



PERCEPTION AND EDUCATION: AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLORE SHARED REALITIES

“Those who follow their opinions (doxai) live a more harmonious and successful life than those who claim to have knowledge (epistème)”

—ISÓCRATES

I would like to start this essay with what has been affected the most over the past few years in my life, or perhaps with what I’ve been most aware of: *perception*. I would like to propose an exploration of the concept of perception in relation to *being present*, and how this relationship can shape one’s life with an endless learning approach, whilst being curious, aware and vulnerable.

We perceive the world with our senses, with our personal stories and collective history: with time. These interactions and interpretations build our *personal knowledge* through sensibility and understanding. Is there *pure knowledge* or is it always related to perception?

The problem with the application of pure concepts to perception is that there is not anything pure concepts are like such that they would match the empirical intuition, which is constructed out of pure space, time, and sensible datay.¹

Perception changes with the mere process of inquiry. The power of questioning is a tool that brings the self a clear possibility of looking around, looking ahead, looking within. This awareness shapes *realities*, acknowledging that those realities are never static –even more so in a virtual world shaped by post-truth–, moreover that it’s never *one real reality*. Therefore life and perception are always evolving and have multiple layers of understanding that rely on our notion of correspondence with the past, present and future.

The way we sense the world is always a representation of our needs, we pick from the storage of our ideas and experiences in order to live and organize our lives, mingling with our past and future to live our present, which instantly turns into the past. As a matter of fact, right now, while writing this paper, I am picking ideas from my interpretation and understanding of what I’ve learned in classes through the sensible lense of my own *self*; which has already been preselected –or curated– by Lisa, Jan and Nicola –Heldke, Masschelein, Perullo– whose extensive readings, writings and reflections are biased by who they are, who they were, who they want to be, but especially by the mere process of inquiry that was built in class and we were all part of.

When approaching an –educational / culinary / _____– *experience* through the process of inquiry, we place ourselves *present* in a vulnerable position, therefore we choose to actively experience *with*, no matter how much *expertise* or *knowledge* we think we have. Vulnerability and embracing that we are –*individually*– in a constant exchange –*collectively*– with what we experience, brings us the possibility to be the experience itself, exploring and sensing the world fully, slowing us down.

In an *educational* environment, the teacher aims to make the words present for the student to handle them (MASSSCHELEIN)²; and I believe that it's only with exchange, vulnerability, presence and curiosity that both student and teacher –participant and facilitator– share the essence of relation. No matter how experienced/ expert the former and/or the latter is, if there is no openness on both sides, there is no exchange, and if there is no exchange there's only “objectivity” and lack of understanding of the other, therefore the idea of being present is lost.

Some questions addressed that I think are crucial for further reflections on our relationship with presence are: How can we turn the world into something “real”? How to make the world “present” without losing ourselves in “perspectives and opinions”? How do we allow us to expose ourselves? What is the purpose of education (*e-ducation*), an awareness of the world around us or a deep correspondance with this world? (MASSSCHELEIN)³

Education shouldn't be shaped by the desire end, it should be shaped highlighting the process, giving the ability to the new generation –or oneself– to renew the common world. (MASSSCHELEIN)⁴ What if we, for instance, think about education as facilitation? What if instead of having an educator with his/her role of “*enlightening*” the “*uneducated*”, we have a facilitator, able to share the journey of exploration through inquiry framed on curiosity? Perhaps, this way we can start to unlearn the importance of bringing students from point A to point B, providing instead a safe space, both for the facilitator and the apprentice. Allowing the individual in a whole to explore through the process of enquiring, experiencing, sharing, connecting with their agency of knowing and perceiving the world around them.

A critical pedagogy requires dialogue, –referred by Paulo Freire as the *teacher-student contradiction*–, in which the dynamics and roles continuously shift between the players, requiring from both, but specially from the teacher, radical humility, embracing a fully Shoshin, “beginner's mind” –a concept taken from the Zen Buddhists–. This level of consciousness and exchange requires openness, emptiness, acknowledgement of preconceptions, moreover eagerness to learn, to make questions; confronting the modernist cultural trap of privileging a single knowledge and an exclusive way of seeing, which has been promoted by the colonialist and imperialist thoughts. (BAI et. Al.)⁵ Knowledge could then be built upon by this constant role shifting, in which each player's participation enriches that of the other ones.

We are entangled in fluid and ever-changing realities, wherever humans are engaged in the transmission and transformation of world views, habits, values and practices, education of some manner and kind is taking place (BAI, ROMANYCIA)⁶. In the article *Philosophy of Education and Transformation of Culture* (BAI et. Al.)⁷, the authors propose an understanding of philosophy of education as a deconstruction of historical and contemporary beliefs, cultures, values and practices that are compromising human and planetary flourishing.

There is an urgent need to unpack and deconstruct our ways of thinking and learning, Western philosophy has been deeply implicated in practices of colonialism and imperialism. It seems like there's a single view of progress shaped by the predominant narrative that shapes our *culture* (BAI et. Al.)⁸, we need to make time to deconstruct this narrative, to celebrate diversity and *cultures*, to flourish as an important part of the learning process. "*No culture is a windowless monad, so all cultures possess to varying degrees intercultural overlappings.*" (BAI Et. Al.)⁹

Philosophy inescapably emanates from, responds to and experiments *with* culture, with the process of inquiry there's always a possibility to implement alternate ways of negotiating reality. (BAI et. Al.)¹⁰ And again, what is reality? Reality can be both subjective and objective, it can be a place in space and time that includes oneself and others –objective– and their views on all these aspects –subjective– (SHOTWELL)¹¹. Perhaps reality is the subjective ability to be present, to look around, ahead and fully within.

Education –as a process rather than a means to an end– deeply relies on encounters, on different ways of seeing, perceiving and understanding our environment and, moreover, *being* entangled. Encounters are at the very core of culture, these confrontations of ideas with an open present mind is what creates and shapes cultures as such.

Encounters are dialogues, and dialogues are conceived as a dynamic never ending process of using language to make meaning (Merril Swain), as a particular relational way of *being* in the world (Aristotle), and moreover as an I-You practice. (BAI et. Al.)¹²

The life of dialogue is no privilege of intellectual activity like dialectic. It does not begin in the upper story of humanity. It begins no higher than where humanity begins. There are no gifted and ungifted here, only those that give themselves and those who withhold themselves.¹³

According to Martin Buber, this practice of dialogue requires seven capacities:

- **Becoming aware**, listening in its broadest sense incorporates the senses, emotions, intellect and intuition
- **Confirmation of the other**, a respect of another as Other and a validation of another's ontological status.

- **Inclusion or empathy**, the ability to incorporate other's experience or presence within the expanding sphere of one's own experience.
- **Presence**, the affirmation of one's own ontological and epistemological standpoints.
- **Holly insecurity**, the ability and willingness to explore the unknown and different.
- **Cognize and grapple with paradox**, the ability to acknowledge and deal with contradiction and inconsistency.
- **Synthesizing apperception**, the ability to see the big picture and synthesize what is being perceived, and how all the systemic holons create a whole. (BAI et. Al.)¹⁴

As understood by Buber, revelation is the revelation of "presence" (*Gegenwart*). In contrast to "object" (*Gegenstand*), the presence revealed by revelation as encounter occupies the space "in between" the subject and another (a tree, a person, a work of art, God). This "in between" space is defined as "mutual" (*gegenseitig*).¹⁵

This dialogue of perception, presence, vulnerability, inquiry and understanding is an encounter that allows the individual to zoom in and to zoom out with the learning process, celebrating her / his own path of embodying knowledge. We establish our humanity through these encounters, that require a loving commitment to others and the world, humility, faith in humanity and hope for the possibility of becoming more fully human. (BAI et. Al.)¹⁶

Reflecting about perception and presence in the learning process, I couldn't ignore the fact of how much our hyperconnectivity has separated from ourselves, from the society and from the natural world. (MUSSON)¹⁷ This hyperconnectivity and disconnection was also mentioned –pre covid-times– in class by Jan Maschelin, as the impossibility of making mistakes freely in the online/digital world, where every move we make is tracked and recorded. This fact adds on and shapes the invisible pressure of success created by our western society, cuts out the idea of recognizing, acknowledging and *being* the process itself, just focusing on the result, on a number or a score. Through our rapid growth as 'modern humans' we have gradually disconnected and divided ourselves from the three core areas that humans need let flourish: connections to ourselves, to each other and to the natural world. (MUSSON)¹⁸

A different approach can be found on Buddhist and Daoist philosophies, where their embodied practices have much to offer to the harmful worldview of the global hegemonic cultures of instrumentalism, consumption, personal success, binary, linear and fragmented individualistic way of perceiving the world, the essentiality of *to be with*. These philosophies are embedded in a relational ethos, an interdependent reality, emphasizing a balance, flow and integration approach rather than a dualistic either/or perception. (BAI et. Al.)¹⁹

Going back to Buber's study of presence and the capacities to dialogue with the in between / mutual space resonates to what Rachel Musson defines as the *Triple Well Being* (for education): **exploring** ourselves, **exploring** society and **exploring** nature. (MUSSON)²⁰. This idea of exploration resonates with the flow and integration approach described along this essay, killing the perpetual model of non-failing and giving tools to learn to flourish widely along the practice of feeling, thinking and creating, moreover celebrating curiosity.

The *Triple Well Being* is a lifelong learning process focused on nurturing and fostering healthy relationships with these three areas that we have separated from - ourselves, with society and with the natural world. These three areas of wellbeing are not simply 'nice ideas' but fundamental to the health and wellbeing of people and planet and the route to whole-person, a whole system flourishing. (MUSSON)²¹

Now, more than ever, in a pandemic and digital world, we need encounters, we need different ways of seeing, perceiving and understanding our *triple wellbeing*: our environment, society and self; moreover we need to celebrate *being* entangled, *being* a holon in the system. We urge fluidity and creativity to open safe spaces to share ideas with a fully present mind and body in order to transform, create and be part of the culture we are shaping. We need to embrace our agency to change by *experiencing* through the process of inquiry, with a *present* and a vulnerable position.

Perception, as life itself, is never fixed, it's always disrupted and deconstructed through the process of inquiry, it is a constant change and exchange. Acknowledging perception is embracing vulnerability towards oneself and life. Perhaps it is possible to see vulnerability as a gift, by embracing what/who we are in a constant exchange with what we experience. Maybe vulnerability brings us the possibility to simply *be*; to bring empathy to the space we inhabit; to explore, perceive and sense the world fully; to cultivate connections; to honour our space, our relation with the system and with the never ending process of enquiry, curiosity and learning.



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