

Symbiotic truth, diabolic deception

**The course of *tension* through the cataphatic and apophatic communion
and its application in education**



Melissa Lynch

Fordham University

Our history and literature reveals the story of our mind, in its wholeness and brokenness. These words of symbiosis and diabolism tend to work for an end of consistency, stability, truth and revelation. The body, mind and spirit of the human person must be known and touched in education for students to experience each aspect within them, and nurture their complete development. The educational theory and research of John Dewey, Kurt Fischer and Maria Montessori interweaves the traditional Judaic-Christian aspects of humanity together and attempts to resolve truth and symbiosis over deception and diabolism in the course of life.

Abstract. *Each aspect of the human being: body, mind and spirit should be present in education through theories that thoughtfully guide our practice through tension for symbiosis and truth between the cataphatic (the created) and apophatic (the uncreated) spheres. Throughout history the images of symbiotic and diabolic, have emerged in the thought and research of our most eminent scholars. John Dewey's education theory for experience: thesis, antithesis and synthesis, revolves between concrete and abstract thinking follows this imprint for the body and biology. Kurt Fischer's research on the mind and brain demonstrates that maltreatment or nonmaltreatment form the early childhood brain for fragmentation or integration; neurological development and life experiences effects the child's interpretation of the world, for better or worse. Maria Montessori highlights the spirit in her immobility lessons of silence and stillness which draw out the spiritual senses of young children. Silence created a secure space that opened the children up to their highest aspect, the spirit, and let them fully experience time. These educational theories correlate to the body, mind and spirit of the human person and can be applied to the course of tension between the cataphatic and apophatic for truth in education.*

Introduction

Throughout our historic memory, images and sentiments of the *symbiotic and diabolic* have marked our desire for consistency, stability and truth. Therefore, aspects of our humanity: *body, mind and spirit*, should be present in education through theories that thoughtfully guide our practice through this life course of *tension* between the *cataphatic* (the created) and *apophatic* (the uncreated) spheres for symbiosis and truth. John Dewey's educational theory: thesis, antithesis and synthesis, illuminates the tension between concrete and abstract thinking by following the biological knowledge of the *body*. Kurt Fischer's research on the *mind* demonstrates that maltreatment or nonmaltreatment form the early childhood brain to fragment or integrate; neurological development along with life experiences effects the child's imagination and interpretation of the world, for better or worse, into their future. Maria Montessori highlights the *spirit* in her immobility lessons of silence and stillness which draw out the sensitivities of young children. Silence creates a secure space that opens the children to their highest aspect, the *spirit*, and allows them to fully experience time. These educational theories may be applied help navigate the course of tension between the cataphatic and apophatic toward symbiosis in education.

Genesis, the foremost work of our literary canon, is the labor of human observation, experience, imagination, creativity, and openness to mystery. This book forms the enduring images of wholeness for truth (*symbiotic* □ *sym*: together, *bio*: life — *to bring life together*), and brokenness for deception (*diabolic* – *dia*: apart, *bol*: to throw — *to throw apart, to shatter*). Human beings inherited the seamlessness of the divine likeness and illumination, and therefore were assigned task of co-creating “goodness” with the Almighty Creator in the Garden of Eden.

However, this epic primordial vision would fall and break in two realities — the *cataphatic* and *apophatic* — as a result of deception; the initial division established the corporal and transcendent kingdoms, the physical body and the spiritual mystery. The metaphors of *symbiosis* and *diabolism* were inherited as the core of the human condition, and further, diabolism (to *throw apart, to shatter*) became associated with all damage and evil rupturing the innate wholeness and goodness of the primordial and risen creation. The created world, the *cataphatic* (*cata*: down, *phatic*: things spoken of — *things that may be spoken of from the earth*) references positive theology, or the created world which is known and experienced; the *concrete* reality. The uncreated world, the *apophatic* (*apo*: away, apart — *things that may be spoken of apart from creation*) is negative theology or silent mystery (the dark matter of creation). *Apophaticism* insists that God is beyond the known and experienced world, the entire created order; and persists that God transcends human experience and imagination which incessantly seeks to create idols in one's own image (intentionally or unintentionally), due to one's own finite perception.¹ The *apophatic*, if you will, may correspond to *abstract* thought which attempts to theorize about the nature of earthly activity and its interrelation with the invisible and unknown, for meaningfulness in life experience.

The field of Religious Education and the spiritual formation of the Judaic-Christian tradition anchors humanity in *imago dei* to honor, preserve and protect the integrity of each person. Truth, virtue and morality have traditionally bound the *apophatic* and *cataphatic* together restoring (*recreating*) the sacred principles of *holiness*, wholeness, completion, of the human person and the cosmic order. Where deception, corruption and immorality destroy order through division, fragmentation, alienation, insecurity, despondency and death. The Judaic-Christian moral formation of ascension was inherited partly from Aristotle, for whom virtue was a developmental process through time, defined through our experiences, governed by our willingness to participate in goodness and truth, or else fall into deception. The threads of moral fiber are then interwoven, and the neurological pathways interconnect. Life is *practiced*.

This path is life's corridor between the cataphatic and apophatic that intersects inside the human person, inside the student. Our power to relate, reason and pray allows us to recreate and reshape our relationships and our world in accord with our imagination and vision. The meta-narratives of individualism and interdependence share the negative space of separation between people, and then for the sacred-minded, between ourselves and God. Almost all dreams concern this empty space and initiate the figuring of connections within it; however, how the connections are shaped within this space initiates the high art of formation, learning, education. In education the voices of children and the students we serve are the base; they are the barometers of our engagement. Each aspect of the person is interrelated and must develop sensitivity for truth over deception in a mysterious and corporal world that presents never-ending challenges and graces.

¹ Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being With God* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006)13-20.

The body in education

The body (*soma*) is the physical aspect of our humanity; it is our living and breathing material that allows us to interrelate to other people and creation, as well as connect to the mind and spiritual aspects of humanity. The body is sensory: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell which extend outward into the world and into the eyes of others. Because of our physical form we must relate to our environment and to the people within it. Therefore, because creation becomes embodied within us, we should care about the purity of our world. Additionally, other people's decisions and actions affect us, therefore we should care about establishing trusting and good human relationships. Because our bodies are designed to relate outside of ourselves and we are connected to each other through our senses, the complexities of our physical environment should be explored and experienced in the most considerate manner.

John Dewey, America's preeminent educational philosopher developed *progressive education* in the early-twentieth century, which has two distinct, yet symbiotic elements that affect the course of tension for the body and mind.² First, Dewey emphasized that humans are biological (*bodily*) creatures and their development (*growth*) can be observed through natural law and thus nurtured in accord with these principles, within the education system; and further, in a democracy the individual and the community shape each other, as they relate to each other (*the cataphatic order*). Therefore, the character of a person is dependent on the morale of the community and likewise, the character of the community is the expansion of the values of the persons who inhabit the community. Furthermore, on a national level, education is for democracy, as democracy is for education. Second, our experiences, encounters and conflicts should ignite reflection and abstract thought to “*transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious.*”³

For Dewey, the sensory nature of human beings allows various stimuli to access the mind. And the mind “tends to dislike what is unpleasant and so to sheer off from an adequate notice of that which is especially annoying.”⁴ Therefore, cognitive dissonance commences in the mind which searches for connections and reasons for synthesis and conclusion. This process is endless because human beings are always taking in new sensory material into the fold of their life experiences; “The moment one thinks of a possible solution and holds it in suspense, he turns back to the facts. He has now a point of view that leads him to new observation and

² As a storyteller, Dewey emphasized the body and mind aspects of the human person for education, sometimes over and at the cost of the spiritual aspect. However, Dewey did not create the schism that exists in education today; this was done by the next generation of educational thinkers who felt threatened by fallacious concepts of religion and teaching.

³ John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1933)100-101.

⁴ *Ibid*, 103.

recollections and to a reconsideration of observations already made in order to test the worth of the suggested way out.”⁵ The mind is seeking truth by testing the conflict and deception that the person encounters, and this mental progression is one of tension. Our minds actively bind together our thoughts and experiences forming our analysis and leading to our synthesis, which ultimately may become our fixed judgment and decision.⁶ For Dewey, the integration of the concrete and the abstract led to “more effective and happier (human beings) if both powers are developed in easy and close interaction with each other.”⁷

Although Dewey’s work is concentrated in the *cataphatic* reality and human biology, he aims for an end of *perfection*. Dewey established a problem-centered method for education that directed students to study their experiences and problems for moral resolve. This method encouraged reasoning by interweaving the *concrete and the abstract*, then the *abstract with the concrete*, and the process would continue endlessly, closing the space between them. For Dewey, the *concrete to the abstract* were natural dance partners, “education should advance from things to thought... And if the abstract to which we are to process denotes thought apart from things, the goal is formal and empty, for effective thought always refers, more or less directly, to things.”⁸ Furthermore, the integration of the *concrete and the abstract* (the *cataphatic to the apophatic*) should be a liberating exercise for the person developing more inquiry and intelligence. If one was to go too far into either extreme — concrete or abstract — they may lose their original sense of purpose to transform creation. Dewey attempts to bind together the *concrete and abstract*, the *cataphatic and apophatic* in the student for an interwoven symbiotic relation that releases him into his most natural condition of union and harmony.

The mind

The mind (*nous*) is the central nervous system that unifies and vivifies the sensory intake and actions of the body, causing the person to be conscientiously and assiduously perceptive of their environment. The mind is capable of abstract thought and logic, as well as forethought and memory which influence and shape the meaning of our experiences, and the manner in which we perceive the entire world, for good or bad. Dewey’s work is supported by modern neuroscientists like Kurt Fischer who focus on the aspect of the *mind* and cognitive development theory for education. Fischer’s work applies the principal images of *symbiotic* and *diabolic* for the healthy and abused (nonmaltreatment and maltreatment) brain pathways of young children. His work is foundational in the field of psychology and education. It is of immense importance

⁵ *Ibid*, 103.

⁶ Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002).

⁷ John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1933) 229.

⁸ John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1933) 220.

to those who care about our sensory perception and the following interpretation in the *mind*, in a world marked with stability and instability, symbiotic and diabolic forces that we encounter in psychological, verbal and physical materializations.

Fischer, and the school of developmental psychology, states that human development and learning has three primary dimensions: cognition (knowledge), emotion (psychological energy) and the social context (the environment – hospitable or hostile) which form the person. The cognitive dimension includes knowledge, skills, and motor learning which are controlled by the central nervous system. The emotional aspect consists of feelings and motivation, attitudes and psychological energy. Either dimension — cognitive or emotional — can override or dominate the other, in relation to the social circumstance, which shapes the learning experience. Cognition and emotion interact in the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and therefore learning is affected positively or negatively by the social environment. Quiet and calmness can foster learning and development, while disruption and anxiety can hinder (Freud) or splinter neurological connections which nurture learning (Fischer). Therefore, because the social learning environment of the human person goes far beyond the class room, to embrace the entire world and beyond, factors of stability and instability, nonmaltreatment and maltreatment, health and abuse, deception and truth, wholeness or brokenness, must be regarded in the process of learning for the development of humanity.⁹

The results of abuse on a child, and the entire ecology of a person's life, have been recognizable for centuries. Sigmund Freud was one of the first psychologists to stand on behalf of the protection of children. He observed and hypothesized that *child maltreatment resulted in immaturity and developmental delay which was a result from fixation or regression*. Fischer's *dynamic skill theory* breaks from Freud's hypothesis by purposing that abused children demonstrate complex skills and pathways equal to their non-maltreated peers, however the pathways are different from the non-maltreated children, and are unique to the particular experience of maltreated children. All children begin cognitive development with fractionated strands, which ideally mature into an integrated web. The development of skills is impacted by contextual influence, including trauma, and the emotional response of the child. Therefore, the maturing web of the maltreated child is likely to differ from the non-maltreated child.¹⁰

Maltreated children consciously keep the events and anxieties of their abuse separated from outside experiences (like school), rather than coordinated, as an adaptive strategy to their environment. They self-deceive to avoid being overwhelmed by fear, anxiety and anger within moderate, everyday, ordered situations. The diabolical nature to separate and fragment thoughts

⁹ Kurt Fischer, et al. "Cognitive and emotional differences in young maltreated children: A translational application of dynamic skill theory." *Development and Psychopathology* 18. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Kurt Fischer, et al. "Cognitive and emotional differences in young maltreated children: A translational application of dynamic skill theory." *Development and Psychopathology* 18. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

and feelings is a survival skill to avoid the suffering of severe anxiety and helplessness experienced in abusive situations. This deception creates fragmented neurological pathways rather than an integrated web of learning experiences. If the maltreatment is recurrent, which it most commonly is, then the schismatic pathways become routine. These frequented pathways of maltreated children are called “*alternative developmental pathways*.” Maltreated children are more likely to turn a positive context negative in a story, relationship, classroom, social situation, conversation, etc. Though maltreated children develop complex skills and pathways, the fragmentation of their experiences and paths put them at risk for psychopathology, a negative view of themselves (*inner badness*) and the world (*negative bias*), and dissociation. The common *positivity bias* of non-maltreated children and adults is replaced by a *negative bias* in maltreated children. The world, rather than being a safe, secure, beautiful and interesting place to learn about, becomes apprehended and interpreted with distrust, meanness, sadness, violence, danger, despair and deception.¹¹

Indeed, abuse is a severe deception that wounds and steals human honor (*imago dei*). Maltreatment has grave, diabolic results in the human brain which fragments the person’s neurological pathways, experiences, feelings and learning coordination. This deception has implications for the victim and for the world because the maltreated person often feels disconnected from others. This division may orient the maltreated person to co-create the ruptures of their own experience. We should be actively integrating and coordinating our own mind, body and spirit with the created order, so that we may also help heal those in need of honesty, trust and the stability they require.

The spirit

The completion of the human person involves the aspect of the *spirit* – the most significant element of humanity according to the Judaic-Christian tradition – which reveals the apophatic silence and mystery integral to our human well *being*. The spirit has had several names throughout history. In sacred writings the spirit was called *pneuma*, the breath of God, or *nous*, the spiritual intellect. In contemporary Christianity, the spiritual aspect is most commonly referred to as the *heart* or *soul* of the creature or organization.¹² The spirit is the created essence of God instilled in humankind (*cataphatic*) and the uncreated energies of God remain outside of creation (*apophatic*).¹³ The spiritual aspect remains grounded in our humanity and refines our

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² In antiquity, *spirit* was not used as a synonym for *soul*, because *soul* was a synonym for the *mind*. Whereas now, *soul* is a synonym for the *spirit* rather than the *mind*. So *body, soul and spirit* became widely known as *body, mind and spirit*. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979) 48-49.

¹³ The theology of energy and essence of God was carefully expounded upon by Gregory of Palamas in the eight-century.

sensitivity within our everyday life, by acknowledging its vitality in each moment and circumstance. The spirit is credited for our creative and inspirational capacity, as well as the ability to derive meaningfulness in various circumstances. Religion attempts to liberate the spirit by forming a deliberate moral compass, driving the mind and body, toward refined reason, good judgment and self-control for peace and justice. To *abide in the spirit* is a hope that one exists in obedience or in accord with a will beyond one's own — the will of God, or the will of the common good. To listen to the spirit, is a hope that we may know the desire of God for the unity and health of our physical life. This will and desire would create and establish a more loving and stable environment which allows all creatures flourish in an interdependent world. Of course, any creature may be deluded by herself (through reasoning and actions that fall to deception), and the spiritual impulse might lead one to selfishly validate her actions as godly and spiritual which actually lead to harm, division and death.

The cyclical nature of the spiritual aspect — actively swingy, swirling, twirling and spiraling between the cataphatic and apophatic — to find truth, balance and synthesis, and likewise learn of its own antithesis, temptation, delusion and finitude through confrontation can be difficult, arduous, disturbing and dangerous work. This labor of resistance is the athletic exercise of the *ascetic* or mystic who consciously faces and enters into a condition of honesty, by detaching themselves from deception and idolatry of the worldly order □ the marketplace. Through the surrender of vain pleasures, the ascetic above all, reaches out to her love and desire: communion, transcendence and freedom beyond herself, beyond her own body.

Spiritual sensitivity is one of the three aspects (body, mind, spirit) that has long been severed from the practice of education due to its content acceptance with negative space, silence, stillness and the unknown mystery, and likewise, its naming and denunciation to eliminate all forms of idolatry. This aspect actively preserves sacred space to honor personhood and authentic human response as co-creator. However, because spirituality actively leaves space open to nothing, it can also appear available for dominion by those who seek to control other people for selfish reasons. The crucial danger of “owning the spiritual” has a long and violent history, particularly in religious institutions and organizations, but it is not limited to them. Indeed, the instinct to possess or deny, *the nature of violence*, is the vast weakness and grave threat to the spiritual aspect which forced its anesthetization from education and democracy.¹⁴ Regulating the spiritual aspect meant pushing it into the fringe, extinguishing its symbols, and identifying it only when it is in the hands of sales people or extremists. Still, the spiritual aspect lives, and it is known and most natural to our human nature, as it is to all of nature; it preserves, renews and inspires us

¹⁴ *The nature of violence* is a phrase coined by John Dominic Crossan which describes the human instinct to deny, oppress, own, control and kill through violence. This instinct is often attributed to religion because religion is named and written down, however *the nature of violence* is widely observed and experienced in all human and non-human creatures, religious or not. *The nature of violence* may be more clearly evident through economic factors of resources and scarcity, stability and instability, rest and unrest.

each day in silent grace and prayer, and the powers of the spirit can be identified, formed and moderated.

The spiritual aspect, like the body and the mind, is an extraordinarily precious and relies heavily on trust and stability for its development. Trust must be balanced with reason, logical skills, active inquiry and even constructive criticism so the person may know their own boundaries and the limitations of others. Therefore the spiritual aspect is dependent on the sensory intake of the body, and the cognitive connections of the mind. The spirit can be understood in the same way we interpret humor. In relationships trust is often tested through humor and interplay. The manner in which one receives or rejects humor, in all of its various styles, actively reveals a person's trust and comfort level in a particular environment and with a particular person. When a person rejects a joke they are expressing that they do not trust the person delivering the joke and their way of interpreting the world.¹⁵ Likewise, the acceptance of a joke affirms trust in the person and their judgment; then you have a *friend*. Therefore, humor is a dance of trust requiring precise balance, form and strength that must be earned and protected — do not drop your partner for practical reasons if you care about their well being, and further do not drop your partner if you care about his/her perception on any level. Indeed, trust is earned in relationships through experiences of solidity and constancy of a friend's heart, mind and body. Our trust in the spiritual, in the transcendent and silent is earned through our experiences, and likewise trust in the spirit may be denied due to instability, unfamiliarity or disfavor with the language forms of such traditions and thought. Still, most people embed their trust within a collection of knowledge and symbols, of both concrete and abstract forms, that could never prove complete consistency or tangibility.

Maria Montessori developed sound and cohesive educational theory and practice on the *spiritual aspect* of the human person, drawing it out and developing its powers (senses) in the classroom through her “silence of immobility” lessons. Montessori discovered that silence and stillness interwove harmony into the minds of her students, which they embodied and then gave in their relations and relationships. She wrote, “Silence can be positively understood as a state transcending the ordinary run of things. It is a momentary check requiring an effort, a straining of the will, which separates and isolates the soul from the ordinary sounds of life and external voices.”¹⁶ Montessori's silent lessons allowed her students to connect and control their entire being: body, mind and spirit at once. This symbiotic exercise opened their perception to mystery, to their sense of bodily integration and belonging in the world; they desired to treat each other and all of creation gently as they also hoped, and maybe even expected to be treated.

¹⁵ One of my very first mentors, John Chryssavgis, told me that it is never wise to use sarcasm with children or in the field of religion and education because sarcasm indicates the speakers distrust in the world, whereas religion and education seek to build and bind trust.

¹⁶ Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1967) 138.

The nature of silence to *transcend the ordinary* unites us with the extraordinary. The spiritual aspect is bound within the body and mind (the *cataphatic*) for assigning its work and reasoning its purpose on the earth. Following the mysterious and spiritual path of silence — which integrates the human person: body, soul and spirit — opens and attaches us to the course between the *cataphatic and apophatic*. This discovery is ever connected and interrelated to thoughts and actions of truth and virtue which materialize unity.

Conclusion

*How do we eat the apple rightly for the life of the world?*¹⁷ In education, I believe this applies to thoughtful and sensitive approaches to curriculum and teaching that should hold an extensive and flexible frame of reference. We need to provide students with experiences that spark their senses, awaken their minds, and inspire them to move their bodies. Furthermore, students need models of stability so they may develop trust. Curriculum designers may help alleviate a fragmented mind by innovating materials that gently incorporate perspective-taking through role plays of stories, plays, literature and historic and current events, etc. Writers can interweave meaning-making through symbolic connections in poetry, religion, politics, etc. Symbols create the interplay between the cataphatic and apophatic that cultivates creativity, inspires questions, responses and opens pathways for multiple interpretations and resolutions. This creativity develops an integrated network of thinking skills, and keeps options open; it allows various solutions to resonate. When students are engaged in the process of communicating, in a structured environment where they must listen to others, and learn a new connection, they might observe another way of living which helps them avoid rigidity. If they do not experience goodness or niceness at home, maybe they will be able to see it modeled in classroom interactions that are structured around critical thinking, problem-solving, team work and transformative learning that has multiple meanings. Modeling attentive presence may make a mark in a student's memory, if not in the immediate moment. Acknowledging spiritual gifts, and providing space for silence and stillness that can fall into a secure rest that makes time, offers stability and quietly gives love. Calling one's name is a simple and respectful practice that collects and integrates our many experiences into a single breath. Such exercises encourage reflection and synthesis, as well as virtue; so the students may recognize and choose their deepest longing — honorable embodiment and relations of truth and unity.

¹⁷ John 6:51

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