A View of Reality and Its Implications for Current Education Systems for the United States

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

By

Lyle R. Young

Dr. Richard Brosio

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
February, 1981

Winter Quarter, 1981
A View of Reality and Its Implications for Current Education Systems in the United States

Introduction

The production of good writing is a creative process. Since the dawn of written language, no writer has been able to detach himself completely. It is the hope of this writer that the following paper will be the clearest statement about reality possible for him at this time; a paper representing five years of university experience and twenty-two years of non-academic experience, synthesized firstly into general knowledge, and, derived from that, specific knowledge of education.

Before dwelling on the author's general beliefs, it is important to elucidate a certain matter; that is, how much of the truth contained in this work will be empirical? Two sorts of statements that can be made are evaluative and scientific. Evaluative statements are value judgements and so say that which cannot be tested empirically. On the other hand, scientific statements are capable of being tested. Both types of statements are valid, but in spite of this, a great deal of squabbling occurs when religious minds meet scientific minds. The reason for this is that each group fails to recognize what kind of statement the other is claiming to make. Scientific statements do not claim to be the truth but merely theoretical approximations of the truth. Religious statements though, being evaluative statements, claim to be ultimate truth.

To clarify then, the question raised, the writer feels no obligation to use exclusively the common hounds of strict empiricism — logic and science — in this fox-hunt of truth. This is so even though the
paper has been written within the context of a university class.
(Robert Pirsig in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance refers to
the University as the Church of Reason - this writer is among those who
wish it were at least that.)

The ultimate raison d'être for this paper is to help the writer
clarify his own thoughts. (The assumption is made that there is intrinsic
value in the cogitation manifested by clear, concise writing). This
desire for clarification is borne out of what, at this point in the
writer's life, is a healthy abundance of doubt, without which no paper
could be written. This is articulated well when Francis Bacon says that
if we begin with certainties, we shall end in doubts; but if we begin
with doubts, and are patient in them, we shall end in certainties.

General Philosophy

The essence of anything, whether in this universe or others, is
consciousness, which itself is energy. In this universe, this energy
can be observed in the perpetual motion of molecules within all things
physical. Energy, and so consciousness, cannot be destroyed but can
merely be modified. For example, energy can be transformed into matter.
Consciousness, therefore, is eternal or immortal.

The most visible nature of man is that he is an animal living on
planet Earth with two arms, legs, an opposable digit on each hand, etc.
But since the essence of all things is consciousness, man must be more
than meets the physical eye. A more accurate description of man must
take into consideration his larger nature, which must, because of the
immortality of consciousness, include his awareness in the past and in
the future. What then is the "larger" or more expanded nature of man?
The experience of any man is dependent on what he is aware of and undergoes. That awareness is not static but changes from moment to moment, as does his experience. Consciousness, having the potential for infinite knowledge, is flexible and is constantly changing in order to meet its own needs for growth. Since this process happens eternally, time is not a limiting factor.

Since man's essence is a constantly growing consciousness or energy, he is far greater than his physical representation. His reality extends beyond time and space and his freedom to be conscious of what he chooses is complete. The "larger" nature of man is such that he can have and so has, infinite power to control his own becoming.

Within the framework of man's true nature this physical world is the collective, on-going creation of man and other forms of consciousness. It is a world that has been created for the purpose of growth. Time and space are only local ordinances of this world and not "trans-universal" laws. The nature of the neurological systems we have chosen allow us most easily to concentrate on one time. But time and cause-effect relationships are concepts we impose on physical reality. Rather than cause and effect it is more accurate to think of all time existing simultaneously. Cosmogony never started at a particular time and will never end at a particular time. Contrary to this concept, we take a point on the continuum, label it "A," take another point, label it "B," and then say that "A" happens before "B". We could just as easily imagine "B" as happening before "A". The past and future, then, are merely projections of a fuller present; they are certain kinds of experiences of the present.
All forms of consciousness have control over what kinds of general experiences it wants to have. If a person is studying to become a minister, he knows that his life will probably be one that involves working intimately with people who feel they need his help. Or if a student decides to work on an oil rig for a summer, he knows that the work will be physically strenuous, and that his associates may not be intellectual giants.

Our selection of general experiences also happens before we are born (again, before is a deceptive word). Before birth each person decides on his early environment and heredity; each individual selects the situation that will allow him to develop along the general lines he considers desirable. Some forms of consciousness chosen have greater control later in life than do others. For example, a person with an I. Q. of 150 in a well-to-do, intellectually stimulating family will have greater rein throughout his life than will a person born with a low I. Q. into an uncaring family.

As we are growing up in our selected environment, we generally accept the beliefs of those immediately around us and of the culture in which we live. This acceptance of beliefs is our own choice and at any time, but certainly after an age when we have achieved independence from our parents, we can reject these beliefs. For example, a boy growing up in Indiana could reject the common belief that to play basketball is healthy and decide that it's unhealthy because the game promotes the commercial exploitation of tall males.

After our birth, our personal reality is created out of our beliefs about reality. For example, if a teacher believes the vast majority of students are lazy, he or she will be attracted to situations where
that is true and he or she will concentrate on physical happenings that prove out that belief. In addition, and very importantly, the teacher will communicate that belief unconsciously in his facial features, body posture, through innuendo, etc. and the students, to a large degree, will respond appropriately. Of if a person has a profound belief that all actions in the world represent good and evil, everything he sees will indeed fall into those two categories. He will have created his own black and white world. In short, a man sees what he wants to see, and disregards the rest. This means that this physical world, for us, is an "of-the-senses" painting of ourselves. For a person who thinks nothing but hateful thoughts will not see a loving person.

Thus far this essay has dealt primarily with the nature of personal reality. Our culture though is highly concerned with that the objective reality is, or with "what are the facts." What is the nature of objective reality?

In a sense this question is not very important. If two men are stranded on the same forested island, their experiences may be quite different. The one may see the forest and be very pleased because he can climb a tree and sleep where wild animals will not attack him during the night. The other many may see the forest and be very pleased because he can use the trees to build a house and furniture, use them to make agricultural tools, and use them as a source of heat energy. After five years, though the original objective situation was the same, the first man may still be sleeping in trees, while the second man has created a new "objective" reality, living in a well-furnished, comfortable home.
Using a more topical illustration, there is supposedly an energy crisis happening now because of the depletion of world oil resources. Now since energy cannot be destroyed, there is not a shortage of energy (Hiroshima certainly proved that): it is only a matter of whether or not we have the technological understanding to tap nature's infinite supply. Because of the way governments of the superpowers view the objective situation, it is deemed important that they spend billions of dollars on defense to assure their share of the limited amounts of oil. But this objective situation could be changed readily if some of those billions of dollars were channelled into research on energy.

Any objective situation then, is not nearly as important as the way that situation is viewed. The subjective experience of anything physical has within it inherently the power to render the physical reality practically meaningless. Man is not a victim of his environment because ultimately, as Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* illustrates, form follows consciousness.

Speaking strictly in terms of science, it is impossible for man to study or test anything without affecting it in some way. We cannot study orangutans in the jungle without becoming part of the orangutans environment. Or a physicist cannot study anything under an electron microscope without bombarding it with electrons.

Another idea very important to our culture is our concept of God. The only omnipotent, all-powerful, life-creating force is consciousness itself. All creating is done by consciousness. Certainly some consciousness had the idea of actualizing this universe. If a person cares to call this God, that could be his choice. If one wants to make that "God" personal then what could be more personal than conscious-
ness? One could apply the term "God" to all consciousness, or deem "God" the collective experience of all experiences.

Bound up with our culture's ideas of God is one of the dominant myths of our culture, the Christ story. The most important aspect of Christianity is not the actual, physical resurrection of Christ. What is more important and truly liberating is the idea behind the Christ drama and Christ's message; that is, according to the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the infinitude of man. Or, as says recent Nobel Peace Prize-winner Mother Teresa: The great sin is the sin of disbelief in the potential powers of the human soul. Christianity, the way it is practiced today is not so much illustrative of Christ's teaching as it is of our Western culture and traditions.

One of the dualisms created by most Christians is good versus evil. This is a classic example of how man, by imposing his beliefs on the physical world, creates his own reality. The natural question is if, let us say mass murder is not evil, does evil have any reality, and if so what is it?

Since man is consciousness, his "being" is controlled by himself only. A man may have his wallet stolen walking home one night from work. Now, though that man has had his money stolen, what that money represents, his awareness of how to make money, has not been taken. This awareness, far more powerful than money itself, would remain constant even if the man were robbed three nights in a row.

Similarly, the Soviet Union could decimate the population of the United States, but by so doing, it could not destroy that which is most valuable: the sense of personal freedom, of justice, of respect for the rights of others, etc. And surely it is in just these values or
in this awareness that lies the strength of the United States. Thus, so-called evil has no power because the values of an individual or a collection of individuals cannot be changed, i.e., their consciousness can be altered only by themselves. And if evil has no effect on an individual, but because he allows it, does it have any reality but in the minds of those who believe in it?

This does not however mean murder is justifiable. Since we, as consciousness, are united at the most basic level, killing one another is like cutting off our own limbs. It is purposeless because it does not promote spiritual growth.

Another experience most people in our culture think limiting is suffering. Let us classify suffering into two categories; emotional and physical. Emotional suffering is real only to those who choose to let it be. For example, after the death of a loved one, one person could become a manic depressive while another, trying to make the dead person's good qualities live on, could become an inspiring leader. Similarly, a divorce could be viewed as a horrible, shameful act or it could be seen as a creative way of allowing two people to explore new freedom.

The other category of suffering is physical. Bodily pain is almost always viewed negatively in our culture and thus it is not often taken for what it is, the body's communication system. Since it is labelled bad, people usually go to medical doctor. People get ulcers because they choose to ignore less urgent messages for so long that finally the body demands attention. This is the case with obesity and heart disease. On the other hand, if pain is viewed as communication we should not ignore it, we should respond to it.
Since pain is viewed as being so evil, it is rarely recognized that people develop diseases for creative reasons. Being told they are going to die in six months prompts many people to explore experiences they probably never would have even if they had lived another sixty years - it gives them valuable insights they would not have otherwise. Or, for example, perhaps a creative person is being obese in order to avoid physical contact with anyone except those who truly love them for what they are and not for their body.

The Writer's Philosophy Applied to Education

At the start of this section, the paper will deal with how individuals, institutions, and society relate in general. Following that the specific situation of the American public school system will be considered.

Any culture's basic concept of man is expressed physically by its society. If the collective basic concept is that a man's function is to serve the collective wants of his country then a state like the Soviet Union may be the result. Or if dominant within a culture is the idea that men are fitted for certain tasks and women are suited for different tasks, society will reflect that, with women and men doing exclusively different tasks.

Within society are certain institutions; schools, hospitals, churches, etc. These are all to a degree microcosms of society, with the largest institutions being most like society. The idea of man is expressed not just by society in general, but more specifically by the institutions, and at the heart of these institutions are individuals with specific attitudes and values.
Now, with the following background material in mind, let us consider the American culture and educational system. American society reflects a view of man which in many ways is rather limited. Many people do not have opportunities to have a job requiring them to be any more than one-dimensional. Very few jobs require people to perform anywhere near their capacity.

This limited view of man, since it pervades society, is to a degree the view of the people involved in one of society's institutions, the education system, and it is the people within an institution whose attitudes are most important in defining that system's values. If the education system were to be better, the individuals ultimately controlling it, the teachers, would have to have a less limited view of man.

Other than a broad belief in man's potential, what are some of the qualities needed in a teacher, the crucial aspect of the education system, if the system is to be reformed? First, the teacher must be a scholar, but he must not be a pedant. An appreciation for the arts and history is crucial but at the same time he must be a person capable of being political. In addition he must be an independent thinker yet able to work well with those who think differently. The ideal teacher would need to be rational and free of excessive emotionalism but at the same time sensitive and compassionate. As mentioned earlier, he must believe in the potential of mankind and of each individual. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, he must care about the students.

It should be recognized that the teacher's primary task is not to give out knowledge as if he had a monopoly on truth. The teacher's most important task, and his most onerous one, is to be an example of
how someone can be a total, well-rounded person in this society. Thus his duties extend far beyond the classroom and into society.

One of the teacher's main goals should be to promote thinking, for this will encourage people to take responsibility for their own education. With this in mind, the classroom should be used as a place where honest, truthful inquiry happens and not where creativity and individuality is stifled.

If the above criteria for teachers is met, reform will take place. It is exactly the type of person referred to that will be capable of asking intelligent decisions regarding curriculum, discipline, facilities, etc., and who will be able to help "clean up" the profession. As mentioned earlier, generally speaking, money spent within an institution is inefficiently spent unless it goes towards improving the individuals within the system. Thus for example, the money that goes towards buying small teaching computers should be put into the teacher's salary in order to attract the best people to the profession.

Teachers should be able to recognize that the system ultimately is created by individuals and thus is not necessarily static. In order to improve the profession and quality of education, teachers do two basic things. They should first of all do everything within their power to live up to the kind of person who should be teaching in the public schools (This is much akin to Voltaire's idea of tending your own garden). Secondly, the teacher should do his utmost to encourage the people with the previously mentioned personality characteristics to become teachers. This includes making the profession more attractive by making loads more reasonable, scheduling time for the teacher to study on his own, increasing salaries, etc.
The importance of the example of the teacher in education and society cannot be overemphasized. Providing good role models may quite possibly be the most important aspect of a system that should be promoting creative, thinking people. Schools should make their jobs attractive to people who are able to function effectively as role models.

Within this scenario, the student's responsibility should be to himself, for ultimately, it will be he who will prosper the most from a good education. It should be the student's goal to learn as much as possible from the teacher. He will be able to do this by emulating those teachers he thinks admirable and by learning how not to be from those less admirable teachers. Concomitant with the student's desire to understand, should be their faith in the teachers and their wisdom. For if a student does not have at least some belief in the credibility of the teacher, the teacher will be of little value to the student.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to define an intellectual-spiritual position and from that outline ideas about education. The salient aspects of the intellectual-spiritual position were: 1) the essence of all things, including man, is consciousness 2) man's freedom extends far beyond that which we see physically 3) the relative unimportance of physical reality 4) each man creates his personal reality through his beliefs about reality. Within the above framework, the writer has explained ideas for education of which the salient points were: 1) the great importance of the teacher within the educational system and society, as a role model, as a scholar, and as a person capable of taking action within the system 2) the importance of making the criteria for teachers extremely high 3) the importance of making the profession
attractive to people who meet the criteria 4) the fuller use of the
classroom to promote creativity, thinking, and individuality.

The final conclusion is this: since man is free, it is well within
his power to change his creations, be it society or a system within
society. However, change will be affected, over time, by people who
have worked long at recognizing their freedom. It is the task of the
conscientious teacher to affect this change within the classroom, the
school system, and society. He will find, as is true whenever excellence
is achieved, that the reward is neither money nor recognition, but the
true joy of personal growth and fulfillment.

Richard A Brooks
26 Feb, 1981