the ongoing act of “ endings” (EN, 84). We perfect our life with each moment of action, and we do this always starting anew in the middle of experience. As Dewey says, “travelling is a constant arriving” (HNC, 195).

Growth in Expanding Circles

Showing a striking similarity to the basic feature of EMP, Dewey’s concept of end in his transactional holism represents his innovative view of growth—the trajectory of growth not as a linear, goal-directed route but as one of an infinite expansion of the whole whose ends are open to all directions. In his description of habit reconstruc-
Dewey’s Emersonian View of Ends

Dewey suggests a quasi-Hegelian quest for “an enveloping whole” (180–81). This whole, however, is not of an absolute totality, but a whole that always leaves room for infinite space, the realm of the unknowable and the uncertain beyond the existing reach of our knowledge. In this regard, Dewey’s quest of the whole is closer to Emersonian whole in the attained and unattained path of perfection.

Goodman, who connects Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell to the American romantic tradition, points out that a common thread running through their thought is what Cavell calls the “marriage of self and world.” In Cavell’s view, according to Goodman, Emerson overcomes “a metaphysical fixture” posed by Kant: the universe being composed of the subjective world of experience and the objective world in itself, beyond the grasp of human understanding. Indeed, Cavell maintains that Emerson, with his “epistemology of moods,” transforms the meaning of “experience,” and is thus able to “destroy the ground” upon which the metaphysical distinction between the subjective and the objective is situated. Thus, Cavell says, Emerson’s view of the universe is neither one of “realism” nor “solipsism.” Moods “color” the world in “succession.” The meaning of the world is “revealed” by moods (Senses, 125–28). Cavell argues that the relationship between the self and world is that of reciprocal responses. This corresponds to Dewey’s transactional holism – the idea that neither self nor world is something to be known as a fixed entity, but that their meaning is revealed only in a transactional process.

Emerson’s contribution, however, does not end merely with this transactional concept. Emerson’s “ever-widening circles,” Cavell suggests, make possible an “onward” movement that resolves the antinomy of subjectivity and objectivity, the private and the public, or the inner and the outer (128, 137–38). The Emersonian view of perfection moves in “endless, discontinuous encirclings” (Conditions, xxxiv). Emerson himself describes the idea of expanding circles as follows:

> Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. This fact, as
far as it symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, around which the hands of man can never meet, at once the inspirer and the condemner of every success, may conveniently serve us to connect many illustrations of human power in every department.  

This passage implies that endlessly expanding circles, which Emerson calls “a self-evolving circle” (“Circles,” 167), is the metaphysics of perfection, “the flying Perfect.” It makes possible his view of ends as new beginnings. On the circumferences of expanding circles, ends to be attained exist in all directions, not only in one, upward direction. Everything in nature is in flux, including the state of perfection. In striking similarity to Dewey’s transactional holism, Emerson writes: “Permanence is a word of degrees. Every thing is medial” (176). This explains why Cavell says, “each state of the self is final,” and why perfection is perfecting. Once we think we have completed a circle, another yet unattained horizon awaits us. When Emerson says, “People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them,” he implies that settlement and unsettlement, perfection and imperfection, and the attained and unattained are facets of “the total growths” (174). Emerson’s metaphysics of growth in expanding circles implies the theme of EMP as a journey of self-overcoming.

Emersonian holistic growth suggests the sense of infinity, with his sense of wonder over an unknowable realm always awaiting in the path of human perfection: “The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel, was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, un-analyzable. That is, every man believes that he has a greater possibility” (168). In contrast to the Aristotelian concept of perfection enclosed by its final limit, Emerson’s idea of growth in expanding circles is open-ended. Or to put it in other words, Emerson is closer to Dewey than Aristotle when he declares: “I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past on my back” (173). Thus, for Emerson, “[t]he only sin is limitation” (169), and “[l]ife is a series of surprises” (174).

Dewey’s idea of growth as transactional holism, its accompanying concept of end, and his quest for “an enveloping whole” may be re-read in the light of the Emersonian view of growth in expanding cir-
cles. In his description of habit reconstruction, Dewey conjures up the image of new horizons opening ahead with the metaphor of the port:

Activity will not cease when the port is attained, but merely the present direction of activity. The port is as truly the beginning of another mode of activity as it is the termination of the present one. (*HNC*, 156)

In the compensatory and circular rhythm of nature (*EN*, 66–67), Dewey says, growth is in “the ever-recurring cycles” (*AE*, 152). In this path, what is midway between apparently paradoxical and contradictory opposites becomes thinkable. Possibilities for growth are opened in all directions. Dewey’s “expanded whole” may share common ground with Emerson’s infinitely expanding circles—holistic circles that combine the notion of unity with the idea that unity is not complete (171.) Dewey’s perfectionism with its ethical import of Darwinian naturalistic growth is much closer to Emerson’s perfectionism than to Aristotle’s or Hegel’s. His Darwinian worldview is surely progressive, but it is permeated by the sense of “humility” over the ever unattainable nature of perfection—“the sense of our slight inability even in our best intelligence and effort” (*HNC*, 200). Dewey’s idea of growth reread in the light of EMP, in place of Dewey between Hegel and Darwin, gestures toward Emersonian holism beyond the philosophy of power and progress.

Dewey’s Emersonian holistic, expanding, and changeable view of the universe, but with its humble sense of infinity and imperfection, transforms the very question that we must address on growth. Since an end can never be fixed on a point in a limited direction, and since an end is infinitely growing with the sense of the unknowable, it cannot be questioned in such forms as “Growth towards what?” or “What is the end of growth?” as if the content of growth were knowable and identifiable. These questions themselves reflect a presupposition that there are certain definable moral sources and foundations that we can ultimately strike. Just as Cavell says that the goal of Emersonian perfection is “nothing beyond the way of the journey itself”
(Conditions, 10), so too does Dewey’s growth as EMP demand a new set of questions addressed to the way of the journey, to the ongoing process of growing. These must be questions that ask “how.” How are we to endlessly create and recreate ends in the here and now in particular situations of our lives? How can each of us learn to articulate and realize ends-in-view as our ways of life? How do we bring forth a “fulfilling close” in “each doing”? (AE, 62).24