This paper provides a guide for those interested in the educational philosophy of author and ecologist Wendell Berry. It is divided into three sections. The first discusses the foundational dimensions of Berry's thought in terms of his conception of human nature, knowledge, and the good society. Berry sees human beings as creators and moral agents who achieve their humanity only in relation to their surrounding land and community. He conceives knowledge as being fundamentally experiential, imaginative, relational, and interactional with nature. He envisions the good society as being unified with nature, community-based, and democratic. The second section focuses on Berry's educational philosophy in terms of the purposes of education, curriculum, and pedagogy. His general orientation translates into an educational theory favoring the cultivation of highly literate individuals capable of exercising critical judgement concerning a variety of social, political, and economic issues. He sees current schooling as little better than "babysitting, job training, or incarceration," supporting environmental exploitation. His outlook advocates a liberal curriculum and an experiential, critical pedagogy. The third section attempts to place Berry's educational thought in the context of the history of educational ideas. Berry's philosophical tradition is rooted in Greek antiquity, which linked education, or character development, with the quality of community life. Berry's advocacy of critical consciousness is also similar to the cultural hegemony theory of the Frankfort School. The document concludes that Berry's philosophy is best described as "ecological," concerned with cultivation of truth, justice, and geological space. (TES)
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EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF WENDELL BERRY

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DOE position or policy.
The purpose of this paper is to provide a guide for those interested in the educational philosophy of Wendell Berry. Berry's name has been mentioned in the company of E. B. White, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson for his accomplishments as a poet, novelist, and essayist. Although his name comes up from time to time in educational circles, a secondary source that would help the interested researcher find out where Berry stands regarding education does not exist. This paper is intended to provide a general understanding of what Berry has to say while easing the burden of those who may choose to pursue Berry's philosophy further. To this end we also place Berry's educational philosophy in the context of the history of educational ideas in general. Our intention is not to provide the last word on Berry's educational philosophy but the first word.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section I discusses the foundational dimensions of Berry's thought in terms of his conception of human nature, knowledge, and the good society. These conceptions form the framework through which Berry's philosophy of education can be delineated. It will be argued that Berry conceives human beings as creators as well as moral agents who achieve their humanity only in relation to their geographical space (the land) and their community. He conceives knowledge as being fundamentally experiential, imaginative, relational, and interactional in nature. He envisions the good society as being unified with nature,
community-based, and democratic.

Section II focuses on Berry's educational philosophy in terms of the purposes of education, curriculum, and pedagogy. The general philosophical orientation discussed in Section I translates into an educational theory devoted to the cultivation of highly literate individuals capable of exercising critical judgment concerning a variety of social, political, and economic issues. It translates into an educational theory which advocates a liberal curriculum in combination with an experiential and critical pedagogy.

Section III attempts to place Berry's educational thought in the context of the history of educational ideas. It is argued that Berry belongs to a philosophical tradition that has its roots in Greek antiquity, in that Berry maintains, as the Greeks did, that there exists an intimate relationship between education, or the development of character, and the quality of community life. Coupled with this "paideic" view of culture and education is his advocacy of critical consciousness similar to the cultural hegemony theory of the Frankfurt School tradition.

1

As James Campbell points out, for Berry the achievement of one's humanity is contingent upon being connected to the land. Berry maintains that "we and our land are part of one another." Berry is positing here what may be referred to as an "ecological" conception of human nature, wherein personhood is constructed, not
socially per se, but ecologically, in dialectical relation to one's geographical space. As Berry puts it, "nature and human culture, wildness and domesticity are not opposed but are interdependent."³

The essence of the relationship between personhood and the land is one of care. Berry maintains that it is only through caring for one's geographical space that one can live a fulfilled human life. In Berry's words: "this place, if I am to live well in it, requires and deserves a lifetime of the most careful attention."⁴ However, if we do violence to the earth, then we can expect a violent way of life, an alienated culture. For, "as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone."⁵ If we act irresponsibly and exploit the earth as well as its inhabitants, then short-term profit may be derived but at the cost of long-term fulfillment. Unfortunately, as Berry points out, our present culture is one in which we are "willing to accept permanent loss as a tolerable charge against annual gain."⁶ In the end, for Berry, when we are alienated from and do violence to the land, we become alienated from ourselves.

Interwoven in the notion of our relationship with the land is "community." Berry defines "community" as the "mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives."⁷ Hence our relationship with the land is mediated according to Berry by the community, for we share the land with
others and in sharing our relationship to the land is defined by the wishes, aspirations, interests, and actions of those living with us. In this case, what we become is not only shaped by our individual interaction with the land, but it is also conditioned by our knowledge of its being shared. The sharing of the land can be irresponsible and exploitive or it can be democratic and equitable. How it is shared in turn shapes the mental and spiritual condition of the individual. A genuine community is one wherein each individual possesses a responsible share in caring for the land and for communicating its sharedness. Consequently, we as individuals and as communities are moral agents, charged with the responsibility of maintaining and enriching the earth and its inhabitants.

In addition, implicit in our relationship to the land is the view of human beings as creators. Echoing Paulo Friere, Berry maintains that we "cannot live in nature without changing it." Through our interaction with nature we transform it, either creatively or destructively. It is through "work" that our human energy is used to creatively enhance life. Thus, work is something that should be treated with the utmost dignity. It is through work that we become stewards of the earth, sharing a commitment with others to life's preservation. Berry suggests that ours is a "world in which millions of people have lost any idea of the materials, the disciplines, the restraints, and the work necessary to support human life." In the process we have "become dangerous to [our] own lives and to the possibility of life." We have lost our capacity
to create, and in the process we have lost a part of our humanity.

However, to create, knowledge is required, especially knowledge grounded in local life. Berry maintains that "local life is intimately dependent for its quality, but also for its continuance, upon local knowledge." Knowledge according to Berry is not, and cannot be, "objective." He argues that "objectivity in practice means that one studies or teaches one's subject as such, without concern for its relation to other subjects or to the world." Berry maintains that the "truth" of something is only gained when it is viewed, not in isolation, but in relation to other things. "The issue of truth rises out of the comparison of one thing with another, out of the study of the relations and influences between one thing and another and between one thing and many others." Relational knowing in turn is based upon "feeling and appearance, intuition and experience, which taken as whole comprises "judgement." Thus for Berry knowledge is a function of judgement which entails the intuitive and experiential apprehension of a interdependent world. Therefore, local knowledge becomes the most important and viable form of knowledge, for knowledge of one's locale is intimately experiential and intuitive in the sense that it emerges out one's living and life in a place over a sustained period.

In addition, Berry maintains that "by imagination we know ... truth." Imagination is an act of creation, an act of visualizing alternatives and possibilities, possibilities that are corrected and refined through the process of judgement. Imagination also serves to
correct our experience, to guide it in new and creative directions that seek new relations and new possibilities for living in harmony with the earth and with each other.

In summary, Berry's underlying philosophical orientation may be best described as "ecological." He envisions human life, community, and knowledge as fundamentally situated in an interdependent relation with the earth. It is through the earth that we achieve humanity, culturally, intellectually, and spiritually.

II

Berry maintains that the most fundamental issues related to education are the questions of productivity and judgement. He suggests that "these two problems, how to make and how to judge, are the business of education." From this perspective, the purpose of education is the development of productive skills and the capacity to exercise judgment. These skills, however, are the "by-products of the making of a good -- that is, a fully developed -- human being." Hence the purpose of education for Berry is fundamentally liberal; it is the development of the full potential of the individual.

Berry argues, however, that current educational practice is profoundly skewed to the development of "practical," productive capacities. He maintains that "the purpose of education [in the United States] has been to prepare people to 'take their places' in an industrial society." Berry suggests that there are hegemonic
forces at work in the schools urging all concerned to expouse what is
"practical." He writes:

The schools, then, are following the general subserviance
to the 'practical,' as that term has been defined for us
according to the benefit of corporations. By 'practicality'
most users of the term now mean whatever will most
predictably and most quickly make a profit. Teachers ... 
have either submitted, or are expected to submit, ... to
the doctrine that the purpose of education is the mass
production of producers and consumers.20

Concerning "cultural hegemony,"21 Berry believes that those with
power in this society have at their disposal the ability to package
thoughts. Using the example of the agribusiness industries and their
relations with farmers, Berry explains, "the products offered for
sale by the makers of agri-industrial technology are not just
ready-made solutions; they are ready-made thoughts."22 Berry
further explains that one should not look to news reporting agencies
such as agribusiness journals or even ostensibly "objective" news
organs like Newsweek to expose this phenomenon, for they are the
vehicles that convey the "ready-made thoughts." The result is what
Berry calls a "mind-dominated society." In such a society

fewer and fewer people will possess independently the
power or ability to make up their own minds. This is
because dominance of mind always implies, politically
and economically, dominance by somebody else's mind --
or worse, by the 'mind' of a government or a corporation.

In a society in which nearly everybody is dominated by
somebody else's mind or by a disembodied mind, it
becomes increasingly difficult to learn the truth about the
activities of governments and corporations, about the quality
and value of products, or about the health of one's
own place and economy.23

Although he has not written precisely on this matter, it is
clear that Berry's reticence about public schools stems from his view that what schools do best is prepare students to obey and believe the packaged thoughts that will bombard them the rest of their lives. Thus, we may understand his poorly concealed contempt for teachers who submit to teaching packaged curricula. They do a disservice to themselves and their students. Berry writes: "The great enemy of freedom is the alignment of political power with wealth. This alignment destroys the commonwealth -- that is, the natural wealth of localities and local economies of household, neighborhood, and community -- and so destroys democracy, of which the commonwealth is the foundation and the practical means."24

This domination turns the schools into what Joel Spring refers to as "sorting machines,"25 at the expense of the development of the whole person, and in particular, the development of judgement. As discussed in Section I, without the development of judgement, one cannot adequately engage in and preserve life rooted in the land and community.

To recognize lies, half-truths, and blatant attempts to convince people of needs that do not exist, Berry claims that Americans must be literate. Critical intelligence, for Berry, is derived from the best literature: "I am saying, then, that literacy -- the mastery of language and the knowledge of books -- is not an ornament, but a necessity. It is impractical only by the standards of quick profit and easy power."26 His book Standing By Words is a passionate defence of clarity, exactitude, and standards in the use
of the English language. Berry sees the person who stands by his words as a contributor to higher ethical standards. The perversion of the English language, on the other hand, allows people to connive and to lie and to cheat. By not being clear and by not saying what is meant, politicians continue to dupe people into believing acts of environmental violence are done in their interest. Analyzing transcribed conversations of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission during the Three Mile Island debacle, Berry confides that "what is remarkable, and frightening, about this language is its inability to admit what it is taking about." By not being precise, by utilizing generalities and jargon, responsibility is successfully avoided. One need not stand by words. There is no ethical commitment in their utterance.

Berry's love for the English language is great, certainly, and he no doubt recognizes that its use requires study. But by delineating a relationship between proper language and ethics, he also suggests there is a note of urgency with respect to this study.

To be an effective component in the production of an ecologically sound social and economic order, then, public education, if we interpret Berry correctly, would have to promote a critical "literacy" that allows a person to see issues from more than one point of view. The cost of comfort, for instance, must be measured in more than just economic terms. Berry writes in poetic form of his efforts to restore his eroded pasture and fields:

I work to renew a ruined place
that no life be hostage of my comfort.
Berry likely would suggest that public education should be intimately connected to life on earth. It should engender more respect for the expectations of the earth itself than for the expectations of those who are currently ruining the earth. Schools must allow students to see and understand the legacy of exploitation that has been the single most pervasive theme in American history. With the exploitation of the earth has come the exploitation of people. Minorities, of course, and women, are always the first victims.

I do not know how exact a case can be made, but it seems to me that there is an historical parallel, in white American history, between the treatment of the land and the treatment of women. The frontier, for instance, was notoriously exploitive of both, and I believe largely for the same reasons. Many of the early farmers seem to have worn out farms and wives with equal regardlessness, interested in both mainly for what they would produce, crops and dollars, labor and sons; they clambered upon their fields and upon their wives, struggling for an economic foothold, the having and the holding that cannot come until both fields and wives are properly cherished. And today here seems to me a distinct connection between our nomadism (our 'social mobility') and the nearly universal disintegration of marriages and families.29

According to Berry, the only way to avoid "this destiny of victimization has been to 'succeed' -- that is, to 'make it' into the class of exploiters, and then to remain so specialized and so 'mobile' as to be unconscious of the effects of one's life or livelihood."30 Rather than being an agent in this process, Berry would suggest that schools need to work to reverse it.

It would be simplistic, however, to suggest that Berry is simply following in the radical/critical tradition. An integral part
of the educational experience of youth, Berry believes, should include socialization into membership in the local community. According to Berry, this comes from communion and shared work in the company of adults. Part of the public school experience that Berry finds detrimental is the long hours of forced association with age-mates rather than adults. Again according to Berry, students need to recognize that there can be dignity, even collegiality, in doing necessary, sometimes tedious work well. This is a vital component of Berry's educational philosophy, which emanates from his conception of human nature and knowledge. In this light, Berry feels that schooling in its present condition is little better than "babysitting, job training, or incarceration." However, he maintains that there is much that schools might do to improve society since they are most likely here to stay. According to Berry, schools must teach literacy by providing access to the best that has been written and said. Schools must teach a critical awareness concerning the uses of language and an inclination to use language ethically. They must promote an accurate and true understanding of our nation's history, particularly with respect to our use of the environment. They must promote local knowledge and encourage membership into the local community by guiding students to understandings about the forces aligned against their communities. In the tradition of John Dewey, schools should not be a preparation for life, the school should be life itself.\textsuperscript{32}

However, at the same time Berry is very much a traditionalist.
He believes education must be shaped to fit disciplines, not students. Berry maintains that the "need for a broadly informed human judgement . . . requires inescapably an education that is broad and basic." Berry employs the metaphor of the tree of knowledge to explicate his notion of this broad and basic education. The trunk of the tree represents the core of knowledge, a broad, liberal education, from which various specific competencies and understandings can grow (branches of knowledge). In this model specialization is based upon generalization, specific professional practice grows out of a general education. Berry writes:

It cannot be denied, to begin with, that all disciplines rest upon knowledge of numbers and letters. From there, one can proceed confidently to say that history, literature, philosophy, and foreign languages rest principally on the knowledge of letters and carry it forward, and that biology, chemistry, and physics rest on the knowledge of numbers and carry it forward. This provides us with a description of a probably adequate 'core curriculum' -- one that would prepare a student well both to choose a direction of further study and to go in that direction.

What makes Berry's prescriptions different from other traditionalists is that he emphasizes that in this curriculum it is necessary to learn from the content rather than about it. By way of explanation, Berry uses the controversy over instruction of the Bible as literature in the public schools. In Berry's mind, both sides of the argument are missing the point. That is, "that we could not consider teaching the Bible 'as literature' -- if we were not already teaching literature 'as literature' -- as if we do not care, as if it does not matter whether or not it is true." If there are not
lessons to be learned from life in school content, then it should not be taught. If there are, then these lessons should be sought, discovered, analyzed, and discussed. Everything studied should equip students with new understandings about the human condition. "The grade schooler and the graduate student must study the same history, and there is no excuse for falsifying it to make it elementary."^37

In this simple but powerful insight, Berry is able to integrate the traditionalist, progressive, and critical elements in his philosophy, for the liberal curriculum is maintained but with an experiential and critical edge.

A major component of the liberal curriculum has included great respect for wisdom that has stood the test of time. Given Berry's affinity for the use of traditional, local, and community knowledge, it comes as no surprise that Berry should exhibit a similar respect with regard to school curriculum, although from the perspective discussed above. A popular reading of progressive philosophy suggests, however, that Dewey felt there was too much institutional inertia in America and that his reform efforts were intended to facilitate rapid change in these institutions (like schooling) in order to keep pace with technological and scientific advances. This way of thinking is diametrically opposed to Berry's traditionalism.

Like Dewey, however, Berry would certainly think very little of a national curriculum, just as he thinks little of the tests and test-makers who are enjoying increasing influence over curricular matters. Based upon his ecological conception of human nature,
knowledge, and community, Berry views schools as a local concern. What is worth knowing and what is worth studying should be fundamentally connected to the lives of the students. Although Berry believes that students should know that certain work is required for their membership in the local community and the larger community that is humankind, he has absolutely no use for vocational preparation in the schools. He has heard the argument that students are free to choose "tracks" and is not impressed:

These are free choices granted to children not prepared or ready to make them. The idea, in reality, is to impose adult choices on children, and these 'choices' mask the most vicious sort of economic determinism. The idea of education as 'career track' diminishes everything it touches: education, teaching, childhood, the future.39

He goes on to say that such a course of study is not a grant of freedom but a "severe limitation upon freedom." It delimits future possibilities.

In the spirit of E. F. Schumacher's economic treatise Small is Beautiful, Berry urges Americans to "Think Little."39 This advice is in keeping with his basic philosophical orientation already discussed and curricular prescriptions outlined above. Local knowledge, local ethics, local community membership, and local responsibility are derived from an ecological conception of human nature, judgement, and productivity, from which a critically liberal and experiential curriculum is framed.

Concerning pedagogy, Berry writes: "Like a good farmer, a good teacher is the trustee of a vital and delicate organism: the life of
the mind in his community. The standard of his discipline is his community’s health and intelligence and coherence and endurance. This is a high calling, deserving of a life’s work.”40 Ideally teachers should work after the model of the craftsmen of old. They should work as examples to their apprentices, leading them in the direction of the mastery that they themselves have attained. This metaphor implies a pedagogy that is experiential, active, participatory, and conversational. But it is not student-centered; it is centered in the knowledge and mastery of the teacher who shapes the judgement of the student-apprentice, through experience and discourse, experimentation and conversation. It is a pedagogy diametrically opposed to what Paulo Freire refers to as the “banking” concept of education, wherein information is merely transferred to, deposited in, the mind of student. Berry’s pedagogy is mutually participatory, wherein both teacher and student are engaged together in a process of creation and development, the development of deeper understandings concerning life and its meaning.

III

Where is Berry’s place in the history of educational ideas? Berry’s educational philosophy is composed of a combination, and perhaps an integration, of three prominent traditions in the history of educational thought: the traditionalist, the Deweyan progressive, and critical traditions.

As James Montmarquet points out, Berry belongs to a tradition
of agrarian philosophy which has its roots in Greek antiquity. The Greeks held that the polis was the greatest educator. The function of the city, the polity, was fundamentally an educative one: to perfect the individual, to culture virtue. This is the essence of paideia. Just as the Greeks conceive the development of virtuous citizenship as a function of the polis, Berry conceives the individual in terms of the community and the land and the achievement of personhood in relation to community. It is the community grounded in the land which has the greatest educational force. However, just as the Greeks pursued rhetorical literacy through formal education in order to fully participate in the life, and hence the overarching educative influence, of the polis, Berry advocates a critical literacy in order to participate fully in community life, leading to the eventual achievement of full personhood. The cultivation of this literacy requires, as did the rhetorical literacy of Greek antiquity, a "liberal" education.

Berry, however, departs from the Greek tradition and a traditionalist liberal education in a fundamental, "modern" way. While recognizing that the community has a profound and central educative potential, Berry recognizes that it also has a profound miseducative potential as well. As discussed above, the state has the power to maintain cultural hegemony, the power to indoctrinate rather than educate. A fundamental point of a liberal education for Berry is the development of the capacity to critically assess the legitimacy of various ideas and policy alternatives. From the polis
and paideia Berry moves to Gramsci and the Frankfurt School tradition. However, this movement is an incorporation rather than a rejection; it is a combination which yields a liberal (in the Greek sense), but yet, a critical educational orientation. Its goal is simultaneously the development of a critical consciousness, while cultivating an awareness of "the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared" and of personhood intimately connected to the place and its sharedness. In this way Berry represents an integration of the classical (traditionalist) and the critical traditions. His educational philosophy seeks to provide a foundation for cultivating a virtuous life, as did the Greeks, while providing the means to penetrate the corruption of modernity.

Berry's philosophy also contains a significant strand of Deweyan Progressivism, in that he views the school, not as a preparation for life, but as intimately connected to life itself. We see this in his conception of liberal education as a guide to life rather than as something merely to learn about for its own sake. Berry's advocacy of community work and experience amid the problems of the adult world are also very Deweyan. The Deweyan strand is also seen in his participatory, social, and active pedagogical approach. He departs from Dewey, though, in a significant way, for he sees education as fundamentally teacher/discipline-centered as opposed to being child-centered. The teacher is the master craftsman and the student the apprentice. While the apprentice-student engages in a mutual process of creation, the process is centered in the teacher.
In conclusion, Berry's educational philosophy may be best described as "ecological," for it is concerned with the care and cultivation of our geographical space, as well as truth and justice. It is a critique and a positive orientation grounded in the fact that we share the earth and are responsible for it. The fundamental educational truth here is that how we treat the earth and its inhabitants will in the end determine our own character.
NOTES


5. Berry, The Unsettling of America, p. 22.


11. Ibid., p. 13


15. Ibid., p. 90.
16. Ibid., p. 94.
17. Ibid., p. 81.
18. Ibid., p. 77.
24. Ibid., p. 127.


29. Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, p. 162. This excerpt is from an essay entitled "Discipline and Hope" and is also available in *Recollected Essays*. This particular quotation appears on page 215 of that volume.


34. Ibid., pp. 82-83.

35. Ibid., p. 86. With respect to Berry's thoughts on curriculum, probably the best two essays one might read include 1) "The Loss of the University" in *Home Economics* and 2) "In Defense of Literacy," in *A Continuous Harmony*.


37. Ibid., p. 89.

38. Ibid., p. 85.

39. This is the title of an essay included in *A Continuous Harmony*.

40. Berry, *What Are People For?*, p. 165. Probably the best essays concerning Berry's views on pedagogy are "Wallace Stegner and the Great Community" in *What Are People For?*, "The Loss of the University" in *Home Economics*, and "Discipline and Hope" in *A*
Continuous Harmony and reprinted in Recollected Essays.
