Passibility
Wolff-Michael Roth

Passibility

At the Limits of the Constructivist Metaphor
All attempts to surmount – from within theoretical cognition – the dualism of cognition and life, the dualism of thought and once-occurrent concrete actuality, are utterly hopeless. . . . The detached content of the cognitional act comes to be governed by its own immanent laws, according to which it then develops as if it had a will of its own. Inasmuch as we have entered that content, i.e., performed an act of abstraction, we are now controlled by its autonomous laws or, to be exact, we are simply no longer present in it as individually and answerably active human beings.

(Bakhtin 1993, p. 7)

Phenomenology aims at ultimate clarification and justification of knowledge, both theoretical and scientific knowledge in the proper sense and that pretheoretical and prescientific knowledge by which we are guided in our life in the world of every day experience, and out of which theoretical and scientific knowledge grows.

(Gurwitsch 2010, p. 152)
A thousand thoughts, a thousand ideas that I would want to reject, which I do not seek out, which I even pity, come through my mind. My reason is hardly ever asleep, it sees all of that, it moans, it blames and it approves, these are its only functions. If some good sentiment arises, do you believe that we should credit it [reason]? No, it does nothing but gives its approval, it uses all its power to maintain it. (Maine de Biran, in Naville 1874, p. 113)

The frontispiece and the present opening quote circumscribe the fundamental point of this book – theoretical reason is not the source of knowing and learning but a power that selects among the thoughts and ideas that emerge within the mind. This mind, as Bakhtin suggests in the frontispiece, needs to be understood from within life. When we approach it from within cognition, then the cognitional act comes to be controlled by its own immanent laws, as if it were only for itself. It is a kind of mind that no longer resides in the world, the kind of mind that Immanuel Kant and following him the present-day constructivists describe. This is also the kind of mind that those with an intellectual heritage in dialectical (historical) materialism – Mikhail Bakhtin, Lev Vygotsky, and Michel Henry – reject as suitable for understanding how human beings know and act in the world. This is a world of living labor where suffering, joy, and crisis are daily experiences. Yet in the constructivist metaphor of cognitive development and learning, these dimensions of daily experience do not appear.

In the introductory quote, Maine de Biran offers a different perspective on the mind, which primarily is but a(n) (un-) willing host. We are not only the subjects of ideas and thoughts but also, and primarily so, subject(ed) to ideas and thoughts, which suddenly come to and surprise us rather than are intended by us. We are but willing or unwilling hosts, approving, blaming, and bemoaning what arises from within ourselves. This position, which recognizes a fundamental dimension of human condition, has been worked out to some extent in phenomenological philosophy, but has yet to be acknowledged in the literature on knowing and learning generally and in the literature on the learning of science particularly. The existing literature is inhabited by an ideology of the intellect, an idealist ideology that makes reason and rationality the primary source of knowing and the agent of learning. Taking as its point of departure the world as we know it, the position is blind to the essentially passive
constitution of everything that matters to and in our everyday lives. It not only is incapable of explaining experiences that arise from passibility but also, and importantly so, to the ways of learning and knowing that arise from passibility and associated experiences such as the passions, radical passivity, uncertainty, and otherness.

If ideas and thoughts come to us – i.e., are given to us so that we may select among them – then we cannot understand learning something new in terms of the intentional appropriation of something into our existing knowledge. The foreign/strange, precisely because it is foreign/strange, is invisible and therefore cannot be visualized, envisaged, and aimed at. That is, we cannot think learning in terms of a framework that already takes the new, unfamiliar, and foreign/strange as something available to be thought, considered, and intended. This is so because we cannot ever understand the learning of something absolutely unknown if we think it from the perspective of the known. To think the learning of something unknown we have to retain it as the unknown in the direction of which we think. If we were not to do so, we would do no better than Whig historians, who explain events in a teleological manner, from the a posteriori perspective of what we know today. But only hindsight has 20/20 vision, whereas learning means inherently engaging with the unknown, unfamiliar, and foreign/strange.

To get a better grip on what it means to learn something that we cannot even imagine what it looks and feels like, we have to think about learning from the perspective of the invisible, the foreign and strange, and the unknown. What does it mean to encounter something absolutely foreign/strange and therefore invisible? How does the invisible become visible, the unknown become part of the known, and how does something foreign and strange become familiar? At the same time, as this something becomes visible, the invisible continues to exist, cannot be absorbed into the visible, for otherwise there would be impossible – against everything we know today – to learn something new; as something becomes familiar, the foreign/strange only recedes. As a something becomes known as something, the unknown actually withdraws. That is, to understand the phenomenon of learning we need to think the unthought, to think the (currently) unthought from the position of the unthought rather than from the position of the newly thought that has arisen from the unthought. And we need to think what remains unthought in our newly thought thoughts. What makes our questions possible? What makes possible that which questions in our questions? As I was beginning to write this book, I set myself as the explicit goal to think the foreign/strange without subsuming it to the familiar, to think it in its radical form as that which forever withdraws. For if we were to know beforehand how our living body responds to the foreign/strange, answers would be nothing more than mechanical reactions. If life were such, we would not even require thinking.

These are some of the fundamental aporia and questions that I raise in this book. I do so because after more than two decades of reading and doing research on learning, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the ways in which learning is thought, theorized, and researched. Increasingly I have realized that in our questioning, we adumbrate the real questions about how humans learn, remember, and know science. Why would a mind think a (scientific) thought? How/why does something like emotion mediate thought? And how/why would thought be able to bring about
change of emotions? How does something as immaterial and without extension – whether it is called soul, psyche, or consciousness – have any effect on the extended, material body and put it into motion? Why does an unexpected turn of a story make us break out in laughter, shaking our bodies to their foundations? Why does presenting a paper make young researchers sweat? Why does a person blush when caught telling a lie?

In pushing on, I have had to learn myself, that is, I had to overthrow what I have come to know and cherish. The more I knew about learning, the less I seemed to know about (the real issues of) learning. The more I learned about learning research, the more I have come to understand that our theories are no more adequate than those that we have had some decades ago. As more about learning has become visible, theorized, and discussed in the clearing marked by what is already known, all the more has come to be covered up and hidden from our questioning. In this book, I return to some of the more fundamental questions. Rather than asking questions such as “What do students learn in this curriculum?” or “How do students learn when provided opportunities to interact and reason with others?,” I am asking questions about the origins of intentions, perceptions, discourses, and conceptions. All of these phenomena are currently taken for granted and the questions as to the origins of these phenomena are no longer asked or even available to questioning. And yet, as I have learned and increasingly come to know, learning researchers currently have no answers to these more fundamental questions. It is to this project – finding answers to the more fundamental questions about how human beings know and learn – that this volume contributes.

Throughout this book, I draw on books in their original French and German versions. All translations are mine, although I have checked, wherever possible and available, my translations with a translator’s translation into English.

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