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Playing with Philosophy: Gestures, Performance, P4C and an Art of Living.

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Abstract:

John Dewey's Art as Experience (1934) explores how art develops out of everyday experience. Imbued with the pragmatism of William James, Dewey widens the discourse of aesthetics so as to recognise that our creation, experience and appreciation of the aesthetic is linked intrinsically to being human. By encouraging the natural playfulness of children, advocates of Philosophy for Children (P4C) may creatively engage students to think, reflect and be more aware of the impact their gestures have on others. One of the most fundamental aspects of the embodied human life is human interaction that is based on expressions, what Schmid (2000b) calls gestures. Through self-reflection, one's set of gestures can be developed into a deliberate performance, a conscious, selected and coherent work of art (Schmid, 2000b, p. 332). By considering how P4C practitioners may engage with concepts of art, drama and performance and linking this to Schmid's concept of gestures within his pedagogy for the art of living, we explore how philosophical play with children can improve their self-awareness as well as other-awareness which in turn supports the practice of phronesis or practical wisdom. The holistic approach to education supported by Dewey, Schmid and advocates of P4C highlights not just rational or critical thinking skills, but also includes playfulness, creativity and empathetic engagement with others that, along with critical thinking, gives rise to decent citizens and democratic human beings.

Introduction

One of the most fundamental aspects of the embodied human life is human interaction that is based on expressions, or what Schmid (2000b) calls *gestures*. Through self-reflection, one's set of gestures can be developed into a deliberate *performance*, a conscious, selected and coherent work of art (Schmid, 2000b, p. 332). Schmid's art of living concept is inspired by, among others, Nietzsche's idea of living life as an artist. By considering how P4C practitioners may engage with concepts of art, drama and performance and linking this to Schmid's concept of gestures within his pedagogy for the art of living, we explore how philosophical play with children can improve their self-awareness as well as other-awareness which in turn supports the practice of *phronesis* or practical wisdom.

We will start by explaining Nietzsche's concept of living one's life as an artist which involves combining two energies: the rational Apollonian and the passionate Dionysian. We will then use Schmid's (2000a) discussion of the art of living to further flesh out this aesthetic notion of the life lived as an artist. We then discuss P4C pedagogy as a means by

which we can encourage the practice of gestures that will form good or beautiful habits required for *eudaimonia* or flourishing. Finally we will consider the subjectivist objection and claim that this criticism is a strength of the theory we have outlined.

Nietzsche on Dionysus and Apollo and living one's life as an artist

In Friedrich Nietzsche's first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in 1872, the idea of living life creatively is embodied in his idea of living life as an artist. Nietzsche refers to two conflicting creative energies: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Apollonian is the cool rational intellect, while the Dionysian is the passionate emotional aspect. Nietzsche worried that the society of his time only emphasised Apollonian energy and neglected the role of the Dionysian. Rationalists like Plato, Descartes and Kant emphasised humans as essentially rational, yet Nietzsche thought it was important to balance our rationality with our sensual and passionate experience of life, and he saw this balance best depicted in ancient Greek tragedies.

Nietzsche insists that Greek tragedy achieves greatness through the inclusion of both Apollonian creative energy, responsible for the dialogue, and Dionysian energy, which inspires the music or chorus. In the plays, the two work together as the meaning of the words are enhanced by the accompanying melody. Using Greek dramatic artworks as an example, we can learn from great art to see the beauty in life. The tragic spectator is united with others in the shared experience of being human. For Nietzsche, life without emotion, art and the creative energy of the Dionysian is bleak. A balance between Dionysus and Apollo allows for pluralistic and authentic modes of expression that are rational as well as creative. These ideas are also reflected in his later writings, such as in *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche writes, "art as the *redemption* of the man of action... Art as the *redemption of the sufferer*".

Martha Nussbaum, in her article *The Transformations of Intoxication: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus*, argues that Nietzsche shows how art teaches a love for order and discipline while also allowing for the unknown or existential aspect of being human. She notes, "[t]he arts show us that we can have order and discipline and meaning and logic from within ourselves: we do not have to choose between belief in god and empty chaos" (Nussbaum, 1998a, p. 59). This is how art can be seen as redeeming. Providing an optimistic reading of Nietzsche, we see humans depicted as creators or artists who are encouraged to affirm life as they authentically shape their own lives to form a masterpiece. This process of becoming may be supported by Nussbaum's own moral theory of aesthetics whereby a 'loving attitude' can be applied to life as a moral principle. Drawing upon Aristotle's (trans. 1996) claim that we are essentially story-telling animals, Nussbaum believes narrative artworks are the best guide for imaginatively engaging with moral dilemmas and empathetically considering the nuances of contextual decisions. Nussbaum outlines how we can practice decision making via vicarious experiences through narrative artworks before having to authentically choose in real life. Creativity in this broad sense is therefore necessary for moral imagining and living an authentic life.

Schmid on *Gestures* and developing an Art of Living

Nietzsche's holistic view of human beings as both rational and emotional, along with his concept of becoming the artist of one's own existence have influenced Schmid's (2000a; 2000b) concept of the *art of living*. Schmid argues that to develop one's own art of living one has to take responsibility for one's own life and try to make it a beautiful one. Schmid uses the term 'beautiful life' instead of 'good life' to emphasise the subjective nature of aesthetic taste. To shape one's own life means to become an artist and to make one's life a work of art. In this way, Schmid's notion of the art of living, like Nietzsche's, is an active one. A beautiful life is one that is pursued actively and, as agents who construct and create our own lives, we are held accountable for the work we ultimately create.

Schmid emphasises the notion of responsibility for shaping one's own life and acknowledges it takes labour to care for oneself. Schmid balances his focus on the individual perspective of living a beautiful life with his acknowledgement that human beings are social animals. People mostly live in communities and, in order to live a beautiful life, one must consider that one's social surroundings are important, alongside one's individual autonomy. To live a good and beautiful life, Schmid argues, it is not only necessary to honour the structures and rules of the society in which one is living, but it is also helpful to be a part of and support an environment in which people are also striving towards a good and beautiful life. Schmid (2000a; 2000b) refers to Aristotle's (trans. 1996) notion of *phronesis* (prudence and practical wisdom) to develop an ethics that originates in the 'enlightened self-interest' of the individual yet expands towards a care for others, society, and humanity on a global level. Therefore, if each individual engaged in the art of living cares for themselves and the people around them with the shared goal of becoming active artists who create their own existence, a social environment is created that supports flourishing and the development of each person's beautiful life.

Schmid's art of living contains key concepts that are central to becoming the artist of one's own life; namely, *Bildung*, self-reflection, prudence and practical wisdom. To develop one's own art of living and to become the artist of one's own life means, Schmid (2000a) argues, to take responsibility for one's own life and shape it according to one's own, self-reflected values and norms (Teschers, 2010). For the embodied human being, as Nietzsche's noted, these considerations have to reach beyond the rational and include the emotional sphere, especially in relation to interactions with other human beings. Gestures and bodily expressions of any kind, Schmid (2000b) argues, are the expression of the inner self and the art of living incorporates an art of gestures which culminates in an artful and purposeful *performance* of 'being'. Gestures express, on a conscious as well as sub-conscious level, our emotions and, to some extent, our state of mind. If a person is sad, hurt or happy it is via facial expressions, body posture, their gaze, voice, and many other gestures that convey the emotions being experienced by this person. We also express our thoughts in similar ways: for example, during a discussion a frown lets our companion know that we disagree or disprove, whereas agreement is expressed by nodding and making affirming sounds.

Furthermore, some gestures may be sub-conscious expressions of our inner self, and they may express our values and beliefs. For instance, the manner in which we approach

another person can be friendly and supportive, it can be neutral, or it can be intimidating. This demonstrates that the way we use space, facial expressions and other gestures impacts on the people around us. Schmid (2000b) argues that for an art of living, one has to consciously reflect on one's habitual gestures to discern if one is acting according to one's values and beliefs, or contrary to them. This reflection and the active and conscious labour of shaping and modelling one's gestures creates an artful performance which allows an individual to act in an authentic manner according to their values and beliefs.

We claim that it is beneficial for teachers to create space in the classroom for children to explore and experiment with gestures using drama techniques such as improvisation, mime and dramatic re-enactment. By acting out various diverse characters, students are given the opportunity to see which expressive actions best fit with their own individual character. When given the opportunity to question and critique the experience afterwards, for example using the P4C methodology such as a community of inquiry [CoI], participants are able to attend to the gestures they and others employ, reflecting on their impact and associated affect, that can lead to a conscious change of the gestures and expressions one uses. Here, the student truly becomes the artist of his or her own life and shapes it into a work of art, a conscious performance of interaction with others. Further, through the (self-) reflective aspect involved in this exercise of conscious engagement with one's set of gestures in relation to one's norms and values, students not only develop their external performance but also take responsibility for shaping their inner self and their own lives.

As has been argued elsewhere (D'Olimpio & Teschers, 2014), P4C and the concept of the art of living align well in their holistic approach to education and the CoI is well suited to explore concepts that are central to the development of an individual art of living. In both approaches students are seen as lifelong learners who need to develop skills and knowledge that supports the development of a good and beautiful life. Teachers utilising P4C pedagogy may further enhance their classroom praxis by incorporating elements of drama education in the classroom.

Playing with Philosophy in the Classroom – P4C and Drama Education

The holistic approach to education supported by Schmid and advocates of P4C highlights not just rational or critical thinking skills, but also includes playfulness, creativity and empathetic engagement with others that, along with critical thinking, gives rise to decent citizens and democratic human beings. Jennifer Bleazby (2012, p.98) points out that, "Dewey is one of the few philosophers who unambiguously emphasizes the fundamental interrelatedness of the imagination and thinking". This is never more evident than in his approach to aesthetics.

John Dewey outlines a pragmatic account of art in his *Art as Experience* (1934), his lecture series that explores how art develops out of everyday experience. Imbued with the pragmatism of William James, Dewey widens the discourse of aesthetics so as to recognise that our creation, experience and appreciation of the aesthetic is linked intrinsically to being human. This is reminiscent of the reading Nussbaum provided of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. By encouraging the natural playfulness of children, P4C teachers may creatively

engage students to think, reflect and be more aware of the impact their gestures have on others. Drawing from the dramatic arts, teachers may supplement a CoI, for instance, by stimulating student questions in an embodied manner prior to facilitating a purely verbal dialogue. This can be done by asking the students to act out the stimulus text prior to completing a Question Quadrant (Cam, 2006), before selecting a philosophical question upon which to base the CoI. Highlighting the creative thinking that works alongside the critical and caring thinking, drama techniques such as role-play, mime, performance and improvisation may supplement and support the philosophical discussion of ideas.

Nigel Toye details the benefits of pairing P4C and Drama Education, saying the results could be mutually beneficial. As Lipman states, “[t]o make higher-order thinking happen in the ordinary classroom, there needs to be reliance upon highly charged materials such as narrative provides and upon a highly charged pedagogy such as the community of inquiry represents” (Toye, 1994, p. 24, quoting Lipman, 1991). The step from energised narrative to dramatic engagement makes sense.

Toye claims that drama and P4C both create a democratic community within the classroom whereby the teacher is not ‘all-knowing’, thereby radicalising the role of the teacher and emphasising the role of the learner in making meaning. The CoI typically commences with a work of fiction, as does drama, and Toye notes, “it is through the distancing effect of focusing through fictional context that ideas can be liberated” (p. 24). This freedom with which we can engage with works of fiction is a point Martha Nussbaum also makes when she describes how readers may practice empathetic engagement with characters in a way that builds moral character. Nussbaum (2001) claims,

The aesthetic activity, which takes place in a safe and protected ‘potential space’ where our own safety is not immediately threatened, harnesses the pleasure of exploring to the neediness and insufficiency that is its object, thus making our limitations pleasing, and at least somewhat less threatening, to ourselves. (p. 244)

Students may feel safer discussing philosophical concepts such as morality, for example, in a fictional context and may even develop habits of empathy towards characters that then benefit their everyday interactions with others. Practising what Nussbaum (1987) calls a ‘loving attitude’ is one way the CoI encourages participants to seek to understand and build upon the ideas of others and not simply argue against one another. Toye (1994) notes the benefits of extending students engagement with stories to dramatic enactments, as “drama can help P4C improve its approach to involving the children at a feeling level and particularly children for whom reading, the basis of P4C, can be a stumbling block” (p. 24).

The idea of learning by doing is central to P4C pedagogy and Toye (1994) comments, “[d]rama brings in the possibility of thinking *with the whole person*, communicating and creating with the body as well as the voice” (p. 25). A holistic approach to education attends to non-verbal communication as well as verbal. One benefit of acting out stories from P4C texts is that students may physically embody different perspectives while role-playing

various characters before discussing the relevant concepts in a CoI. Furthermore, the teacher could be provocative within the fictional context by performing the role of one of the challenging characters, thereby facilitating a less threatening space for children to explore responses to, for example, discriminatory attitudes found within characters that reflect everyday people one might meet in real life. Therefore, drama techniques could supplement and support P4C praxis as students embody and enact philosophical concepts prior to reflecting critically on their experiences in a CoI. This would particularly benefit younger children who are physically expressive and attracted to creative expression and playful exploration of their thoughts and feelings

This can be linked to Schmid's notion of the art of gestures and the development of a purposeful performance of life. Drama and role-play techniques can be used to explore how body language and certain ways of acting affect oneself and the other one interacts with. Using the CoI, students can reflect on the emotions a gesture triggered, how they felt in certain situations, and how these feelings and gestures relate to certain values, beliefs and norms. They can further reflect on their own beliefs and values, question those that society and/or family present and actively shape their own self through the development of a personal performance of reflected gestures that are aligned to one's beliefs, norms and values. This conscious reflection on personal norms and values, together with actively shaping one's gestures and expressions resonates strongly with Schmid's art of living concept that builds on taking up responsibility for one's own life and actively shaping it into what one considers a beautiful one – a piece of art.

The Challenge of Subjectivism

The *telos* of education, according to Dewey (2008) and P4C practitioners, is to encourage students to think for themselves, and ultimately live collaboratively as democratic citizens who judge ideas they are presented with and who have the freedom to creatively explore and develop their own talents and interests. The criticism of the approach we have detailed here (using Nietzsche, Schmid, Nussbaum and Dewey) is that the authentic life is extremely subjective. If I am the artist creating my life to be a masterpiece that suits my taste, there does not seem to be anything stopping me from being selfish, which erodes any sense of morality. Yet, as Schmid notes, the flourishing or beautiful life involves care for others as well as self-care. We must not forget that we are social beings who live in communities. The beautiful life must not restrict the freedoms of others, who are also free-willed subjects trying to create their own beautiful lives. We would argue that an authentic life fails to be beautiful if it denies the freedom of other people. Therefore, the pluralism that is allowed for on this account is a strength not a weakness, and the values that are life-affirming are shared by all. Namely, the desire to live a beautiful life that is free from harm, should govern the decision making of rational and creative individuals and powerful institutions should work to provide opportunities for the flourishing of individuals within their jurisdiction. This allows for shared values or virtues that do not collapse into relativism (Bleazby, 2011).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored how playing with philosophy – especially the philosophy of the art of living – through drama and the CoI can help students to purposefully develop a set of reflected gestures, an artful performance of life. CoI practice in connection with drama can allow students to reflect on their beliefs, norms and values and how their actions and habitual gestures relate to these. Therefore, through drama and P4C, educators can support the development of their students' own art of living, help them to shape themselves and to take steps towards becoming the artists of their own beautiful life. We argue that education today needs to aim higher than towards measurable standards in reading, writing and maths. We argue that philosophy and the arts have an important role to play for the development of our children's character and way of being. As society, we should aim towards creating an environment that allows all human beings to live beautiful lives and to become the artists of their own life.

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