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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,

consists of visions and views that are intensely personal and yet equally intensely comprehensive and viable because they have been tested in the interpersonal crucible of dialogue; authenticity is the condition of the self who has withstood these challenges, resulting in a sense of integrity and conviction. Thus personal knowledge need not be *merely* subjective, that is, idiosyncratic. From the intersection of the private and the public emerges personal knowledge. (p. 12; italics in original)

While it is not clear just how one’s own subjective and idiosyncratic knowledge is transformed into non-idiosyncratic personal knowledge simply by engaging in dialogue with what must only be the subjective and idiosyncratic knowledge of others, it is clear that the workings of such dialogue marks an

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 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, thereby 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 we 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.