Paideusis

A World of Our Own: Heesoon Bai and the Flight into Romanticism

Dennis Cato

Volume 15, numéro 2, 2006

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072688ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1072688ar

Citer ce document
A World of Our Own: Heesoon Bai and the Flight into Romanticism

DENNIS CATO
Lachine, Canada

We'll build a world of our own
That no one else can share,
All our sorrows we'll leave
Far behind us there,
And I know you will find
There'll be true peace of mind,
When we live in a world of our own.

“A World of Our Own.”
The Seekers, 1965.

Over the past few years, under the aegis of postmodernism in its various guises, philosophy of education appears to have taken an “inward turn.” From philosophizing in the context of some aspect of an independently existing reality—whether conceived in terms of impersonal standards or rules, shared linguistic usage, or conceptual analysis all of which served to constrain the activity of the agent—a new focus has emerged, one centering on the interiority of the subject conceived in terms of serial feats of introspection framed in the context of unconstrained freedom. Where the former might have rendered philosophy of education abstract and remote from the concerns of educational practice the latter, as it must, descends into a romanticism characterized ultimately by irrationalism, mysticism and obscurantism which renders it even more remote from educational practice. One of the most recent examples of such romanticism is to be found in Heesoon Bai’s “Philosophy for Education: Towards Human Agency,” (Paideusis, Vol. 15 (2006), No. 1, pp. 1-19).

For Bai the importance of the notion of “autonomy” is such that it serves to ground both education in particular (“Modern education is dedicated to the cultivation of autonomy as human agency”; p. 7) and philosophy generally (“I intend to make a plea for a conception of philosophy as a practice devoted to the cultivation of fundamental human agency, namely autonomy”; p. 8). But when she defines autonomy as the possession of “the capacity to enact one’s freedom grounded in personal knowledge and ethics” (pp. 7-8) it is not clear exactly what she intends. Is this capacity to be understood in its full-blown sense as one unconstrained by circumstance? So viewed, its exercise might enable its possessor to perform some of the philosophical somersaults found in the pages of Paideusis, but what about the real-life blowback down at the office? Again, since she does not elaborate on just what she might mean by “ethics” in relation to autonomy, can one ask about the possibility of something like “the autonomous Nazi,” one who just happened to enact his freedom grounded in his personal knowledge? Further still, does autonomy refer to a capacity that features only in the rarified realm of philosophy or is it to be found, in varying degrees, in all sorts of human activities? Can one
ask, for example, about the possibility of something like “the autonomous gardener”? If we can, does autonomy amount to little more than an attitude or state of mind? Can one say (perhaps best only to oneself) something like “I’m feeling rather autonomous today”? In effect, is the pursuit of autonomy then little more than the pursuit of an empty romantic chimera? The answer can be found only by determining what is meant by “personal knowledge.”

According to Bai, “personal knowledge” is subjective and relative to the individual. She gives the example of the “meaning” of a rose, maintaining that it is particular, relative to the individual who sees it. “This particularity renders meaning-making subjective: no one else would have exactly the same meaning-constellation.” (p.10; italics in original.) But if all meaning-making is subjective, relative to one’s own particular meaning-constellation, one wonders how, since her meaning-making constellation must also be similarly subjective and relative, she is able to coherently make the universal claim that no two meaning-constellations are the same. Does her own particular meaning-constellation have some sort of overview of those of others and by virtue of which she knows that they are all unique? Further, on what grounds is she able to reduce the “meaning” of a rose to the particular associations or reactions one might happen to have in relation to it? The rose itself, lacking as it does any conscious or purposive agency, has no “meaning.” All it has is botanical activity for which description, not explanation, is the appropriate activity. Indeed, does this account of the meaning not distort the very concept of itself? In other words, when I ask about the “meaning” of a rose, I am not asking about the rose: I am asking about me. It is, in effect, to deny if not the existence then at least the possibility of knowledge of an independent reality. Her rendering of meaning as subjective and particular to one’s own meaning-making constellation marks the first but decisive step along the romantic road winding downward into a relativistic and solipsistic romanticism. The second step, “world-making,” will extend the example of the rose to physical reality in general.

“Though the physical reality may be the same for everyone insofar as it impinges upon everybody equally,” Bai writes, “the reality of understanding and experience — which we shall now call the ‘world’ — emerges as separate particulars on the plane of meaning. It is in this sense that we speak of the plurality of worlds and also the idea of world-making.”(pp. 10-11; italics in original) But, as in the case of her unique meaning-constellations in relation to the rose, one might ask the derivation of her aperçu that all worlds are similarly subjective and relative to the individual who makes them. Either her “world-making” has a privileged perspective on the “world-making” of others or it has encountered an independently existing reality which has revealed to her that this is indeed the case, a view, of course, which her subjectivist-relativism rejects. Is her claim therefore incoherent? It can only be the manner in which “world-making” and the consequent plurality of worlds “emerges” which will determine the issue. One’s world, for Bai, emerges as a consequence of “world-travelling,” that is, in dialogue with the particular worlds of others. “World-travelling” is the third step along the romantic road, one that is intended to establish autonomy—as human agency to which the cultivation of modern education is dedicated.

According to Bai, it is through dialogue with others that simple information is turned into personal knowledge which, in its turn,
increasingly inward romantic turn. In the struggle for intellectual autonomy the challenges to one’s own
world are tested in the crucible of interpersonal dialogue with the prize of authenticity, the condition of
the self and therefore of autonomy, awarded to those who have successfully beaten them back.
( Presumably, those failing to withstand the challenges and so having proven themselves unworthy are
cast down, their autonomy forfeit.) Secured in the purifying fires of the dialogical crucible, one’s
personal knowledge is now validated by the sense of integrity and conviction with which it is held. But
what, one might ask, is it that is being defended so vigorously? Could it be something that is non-
dialogically true? For example, could it be the vision that autonomy is necessarily the outcome of the
interpersonal crucible of dialogue since the vision itself is not the outcome of such dialogue but is prior
to it? If so, this amounts to a substantive belief, one unrelated to dialogue and, by extension, to the
formation of autonomy itself, thereby undermining the entire “world-making”/“world-travelling”
project. However, as with the rose, it is one’s particular and subjective “meaning-making constellation,”
whatever its content, which takes precedence. In Bai’s subjectivist-relativist world free-floating
authenticity, integrity and conviction are all that there is.

But the struggles of the world-traveller to safeguard her autonomy spotlights the interior terrain
on which the real struggle takes place. Personal knowledge emerging between interlocutors may be one
thing but philosophical thinking is another. “What turns working with ideas into philosophical
thinking,” according to Bai, “is the crucial presence and activity of the self that refuses to accept any
idea without putting it to the ‘laboratory’ test of one’s own interiority.” (p. 13) Like mixing food with
digestive juices, in philosophical thinking “Ideas are brought into one’s interiority and ruminated by
means of questioning.” (p. 14) Rather than some neutral middle ground between interlocutors then, the
central action takes place in one’s own “interiority.” It is by exploring one’s interiority that Bai will now
take what might be called “the Full Romantic Turn,” her fourth and final step along the road leading
downward into irrationalism, mysticism and obscurantism.

Where the crucible of dialogue met the external challenges to one’s autonomy, so now it is time
to meet the internal challenges to one’s interiority, challenges which, perhaps oddly, come in the form
of one’s own concepts. Our concepts may be the the building blocks of our world-making “But when
we are caged up in concepts and are driven by them, we do not have the freedom to make worlds as we
see fit.” (p. 18) Indeed, when we are caged up in our concepts, “we are prone to identifying our notions
(pictures of reality) with the reality itself, whereby easily falling into dogmatism.” (p. 18) While it may not
be clear just how making worlds as we see fit, the sort of thing that happens when we are not caged up
in our concepts, is to be distinguished from identifying our pictures of reality with the reality itself, the
sort of thing that happens when we are caged up - on what other basis, one wonders, does one make
worlds as one sees fit since, as their truth is presupposed in their very articulation, the only thing odder
than identifying our pictures of reality with reality itself, (i.e. “naïve realism”) is not identifying our
pictures of reality with reality itself (i.e. an incoherent and ultimately vacuous romanticism)? - the
pressing concern here is how we can manage to escape from our own conceptual cages. How can we avoid confusing our concepts of reality with the real thing and so avoid dogmatism? We can do it by
adopting the Buddhist “mindfulness practice” which involves “an opportunity to experience non-
discursive states of awareness in the gap between thoughts.” (p. 19) It is no good asking, of course, just
what this non-discursive state of awareness might look like since, well, it is non-discursive. It does not
look like anything. However, as we experience that gap, our thoughts become progressively dimmer
until, at length, rationality itself winks out. (Perhaps the exercise should be called the Buddhist
“mindlessness practice.”) But in any case, Bai has reached the destination at the end of the romantic
road. While experiencing her non-discursive states of awareness in the gap between her thoughts, she is
now able to float freely as she sees fit, rotating slowly in the warm, darkened space of her own
interiority. Living in a world of her own, at last she has found true peace of mind.