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## RESPONSE AND REJOINDER

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### Imagination and Learning: A Reply to Kieran Egan

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I welcome Professor Egan's drawing attention to the importance of the imagination, as I welcome his discussion of the narrow focus of education governed by what he calls the "*ad hoc* principles." Both are of particular importance at this time of educational prescription and reform. The word *imagination* does not appear in the major government and foundation reports or recommendations; the focus throughout tends to be on what Egan calls "the progressive mastery of practical tasks and logical sequences of discipline areas." We are in agreement that this is not an adequate account of educational development.

We are not, however, in total agreement on the nature of imagination, on the meaning of the concrete, or on the abstract categories or conceptual tools that (for Egan) account for children's comprehension of fantasy stories. I want to introduce some alternative views, in the hope that the argument can be enriched but not undermined. It is altogether necessary to sustain Egan's focal point: that existing "curriculum and teaching methods . . . have excluded much of the richness of human experience that young children can have direct access to." I wish to draw on different resources and take a rather different perspective.

It may well be that there has been little research concerned with imagination and that it has been "largely ignored" in educational psychology and philosophy. I do not believe we should overlook, however, the significant tradition of philosophical and literary writing on imagination, a tradition that remains to be tapped by educational thinkers and curriculum makers. I have Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*<sup>1</sup> in mind, of course, as well as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's work and that of William Wordsworth.<sup>2</sup> For all the differences in emphasis, there is throughout a concern for imagination as the capacity to create new orders in experience, to open up new possibilities, and to disclose alternative realities.

All this is closely related to the image-making function, the ability to envisage the "nonactual," the "unreal." There is also, in John Dewey's work, for instance, a concern for imagination in its meaning-giving role. In *Art as Experience*, he wrote:

For while the roots of every experience are found in the interaction of a live creature with its environment, that experience becomes conscious, a matter of perception, only when meanings enter it that are derived from prior experiences. Imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction; or rather . . . the conscious adjustment of the new and old *is* imagination. Interaction of a living being with an environment is found in vegetative and animal life. But the experience enacted is human and conscious only as that which is given here and now is extended by meanings and values drawn from what is absent in fact and presented only imaginatively.<sup>3</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre, similarly, saw imagination as giving intelligibility to the present moment. Somewhat like Dewey, he suggested that in any interpretation of what is perceived, there is a dimension of awareness of the past and of the future, of what is not or what is not yet.<sup>4</sup>

I would prefer to think of the "concrete" in terms of what is perceived, rather than what is sensed. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, emphasizes "the primacy of perception," the experience of perception as "a nascent *logos*." As he saw it, perceiving is a process of configuring, of patterning the lived world; it is a process mediated by the body that registers the presence of the objects and events around. It is an active process, and the field opened by perception is continually enlarged by imagination, which opens up the possible. Again, as in Dewey's viewing, the imagination effects connections between what is already known and understood and what is newly given. This is quite different from the mediation process Egan describes, even as it involves a movement from the known to the unknown, an opening outward to what is not yet.

Merleau-Ponty, considering the child's perceptive capacities as a mode of organizing experience, went on to say that we cannot "assimilate what is called the *image* in the child to a kind of degraded, weakened copy of preceding perceptions." Imagination provided still another way of ordering experience: "What is called imagination is an emotional conduct." It had to do with something occurring "*beneath* the relation of the knowing subject to the known object . . . a primordial operation by which the child organizes the imaginary, just as he organizes the perceived."<sup>6</sup> Clearly, this is an alternative to a conception of programming, of the "abstract categories" Egan turns to, to account for the child's making sense of Frodo's journey or *Cinderella*, or his or her ability to summon up unicorns.

He might, of course, say that this does not adequately explain the child's ability to grasp plot lines and so on. Louise Rosenblatt, talking about transactions with different texts, emphasized the "action of the reader in relating one episode or one element or one aspect of the events to the others decoded from the text." She went on: "A child may look at the separate squares of a comic strip, and see them as separate and distinct. Plot begins to emerge when he sees that the characters and situation of a second square can be related to the first, usually as later in time and as developing from the situation of the situation indicated in the first and so on, so that the comic strip becomes a narrative. This is a simpler version of a process carried on in the reading of a play or a novel."<sup>7</sup> As Rosenblatt sees it, it is a matter of the reader's *living* through a series of events, relating them, and organizing his or her emotional responses to them. For her, the reader "provides the experimental ligatures" between the events as they proceed; this, again, seems to be quite different from a "way the mind is programmed to learn."<sup>8</sup>

Of equal interest in this regard is Jerome Bruner's notion of what he calls the "narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought."<sup>9</sup> He believes that there are two modes of cognitive functioning, each of which provides a way of "ordering experience, of constructing reality." The paradigmatic mode is the logico-scientific one; the narrative mode is a temporal, story-telling mode, which constructs two landscapes simultaneously. "One is the landscape of action, where the constituents are the arguments of action: agent, intention or goal, situation, instrument. Its other landscape is the landscape of consciousness: what those involved in the action know, think, or feel."<sup>10</sup> Now it is clear enough that the paradigmatic mode makes truth claims possible; the narrative mode allows for verisimilitude or believability. Both modes, Bruner says, can be imaginatively applied: That is how we get good theory, logical proof, and so on, on one side, and how we get "good stories, gripping drama, believable historical accounts" on the other.<sup>11</sup> It seems to me to be at least possible that Egan's questions about children's capacities to deal with stories can be partially resolved by a recognition that storytelling and the understanding of stories involve an alternative mode of world-making or interpretation. They may not need to be reduced to conceptual schemes.

Of course it is the case that children's sense-making abilities are belittled in too many schools. To read some of the accounts presented by some of the phenomenologists of childhood<sup>12</sup> is to be reminded of this. To read of such teaching adventures as those reported by Gareth B. Matthews in *Philosophy and the Young Child*<sup>13</sup> of what good (philosophical) teaching can elicit does the same. (Matthews also believes that "Piaget's low regard for the thinking of young children is unwarranted."<sup>14</sup>) And who can disagree that a neglect of imagination is a ne-

glect of a significant dimension of mind and mindfulness? My problem is that I scent a kind of reductionism in Egan's work, a neo-Kantian subsuming of imagination under schematization and conceptualization.

I find suggestive Mary Warnock's words at the end of her book, called *Imagination*, when she writes about educational policy. She believes, as Egan and I do, that the education of children should indeed be directed to their imagination. She believes this should not necessarily be done through an emphasis on self-expression, but by enabling them "to read and to look at the works of other people . . . grown-ups, or the works of nature." And then: "In so far as they begin to feel the significance of the forms they perceive, they will make their own attempts to interpret this significance. It is the emotional sense of the infinity or inexhaustibility of things which will give point to their experience."<sup>15</sup>

She seems to believe, as I do, that imagination is what sees the meanings in the objects of which we become conscious in the course of our perceiving. Imagination may order, effect connections, and sometimes disorder or transform. And it may suggest "that there are vast unexplored areas, huge spaces of which we may get only an occasional awe-inspiring glimpse, questions raised by experience about whose answers we can only with hesitation speculate."<sup>16</sup> That, to me, explains the power of imagination in learning: It draws toward the unexplored, toward the possible. It opens windows in the actual and the taken-for-granted toward what might be and is not yet.

### Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).
- 2 See Harold Bloom, *A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1960), pp. 132-249.
- 3 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), p. 272.
- 4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1963), pp. 3-77.
- 5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 25.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 7 Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 92.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Jerome Bruner, "Narrative and Paradigmatic Modes of Thought," in *Learning and Teaching: The Ways of Knowing*, Eighty-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, ed. Elliot W. Eisner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 97-115.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 12 See, e.g., Martinus J. Langeveld, "How Does the Child Experience the World of

Things?" *Phenomenology and Pedagogy* 2, no. 3 (1984): 215-23; and Valerie Suransky, *The Erosion of Childhood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982)

13 Gareth B. Matthews, *Philosophy & the Young Child* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980)

14 Ibid., p. 48.

15 Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 207.

16 Ibid., p. 208.