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Dewey's Truman Show

My personal theory of education centers around four important themes. First, there must be inspiration to learn. Second, relationships, whether between the teacher and the student, or the student and others, are of ultimate importance. Third, the emotional experience of learning affects how we recall what we have learned. Finally, it must create a passion for new experiences that further education.

Examination of *The Truman Show* through the lens of Dewey's *Experience and Education* and my own personal philosophy of education can help us understand and examine several concepts Dewey presents; the either-or philosophy, mis-educative experiences, and the meaning of purpose.

Either-Or Philosophy

Truman lives in an environment that was created for him based on what Christof believes to be beneficial to his well-being. Christof states, *"In my world you have nothing to fear...I know you better than you know yourself."* This constructed reality excludes much of the real world, and is limited to the ideas and a system that Christof deems appropriate for Truman to live a life he believes is real. It allows him freedom to make choices, but often presents him with obstacles and situations that steer him in a direction that has been pre-determined for him.

Dewey might suggest that this constructed reality is similar to the either-or philosophy so prevalent in society. Christof, the educator, has rejected and excluded the traditional way life happens, much like progressive education excludes traditional, historical ways of learning. He has removed the possibility for many of the challenges life can present. Rather, he has created this new environment aimed to steer Truman, the student, in a particular direction while giving him the illusion of free will. Dewey states, "The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure." (Dewey, 1938, Chapter 1, Paragraph 1)

Rather, Dewey suggests that we should seek out an intermediate possibility, one that is based on tradition and history, but that allows students to have positive educative experiences that foster additional growth and development. However, Dewey also suggests that mankind recognizes no intermediate possibility, but often thinks in terms of an either-or philosophy, much like Christof has in the creation of Truman's world. (Dewey 1938, Ch. 1, Para 1) Truman's reality is presented factually, and static, in a final version. (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 1, Para 5) Dewey would conclude that this philosophy is what ultimately causes its destruction, because it fails to ask important questions about its own evolution and creates a new set of problems. (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 1, Para 8) He

states, “The general principles of new education do not of themselves solve any of the actual or practical conduct and management of progressive schools. Rather they set new problems which have to be worked out on the basis of a new philosophy of experience.” (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 1, Para 9)

He then goes on to state, “We shall operate blindly and in confusion until we recognize this fact; until we thoroughly appreciate that departure from the old solves no problems.” (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 2, Para 1) This seems to be the state in which Christof and his colleagues operate once Truman begins to notice fallacies in his reality that lead to his mistrust and curiosity. They have long relied on Truman’s habits, and lack of spontaneity. When Truman dupes them with a snowman and a tape recorder, they very hastily react in confusion by ceasing transmission of the broadcast.

Mis-Educative Experiences

The few positive experiences Truman has are quickly stifled by the creation of news stories trying to justify why things have happened, or the abrupt removal of characters from the show. In one instance, in order to keep Truman’s desire to explore in check, his father is killed off the show in a sailing accident during a storm. This traumatic and mis-educative experience instills a fear of water in Truman, and keeps him from leaving the island to explore his curiosities about the world for many years.

Dewey suggests, "Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience." (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 2, Para 2), and "no experience is educative that does not tend both to knowledge of more ideas and to a better, a more orderly, arrangement of them." (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 7, Para 15)

In another instance, Truman becomes infatuated with a character named Sylvia. However, Christof and the show's creators have already pre-determined that a character named Meryl to be his love interest, and ultimately his wife. Whether because of genuine feelings of love or feelings of sympathy for the situation he is in, Sylvia also falls for Truman. Sylvia reveals her true identity, and spontaneously departs from the script leading Truman down a path that has not been pre-determined, that may undermine the authority of the show and Christof. Soon, she is quickly whisked away by a man pretending to be her father who indicates to Truman that she is schizophrenic, and that they are moving to Fiji. Sylvia breaks through Truman's reality, and exposes him to new ideas, new truths, and a new lens to view his world.

While inhibiting his further experiences with true intimacy, and his true feelings, this time his subconscious perseveres. Truman never really forgets Sylvia. He becomes infatuated with her, ripping images out of magazines to create his own tangible version of her. He becomes fixated on the idea of traveling to Fiji to find her. While the world around him, through the direction of the show and Christof, continues to bombard him with anti-travel messages that threaten his life and that Seahaven is the best place on

Earth, and a new love interest, the inspiration, emotion, relationship, and passion within him that one experience created remain. His purpose lies in Sylvia.

Meaning of Purpose

Dewey states, "The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning." (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 3, Para 30) and, "the only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile." (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 5, Para 1) Truman can't have these types of experiences living under a dome, in a world created for him. Truman is not allowed experiences that fuel his desire to find out the truth about Sylvia. When his father breaks on to the set and tries to contact Truman, he is also quickly whisked away. Truman is not allowed to investigate, but is again bombarded by messages about homeless people in Seahaven. He is then presented an explanation about what happened to his father in order to steer him away from investigating the fallacies he continues to find in his environment. Dewey might say that his "ability to think is smothered...by accumulation of miscellaneous ill-digested information, and by the attempt to acquire forms of skill which will be immediately useful in the business and commercial world." (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 7, Para 19) Truman is only presented with knowledge that enhances the experience Christof wants for him in the reality he has created, consequently smothering Truman's ability to think...momentarily.

Seahaven is the way the world should be, according to Christof. However, the prescribed reality he has created cannot overcome or suppress the human nature to seek authentic experiences that inspire the soul. Dewey states, “What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information...if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?” (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 3, Para 30) The knowledge being presented to Truman becomes less and less worthwhile to him because he is searching for meaning in a reality that doesn't inspire further experiences, and that cannot be found in Seahaven.

While Truman has so many factors working against his escape, in the end his desire for authentic experiences free him. In spite of Christof's manipulation and false inspiration to keep Truman in Seahaven, Truman has instead been inspired to fulfill his passion of exploration, fueled by the emotions of a lost relationship. It is so strong it motivates him beyond his fear of the sea that once contained him. It is so powerful it pushes him forward to new experiences, to find meaning, and his soul's purpose.

In the end, while we believe we've created positive experiences that further education, like Truman, I can only hope that youth can overcome everything we've put in their way and escape to create their own world.

References

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