The Transcendental Properties of Moral Imagination

“We create the world that we perceive, not because there is no reality outside our heads, but because we select and edit the reality we see to conform to our beliefs about what sort of world we live in. The man who believes that the resources of the world are infinite, for example, or that if something is good for you then the more of it the better, will not be able to see his errors, because he will not look for evidence of them. For a man to change the basic beliefs that determine his perception - his epistemological premises - he must first become aware that reality is not necessarily as he believes it to be. Sometimes the dissonance between reality and false beliefs reaches a point when it becomes impossible to avoid the awareness that the world no longer makes sense. Only then is it possible for the mind to consider radically different ideas and perceptions.”

— Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*

I must first declare that I know no more about the current state of the world than I possess authority in determining the direction in which to guide it. What I “know” and often cling to, though work to step beyond the constraints of for the sake of empathetic systemic development and connection, is my own experience of life filtered through an individual, value-based perception of its constructed limitations and necessary priorities. If there is validity in asserting that all individuals possess this sense of agency in creating the world in which they live, it is then worth delving deeper into how the agreements of societal systems are accepted and advanced on the basis of democratic principles as well as how their unequal individual representation arises out of the regulatory power of the collective whole. As I see it, we are existing in a time where we are mindlessly prioritizing profit over people, self over service, global scale over sustainable practices in localized communities, cutthroat competition over symbiotic cooperation, fame and wealth over familial connection and resourcefulness, and mechanistic technological advancement over basic social responsibility. We are trapped in revolving mechanisms that reinforce a reckless craving for ownership and domination guised in the narrative of self-preservation and
the need for belonging, which is preyed upon by the endless suggestions of the inadequacy of identity without continual consumption.

In the film, *Mindwalk*, Sonia, a physicist determined to bring forth the limitations of mechanistic worldviews, notes the impossibility of isolating the interdependent parts of a complex whole for reconstruction and states the importance of challenging the beliefs held at the foundational level that predetermines their growth. When the movie’s political archetype, Jack, proposes the perceived barrier of the concrete implications of such thinking in policy-making and societal functioning, asking her where she believes we could start, she responds by saying, “By changing the way we’re seeing the world. You see, you’re still searching for the right piece to fix first. You don’t see that all the problems simply are fragments of one single crisis, a crisis of perception (*Mindwalk*, McFerran).” Rather than attempting to improve quality of life in the world by externalizing the solutions to our suffering in the systems we set out to fix, perhaps the necessary task is to reimagine relationships - to detach ourselves entirely from Descartes’ proposition of the line separating self from society, to accept and live peacefully in accordance with natural confinements, to acknowledge our interconnectedness and not be hardened by the belief of individual righteousness, and to accommodate the necessary adaptable nature of systems that provide prevention instead of requiring that we impose intervention (*Mindwalk*, McFerran).

A society’s economy sets the organizational model for relational standards among its population. In the current framework that holds money as the sole currency and idolizes economic growth as a cure-all, we are experiencing the dangerously rapid deterioration of natural resources that results from an “assumed limitlessness” (Berry, 2008) of human entitlement as
well as a corruption of community based in the reduction of the complexity of human interaction
to simple monetary transactions, implicated further by the disproportionate distribution of
economic power in the free market and the destructive competition of a shared scarcity mindset.
In a Harper’s Magazine article entitled *Faustian Economics*, written by Wendell Berry, he
explains the monopoly power of a few that exists only at the expense of the powerless many,
against all community moral concern, when he states that “the drug industry is interested in the
survival of patients, we have to suppose, because surviving patients will continue to consume
drugs (Berry, 2008).” Berry’s suggestion for how to reinstate devotion to common interest is to
abandon our structurally supported attachment to more and begin to abide by, within science and
technology as well as individual pursuit, series of self-imposed limits. While he acknowledges
the extremity of the proposition relative to our current understanding of the importance to grow,
globalize, and transcend the knowledge of history, he says, “Our human and earthly limits,
properly understood, are not confinements but rather inducements to formal elaboration and
elegance, to fullness of relationship and meaning (Berry, 2008).” This sentiment relates to a
recent economic phenomenon known as the paradox of choice, which suggests that the more
options proposed to consumers, the less satisfaction is derived from the resulting selection. Berry
echoes the dilemma in saying, “If we always have a theoretically better substitute available from
somebody or someplace else, we will never make the most of anything.” Given that the ambition
of our society is rooted in the promise of an illusive ever-present better substitute, the current
crisis dealing in the mass lack of satisfaction with life and hopelessness resulting from perceived
helplessness is not unreasonable.
The idea that liberation exists in the transferal of the linguistic and aspirational power of more to enough is not a new one, as there is an entire branch of economics, known as Buddhist Economics, that was conceptualized in 1955 by E.F. Schumacher. The model’s aim is to utilize the spiritual requirements of Buddhism to find “the right path of development, the Middle Way between material heedlessness and traditionalist immobility (Schumacher, 1).” It revolutionizes human connection through recognizing the values of simplicity and nonviolence and calling into question much of the modern economist’s assumptions about the absolute truths of the science. One of the main deviations from modern economics proposed in the Buddhist economics model is the role of work. As it currently exists, works is said to exist as “little more than a necessary evil (Schumacher, 1),” where employers view labor simply as a cost to be minimized through rapidly developing technologies of automation and employees view work as a sacrifice of their individual leisure and comfort, and thus view wages as a means of compensating their personal sacrifice. In Buddhist economics, work has three main functions: to provide an opportunity for people to develop their faculties, to encourage mastery over self-centeredness through joining others in a common task, and to assist in the creation of goods and services that create the conditions for a fulfilling life (Schumacher, 1). In this sense, work is viewed primarily as a function of character development and both personal and communal enrichment. As the distinction of the two approaches to economic policy pertains to simplicity, Buddhist economics prioritizes freedom from want in place of the materialistic perpetuation of want encouraged in modern capitalism. Consumption becomes the means to an end, whereby people seek to achieve maximum well-being through minimal consumption instead of maximizing consumption through the minimization of the productive effort and means of labor and capital. This also increases the
acceptance and prevalence of nonviolence, as people are able to obtain high levels of satisfaction while consuming relatively fewer resources, eliminating the need for corruptive competition. There is also a greater initiative in Buddhist economics to identify the distinction between renewable and non-renewable resources and to responsibly oversee the use of non-renewable materials with great care for conservation, as it is understood that to “use them heedlessly or extravagantly is an act of violence (Schumacher, 1).” Of course, in modern Economics, all materials are equalized on the basis of monetary value, and the cheapest option is viewed as the rational choice. One final element of Buddhist economics that involves redefining relationships is the emphasis on the rationality of self-sufficient local communities. It understands the heightened possibilities of involvement in violence when consumers are dependent on international trade systems and the misfortune of looking beyond local production for goods that causes disruption to the patterns of sustainable consumption. What makes the premises of Buddhist economics appealing is the investment in a new kind of nourishment for individuals, communities and their connection to the natural world and spiritual element of equalizing our existence. It removes the stiffness from the avoidance of bearing the costs of human inconveniences and instead generates a vision of societal connection where we can depend on each other, not distrust each other.

The adaptation of acquiring knowledge, though largely influenced by individual experience, is also a product of the mental habits of considering complexities instilled through education. The extent to which all modern systems are connected also reflects the degree to which they are individually influenced by the common foundational mindset upon which they were built. The ideology of the mechanistic economic model dating back to the Industrial
Revolution had a profound impact on systems of education that has intensified dramatically in the exponential growth of materialism. Beyond the systemization towards instructed convergent thinking and a lack of recognition and resourcing for the necessary support of personalized youth development in foundational schooling, higher levels of education have become at once, more common and more of a luxury, simply an extended statement of societal standing premised on the parade of purchased degrees and comfy careers more than the value of developing the content of one’s character and committed exploration towards the fulfillment of service. Paulo Freire further comments on the economic infiltration of schools as he identifies the “banking system” of education, wherein the teacher is assumed to be the holder of all knowledge and is responsible for depositing information to the students, who are considered to be passive objects of reception. Herein lies the problem of individual agency in challenging and changing systems; Freire says, “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them (2).” Not only are individuals perceptions of reality augmented by their false beliefs, but their beliefs are often formed as a result of the portrayal of reality given to them by an authority within the system they will often then not possess the capabilities to challenge. Freire’s solution is a concept known as “problem-posing education,” which invites students and teachers to engage in an equal, direct, inquisitive communication that strives for the “emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (Freire, 7).” Problem-posing education is a mechanism of
liberation from the oppression of imposed detachment and an increased awareness of their own incompleteness and agency of consciousness within a dynamic present of possibility.

In many ways, the systems we have developed reflect a certain frantic, autonomic response to the burden of the realization that reality is simply a construct of our creation. But too often, we accept the oppression of passive identity in our own lives. We assume the beliefs bestowed upon us because we haven’t been taught that we are equipped to look beyond them. We buy into the concept of more because we don’t want to be alone with less. We must understand the power of this planet, how it regulates our lives and how we impact its functioning.

We must question without fear for what we might find and work towards literacy in mystery. We must care for the consideration of our consciousness, our character, and our community. We must come to see that liberation and limitation are not at odds in the same way of spiritual nourishment and material well-being. And our approach to the process of development must work to identify the interdependence of superficially unrelated components to determine the decision of values and their implications to the ecology of being within the framework of a healthy, functioning society that never ceases to envision another way.
Bibliography


Chapter 2.” *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire, Continuum.
