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TWO DOGMAS OF EXCELLENCE: DISSONANCE IN THE DISCOURSE ON EDUCATION[1]

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> There is excellence in art, in music, in craftsmanship, in human relations, in technical work, in leadership, in parental responsibilities. There are those who perform great deeds and those who make it possible for others to perform great deeds. There are path finders and path preservers. There are those who nurture and those who inspire. There are those whose excellence involves doing something well and those whose excellence lies in being the kind of people they are, lies in their kindness or honesty or courage.
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> John W. Gardner
> *Excellence* (1984)

The *Soilure* of Excellence

In the language of educational aims, 'excellence' is now a protean word. Like Proteus, the sea god of the Romans, 'excellence' is able to assume many shapes, take on many meanings. To the uncritical mind, all uses of the word are right, and most are good, in the same general way that words such as 'honesty,' 'courage,' and 'virtue' are both right and good. This is precisely the reason politicians, educational leaders, and business executives so often appropriate 'excellence' for their own ends, whether noble or ignoble. Hence, a certain *soilure* now attends the word's use in the discourse of educational aims. A result -- perhaps the major result -- of this soiling or staining of 'excellence' in the language of education is that it masks a great tendency toward undemocratic influences and consequences in our system of education. Once detected, this *soilure* compromises the infallibility of 'excellence' as an aim, and jeopardizes the positive, uplifting quality we tend to associate with it. But then, who wants to come out against "excellence in education," even when the slogan is used to ordain the meanest uses of the school as an instrument of class, race, and gender repression; to deny the primacy of students as subjects (not objects); or to sustain varieties of corporate greed, or, in general, to implement undemocratic forms of social control?

Here I shall attempt to delineate two dogmas of excellence -- only one of which is commensurate with the aims of education in a just and democratic state. In my differentiation, I shall illustrate these dogmas in a way that will, I trust, make the case deductively that one must be embraced by educators, and the other abandoned as insufficient.

The Discourses of Excellence

The dissonance within the democratic discourses on educational aims is a direct result of different conceptions of democracy itself. Recognizing this, it is helpful to keep in mind the operative meaning of 'aim,' as distinct from 'goal,' 'outcome,' or 'objective' in our normative talk. In this, I take Richard Peters's work to be authoritative, *viz.*, that an aim for education is a directional statement, generalized, idealized, and therefore not to be expected ever to be fully achievable.[1] For example, we say for the sake of broad distinction, that Plato advocated "education for justice," Rousseau wanted "education for freedom of the individual," and John Dewey, in his sophisticated advancement of each of these, embraced the aim of "education for democracy,"[2] which he understood to be a conjoint form of social and moral group relationship in which no member of the group -- from "family" to "humanity in general" -- is denied the opportunity for optimal growth experiences.[3] If such statements as these, which reduce the educational aims of Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey to mere slogans, are viewed as vague and general, it is because they are aim statements, not goal or outcome or objective sentences. These latter statements of educational purpose are, in various ways, intended to be achievable or terminal, the only variables being those of time and condition. Thus the overriding question of this inquiry is "How can good

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and generous persons of a strong democratic disposition vary so widely in the proposals they proffer for education in America?" The answer, I believe, is to be found in their "aim language," or in their lack thereof. This is the source of the dissonance referred to in the title of this paper.

The Complexity of Excellence

Here I trust you will grant me some privilege as I place the cart before the horse. I have examined numerous normative documents on education over many years, and have found none expressing statements of democratic educational aim that cannot be reduced to one of two logical types. I shall only allude here to these myriad texts, in as much as entire volumes have sought to reproduce, summarize, explicate, classify, or critique them. Nevertheless, without reviewing the manifold data upon which my reduction is based, I contend that we must acknowledge the fundamental nature of two very different kinds of prevalent educational aim as a prerequisite to any mature appreciation of what is going on in education. Accepting this, let me offer a differentiation of the two. This I shall attempt along lines of the concept of excellence.

If 'educational excellence' qualifies as a conceptual conundrum, it is, nevertheless, one that can be approached by means of a clarification of the logic of its aim language. For starters, 'excellence', like 'loyalty' is such a happy word that few are willing to interrogate it. But like our old friend John Densford, who two decades ago treated us with his paper "Loyalty and Other Evils, Or, Get on the Team if You Want the Cream,"[4] we must draw a line in the sand where 'excellence' is concerned. Or, to appropriate and paraphrase our friend and colleague, Jim McClellan's words in his 1971 "Response" to the Presidential Address of Professor Jonas Soltis to The Philosophy of Education Society, what we must do is draw a line and defend it against certain "excellence-mongers." It must be marked: "Beyond this point, no more bullshit!"[5]

In understanding the meaning of 'excellence' we must consider its uses, which involves consideration of its *family* of uses.[6] An entailment of the dominant sense of 'excellence' is a singular sense of the word. This I shall ordain SE, referring to "Singular-sense Excellence." The other, more complex sense of 'excellence' carries, contra SE, qualities of plurality or multiplicity of meaning, making it the more abstract and elusive. I shall label it PE, for "Plural-sense Excellence." It is what Maxine Greene has in mind in her plea for "a diversity of excellences."[7] A differentiation of SE and PE is complicated by the fact that neither type is necessarily exclusive of characteristics of the other. In fact, they do not at all constitute logical categories equal in scope and connection. As a result, SE and PE, if not thoughtfully considered, can be causal agents in the propagation of the type of logical fallacy identified by Gilbert Ryle as a "category mistake."[8] For example, PE is a concept which includes, but does not entirely subsume, some very basic elements of SE. *Ergo*, many of the truth cells in the SE matrix are amenable to, if not necessary conditions of, PE. The reverse, however, is not the case. This explains why advocates of SE can speak glowingly of individuals and entities as exemplars who justify SE's successes, irrespective of the playing field of education. SE proponents throw up models of achievement, often culturally eminent individuals, as evidence of the efficacy of their concept of 'excellence'. These cases always appeal to conventional criteria, except in certain quite technical areas of competence, and are determined by questionably objectifiable criteria. If a class of thirty-six ghetto children has two who go on to high achievement in society, for example, these are established as examples of the assertion that, "It *can* be done, but only if you study hard, persevere, and keep your eye on the ball -- or prize." While it is a truism that motivation, discipline, and tenacity of purpose are all ingredients of excellence, whether of the SE or PE variety, John W. Gardner has enunciated the SE fallacy in lucid terms:

> Everyone agrees that motivation is a powerful ingredient in performance. Talent without motivation is inert and of little use to the world. Lewis Terman and Catherine Cox found that historical geniuses were characterized not only by very high intelligence but by the desire to excel, by perseverance in the face of obstacles, by zeal in the exercise of their gifts.[9]

Gardner goes on to point out that:

> Some people may have greatness thrust upon them. Very few have excellence thrust upon them. They achieve it. They do not achieve it unwillingly, by "down' what comes naturally"; and they don't stumble into it in the course of amusing themselves.[10]

On these assertions, there appears to be no significant disagreement between SE and PE. The rub comes in the application of these beliefs and in the politics behind these applications.

Gardner raises the perplexing question, Can we be equal and excellent too? He answers it in the affirmative, and does so on the basis of a PE conception of 'excellence.' For him excellence is not one thing, or one kind of thing. It is not only many things, but many kinds of things, involving multiple conditions and criteria. In developing his argument, Gardner points out the reason why Americans feel so little compunction to discriminate "nicely between excellence and mediocrity" in, say, athletics, while, on the other hand, refusing "to be similarly precise about differences in intelligence." For Gardner, this is not a matter of our being more serious about athletic ability. Rather, it is "because we do not take these as total judgments on the individual or as central to his self-esteem."[11] For who among us has not heard the pithy point that "Nice guys finish last?"

Gardner's argument is exemplary of the PE vision for education. He is at his best as he argues that PE need not limit SE, as some would have it. His argument is advanced by the introduction of what he terms Americans' "principle of multiple chances."

> The European system used to separate youngsters at ten or eleven years of age on the basis of ability and then prepare some for the university, others for less demanding levels of education. This was in some respects an efficient procedure; and there were critics here at home who thought we should have a similar system. But in recent years some European countries have modified the system, and we have never found it attractive. In the American view, it presents a host of difficulties, only one of which need be noted here: early separation of the gifted and the less gifted violates our principle of multiple chances.[12]

Gardner goes on, providing content to illustrate his principle of multiple chances in a way that suggests his intimacy with the philosophy of John Dewey,[13] while anticipating Lawrence A. Cremin's notion of "a cacophony of teaching voices"[14] and "the theory of multiple intelligences" advocated so successfully in our own decade by Howard W. Gardner.[15] John Gardner speaks in popular terms about "successive opportunities" for self-discovery, the dilemma of "the late bloomer syndrome," the last chance fallacy, the problem of cultural influences, meritocratic public universities, and the sorting function of schools (which he rates as "very nearly the most delicate and difficult process our society has to face").[16] Gardner's final point in his principle of multiple chances is this:

> The traditional democratic invitation to achieve the best that is in them requires that we provide each youngster with the particular kind of education suited to his or her special abilities. That is the only sense in which equality of opportunity can mean anything. The good society is not one that ignores individual differences but one that can deal with them wisely and humanely.[17]

Another premise in the PE argument is that, ideally, everyone wins; nobody loses. But this is not likely to be a very satisfying slogan to a body politic of Americans who have been hammered long and hard with athletic analogies of competition -- winning and losing -- over all matters of aggregate public experience, whether economic, political, industrial, social, or educational. Even organized religion -- no newcomer to this competitive fray -- fills its share of the public debate over excellence and educational aims with its own often convoluted form of discourse on winning and losing, victory and defeat, conquest and submission, or some other analogy to athletics or war. In their worst form, athletic and military analogies of excellence yield equally detestable forms of nationalism, racism, classism, sexism, and religious bigotry.

Bertrand Russell, for all of his personal warts, seems to have know this instinctively, if not fully, when in 1916, he formulated his "principle of growth" in fervent opposition to Britain's entry into what her patriots termed The Great War. Russell describes this theory as "an instinctive urgency leading [people] in a certain direction, as trees seek the light":

> This intimate centre in each human being is what imagination must apprehend if we are to understand him intuitively. It differs from man to man, and determines for each man the type of excellence of which he is capable.[18]

This is precisely the reason we must not recoil immediately from positive, especially democratic slogans or proverbs such as those mentioned above. Instead, if they ring right to us, it is worth our energies to bring about creative ways of investing them with one or another democratic form of excellence, i.e., a desired version of PE. Philosophically, the job before us is to blow away the smoke of the linguistic battlefield of 'excellence' and attempt to understand the scope of its uses. This is no small task.

It is helpful, for starters, to begin with worst-case

scenarios of the simplest, nay silliest, sort. For example, I cannot help remembering a painfully incompetent but aggressive former colleague who taught educational administration, and whom Joe Kincheloe and I used to vilify privately and frustrate publicly. On this man's desk, which he sat behind while facing the door to his office, was a finely wood-carved piece that said "Excellence." *A Nation at Risk*[19] had just appeared and he accepted it heartily. Ironically, he was exactly the type of professor who posed the greatest risk to university education -- a bureaucrat to the toenails; loaded with unexamined assumptions; possessing absolutely no record of research, scholarship, or publications; devoid of any sense of nuance and complexity; and, in short, a defender of the *status quo*; an apostle for convention; and a willing vessel for the domination of education, at all levels, by the corporate power that threatens us all.

Other examples are less obviously flawed in that they are expressed logically and in erudite form. Consider Alexander Astin's trenchant challenge to America's universities to abandon traditional views of excellence associated with reputation, resources, and outcomes on the ground that continued adherence to these criteria can neither expand educational opportunity nor enhance the overall quality of the nation's system of higher education. In a decidedly PE vein, he proposes an amended notion of institutional excellence based on students' personal and intellectual development.[20] John Dewey would undoubtedly agree.

In contradistinction are the numerous conservative and reactionary notions of excellence as seen in, for example, the Reagan administration's *A Nation at Risk*, or Mortimer Adler's *The Paideia Proposal* of 1982,[21] both embodiments of the SE type of excellence. And then there are the ubiquitous varieties of excellence advocated by the champions of business and industry. These are always of the SE variety and seldom made in the name of personal or intellectual development, but most often couched in a language of profit-seeking, increased productivity, national defense, improved standardized test scores, or technological primacy, invariably in a climate of a worldwide economy and increasing competitiveness for world markets. Subtext: We must find ways to market our products -- including carcinogens, poisons, cultural trash, and weapons of destruction -- in other countries, preferably by "opening up new markets." This is why comedian George Carlin refers mockingly to marketing as the most evil subject taught in universities. It is aimed at making people feel a need for things they don't need.

The Politics of Excellence

Inherent in all politically driven plans for SE is an explicit or implied delay or abandonment of our educational efforts, especially since the 1960s, to achieve some enlightened level of equity of educational opportunity. Using an often malevolent form of patriotic language, such plans are frequently grounded in a misappropriated notion of the national interest, a concept which, since 1980, has come to be understood in primarily economic terms. *A Nation at Risk* is a paradigm case of this version of SE. As a presidentially driven report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* was enormously important. It has had a polarizing effect on educational discourse since its appearance in 1983. Although it was only one of many reports on equality, equity, and excellence to appear in the decade of the 1980s, *A Nation at Risk* was politically the most important. Others included *Action for Excellence*[22] from the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, *Academic Preparation for College*[23] from the College Board, *Educating Americans for the 21st Century*[24] from the National Science Board's Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology, *Horace's Compromise*[25] by Theodore Sizer, *High School*[26] by Ernest Boyer, *Making the Grade*[27] from the Twentieth Century Fund, *A Place Called School*[28] by John Goodlad, and Mortimer Adler's previously cited *The Paideia Proposal.*

Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter have studied these reports and pointed out that four of them "were oriented primarily toward preparing workers for an increasingly technological economy, while two were oriented toward developing cognitive, and, to some degree, affective sensibilities of young people in order to improve the quality of individual and collective lives. The other three can be placed between these orientations, as they contain features of each."[29] These writers go on to conclude that the first four of these -- the "economically- and technologically-oriented" reports -- proffer a quite different vision of American society than that outlined by Grant and Sleeter earlier in their paper:

> It is a vision in which most jobs will or should become highly technological, in which the nature of work people will be performing will be humanly satisfying, and in which there will be much less stratification of people in terms of reward for their work -- or at least in which such stratification is not an issue.[30]

Calling this vision naive on its face, the authors point out these reports' flaws in several ways,[31] all of which support my contention that these influential documents conceive 'excellence' in terms of singularity; they are, to a fault, examples of SE excellence, and therefore insufficient as statements of educational aim for a democratic society. All that is required of the enlightened critic of these flawed aim-statements is to ask the questions, "Who wins? Who loses?" The answers are obvious and predictable.

According to Grant and Sleeter, even the more humanistically oriented of these reports are flawed, but in a different way. Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* and *Adler's The Paideia Proposal*, in their "attempt to be 'color-blind' in a culturally diverse and differentiated society," ignore the lessons from "the sociology of knowledge" and the "Lebenswelt" of individual Americans.

> Only one [of these nine reports] even entertains the notion that student experience and student interest need to be taken into account when planning curriculum. The rest discuss curriculum as if students did not bring to school personal, cultural, or gender identities with them that might affect the meaning they derive from a curriculum, and that might suggest fruitful avenues of learning for their growth.[32]

If we comb the literature on excellence in education, we detect conceptions of 'excellence' ranging from the believable to the bizarre to the absurd. One curious example, a brief but interesting piece in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, finds British philosopher John Haldane calling for a return to "taste" as a criterion for "excellence" in education. Haldane recognizes that "two strongly individualist and utilitarian lines of thought" -- one liberal and intellectualist, the other commercial and pragmatic -- have dominated recent discussions about the justification and content of education. He concludes that taste is "clearly a more encompassing notion than artistic sensibility," and therefore must serve to give direction to these lines of thought about the aim and content of education, thereby making taste education's aim.[33] When one considers Plato's "education for justice," Rousseau's "education for freedom," and Dewey's "education for individual growth in a liberal democracy," "education for taste" somehow resonates as regressive. At its best, it begs the questions of "Whose taste? What taste?"

Against the sordid but exceedingly influential SE versions of 'excellence' advanced since 1980, it is inspiring, to say the least, to read such counterperspectives as that of Maxine Greene, who challenges us to compare older, presumably more "conservative" statements of educational aim -- such as those of Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey -- with those above. She points out that:

> It is interesting to ponder older views: the classical conception of *areté*; Erasmus's notion of the moral virtues and Christian piety; Jefferson's idea of developing the reasoning faculties of youth, enlarging their minds, cultivating their morals; Cardinal Newman's description of the person "who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze." There is something strange about the report writers' choosing to evoke the old humanist tradition in their effort to legitimate a certain range of largely technical competencies to promote what is called the national interest.[34]

Greene wants us to appreciate that, although these older conceptions of educational excellence may be viewed as conservative according to the liberal standards of the past century, their conservatism is of a strikingly different character than that witnessed since 1980. But Irving Howe might have said it best when he wrote that "the very word 'excellence' ought to make us cringe a little, so thoroughly has it been assimilated to the prose style of commission reports, letters of recommendation, and hair spray commercials." He moves on to say that 'excellence' has been co-opted as a code word for "educational Reaganism," and thus associated with tougher testing, increased discipline, and merit pay. (Here one might also include vouchers, massive federal aid to private schools, tuition tax exemptions, teacher testing, endless standardized testing of students, a rhetoric of higher standards, and the nourishing of an increasingly hostile climate for public schools, not to mention the resegregation of American education by means of accelerated tracking policies, magnet schools, and charter schools.) During the 1980s and into the present decade, the Reagan and Bush administrations set into motion policies of recognizing schools of excellence at official White House ceremonies, a practice that inspired widespread resentment among professional educators owing to the sociologically differentiated populations of American society and the philosophically differentiated roles of American schools. The criteria for determining "schools of

excellence" involved written applications, a process of state and regional and national elimination, quantitative data (involving student test scores), and letters of recommendation. Howe describes this new and narrow sense of 'excellence' as anti-humanistic, both in intent and overtone.[35] Whatever the case, it is clearly reactionary and, one hopes, constitutes a worst-case scenario of SE in our age. This is just why people of conscience must Just say '*No!*'

Because of the political baggage and conceptual encumbrances that 'excellence' now brings with it, some have found it puzzling that Nel Noddings, in her 1993 presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society argued "that excellence ought to supplant equality as the guiding educational ideal."[36] For Kenneth Howe:

> The Crux of Noddings's argument is her identification of "*equality*" with "*sameness*," in terms of both the curriculum and the goals held for different students. . . . [She] maintains that we could make students equal by providing them with equally miserable conditions. Noddings identifies "*excellence*," by contrast, with varying the curriculum and its goals so as to coincide with the different things different students might be good at and might want to pursue.[37]

Yet, far from junking Noddings's argument, Howe places it within a larger framework of "participatory educational opportunity," which emphasizes education's political dimensions, "can accommodate and be enriched by a view like that of Noddings, which emphasizes the personal dimensions," and thus contributing to a reconciliation between the goals of liberal democracy and feminism.[38] The several versions of excellence advanced by each are illustrative of pluralistic excellence and a richness of possibility inherent in PE.

The Logic of Excellence

I want, now, to return to the SE/PE conceptual maze. If excellence, simply understood, is a word intended merely to ascribe status or high quality to an object, then it is reasonable in a just society to view it in pluralistic terms. But let us for a moment consider the simplest, singular senses of excellence as ascriptions of value to objects or entities. This allows us a fairly clear notion of what is going on when the critic speaks of art, or when the collector assesses the value of a rare baseball card. Ascriptions of excellence in such usage range, of course, from the innocently naive to the deeply appreciative and insightful. Often, when used for commercial or profit-seeking purposes, the criteria for the word's use are suspicious and contradictory owing to its user's conflicting interests and agenda. Indeed, it often becomes impossible to separate certain users' biased self-interest from the word itself. Our actual or imagined conversations with used car dealers illustrate this problem. The distinction (which is really a sliding scale of distinctions) necessary to understanding the different forms of SE usage is always located in a complex matrix of detachment of judgment, enlightenment, and honesty of the word's user. This makes absolute clarity often difficult and elusive. For example, "degree of detachment" alone is often difficult to assess. We see this problem in medicine, thought by many to be the noblest of professions, when we notice that a questionable but prescribed treatment, if followed, has the effect, among others, of large financial benefits to the physician. Other difficulties have more to do with status than money, as in the case of the connoisseur or aficionado, who, driven by a large ego while bound to conventional standards and criteria received from high culture, possesses a psychological need to be "proper" and correct at all times. I believe this is what Wittgenstein meant when he wrote:

> It is remarkable how hard we find it to believe something that we do not see the truth of for ourselves. When, for instance, I hear the expression of admiration for Shakespeare by distinguished men in the course of several centuries, I can never rid myself of the suspicion that praising him has been the conventional thing to do; though I have to tell myself that this is not how it is. It takes the authority of a *Milton* really to convince me. I take it for granted that he was incorruptible. -- But I don't of course mean by this that I don't believe an enormous amount of praise to have been, and still to be, lavished on Shakespeare without understanding and for the wrong reasons by a thousand professors of literature.[39]

A problem in all of this, then, is that the criteria for invoking excellence in any particular language-game are often subject to the hardening effects of conventional ways of seeing and thinking, which invariably brings on a decreasing tendency to think, inquire, discover, explore, create, and reflect, either individually or through discourse. This is exactly the undesired tendency Dewey warns us of in his criticism of fixed curriculum and staid teaching.[40] Alfred North

Whitehead calls it "inert knowledge."[41]

Except in certain religious or mystical language-games, a thing cannot be claimed to be 'excellent' in its own right, i.e., simply *as* it is, ontologically. Rather, a thing (T) is usually said to be excellent in its relation to other things of its genre. This is how the concept of excellence takes on primordial sense -- initial, rooted meaning. Criteria for judgment are later established and reaffirmed until, along the way, meanings become clearer, then conventional. In the process, rules of meaning are refined and altered, while others are discarded in favor of more appropriate ones, always in the light of fluid circumstances and new problems. This explains why both the standards or criteria *and* the content or object of any use of 'excellent' may be viewed as social or human constructions. Chomsky's linguistics notwithstanding,[42] the standards and content of 'excellence' are always derivatives of human experience, forged through human intentions, and expressed in language, which broadly understood, means "any system of signs."

It is noteworthy that all SE notions of excellence, however expressed, embody the quality of competition, or competitiveness. If a thing (object, ability, process, activity, outcome, person) is judged or appraised as excellent, such judgment or assessment must be done in a comparative way. Except in the aforementioned religious or mystical senses, excellence is meaningful only in language-games involving better and worse. If one is said to be an 'excellent student', an 'excellent philosopher', or an 'excellent baseball player', it follows that most students, philosophers, or baseball players are worse. One might counter that, as in the educational language-games of student or program or institutional evaluation, there exist forms of judgment that do *not* involve competition between students or programs or institutions. This is the argument from what is commonly called criterion-referenced evaluation. (Most who read this paper will be familiar with the distinction between norm-referenced evaluation and criterion-referenced evaluation, the former being the type that places students in direct competition with each other.) Nevertheless, while competitiveness of this sort is less direct and ostensible in criterion-referenced evaluation, it is difficult to conceive of any form of criterion-referenced judgment which, at some point, does not bump up against, if not inherently contradict, the idea of symbolic success, as in grading or ranking or accreditation or funding. Grading, for example, implies value-driven gradation or classification, and it necessarily yields judgments of better or worse student achievement, *ergo*, winners and losers. Some argue that in criterion-referenced judgments of excellence, *all* cases can be excellent, an argument that is not possible in norm-referenced evaluation. But in an SE sense of excellence, this cannot be a meaningful use of the word in as much as, statistically speaking, if every case is excellent, then no case is excellent. It is a simple tautology under SE meanings. It turns out that 'Excellence is what all students do' means the same things as 'What all students do is excellent.' We can therefore conclude what appears to most ordinary speakers to be patently obvious: That when we speak of something as excellent, we are claiming that it is better, of higher quality, or perhaps even iconic, compared to other cases of its genre.

It should be stressed that not all senses of better or worse involve competition in a strict sense, but that competition is consciously imputed after-the-fact. Take the sentence, 'This is an excellent peach', for example. If one peach is excellent and another not excellent, it is nonsensical to claim that one peach *won* over the other, notwithstanding a possible rejoinder from biologists informed by Darwinian theory. In this case, the excellent peach did not *intend* to prevail over the other peach, as in the case of a sword fighter or race horse jockey. Does this suggest, then, that consciousness and intentionality are not logical features of excellence? A quick answer is, Obviously, Yes! And this is accurate, perhaps, to the extent that one peach just *is* excellent while the other is not. In an adaptation of Popeye's famous declaration that "I *yam* what I *yam*!," We can all agree that "A peach *is* what it *is*!" But what is it that makes one peach "what *it* is" and another "what *it* is?" To the one we impute 'excellence', to the other 'not excellent'. It follows that 'excellence' is *not* in the *is-ness* of the peach, but is rather an ascription deriving from human judgment, an ascription conferred on the peach by minds replete with consciousness and intentionality. Thus, while not present in the *is-ness* of the peach, which possesses Heideggerian *being-in-itself*, qualities of consciousness and intentionality are imputed to the referential use of 'excellence', making it a perfect example of a social construction. This is what brings on forms and conventions of *graded-ness* in our language.

Adopting a Wittgensteinian technique,[43] one might imagine a society or tribe whose members prize peaches of a most irregular and misshapen contour,

who prefer their peaches to be hard as apples, who enjoy smaller rather than larger peaches, who detest the sweeter peaches, who hate freestone peaches and appreciate those whose seeds cling to the juicy pulp, and who desire browner rather than redder peaches. In such a society, 'excellence' would be used in the exact opposite way from that commonly employed in the grading shed of the peach orchard where I worked as a youth in my hometown. Is the proof of excellence, then, in the eating? Of course it is. But, more accurately, it is in the mind of the eater, which is ultimately inseparable from the body.

The Tragedy of Excellence

In previous papers I have endeavored to demonstrate the fallacy of SE as an aim of education by employing the lives and careers of two individuals whose accomplishments set the highest standards biographically available to us in their separate spheres: Ty Cobb in baseball and Ludwig Wittgenstein in philosophy.[44] Each constitutes a perfect example of a "logical extreme" in human accomplishment, accompanied by disorders of personality or character that most of us find haunting, if not disturbing. I submit them as counterexamples of the validity of SE-type excellence as an aim for education, and a basis for embracing PE-type excellence. In so doing, I trust that this audience will forgive my indulgence in the tragic side of these great men's lives.

For the critical observer, it is not even controversial to claim that Cobb and Wittgenstein were the best *ever* at what they did. Yet both were beset with antisocial and authoritarian qualities of personality and spirit that precluded a "normal" life of conventional relationships. These qualities were so extreme that those who knew these men viewed them as personality disorders. These qualities, coupled with the level of demand each made on himself to be excellent, resulted in a certain unbridgeable "distance" between themselves and those who knew them -- including, in Cobb's case, his own children -- but also a strange, uncanny fear of each by those who knew them. Both were driven during most of their lives by a neurotic obsession to excel, and each imposed an enormous strain on his personality, and, thus, on all personal relationships. In his recent biography of Cobb, journalist Al Stump, who spent the last year-and-a-half of Cobb's life with the baseball player as ghostwriter for his autobiography,[45] gets right to the heart of the problem of Cobb's character and personality:

> I think, because he forced upon me a confession of his most private thoughts, along with details of his life, that I know the answer to the central, overriding secret of his life. Was Ty Cobb psychotic through his baseball career? The answer is yes.[46]

Whether Stump's diagnosis could stand clinical scrutiny is a moot question. But Cobb's lifelong, consistently hostile and aberrant behavior is incontestable, as are his bigotry and race hatred. With an uncharacteristic self-judgment during his later life, Cobb described his youthful self as "a snarling wildcat."[47] Sports editor Paul Gallico, describing Cobb's compulsion toward excellence with its ultimate expression in winning, writes:

> There was a burning rage in Ty Cobb never far from the surface. He brought a fury, cruelty and viciousness heretofore unencountered even in the roughest kind of play.[48]

Gallico shares Stump's view concerning Cobb's mental illness. Describing him as "savage," Gallico saw him as "a mass of paradoxes with a life that reads like a Gothic horror tale."[49] The lovable and modest Lou Gehrig even became angry enough to say that "Cobb is about as welcome in American League parks as a rattlesnake."[50]

Stump remembers how one of Cobb's former teammates forewarned him of The Georgia Peach's egotism, nastiness, and eccentric ways as Stump was entering into his journalistic relationship with Cobb. "In baseball," the ex-teammate said, "a few of us who really knew him realized that he was wrong in the head -- unbalanced . . . he was a demon. . . . The public's never known it, but Cobb's always been off the beam where other people are concerned."[51] For Cy Young, the trouble was that "he takes life too seriously, . . . [he] is going at it too hard."[52] Revered baseball critic Bozeman Bulger put it poetically: "He is possessed by the furies,"[53] whereas Ernest Hemingway, who knew Cobb well, but in the way that Great Men are attracted to each other, is quoted by Stump, who tells this story:

> [Cobb] had a loose screw. I never knew anyone like him. It was like his brain was miswired so that the least damned thing would set him off. On a bighorn-sheep hunt in the Wyoming back country, said the Nobel prizewinning author, their guide led them down a wrong trail into a swamp: "It was easy enough to climb back out, but Cobb went wacko, grabbed his rifle like a bat, and decked the guide. That was it for me -- I packed out next day and after that avoided him." . . . Later, seeing no changes in his rages and indigestible actions off the field,"

> Hemingway expressed the opinion that Tyrus Cobb was the supreme player of all time -- but an "absolute shit."[54]

The connection I am seeking in my argument is perhaps stated most concisely by historian Charles Alexander: "Cobb was relentless in his pursuit of excellence."[55] For him, baseball was "something like a war," and excelling at the game constituted Cobb's understanding of survival. "Jack Dempsey in spikes," he was called.[56] When he retired from baseball in 1928 Cobb held more than ninety major league records, several of which remain unapproachable: a lifetime batting average of .367, fifty-five home-plate steals, and twelve American League batting championships.[57] By any measure of excellence understood in singular terms, Cobb's accomplishments are paradigmatic. Still, there are haunting suggestions by certain baseball critics that Cobb's excellence as a player must be superseded in any ranking of greatest players by consideration of the question, Who contributed most to his team? This is a question that moves the concept of excellence to a different level in the discourse, *viz.*, it introduces into the equation a new pluralism: "Affect on others" -- in Cobb's case, on his team -- becomes an added criterion for 'excellence' as a baseball player. In this, some might detect an embryonic form of PE as I have outlined it. For others, it introduces a certain *soilure* into the concept of excellence. A number of baseball critics have viewed Cobb as other than the very best player of all time. These include the indomitable John J. McGraw, who placed Honus Wagner above Cobb,[58] as well as Jimmie Reese, who thought Babe Ruth was better.[59] In the case of McGraw, one might counter that he was too close to the situation, and held such animosity toward Cobb, that his judgment was clouded by that proximity. But whatever the case, Cobb was unarguably excellent in singular terms.

Those who lack imagination -- and perhaps some who do not -- will see no basis for comparing the all-consuming rage and pugilism of Ty Cobb with the intellectual discontent and unnerving emotional personality of Ludwig Wittgenstein. But I want to argue for that basis, mainly to illustrate the logical limits of SE as an educational aim.

Cobb and Wittgenstein were very nearly the same age, Cobb having been born on December 18, 1886, hardly more than two years before Wittgenstein's birth on April 26, 1889. Each was beset with a troubling temperament which took its own peculiar form at the outset of their careers during this century's first decade. One would choose baseball, the other philosophy. Each would go on to redefine those activities in ways theretofore unparalleled, becoming an exemplar at what he did. In fact, so much parallel do I see in their lives that I have referred to Wittgenstein, one of my philosophical heroes whose grave site I have visited in Cambridge, as "the Ty Cobb of Philosophy." Each man set personal standards of excellence so exacting that he could tolerate nothing less. Each evinced qualities of character that evoked an eerie combination of awe, respect, and fear in others.

Both men found it exceedingly difficult to sustain friendships or family relationships. Old-timer Nap Rucker, Cobb's roommate for a time, pointed out that "Cobb was a loner by his own choice." Rucker relates an interesting story of Cobb's rage at finding Rucker bathing in their boarding house tub after a game. Incensed, Cobb attempted to wrest his roommate from the tub, wild and trembling. Rucker was shocked, angered, and amazed, realizing that Cobb was about to strike him. "You gone crazy?" exclaimed Rucker. To which Cobb gritted, "You don't understand! I've got to be first at everything -- all the time!"[60]

Wittgenstein's rage had a somewhat different form, lacking in pugilism, though always near the surface in personal relationships. One of hundreds of recorded incidents occurred at a meeting of Cambridge's Moral Sciences Club in 1946 following a paper by Sir Karl Popper:

> According to Popper, he and Wittgenstein engaged in an animated exchange. . . . Wittgenstein, who had all the time been playing with a [fireplace] poker, then stood up, poker in hand, and demanded an example of a moral rule. 'Not to threaten visiting lecturers with pokers', Popper replied, whereupon Wittgenstein stormed out of the room.[61]

Personal accounts have it that neither Cobb nor Wittgenstein liked to be touched. Stump tells a story of Cobb's referring to General Douglas MacArthur as a "sentimental old bastard" after the renowned Old Soldier, who claimed to be Cobb's Number One fan put his arms around Cobb in a parting embrace in MacArthur's Waldorf Suite in 1960. Cobb shrugged free and said "So long, Doug." Concerning Wittgenstein's forced chastity, Fania Paschal, who taught him Russian, comments that ". . . one cannot imagine anyone who would ever dare as much as to pat him on the back, nor imagine him in need of the normal physical expressions of affection. In him everything was sublimated to an extraordinary

degree."[62]

For both men, practically all personal relations were turbulent. While Wittgenstein never married and was more or less homosexually oriented, though no hard evidence confirms this, Cobb's "two wives . . . charged extreme cruelty in divorces, each deposing that The Georgia Peach was uncontrollable when crossed or drunk, or whenever he was reminded of how he had regularly bloodied opponents with his spikes -- 'Cobb's kiss', as one victim, Frank 'Home Run' Baker, called his slashing."[63] Amusingly, Richard Bak, a baseball historian, in referring to Cobb's first wife, Charlotte, has observed that "staying married to Ty for some forty years undoubtedly qualified her for sainthood."[64]

Wittgenstein was already regarded as something of a cult figure when he returned to Cambridge in 1929 following several years of soul-searching and self-imposed isolation. He remained such until his death in 1951, unwilling to publish any of his work, while building a cadre of loyal and deeply respectful followers, some of whom would be designated his literary executors. Upon Wittgenstein's return to Cambridge in 1929, John Maynard Keynes wrote to a friend, with acid wit, "Well, God has arrived. I met him on the 5:15 train."[65]

Years later, in 1949, this image of Wittgenstein as the personification of excellence, somehow above and apart from others, had not abated. If anything, it had grown. Ray Monk provides an example: Wittgenstein had accepted an invitation from his former student, Norman Malcolm, to visit the United States for a lengthy stay. On one occasion, Malcolm took Wittgenstein to a meeting of graduate students in Cornell University's philosophy department. One of the students has recalled the impact of that visit:

> Just before the meeting was to get underway Malcolm appeared approaching down the corridor. On his arm leaned a slight, older man, dressed in windjacket and old army trousers. If it had not been for his face, alight with intelligence, one might have taken him for some vagabond Malcolm had found along the road and decided to bring out of the cold.
>
> . . . I leaned over to Gass and whispered, 'That's Wittgenstein.' Gass thought I was making a joke and said something like, 'Stop pulling my leg.' And then Malcolm and Wittgenstein entered. [Gregory] Vlastos was introduced and gave his paper and finished. Black, who was conducting this particular meeting, stood up and turned to his right and it became clear that he was about to address the shabby older man Malcolm had brought to the meeting. Then came the startling words; said Black, 'I wonder if you would be so kind, Professor Wittgenstein . . .' Well, when Black said 'Wittgenstein' a loud and instantaneous gasp went up from the assembled students. You must remember: 'Wittgenstein' was a mysterious and awesome name in the philosophical world of 1949, at Cornell in particular. The gasp that went up was just the gasp that would have gone up if Black had said, 'I wonder if you would be so kind, Plato . . .'[66]

This visit to America occurred shortly before Wittgenstein fell ill and died from cancer, a fate that would befall Ty Cobb a decade later. Both died of prostate cancer.

Wittgenstein's contentiousness, though it could descend to pettiness, lacked the qualities of bellicosity, pugilism, and outright cruelty seen in Cobb. But this might be only because his form of excellence did not require such demands. After all, Cobb had to give up his medium of excellence while barely in his forties, while Wittgenstein continued his literally to his death.

Numerous Cambridge dons, students, and others have recorded in vivid detail just how daunting and exhausting it was to engage in philosophical dialogue with Wittgenstein. Especially noteworthy were Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, themselves first-rate philosophers of the highest stature. They describe Wittgenstein's intensity, keenness, rapier methods of argumentation, and purity of purpose -- all driven by an indescribable energy. In Russell's autobiography he recalls a conversation about Wittgenstein's dietary habits. It seems that Wittgenstein hated food, insisting that if he must eat, it must be the same thing every day. Someone in the conversation described, accordingly, how the genius subsisted on milk and vegetables or some such food. With characteristic wit, Russell remarks, "I used to feel as Mrs. Patrick Campbell did about Shaw: 'God help us if he should ever eat a beefsteak'."[67]

Cobb never spoke of suicide, as did Wittgenstein, though several astute observers detected in his reckless, daredevil behavior a certain tendency towards self-annihilation. Wittgenstein, who had three brothers commit suicide, frequently spoke of taking his own life during moments of despair.[68]

Apparent in each of these men's personality was an

abnormal and chronic sensitivity to the nuances of human behavior that contributed to their excellence while causing themselves and others considerable harm. For Wittgenstein, a genius beyond question, this hyper-sensitivity resulted in constant, soul-wrenching introspection on moral questions, coupled with equally rigorous intellectual demands. One of his sisters described him during his early adulthood as "constantly in a state of indescribable, almost pathological excitement."[69] She continued, expressing fear that his former professor, Gottlob Frege of the University of Jena, then an old man, "would not be able to muster the patience and understanding needed to go into the matter [of Ludwig's newly-developed philosophical insights] in a way commensurate to its seriousness."[70] Wittgenstein's biographers conclude that his turbulent philosophical encounters with Frege and Russell, and his later religious encounters while serving in the Austrian military during World War I, had the effect of reducing his suicidal tendencies.

For Cobb, the manic aggression, megalomania, acute self-worship, delusions of persecution, and dipsomania kept him in a state of rage and fury until his death on July 17, 1961. Early on he warned Al Stump, speaking softly, "To get along with me, don't increase my tension."[71] So alone was Ty Cobb in his greatness that only three people from organized baseball attended his funeral. Stump writes:

> They were Mickey Cochrane, old-time catcher Ray Schalk, and Nap Rucker from his minor-league days. Other than these and several hundred Little Leaguers of the Royston area north of Atlanta who lined the path to his twelve-foot-high marble mausoleum, the funeral of the most shrewd, inventive, lurid, detested, mysterious, and superb of all baseball players went unattended by any official representative of the game at which he excelled.[72]

One historian explains that Cobb was "a man who set the highest standards for himself and consistently met them. . . . [He] was never able to understand why most other people failed to share his passion for excellence and refusal to settle for second best."[73] It never seems to have occurred to Ty Cobb that, under this notion of excellence, winning also means losing, that this meaning of excellence implies many more losers than winners, and that his own excellence could not logically be shared.

The Aim of Excellence

The argument of this paper is that all uses of 'excellence' in the aim-language of education may be classified in two fundamental categories, which I have called singular-type excellence (SE) and plural-type excellence (PE). I have claimed, with a variety of cases and subjects, that, while PE is inclusive of all-important forms of SE, the reverse is not the case. SE uses of 'excellence' tend to be one-dimensional in scope, while PE uses always embody a putative multiplicity. Knowing what we now know about the social/cultural construction of "good and bad" and "right and wrong," as well as varieties of meliorism inherited from the eighteenth century's Enlightenment Age and amplified in numerous contexts in our own Age, it is no longer possible to justify the aim-language of education in SE terms. The only democratically justifiable uses of excellence as an aim for education must be situated within the larger context of varieties of exceeding and excelling. The number and types of excellence(s) will always be a matter of human desire (intentions) and cultural context, and implicit, at least, in statements of educational aim. Ideally, if such aims are democratic, they will not only reflect roots in a Kantian ethic of "respect for persons," but will also reflect a Deweyan perspective on right and good as suggested in his conception of democracy, coupled with his aim of growth, a mix which, when rightly understood, allows for Noddings's ethic of care. To my mind, one current example of such a theory is Amy Gutmann's book, *Democratic Education* (1987).[74] Let us continue to appreciate the Wittgensteins and the Ty Cobbs among us, who show us exactly what is meant by 'excellence' in a strict sense. But let us also be aware of their imperfections and undesirable qualities as expressed in their "I've-got-to-be-the-best" outlook toward life and social relationships. I love them both, in an abstract sort of way. Indeed, I have visited Wittgenstein's grave site in Cambridge as well as Cobb's shrine in Cooperstown. Admittedly, their imperfections compel as much of my interest as do their accomplishments. So there you have it! My appropriation of their lives -- especially their tragic side -- has been intended to demonstrate the dangers and limitations of valuing just any old statement of educational aim that singularizes excellence. As not only philosophers of education, but also practitioners of the noble art of teaching, I suggest, for starters, that we take another look at John W. Gardner's treatise on *Excellence*.

Post Script: I am deeply appreciative of the invitation to deliver the 1997 William E. Drake Memorial Lecture, and want to thank the members of the Texas Foundations of Education Association for that honor. I knew Bill Drake fairly well at the time of his death, and I believe he would have taken kindly to my argument here. I trust that others find it interesting enough -- whether it's right or wrong -- to respond in some way. My thanks to all of you.

Joe L. Green
October 2, 1997

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