

# KETTERING REVIEW

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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

# Contents

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	5	Editor's Letter
<i>John Dewey</i>	8	The School as Social Center
<i>Lawrence A. Cremin</i>	14	Public Education and the Education of the Public
<i>Stewart Ranson</i>	23	Towards a Learning Society
<i>Judith Green</i>	33	The Continuously Planning City
<i>Wendy Brown</i>	44	We Are All Democrats Now
<i>Bill Bywater</i> <i>in an interview with Noëlle McAfee</i>	53	Tarrying with the Negative
<i>David Mathews</i>	59	. . . afterthoughts

# Tarrying with the Negative

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by Bill Bywater  
in an interview with Noëlle McAfee

*In order to deliberate, in order to create community, in order to forestall the war of all against all, we have to face our histories; our traumas; our ghosts; our fears of one another; and our fears about what we will find within ourselves.*

*Recently you have been writing about what you call the bildung tradition, stretching from Goethe through Dewey to the present. Bildung, of course, is the German word for “education,” but you don’t mean just cognitive education about facts and science, do you? It also involves what you call “moral imagination.”*

Yes, Noëlle, *bildung* is “education of a special kind.” Broadly, *bildung* is the characteristic way in which a living being develops. In his study of plants, Goethe discusses the *bildung* of the plant; it’s the plant’s pattern of growth—what the plant typically looks like over time. Goethe argued that we use our imaginations in a special way to grasp a plant’s *bildung*. Once we become familiar enough with a plant we can “see” it whole. We grasp the plant’s *bildung* so that when we see a living plant we can also see, with our imagination, the whole life of the plant—how it has developed, what it will grow to be, and how it will perish.

People are a lot more complex than plants; but like plants or any other living thing, people need a proper environment in which to flourish. One of the conditions of our flourishing is to have the kind of imagination that lets us understand the natural world. Since we are part of that world, this kind of imagination will help us understand ourselves, other people and how we all flourish. Goethe was careful to specify that this imagination is not about day dreaming or making up things, or creating imaginary worlds. Goethe’s imagination lets us know what’s going on in the world by allowing us to grasp change through time.

Goethe thought change was everywhere and all the time. Because we can see things as they move through time, imagination brings the past and the future into play in our every experience. We are always both seeing and “seeing.”

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## People with lively intellects create a life together—create a community that supports and enhances the liveliness of all.

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**T**he complex seeing that we do, even when we are looking at plants, has a normative dimension to it. We can see the plant under the best of circumstances and, if we know enough, we can also see it under less than ideal circumstances. People are much more complicated, but for Goethe our flourishing requires a “lively intellect” that is open to listening and learning; an intellect that does not come at things with preconceived notions and fixed categories or judgments. The lively intellect gets beyond the fixed and final, or the correct and familiar, to watch for the surprising and novel; to see what could be if we changed our way of thinking about things or if circumstances were different. Education in the *bildung* tradition creates a lively intellect that is able to see other, richer possibilities for people’s lives; to see how one’s current social institutions are blocking human flourishing in one way or another.

And in this context, flourishing is not about being successful by current social standards but about exercising one’s intellect

in a lively manner. Goethe called it opening new organs of perception. Dewey called it growth—the endless enrichment of experience. Understanding more about other humans, and other living beings and their lives, gives us a much better understanding of ourselves. The enrichment is endless because as it ramifies, we are changed; and, as we are changed, more enrichment becomes possible. Remember, all this is happening in a context. Enrichment is endless because it is endlessly connected to other people and more broadly therefore to the living world.

*So you have been thinking of this tradition as helping people question and challenge what is familiar, so that they do not just accept the status quo as it is. I can see how this pertains to our moral reasoning, but what about our collective political reasoning about the shape of our communities?*

There is a direct connection between the two, Noëlle. In your book, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, on democracy you talk about how people are alienated from one another and from elected officials. I have a vivid memory of attending a meeting of my local school board to speak about an issue



that had the community so engaged that the event was held in a school auditorium to accommodate everyone. At the very beginning of the meeting, before any discussion of the issue by those in the auditorium, the school board took a vote on the issue to be discussed. It was a stunning moment for me. I felt shut out; I felt we who had come to speak had been shut out. I think what happened was what pragmatist Alfred Prettyman would call a social “smother”: a distance is created between the parties involved when a power imbalance is used to close down discussion. I think a smother can happen even between two people: for a smother to be possible one person has

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**We have to cultivate our ability to make delicate distinctions; to perceive aspects of good and evil not previously noticed.**

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merely to be requesting something of the other that the other might ignore or belittle.

This is how I think of alienation. If a community is riven by such smothers, it really isn't a community; it remains bunches of people who are more or less in tension with one another. Growth is not happening, cannot happen. The process of forging a common understanding of our collective situation and of solving our common problems, as you point out in your book, requires that people come together to listen and learn from one another. Dewey said that democracy is “a name for a life of free and enriching communion” which can be achieved when we practice “the art of full and moving communication.”

**W**hen Dewey talks about democracy in such terms, I understand him to be discussing how people with lively intellects create a life together—create a community that supports and enhances the liveliness of all. The first rule of such an effort is never, ever to smother. Full and moving communication—communication that touches the heart and induces action—only happens when we give one another room enough. If “never smother” is the first rule, then “how to avoid smothers” is the first problem.

*So how do we keep from inadvertently smothering?*

We have to cultivate our ability to make delicate distinctions; to perceive aspects of good and evil not previously noticed; to take into account that doubt and the need for choice impinge at every turn. We have to be attuned to the impact of trauma on people's lives; how unresolved effects of past evildoing leave people unable to engage in full and moving communication. With Shannon Sullivan, for example, we should pay attention to how the ghosts of racial injustice in the United States currently haunt and infect the lives of white people, blocking full and moving communication between whites and the other races that make up our community. In situations of evildoing, all parties are affected. Seeing what possibilities exist for healing and reconciliation is a task of moral imagination that prefigures “collective political reasoning about communities.”

*This sounds like a tall order.*

Yes, but here's where we can start! An important dimension of the activity of moral imagination is what I have come to call “tarry-

ing with the negative.” Many people who have trauma in their history, or who are haunted by Sullivan’s ghosts, simply want to forget about it. It is especially easy for people with privilege or power to avoid or deny the significance of past evildoing. I have heard white people express the opinion that slavery and racism are things of the past that no longer have an impact on the present. I have heard white people, apparently without any qualms, say that efforts to create racial parity in employment or admissions are reverse discrimination. Such instances exhibit an inability to make the delicate distinctions which Dewey mentions. It is essential that white people tarry with the negative dimensions of our history in the United States. It can be difficult, embarrassing, frightening, disgracing, debilitating, aggravating, and disheartening for white people to do this. But if it is not done we will not be able to deliberate with one another; we will not be able to achieve community. Our public spaces will not accommodate or contain all of the people.

Perhaps the first steps in any deliberation across racial lines need to be about being open to the traumas of race in the United States. Whites who do not tarry with the negative may not be taken seriously as deliberators, problem solvers, or community builders; and if tarrying with the negative is the way to avoid smothering, then the immediate problem is how to tarry with the negative without being overwhelmed.

*In your work, you’ve developed the idea of apprenticeship—not apprenticeship towards mastery but an apprenticeship of transformation. The former you say is about developing power over something, while the latter, making us vulnerable, changes*

*our relationships with others. Why would one want to go this second path?*

I have come to see apprenticeship as a central element in the bildung tradition. But I first came across the idea in the work of Elizabeth Spelman, where she recommended that white women become apprentices to

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women of color in order to begin to overcome the problems of exclusion as they existed in feminism in the 1980s. I expand her idea by using the bildung tradition; and I enrich the moral dimension of the bildung tradition by sharing Spelman’s concerns about white supremacy—which of course was a concern totally absent at the founding of the tradition. You’re right that my idea of apprenticeship switches our focus from mastery to transformation and growth.

In the part of Pennsylvania where I live the tool and die industry is a major presence. Many young people aspire to become apprentices in that industry in order to master the technology and art required by it. An apprenticeship of mastery is not a bad thing; such mastery is essential for our survival and our flourishing. Mastery becomes a problem, however, when it becomes a dominant way of life, a dominant value for people within a community. If the most important goal becomes mastery and the control that it requires, then people are no longer listening to one another. Instead, they are trying to figure how to

gain and keep advantage over one another. Deliberation becomes impossible . . . and community fragments. As Hobbes suggested, life then becomes a war of all against all, in which alliances are matters of convenience rather than respect. I'm afraid that politics in the United States at this time is mostly such a war and I'm afraid that our society, more broadly, is exhibiting its qualities. The huge shift in wealth from a broader to a more concentrated distribution cannot but exacerbate the behaviors associated with a Hobbesian world.

So, valuing mastery may be necessary for flourishing but it isn't sufficient; it can't be the whole story. People who exhaust their energies in acquiring the money to build walls, gates, moats, and security fences between themselves and the war of all against all would be much safer, in the long run, if they spent time tarrying with the negative. We've got to become apprentices to one another.

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In order to deliberate, in order to create community, in order to forestall the war of all against all, we have to face our histories; our traumas; our ghosts; our fears of one another; and our fears about what we will find within ourselves. In general, white people in the United States don't get much practice in



tarrying with the negative. Our position of superiority has not given us the resources to face this challenge. We have weakened ourselves by supposing we are self-sufficient, by supposing we are above or beyond the influence or impact of history—of our very own history. When confronted with that history we're at a loss for how to respond to its effects; we're immobilized by our own isolation.

**A**pprenticeship undercuts isolation. It implicitly acknowledges that we are historical beings and being historical means we are connected to others; we have common histories. We live our histories at every moment. At every moment of deliberation, of community building, of personal decision making, of passing our fellow citizens on the street we are negotiating with our histories. What do we cherish, what do we retain, what must we remember at this moment, and what can we put off for another time? This negotiation richly takes place when we think of ourselves as apprentices to one another.

The short answer to your question about why we should follow the path of apprentice-

ship for growth and transformation is so that we can avoid being consumed by the war of all against all.

*Would it make sense to think of a deliberative public as a kind of apprentice?*

Yes, I think it might make sense to think of a public as an apprentice. Apprenticeship can apply at various levels. Individuals can be apprentices, but we have already seen that individuals can be riven by the histories that are embedded in them. We are complex. We can contain within us the same kind of conflicts that range across groups of us—so, we can say that groups can be apprentices to one another. You have written about how both individuals and groups of people can be torn about what to do; I agree. Therein might be more complexity; and there will surely be more voices involved in a more public discussion; but the principle remains the same. There is continuity here; just as Dewey observed that we do not begin to talk to ourselves until we have first learned to talk with others, we might observe that individuals are not torn between courses of action or conflicting ideals until and unless their environment contains such tensions.

Some people find it difficult to accept that a public can be formed out of a bunch of heterogeneous individuals. And that's understandable, given the power of our Western cultural tradition of individualism. Often we think of individuals as little atoms, or ping pong or billiard balls, composed of interests and desires which move us to action and to bump into one another. Enticed towards individualism, we see these interests and desires as—well—“individual!” With this model, a public becomes a fleeting thing, forming only when significant numbers of individual interests or desires come into

alignment. But, this tradition is undercut by what we have been talking about here. It fails to take into account that as individuals we are living history. We are immeshed in one another's problems. We are formed by one another's problems. We create one another's problems. We are one another's problems. Before being individuals we transact with one another in myriad ways. We are potentially a public before we're anything else!

*At the Kettering Foundation we've been thinking about what makes some communities “learning communities” and others not, how some political communities seem to thrive and find solutions to “wicked problems,” while others stagnate, no matter their resources. How might the bildung tradition help us understand this phenomenon and cultivate more civic learning—or what you even call “public apprenticeship”?*

It would be a wonderful project for someone who is very familiar with how a learning community works to see whether activities of apprenticeship are characteristic of interactions there. And, conversely, to see if stagnating communities are home to social smotherers and lack the openness that characterizes activities of mutual apprenticeship. If such outcomes were forthcoming, then the bildung tradition could serve as a model for the development of the kind of deliberation that leads to the formation of a genuine “public.”

Or should we say, to the rediscovery or re-activation of the public that is already present.

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