



Philosophy With Guts*

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Abstract

Western philosophy, from Plato on, has had the tendency to separate feeling and thought, affect and cognition. This article argues that a strong philosophy (metaphorically, with “guts”) utilizes both in its work. In fact, a “complete act of thought” also will include action. Feeling motivates thought, which formulates ideas, that action tests in practice. This idea of philosophy draws on insights from John Dewey and several poets and other writers. Some implications are drawn for education.

Keywords: *Emotions, affect, cognition, Dewey*

I like to use a good quote, so I will repeat what an ancient philosopher once said: that the point of an exposition should be clear at the beginning and the presentation should be simple and dignified. That means that I should explain the point of my title.

The title—“Philosophy With Guts”—has a double, and colloquial, meaning. My intent is to show that philosophy—which is reflection or rationality—involves feelings or emotions, or what is crudely and metaphorically called “the guts.” Secondly, a philosophy that takes account of feeling is more substantial, more robust, and thus it “has guts.”

Some of my colleagues may think I am redundant. They have heard me say these things before, most recently at a departmental gathering with faculty and students. I was asked to talk about John Dewey’s philosophy, but instead of being didactic about his work, I decided to use him to buttress my own views about a vexing problem in education. That problem is the tendency we have to separate feeling and thought. Dewey strikes a good response in me. (I am aware that he strikes an opposite response in others.) His observations “fit” my own experiences; what he says “makes sense.” So I will continue to use him. Seneca used to say that whatever is well said becomes my own.

Rudolf Flesch, in his book *How to Make Sense*,¹ believes that redundancy is useful in getting through “semantic noise,” or all the circumstances that get in the way of understanding. In other words, some things bear repeating. A protest against the separation of feeling and thought is one of them. Philosophers have argued against the separation, but it continues. The tendency to

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1. Rudolf Flesch, *How To Make Sense* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), Chapter 7.

separate feeling and thought perhaps is well enough known that it need not be sketched here-again. Its origin—and persistence—has been traced to Plato. The tendency really is to tri-polarize, rather than bi-polarize, to separate feeling, and thought, and action.² My focus is on the rupture between feeling and thought, but repair has implications for action as well.

The tendency to separate feeling and thought is more widespread than only in education. The conception seems to be ingrained in philosophy. In 1938, when travelling in Europe, Irwin Edman recorded that an English friend explained that “there are two unpardonable sins at Oxford [University], one is to be seen working, the other is to be enthusiastic.”³ Things have not changed much in forty years. When studying Thomas Green’s *The Activities of Teaching*,⁴ a student in philosophy of education class recently suggested that the “logical” acts of teaching—e.g., explaining, giving reasons, demonstrating—are cognitive in nature, and the “strategic” acts of teaching—e.g., motivating, encouraging, disciplining—are affective. As if feeling is not part of explaining, and thought is not part of motivating and disciplining.

But of all places, we ought to counteract in philosophy and education this separation of feeling and thought. Instead, we continue to act as if feeling and thought were different, and competing, and more or less worthy realities or ways of knowing. The separation is alive in curricula and academic politics in higher education. Even those who are friendly toward “feeling” simply reverse the opposition, opting for more “affective” education, but thereby retaining the separation. .

The separation has problems. It doesn’t “match” experience (certainly not my own); it is “formal” rather than practical, and thus has the usual failings of abstractness. Israel Scheffler says that the

opposition of cognition and emotion must...be challenged for it distorts everything it touches: Mechanizing science, it sentimentalizes art, while portraying ethics and religion as twin swamps of feeling and unreasoned commitment. Education, meanwhile—that is to say, the development of mind and attitudes in the young—is split into two grotesque parts—unfeeling knowledge and mindless arousal.⁵

Once the separation is made, we spend our efforts trying to “bridge the gap,” to get feeling and thought back together again, to “unify” them, rather than dealing with practical applications and problems. In education, some of those problems are to understand and make use of student “interest” (or motivation), “discipline” (in the sense of effort), “values,” the relation between theory and practice, and distinctions such as those made between education as science and art. As Bishop Berkeley said about another matter, “we have first raised a dust and then complain that we cannot see.”

I begin graduate philosophy of education classes by asking where philosophy came from; how did it develop? The usual answer to this kind of question is to locate an event or a personality in time. But in a chapter titled “Changing Conceptions in Philosophy,”⁶ John Dewey goes at

2. See John Dewey, “Affective Thought,” *Philosophy and Civilization*. (New York: Minion, Balch, 1931), p. 117.

3. Irwin Edman, *Philosopher’s Holiday* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), p. 200.

4. Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

5. Israel Scheffler, “In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions,” *Teachers College Record* 79 (December, 1977): X, p. 171.

6. John Dewey, “Changing Conceptions in Philosophy,” *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957; original publication, 1920), Chapter I.

the matter differently, showing that philosophy did not develop full-blown in the heads of one or two persons, but evolved from competing interests and activities. He says (in paraphrase and with my emphasis): We remember what *interests* us and *because* it interests us. Thus, the primary life of memory is *emotional, not intellectual* or practical. When left to himself, man is a creature of desire rather than intellectual study, inquiry, or speculation. He ceases to be so motivated only when subjected to a *discipline* foreign to his nature. Philosophy *emerges* out of material *irrelevant* to science and explanation. Philosophy arose historically from the need to reconcile two kinds of mental product—memory and matters-of-fact, incorporated in poetry and science. Thus, philosophy did not develop *unbiased* and *unprejudiced*; its role was (and is) to preserve the past in a new form.

One can remark about the Deweyan themes of reconstruction and continuity in this statement. And there could be a controversy about the “truth” of the interpretation. Some students take Dewey’s comments as implying a disrespect for philosophy (which shows they accept—at least unconsciously—the separation between feeling and thought and consequences). But these are not my concern at the moment. Neither is it my point to propose a theory of recapitulation, that the development of thought in every individual follows this pattern. The point is to focus on the emotive ingredients or thoughts, to show that thought arises from emotion (specifically a “doubtful” or unclear emotion) and returns ultimately to (a satisfied) emotion. Emotion is part of a “complete act” of philosophy.

I have found similar points of view in other subject matters—for instance, in poetry. The poet Robert Frost reminds us by metaphor that “Calculation is usually no part in the first step in any walk.”⁷ He says (again with my emphasis):

The freshness of a poem belongs absolutely to its *not having been thought out* and then set to verse as the verse in turn might be set to music. A poem is *the emotion of having a thought* while the reader awaits a little anxiously for the success of dawn. A poem is never a put-up job so to speak. It *begins* as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a home-sickness, a love-sickness. *It is never a thought to begin with*. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness. It *finds its thought* and succeeds, or doesn’t find it and comes to nothing. It finds its thought or makes its thought... It may be a big emotion... and yet finds nothing it can embody in. It finds the thought and thought finds the words. Let’s say again: A poem *particularly must not begin with thought first*.⁸

You may think that is okay for poetry, which is *supposed* to be emotional and not rational (again maintaining the separation). But that is not what Frost or Dewey says. Philosophy, like poetry, begins with emotion and finds a thought, or it amounts to nothing. Rudolf Flesch makes the same point about speech and writing, which are effective only if they touch an “interest” in the audience:

What is that flicker of interest? It’s an emotion. If your words can’t arouse that bare minimum of emotion, they are dead.⁹

7. Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1973), p. 130.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 25—26.

9. Flesch, *How to Make Sense*, p. 183.

Your audience must get some emotional experience...; without that, nothing you say will make the slightest difference...Pure thought by itself does not communicate; there has to be some emotional material to carry it across.¹⁰

[It is useless to speak and write] without emotional involvement. Our feelings must get into our words, the more so the better.¹¹

These really are comments about “interest” and its role in thought. Interests are feelings or emotions. Dewey says that “...feeling is the interesting side of all consciousness...”¹² Contrasted with “mere” feeling, interest is what Dewey calls “developed” feeling, or feeling that is taken out of isolation and put into relation to objects of knowledge or ideals of action.¹³

Perhaps the word “interest” has been used so much that we have forgotten its sense. We are paid “interest” by a bank and have an “interest” in a business partnership. In education we talk about using student “interests” as the basis for instruction. An interest is a stake or an investment in something. Student “interests” are their “investments” in education, in other words, interests are values.

Like all values, interests are not passive, which is not to say that we engage in a feverish pursuit of them at every moment, that when the time comes we act on them. The dictionary says that interests are “concerns” with things that “make a difference.” Interests are inclinations to act. According to Dewey, there is no need to overlook the “feeling” phase of emotion in order to note that in ordinary speech it is the “behavior” sense of emotion that is important.

When we say that John Smith is very resentful at the treatment he has received, or is hopeful of success in business, or regrets that he accepted a nomination for office, we do not simply, or even chiefly, mean that he has a certain “feel” occupying his consciousness. We mean he is in a certain practical attitude, has assumed a readiness to act in certain ways.¹⁴

“Motive” thus is the important connotation of the word “emotion,” which means “to stir up” or “to move.” In summary, feelings or emotions are interests or values; their function or purpose is to stir things up or to get things going.

In education, we usually encounter several problems at this point. One is to wonder about the “proper” ways to stir up thought or to display feelings or emotions. I suppose that we are afraid that feelings will, as they can, get out of hand. (But so can thought.) We should remember that it is the function of education to develop, not to impose, techniques and skills for controlling feeling—and thought. There is no absolutely right way to express or control a feeling or an emotion. What is required is that one have feelings—about experience—and that they be expressed.

10. Ibid., p. 184.

11. Ibid., p. 187.

12. John Dewey, *Psychology*; reprinted in *The Early Works of John Dewey, Vol. 2* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 216.

13. Ibid., p. 240.

14. John Dewey, “The Theory of Emotion,” *Psychological Review* (November, 1894); reprinted in *The Early Works of John Dewey, Vol. 4* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 152.

Dewey says the expression of an emotion is not a side issue,¹⁵ it is a clue to interest and a motive for thought.

Another device that I use in philosophy of education is to ask students how they “feel” about something they have read or about an idea we have discussed. This is risky business. I do not mean to ignore the distinctions that can be made among “feeling” and “believing” and “knowing.” My point is that feeling is a preliminary to knowledge. (“All knowledge...exists...in the medium of feeling.”¹⁶) If we can express how we feel, then we can become thoughtful about it. (Conversely, if we have no “feelings” about a matter, or if we are unable to express them, then thought at best becomes abstract. And this turns into motivation and discipline problems.) Such questions as “how do you feel about...?” and “why?” and “would you feel differently if...?” and so on should be taken as attempts to stir up thought.

The fact of the matter is that we do have such feelings. (Though we may suppress them and not recognize that they are a motive to thought.) We are surprised or intrigued or revolted or elated by experiences. We like the recommendations that one essayist has, or dislike the proposals put forward by some legislator. Our “guts” are tense, our heads ache, we pace the floor, and our voices rise. These all are indications that we have an “interest” in the matters at hand. Alas, instead of using these as a motive to thought, to exploit the interests, we suppress the feelings; we believe they are in competition with thought and always should be judged the loser.

Rudolf Flesch provides an easy example. He says,

...We have gotten out of the habit of expressing our emotions. Human beings, like their evolutionary ancestors [the ape, who “shows hunger, fear, pain, and rage on his face and with his whole body”], are so designed by nature that every emotion should have an outward expression...

The other day I took my small son to see a three-dimensional movie. It was a matinee and the theater was filled with children—children who whooped and yelled whenever a ball or a chair seemed to fly out of the three-dimensional screen directly at the audience. There was no inhibition of the slightest degree in the expression of the emotions of these children; they acted like healthy young animals and all the yelling and screaming probably did them a world of good. Grownups don’t act that way anymore; they behave themselves, they are dignified, they know how to hide their feelings. They don’t scream with laughter, they don’t slap their thighs, they don’t shiver with excitement: they have learned to keep their emotions inside...¹⁷

In keeping emotions inside we lose the motive for thought. (We may also get ulcers.) Flesch observes that instead of preparing themselves for “fight or flight,” like the ape, “human beings have one more alternative:...they can respond to dangers and opportunities by [thinking].”¹⁸ But humans cannot think effectively, if at all, if they suppress their emotions. Dewey makes the point: He says “Thinking is not a case of spontaneous combustion; it does not occur just on ‘general principles.’ There is something that occasions and evokes it.”¹⁹

15. Ibid.

16. Dewey, *Psychology*, p. 257.

17. Flesch, *How To Make Sense*, pp. 188—189.

18. Ibid.

19. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1971; original publication 1931), p. 15.

Another problem encountered in education is the worry that if feelings are made legitimate, they will replace thought. (That too preserves the separation between feeling and thought.) Everything I have said is that feelings are a part of thought, not the whole of it, but particularly the motive to thought. In *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey cautions that interests, or feelings, are not achievements or accomplishments, but rather “attitudes toward possible experiences”; their value is in the leverage they give to thought.²⁰ In *Art As Experience*, he says that emotions are not complete in themselves; they are to or from or about something objective; and involve a self that is vitally concerned.²¹ Emotions have work to do: to effect continuity and singlemindedness and variety.²²

Robert Frost said that poetry begins with a feeling and finds a thought. Poetry is at its best, he says, when it is vague. I understand that to mean that there is something left to the imagination. Philosophy and education, on the other hand—which also begins with feeling—attempt to “clarify” thought, and together these lead to action. There is no need to believe that if feeling is allowed into the arena, there will be no need for thought. Rather, to employ a Kantian metaphor, the point is that thought without emotion is empty and emotion without thought is blind. (Scheffler also makes this observation.²³).

In 1886, Dewey addressed the Students’ Christian Association at the University of Michigan on the topic, “The Place of Religious Emotion.” His comments are a good summary of a more general view of the role of feeling in thought. He said,

I know of nothing more important in the practical [religious] life, than the right conduct of the emotions. They are so central that when they are healthy, we may take it for granted that the whole religious life is upon the right line. There are two unhealthy developments of emotion which occur to me in the consideration of this subject. One is deadness or apathy of feeling. The other is undue or unregulated stimulation. It is certain...that without a spontaneous and active interest in things that are lovely and of good report, there will be no sincere devotion, no earnest service. This is a truth not confined to religious action. It is coextensive with all action. Without the interest supplied by emotions, men might sleep and dream, but they would never awake and act. But mark one thing—the feeling is not a good in itself, it is good because it does arouse, because it awakens aspiration, kindles devotion, and leads to service.

...This suggests the fact that, while it is all important to have the religious emotions alive and developed, it is equally important that they should be healthy. But what is unhealthy religious feeling?...Religious feeling is unhealthy when it is watched and analyzed to see if it exists, if it is right, if it is growing. It is as fatal to be forever observing our own religious moods and experience, as it is to pull up a seed from the ground to see if it is growing. We must plant the seed and nourish it, and leave the rest where it belongs, [to nature]. Healthy emotion, whether religious or otherwise, is that which finds no time nor opportunity to dwell upon itself and see how it is getting along; which loses it-

20. John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956; original publication 1921), p. 15.

21. John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1958; original publication 1934), p. 67.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

23. Scheffler, “In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions.”

self in pushing on to the work of the prize of the high calling. It is emotion which expends itself in action, and which gives the impetus to new endeavor.²⁴

It is not my purpose to discuss the development of feeling or the emotions, but only to make the point that feeling is a part of thought, part of a “complete act” of philosophy—emotion, cognition, and action, and the cycle begins again. After quoting at length from Dewey about religious emotion, another summary of my point perhaps is not necessary. (In this case, there is no need to be redundant) But I want to give an example from my own university of Dewey’s point that feeling is unhealthy if it is watched and analyzed too much. If you think the example “washes our dirty linen in public,” I will invoke the psychologist James McKeen Cattell, who said under similar circumstances that it is better to wash it than to continue to wear it. I am interested in the example, not the complaint.

One of the extraordinary concerns we have at our university is with our reputation. We like to think that we are “No. 1” both in academics and athletics. Our desire is to be the “flagship” university and to win the conference championship in football. There are reasons to believe that we fall far short of those aspirations in many cases. But we spend a lot of time talking about the matter, and assuring ourselves of our reputation, and trying to win through public relations what we have not gained in substance. We try to talk our way, rather than work our way, to the top.

What is wrong with this simply is that we constantly watch our feelings—in this case, the desire to be the best—rather than use them to stimulate thought and action, to decide means and organize effort. If we want to be the best, we should stop worrying about it and get to work. (I think the same analysis and evaluation can be made of the nationwide concern with “basic skills” or the “right to read.”) Feelings or emotions have a useful motivating function, but when we become too self-conscious about them they paralyze us. We should get to work. A better reputation will grow from that.

Some years ago another philosopher formulated the “Criteria for Judging a Philosophy of Education.” His concluding criterion is that “a philosophy of education should be satisfying to its adherents.”²⁵ It should be intimate, have a personal flavor, and express one’s personality. If it finds favor with others, if it is pleasing, if it appears true, and strikes a responsive chord in them, then it meets an important test which can be applied to any philosophy. This is yet another comment on the “affective” or “feeling” dimension of philosophy. I have attempted to describe that dimension and its role in thought. If it appears true to you and motivates you to work at the problem I have described, that will be the test of my claim.

24. John Dewey, “The Place of Religious Emotion,” in *The Early Works of John Dewey, Vol. I* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), pp. 90—92.

25. George Counts, “Criteria for Judging a Philosophy of Education,” *School and Society* 3G (July 27, 1929): pp. 103—107.

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