The Gleam of Light
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The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson.  

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Cavell urges us to see how close and far Dewey and Emerson are. Having discussed the common ground between them, we turn now to attend more closely to Cavell’s voice of criticism. One of the challenging questions that Cavell addresses to Dewey is the lack of concreteness in his language. Especially, he cannot hear “the speech of children” in Dewey’s writings on education.¹ To take up this line of criticism, we now invite Dewey, the how-philosopher, to respond to the following question: How can a good end be determined at each moment of perfecting? A more concrete picture of growth is needed in order to show what it means to live the life of growth as growing without relying on fixed ends, and what is going on in this very moment when we are perfecting our lives with the sense of finitude and infinitude. An attempt to answer this question involves Dewey’s idea of the social reconstruction of criteria.

In the face of the challenge, Dewey starts to disclose his distance from Emerson. It is Cavell and Emerson, his critical conversational
partners, who confront Dewey with this distance. The distance becomes apparent in the form of the inadequacy of his language to narrate, or itself to exemplify, the process of growth as perfection. The distance is a matter of not only linguistic means, but also of philosophical means, which affects Dewey’s theme of EMP. An internal gap that lies between the horizons of EMP and the scientific horizons in his naturalistic philosophy of growth is suggested.

How Do We Know a Good Ending of Growth? Growth and the Social Reconstruction of Criteria

In response to the question of how he distinguishes “educative” growth from its “mis-educative” counterpart, good growth from bad, Dewey states: “When and only when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing.” To elaborate further the meaning of this “principle of continuity,” however, it remains incumbent upon Dewey to respond to the question of the how, to demonstrate the way in which the principle applies in determining each ending of growth as a good one or bad one.

Dewey’s idea of the social reconstruction of criteria partially responds to this question. He takes an evolutionary position with respect to the good, a view that everything is in flux and medial. The good is a matter of degree, as Dewey says:

Reflection upon action means uncertainty and consequent need of decision as to which course is better. The better is the good; the best is not better than the good but is simply the discovered good. Comparative and superlative degrees are only paths to the positive degree of action. The worse or evil is a rejected good. In deliberation and before choice no evil presents itself as evil. Until it is rejected, it is a competing good. After rejection, it figures not as a lesser good, but as the bad of that situation.³

This represents Dewey’s pragmatist position since it allows the process and consequence of an action in a particular situation to determine its value. He rejects the idea of fixed, pre-given criteria as the
The significance of growth as perfection can never be measured by “standardization, formulae, generalizations, principles, universals.” As an alternative, Dewey presents the concept of revisable criteria in connection with the idea of “warranted assertibility.” Criteria are not “fixed first principles as ultimate premises or as contents of what the Neo-scholastics call criteriology.” Rather, they emerge from the ongoing process of cooperative inquiry in a particular situation.

The way to bring forth a good ending for perfection hinges on what kind of social interaction takes place in the process of revising criteria. Dewey says that it is conducted through a cooperative action in experimentation and dialogue. Hilary Putnam discusses this concept by claiming that what guarantees Dewey’s pragmatist concept of “justification without foundations” is the procedure of “the democratization of inquiry”—the scientific method of hypothesis, testing, and experimentation through cooperative inquiry and free communication. This is a democratic procedure by means of social intelligence. The acquisition of the capacity for an equal and free exercise of social intelligence is a condition of growth, and it requires education (EE, 56). Moral standards of culture and custom are being questioned and reconstructed through reflective and experimental intelligence in interaction between and among the young and the adult. The ways they interact with each other in their daily lives determine the production of good ends for growth.

As a more specific characteristic for such social interaction, Dewey presents the idea of “intimate contacts between the mature and the immature” (21). This represents his idea of face-to-face dialogue and friendship. Dewey claims that moral standards cannot be found in a choice between control given by the adult, as a representative of social custom, on the one hand, and freedom exercised by the young in their rebellion from custom, on the other (ibid.). In his idea of habit reconstruction, criteria for a good end of growth are continually sought and reconstructed in the middle realm between the lives of adults and the young, through the flexible interaction of their perspectives. In such shared activity, Dewey says, “the teacher is a
learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher” (DE, 167). The young and adults mutually educate and grow as friends and equal partners.

Dewey puts the idea of interaction as follows:

The word “interaction,” which has just been used, expresses the second chief principle for interpreting an experience in its educational function and force. It assigns equal rights to both factors in experience—objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a situation. (Emphasis added) (EE, 42)

By “objective conditions,” Dewey means such external factors in the classroom as the teacher, books, and equipment, which constitute the environment of the young. By “internal conditions” he means the impulse and the immediate inclinations of the young (41). Interaction is the process that mutually modifies the two. Dewey further elaborates:

[W]hen it is said that they live in these situations, the meaning of the word “in” is different from its meaning when it is said that pennies are “in” a pocket or paint is “in” a can. It means, once more, that interaction is going on between an individual and objects and other persons. (43)

The key word here is “between.” To live in a situation and thereby participate in interaction means to live in the middle realm between the internal and the external, a realm that is being created between individuals and their surrounding objects. Dewey does not reject the concept of the “in” or the “internal” as a unique attribute of an individual being; as he says: “Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose. . . . But this is not the whole of the story” (39). There is no such thing as “something purely ‘inner,’” or “an ‘inner’ personality” to be perfected (DE, 129). The “inner” is given its meaning solely in the matrix of our life situation. The impulse of a child finds and realizes its meaning only in its manifestation in action in a
shared situation. This is probably what Dewey means when he speaks of the unity of “action and soul” in his theory of habit (HNC, 52). And, as the sole meaning of human life is found out in “intimate contacts,” adults are compelled to observe, interpret, and engage themselves carefully with the life of the young in the middle realm of interaction.\(^9\)

The social reconstruction of criteria takes place in this process of intimate interaction. The relationship of face-to-face dialogue is a dynamically but subtly constructed practice of revising criteria among diverse perspectives. In addition to the child’s life, and his or her “present inclinations, purposes, and experiences,” a situation encompasses a wide range of objective conditions,\(^10\) including:

- What is done by the educator and the way in which it is done, not only words spoken but the tone of voice in which they are spoken.
- It includes equipment, books, apparatus, toys, games played. It includes the materials with which an individual interacts, and most important of all, the total social set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged. (EE, 45)

At each moment of interaction, our ways of thought, action, and speech are at stake for the social reconstruction of criteria. In this sense, bringing forth a good ending for growth without relying on fixed criteria is a task that demands rigor. It must involve an urgent sense that “the good is now or never” (HNC, 200).

*The Case of the Recalcitrant Child*

Dewey’s idea of the social reconstruction of criteria and its concomitant idea of the intimate contacts between the young and the adult, however, pose a question concerning the how. Israel Scheffler, criticizing Dewey, puts this as follows:

- How, one wants to know, is an instance of flexible remaking of habits to be recognized, in contrast with a non-flexible sort? How is one to establish a balance between thought and energy? How is one to determine when a piece of thinking embodies a “balanced arrangement of propulsive activities,” or reflects a “proportionate
emotional sensitiveness?". . . In sum, if the balance between reflection and impulse turns on the avoidance of their respective vices, the very notion of such balance turns out to be empty, or virtually empty, without additional specification. One can interpret the desired balance in various ways, depending upon how one independently reads the situation.\footnote{11}

Here Scheffler maintains that Dewey’s theory of situation is viciously circular, allowing us arbitrary choices. In addition to this general difficulty, he points to a confusion involved in Dewey’s concept of impulse as the pivot for reconstruction. Dewey’s “psychological” account asserts that impulse is released only when habit breaks down. Scheffler claims that this cannot, however, explain Dewey’s moral imperative that habits should be \textit{continually} reconstructed, since he does not show any energizing source for impulse prior to a habit breakdown.\footnote{12} Scheffler raises the question of how the impulse of the young can be released continually. He implies that the principle of continuing growth alone is not enough.

Robert B. Westbrook raises similar questions. He asks “how impulses could be employed to break the cake of custom if they required adversarial habits to redirect them.” Westbrook’s interpretation is that Dewey offers two responses. One is the education of children for “habits of flexible response.” When customs are rigid but when there is nevertheless a need to educate children for the acquisition of flexible and creative habits, however, a second solution presents itself: adults should locate “the source of a disposition for reform in the conflict among prevailing habits.”\footnote{13} At such a general level of explanation as Westbrook gives for Dewey, however, it is not clear how the social reconstruction of criteria is being flexibly and continually conducted in the interaction between the young and the adult; nor how the rigid custom of the adult can be prevented from suppressing the plastic impulse of the young, when they are already embedded in custom. If the existing standards of a culture function smoothly, and if there is no disturbance or conflict among habits or institutions in a well-regulated state, how can the young obtain the source for the release of their impulses? They may not even feel the need to change
the status quo. These are the questions concerning the process of
growth that Dewey is obligated to answer as the philosopher of the
how.

There is also a more specific case that challenges Dewey concerning
how loyal he is to his own claim of the social reconstruction of crite-
ria: the case of the recalcitrant child in the classroom. Dewey exhibits
an Emersonian perfectionist spirit of nonconformity and criticism.
He criticizes conformity in the following manner:

Natural instincts are either disregarded or treated as nui-
sances—as obnoxious traits to be suppressed, or at all events to
be brought into conformity with external standards. Since con-
formity is the aim, what is distinctively individual in a young per-
son is brushed aside, or regarded as a source of mischief or
anarchy. Conformity is made equivalent to uniformity. Conse-
quently, there are induced lack of interest in the novel, aversion
to progress, and dread of the uncertain and the unknown. (DE,
55–56)

This is the Dewey who shows the Emersonian courage to venture,
with the immature young, into the uncertain realm of growth. He
does not fear the innovation of the young as a potential source of
anarchy. And he is critical also of the tendency of the adult to “regard
novelties as dangerous, experiments as illicit and deviations as forbid-
den” (HNC, 159). Dewey allows for deviancy as a necessary element
of experimental growth. He writes:

The justification of the moral nonconformist is that when he de-
nies the rightfulness of a particular claim he is doing so not for
the sake of private advantage, but for the sake of an object which
will serve more amply and consistently the welfare of all. The bur-
den of proof is upon him. In asserting the rightfulness of his own
judgment of what is obligatory, he is implicitly putting forth a
social claim, something therefore to be tested and confirmed by
further trial by others.14

Dewey’s view of nonconformity presents a notion of courage that is
demonstrated not in the mode of nonjoining or estrangement, but
more thoroughly in the attitude of participation—the courage to ac-
cept others’ criticism from them face-to-face, and to shoulder the re-
sponsibility of one’s own counter-claim. This may well remind us of the following passage in Emerson:

> It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.\(^\text{15}\)

With Emerson, Dewey presents a middle path by overcoming the dichotomous choice of either not joining or participating, of being solitary or being social. He offers a view of the nonconformist within a society. Dewey as an Emersonian moral perfectionist is not a mere proponent of social guidance; he recognizes a space for the unique and deviating perspective of the young in the social reconstruction of criteria.

It is perhaps surprising then that Alan Ryan criticizes Dewey for never sufficiently emphasizing “ethical individualism,” the “ability to stand out against the crowd” as “the introspective nonjoiner” in “estrangement.” He thinks that Dewey does not allow for an “imaginative, quirky, original” child.\(^\text{16}\) To a certain degree, however, Ryan is correct that Dewey limits the concept of deviancy. Dewey, in his social theory of self, consistently shows his caution with the “recalcitrant” individual. In *Democracy and Education*, he condemns the “aloofness and indifference” of “self-sufficient” individuals. He thinks that it is an illusion to think that one can “stand and act alone” (*DE*, 49). In *Human Nature and Conduct*, he distinguishes the “independence” that is “subjected to severe, experimental tests” from “cranky eccentricity” (*HNC*, 47). His avoidance of extreme deviance becomes most conspicuous in the later book, *Experience and Education*, especially in the chapter “Social Control.” There Dewey’s attitude toward the “exceptional” individual seems to become less tolerant, or even inflexible. True to his respect for nonconformity, he tells teachers to deal with “exceptional” children who are “bumptious,” “unruly,” or “downright rebellious,” by doing their best to discover “the causes for the recalcitrant attitudes.” He maintains, however, that “authority” resides in “the moving spirit of the whole
group,” not in “personal will.” The “normal, proper conditions of control” take over the exceptional, since “[e]xceptions rarely prove a rule or give a clew to what the rule should be.” Teachers should not allow “the unruly and non-participating pupils to stand permanently in the way of the educative activities of others.” In this context, Dewey cites the example of the rules of a game, and emphasizes the importance of the “conventional” in the formation of rules (EE, 54–59).

In interpreting these remarks, we must take into consideration the historical context of the late 1930s. Dewey had to emphasize the importance of social control in order to save liberal progressive education from the charge of being permissive and chaotic, the stock response of conservative critics to the emerging left. He inspires, however, such criticism as Ryan’s because he ducks the challenge of articulating any specific, persuasive account that might give substance to his Emersonian claim for nonconformity. The way Dewey speaks about—and does not speak for—the recalcitrant child suggests his tendency to muffle the voice of a single child in the confidence of an adult who, from an overintellectualized distinction between the conventional and the exceptional, attempts to discover and judge the benefit of a whole group in the light of the “normal” standards. The inner life of a recalcitrant child—or her first-person standpoint—seems to be subsumed in the clear, established minds of adults.

In the light of his theory of interaction between internal and objective conditions, it is not clear how Dewey would handle the internal (or invisible) condition (and process) of the life of the visibly anti-social, recalcitrant child. Dewey may call Emerson’s “nonchalant boy” recalcitrant—a child who gives judgment on the passersby in “unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence,” and hence, who “put[s] them in fear” (“SR,” 33). The ambiguity in Dewey’s description of the social control of the recalcitrant child may, in spite of his intentions, endorse a prevailing conformity. If this is what Dewey envisions as “face-to-face” dialogue in social reconstruction of criteria, and if this is how we measure the moment of perfecting, it seems to defeat the Emersonian perfectionist spirit. It is here that
Cavell’s criticism of Dewey comes back to us—his frustration with the lack of concreteness in Dewey’s language and with the inaudibility of voices of children in his text.

_Lending an Ear to the Emersonian Child: Cavell’s Idea of Criteria_

These doubts are augmented when compared with Cavell’s handling of the Emersonian child in _The Claim of Reason_, the book in which he most fully interprets Wittgenstein’s concept of criteria. Though Emerson does not appear at center stage, Cavell’s words presage his later claims for EMP and present the voice of Emerson’s child. He discusses the relationship between adult and child as creating an “asymmetry between teaching and learning”—where there is a discrepancy between an adult’s and a child’s perspectives. This asymmetry is most evident in the moment when an adult, in the face of a child’s novel and unexpected questions about the facts of life, feels that his or her reason comes to an end. He describes such a moment as follows:

> When my reasons come to an end and I am thrown back upon myself, upon my nature as it has so far shown itself, I can, supposing I cannot shift the ground of discussion, either put the pupil out of my sight—as though his intellectual reactions are disgusting to me—or I can use the occasion to go over the ground I had hitherto thought foregone. If the topic is that of continuing a series, it may be learning enough to find that I just do; to rest upon myself as my foundation. But if the child, little or big, asks me: Why do we eat animals? Or Why are some people poor and others rich? Or What is God? Or Why do I have to go to school? Or Do you love black people as much as white people? Or Who owns the land? Or Why is there anything at all? Or How did God get here? I may find my answers thin, I may feel run out of reason without being willing to say “This is what I do” (what I say, what I sense, what I know), and honor that. (_Claim_, 124–25)

The specific questions that Cavell asks with and for the voice of a child represent his view of growth, as filled with puzzles and uncertainties. Faced with the natural reactions of a child (or, to borrow
Dewey’s term, the impulse of the young) the adult cannot simply rely on her conventional criteria. This is the crucial moment when “attunement” between adult and child becomes “dissonant” (115). The adult is forced to question the ground of her reason in wonder. She poses the question: “When? When do I find or decide that the time has come to grant you secession, allow your divergence to stand, declare that the matter between us is at an end?” (ibid.). Cavell speaks with the voice of an adult who submits the limitation of his reason to the novel, perhaps disturbing, perhaps threatening, impulse of a child.

Behind this attitude lies Cavell’s idea that both normality and abnormality constitute a “fundamental unity” in civilization (112). For Cavell, a child often represents the voice of the abnormal, or “lunatic” (122), something that unexpectedly betrays our conventional views. It is easy for an adult to pretend not to see the abnormal, and to continue to live in the conventional view. As Cavell says:

> Children’s intellectual reactions are easy to find ways to dismiss; anxiety over their “errors” can be covered by the natural charms of childhood and by our accepting as a right answer the answer the child learns we want to hear, whether or not he or she understands what we think of as the content of our instruction. (124)

This captures the crucial moment when a mismatch occurs between the adult’s expectation and the child’s learning. There is a humble sense of the unknowable that is expressed by an adult who tries to see the invisible beyond the visible. In connection with the theme of EMP, Cavell later discusses the similar issue of the exclusion of the newcomer from society: “If the child is separated out, treated as a lunatic, this shows at once society’s power and its impotence—power to exclude, power to include” (Conditions, 76). For Cavell, a child is “our familiar stranger” who sometimes forces us to acknowledge abnormality itself as “the other’s separateness from me” (Claim, 122, 124). The child is the other within ourselves. Cavell’s tolerance for and inclusion of a novel but abnormal child reflects his Emersonian perfectionist sense of imperfectability in the knowledge of the other.
For an adult to open his or her mind, beyond his or her conventional views and cognitive understanding, to the child’s unexpected and unknowable horizon of life is not a nostalgic romanticization of childhood; rather it is a tough obligation assigned to us to remember and confront “the prospect of growth and the memory of childhood” within and without ourselves (125). Cavell offers the perspective of mutual growth for adults and children as the endless process of perfection.

Cavell reveals the process of the dynamic search for criteria in a confrontation between the young and the adult. In interpreting Wittgenstein’s concept of criteria, he emphasizes that an agreement among different perspectives is not a matter of knowing with absolute certainty in an absolute “correlation” between “some inner stuff” and its outward manifestation, all as a matter of epistemological knowledge (91–92). Rather, it is “the fact of agreement itself” (32), namely, the “coincidence of soul and body, and of mind (language) and world überhaupt—an attunement of the inner life and outward behavior in the effort of “placing-oneself-in-the-world” (108–09). This empirical fact he calls “mutual attunement,” or “the attunement of one human being’s words with those of others” (32). Mutual attunement involves what Cavell calls “regions of the soul” (101). He interprets “soul” not as referring to something “inaccessible, hidden (like a room),” but as something “pervasive, like atmosphere, or the action of the heart” (99). When we successfully find a match between the inner and the outer, it is not that “I move from uncertainty to certainty,” as if we identify the absolute location or existence of the inner that matches the outer behavior. Rather, it is a fact of our achievement in which we move “from darkness to light” (102). It is such criteria, rather than the calculated measurement of success or failure, that are integral to moments of mutual perfection. Criteria embody the sense of attainment that can at any time defeat us, bordering on the sense of unattainment and uncertainty. Cavell’s EMP is foreshadowed by the sense of the proximity of attainment and unattainment.

Cavell’s account of criteria, however, is no celebration of irrationality or luck. Instead, he suggests that mutual attunement requires a
particular type of reasoning. Contrasting the realm of morality to the playing of a game, Cavell says:

Our way is neither clear nor simple; we are often lost. . . . What alternatives we can and must take are not fixed, but chosen; and thereby fix us. What is better than what else is not given, but must be created in what we care about. Whether we have done what we have undertaken is a matter of how far we can see our responsibilities, and see them through. . . . Here we cannot practice the effects we wish to achieve; here we are open to complete surprise at what we have done. (324–25)

In chaotic, uncertain, and ever-surprising moral struggles, a “moral reason can never be a flat answer to the competent demand for justification.” We cannot simply rely on “the rules of an institution,” or social convention (303), nor can we remain “within clear lines” (325). The search for the mutual attunement of criteria in the interactions between the young and the adult can be considered a good example of those moral struggles in which the adult’s reason is faced with its limitations, or in which, as Cavell says, “the paths of action, the paths of words, are blocked” (125). He does not, however, consider this to show “the irrationality of morality,” but rather to “help to articulate what gives it the rationality it has” (325). We are at a “crossroads” when our reason is tested through the confrontation between our “culture’s criteria” and our words and life (125).

Thus, Cavell’s idea of mutual attunement in search of criteria embodies his view of human reason as that which confronts and assimilates the facts of uncertainty, disappointment, and surprise posed by life—expressed by the voice of an Emersonian child. Cavell’s early discussion of Wittgenstein’s idea of criteria not only presages his later EMP, but also sows the seed for his criticism of Dewey—a criticism that he cannot hear the speech of children in Dewey’s text.

Gaining from the Distance between Dewey and Emerson

The contrast between Dewey’s treatment of the recalcitrant child and Cavell’s Emersonian child indicates their different stances toward a
child in growth—a child whose immaturity and novel perspective poses a challenge to social convention and the adult’s intelligence, on the one hand, and a child whose natural life of growth is more or less carefully molded, even if not tightly confined, into the adult’s convention, on the other. Simultaneously, the difference affects how criteria of good growth can be socially determined in each moment of growth in the process of interaction.

In comparison to Cavell’s description of the process of growth, the way Dewey presents his theory of situations, notwithstanding what he says about a unity of “soul and action,” does not quite seem to integrate the inner soul and outer action. Despite his Emersonian call for face-to-face dialogue between adult and child in the social reconstruction of criteria, the way he describes the relationship obscures the subtle realm in which the self and the other meet in the here and now. Despite his claim of the flexible concept of revised criteria, how he describes it is in reality gives us an impression that it is less flexible, demanding some definite, clear point of reference. Despite the Emersonian sense of expanding circles in Dewey’s transactional holism, any sense of infinite expansion disappears in Dewey’s straightforward, clear-cut description of growth. In other words, compared to Cavell’s idea of reason, Dewey’s notion of intelligence seems to function within a carefully delineated regime of clarity, organization, and stability, avoiding or even suppressing the senses of the invisible, the infinite, and the imperfect. Such an intelligence appears at times not courageous enough to guide the young to grow without relying on fixed ends.

Though it could never have been his intention, in comparison to Cavell, the way Dewey describes the guidance of youthful impulse by adults suggests a tendency toward fixity in growth. The socializing force is directed towards the assimilation of radical deviancy into the normal practices of society by means of social intelligence—by an appeal to clarity and stability, and hence security. We might wonder if criteria such as Dewey describes will eventually mold the life of children into social conventions. Further, Dewey does not seem to be speaking from the perspective of the child. Cavell and Emerson sug-
gest to Dewey that some invisible, unstable (and perhaps threaten-
ing), yet undeniable inner life of the recalcitrant child, and the sense
of the infinite, the imperfect, and the unknowable that an adult might
experience in the face of the child, disappear in these situations; and
that the child and an adult are deprived of a chance of mutual perfec-
tion, to open themselves to the surprise that may be bequeathed by
life.

To look at the issue from another perspective, Dewey creates a dis-
tance between what he says and how he says it. It is here that we
are brought back to Cavell’s criticism of Dewey’s language as one
that creates a distance from EMP. Anderson defends the idiosyncrasy
of Dewey’s language: “However inadequate his literary means . . .
Dewey’s philosophical means are neither inadequate nor sub-
Emersonian.”

Is it true, however, that a philosopher’s literary means are separate from his philosophical means? Dewey would have said no
to the question. For Dewey, language is “the tool of tools,” which is
“a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence.”
Language is a medium for man’s interaction in the world; “mind
emerges” through linguistic activities, which enable humans to be en-

gaged in “potential acts and deeds” (EN, 133–34). In his theory of
habit reconstruction, Dewey attempts to overcome the “separation of
habit and thought, action and soul,” which he says requires the me-
dium of language and communication (HNC, 52, 57). In Dewey’s
pragmatism and naturalism, language cannot afford to be a mere ab-
stract representation in the head. Rather, it must serve an indispens-
able role in mediating thinking and action in particular situations;
linguistic activities must embody the concrete process of how we live.

Despite what he says about language, however, Dewey’s own use
of language or “literary means” contains inconsistencies with his
“philosophical means.” First and foremost, the sense of distance that
Dewey’s readers feel from his text—what they express as being “im-
personal,” or “reticent,” or “dry”—suggests that his language cre-
ates a barrier between himself and readers—and perhaps between
him as the adult and the children whom he speaks about: that it does
not give a concrete indication about how we should live. This is also
a betrayal of his own philosophical—and Emersonian—claim for “face-to-face” dialogue in reconstructing a democratic community from within.

Second, Dewey’s idiosyncratic use of language is the indicator of a potential flaw in his pragmatic project: to overcome dualism for a unified life. In his theory of interaction, Dewey aims to return philosophy to everyday life, beyond diverse forms of dualism: theory and action, reason and emotion, inner mind and outward behavior, means (processes) and ends (goals), facts and values, particularity and universality, the self and the world; and beyond realism and idealism, and foundationalism and antifoundationalism. Since he speaks in the “middle term” (HNC, 51), however, Dewey’s expression often confuses his readers and creates an impression that he merely juxtaposes traditionally divided categories. Contemporary Deweyan philosophers such as John J. Stuhr and Jim Garrison defend Dewey, however, by pointing out that Dewey’s Darwinian naturalism and scientific methods of thinking are fundamentally different from naive behaviorism or positivist scientism. As Raymond D. Boisvert and Steven C. Rockefeller say, Dewey tries to present a new metaphysical theory. Yet, Dewey’s language allows room for the old categories and concepts of philosophy to sneak into his innovative philosophy. It is one thing to claim that the self is a social being; it is another to show specifically how such a self grows to be a communal being by overcoming diverse dualisms and conflicts. It is one thing to propose that education is one with growth and growth is an ongoing activity of growing; it is another to persuade people that one can keep growing without relying on fixed ends, to truly save them from a persistent temptation to old dualisms. It is the responsibility of the philosopher fully to resist the foe he fights against; it is the responsibility of the how-philosopher successfully to translate theory into practice.

These are the observations implied in Cavell’s criticism of Dewey’s use of language and the sense of distance that he perceives between Dewey and Emerson. His criticism can be reinterpreted as a voice of concern for the underestimation of language and a reminder of its significance for meaningful action. When Emerson makes the quasi-
The pragmatist statement that “I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back” (“Circles,” 173), Cavell may hear Dewey’s voice in Emerson. He is, however, skeptical of how Dewey says what he says; and how what Dewey says can possibly effect change in the world (as well as in the self). In Dewey’s language, Cavell cannot find out where Dewey places himself in the world, or to whom he speaks. He invites Dewey to speak in his own voice, rather than about the child, growth, and for that matter, life as a whole.

Indeed, Cavell’s criticism of Dewey’s “scientific” methods is implicitly tied up with his criticism of Dewey’s language. To Cavell, who is concerned that “we take too much for granted about what the learning and the sharing of language implies” (Claim, 173), and who cares about “shades of sense, intimations of meaning, which allow certain kinds of subtlety or delicacy of communication” (189), the way Dewey uses his language represents his scientific tendency to rush into generalization and clarification—a totalizing tendency to blind us to the sense of the unknowable and particular struggles entailed in the path of human perfection and to demystify the wonder of life. This, I believe, is what Cavell implies when he says that the distance between Dewey and Emerson represents “a certain air of conflict in philosophy between the appeal to science and the appeal to ordinary language” (“Calling Emerson,” 74–75). The Emersonian child presented by Cavell suggests that the moment of perfecting cannot simply be the object of definite measurement through our scientific eyes. It symbolizes a call for infinity, a destabilizing and unsettling force of life that challenges the totalizing force of inclusion and assimilation. Pragmatists and Deweyan scholars who defend Dewey’s richer concept of “science” may be right; and it may be true that Cavell’s criticism of Dewey’s view of “science” by definition is narrow and limited. However, it is worthwhile to lend a careful ear to Cavell’s caution for the sake of helping Dewey realize his own vision of EMP.

Cavell, who asks us to see how close and how far Dewey and Emerson are, can now be reconsidered as a strong conversational partner for Dewey—an Emersonian friend who confronts Dewey with the
distance that he himself unwittingly creates between what he says and how he says it, between the horizons of EMP and those scientific horizons of his naturalistic philosophy of growth. As much as we can learn from their closeness and precisely because Dewey shares a certain common ground with Emerson, we must also acknowledge the distance between the two. The paradox of closeness and distance now can be reconsidered as an internal tension within Dewey’s philosophy of growth—and, one hopes, a rich source for its reconstruction. Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth is positioned precariously on the border between the philosophy of totality characterized by power and progress, and the Emersonian philosophy that treasures infinity and myth.