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Objectivism through the Lens of Teaching

Objectivism has been heralded throughout the modern world as the way of understanding the world around us without the bias that a personal perspective inflicts. In Parker Palmer's Book, The Courage to Teach though, objectivism is seen far more realistically as helpful and needed but only when balanced with subjectivity. In our world though, "we see everything as this or that, plus or minus, on or off, black or white, and we fragment reality into an endless series of either-ors" (pg. 64). Instead of balancing the two as necessary, we either objectify the world until it cannot be understood or view the world so subjectively that no universal truth exists. Indeed, "in objectivism, subjectivity is feared not only because it contaminates things but because it creates relationships between those things and us- and relationships are contaminating as well. When a thing ceases to be an object and becomes a vital, interactive part of our lives- whether it is a work of art, an indigenous people, or an ecosystem- it might get a grip on us, biasing us toward it, thus threatening the purity of our knowledge once again" (pg. 52)

echoing Dewey

I love this quote

By its very essence then, subjective thinking allows for the possibility that everything in our world may not be black and white after all. This possibility is frightening for many people including myself, so instead of dealing with the paradoxes that life brings, we distance ourselves from the thing that causes us confusion. Therefore, when we allow ourselves to distance something it allows us to diminish its value to the extent that we allow unthinkable wrong to

well said.

occur, under the guise that it is allowable by scientific standards. "So objectivism, driven by fear, keeps us from forging relationships with the things of the world. Its modus operandi is simple: when we distance ourselves from something, it becomes an object; when it becomes an object, it no longer has life; when it is lifeless, it cannot touch or transform us, so our knowledge of the thing remains pure" (pg. 52) This seems to be very true of our history in particular.

Good example!

Throughout Idaho's history, eugenics was heralded as simply the scientifically efficient way of doing schooling and allowed the supposed "moron" children to be separated and castrated. Throughout the world's history, eugenics was used to justify genocides such as the Holocaust. This is because "supposed" science justified the dehumanization of a whole group of people without any real fact lying behind it. Now we understand that this dehumanization is quite obviously wrong, but at the time, objectivism seemed to point to a better truth. Objectivism set out to determine truth beyond the whims of a small group of people but in doing so it reached dangerous depths. "Objectivism set out to put truth on firmer ground than the whims of princes and priests, and for that we can be grateful. But history is full of ironies, and one of them is the way objectivism has bred new versions of the same evils it tried to correct. Two examples come quickly to mind: the rise of modern dictatorships and the character of contemporary warfare" (pg. 53)

Indeed, in the quest for objective truth, frequently we lose all sense of moral truth. This is because, "as people became convinced that objective answers to all questions were possible- and as specialists emerged who were glad to give answers- people began to distrust their own

knowledge and turn to authorities for truth" (pg. 54). Many times then, the authorities exploited the people's weakness for their own gain, leading to the many totalitarian regimes that have existed. "We separate head from heart. Result: minds that do not know how to feel and hearts that don't know how to think" (pg. 68). In doing so, the common people mistakenly believe that they no longer have the ability or power to define truth for themselves. This has also de-railed our current education system as many teachers suppose they have the truth that the students are so obviously lacking.

By doing so, they inadvertently discourage any student creativity assuming that their greater knowledge allows for a lack of understanding of any ideas the students could have. I've noticed this in classrooms in which truth seems to have been forgotten entirely. "Truth is not a word much spoken in educational circles these days. It suggests an earlier, more naïve era when people were confident they could know the truth. But we are confident we cannot, so we refuse to use the word for fear of embarrassing ourselves" (pg. 102) By devaluing their importance then, the teachers begin to assume a distance from their students in which they separate their teaching self from any personal individual feeling that they currently feel toward their pupils. "We separate facts from feelings. Result: bloodless facts that make the world distant and remote and ignorant emotions that reduce truth to how one feels today" (pg. 68)

In doing so then, they become the feared wooden teacher, the one who really doesn't help their pupils, but instead serves as a reminder of the world of mind-numbing hours spent in school. I have felt this especially from math teachers as they shut down after a student ceases to understand according to their preferred method of teaching. So, instead of explaining the

*this feeds on the
fears Palmer talks
about. If we feel
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also.*

process in a different way, they simply demand that their way is best after all. In doing so, they eliminate any differences that the students might have brought in, loving students only that fit within their view of what school should be. *they reject the "other" who is different* Only the teachers that choose to love students with all of their differences then get to experience the wide array of talents their students might possess. Parker Palmer highlights this idea when he states, "McClintock, in her relation to ears of corn, achieved "the highest form of love, love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference" (pg. 57)

Indeed, true learning can only be accomplished within the context of a safe learning community. "Community cannot take root in a divided life. Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as seed in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others" (pg. 92). This is because true learning is far more than just textbook reiteration. True learning allows for the student to grow and use the knowledge and for it to encourage further learning.

In doing so, this means more than just head knowledge and so the learner must be willing to explore to understand more than just what they've been told about what to think. This method of knowing is considered dangerous for the objectivist ideals. "For objectivism, any way of knowing that requires subjective involvement between the knower and the known is regarded as primitive, unreliable, and even dangerous" (pg. 53). This is because this means that *fear leads to the desire for power over others.* the student has the ability to eventually surpass their teacher. As well, the new way of thinking is threatening as it does not contain any of the supposed evidence the past has brought. It allows for the fact that students must feel a safety before meaningful learning can be achieved.

However, Parker Palmer does not use this as a means of explaining truth in an existentialist way. Instead, he seems to explain that moral truth can be reached, unlike the existentialist perspective, but learning frequently cannot be dictated into truth. I felt a keen understanding of this, because it seems irrational to expect that everyone can have their own truth. In decreeing there is not a universal truth, laws lose their legitimacy because their significance is based upon an agreed moral code. If moral codes disappear then, each person's decision is simply based on whether or not they believed in whatever the decision was. Obviously then, Hitler's actions or the eugenics practiced cannot be judged because we have no way of knowing, according to existentialism, whether or not their actions were genuine. This to me seems impractical and far too subjective to be reasonable.

Therefore, Parker Palmer's conclusion seems to be the only really reasonable one. We cannot abandon objectivist thinking entirely. Likewise, we cannot distance ourselves completely from subjectivist thinking. Indeed, the world we live in dictates that both must be combined in order to truly understand the paradox that is our everyday lives. Also, in teaching we cannot expect our students to distance themselves completely from the world around them. Instead, as teachers, we must help our students to achieve true learning through both methods as we seek to understand the moral and logical complexities that surround us.

— lots to talk about here!
a criticism of Existentialism is that it says anything goes, each person can create their own morality. Personally I think this is an oversimplification of Existentialism, but my reasoning is complex. Maybe we can talk about it sometime!

Karissa, excellent essay! You tackle some difficult ideas here and present a convincing position. Very nice use of quotes from Palmer and great examples to make your point. How to reconcile Subjectivism and Objectivism has been a central theme of Philosophy from the beginning. Both Dewey and Palmer try to arrive at a meaningful synthesis that avoids neither or "extremes". Today "Postivism" (the current position is similar to objectivism) and "Postpositivism" are the two philosophical camps battling over this same problem.

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