

The Poetry of Moral Perception in Plato, Dewey, and Wordsworth | Matthew Farrelly

In an age of ever-increasing distraction, moral educators face very real challenges in maintaining students' attention in classrooms of all grade levels. Student inattention is a far deeper problem than those touching productivity outputs and maintaining proper respect toward teachers and peers (however important). Unconstrained habit formation with digital technology threaten to further detach us from unmediated experience with the concrete reality of the *now, here, this*. Helping students recover their innate capacity to attend to the world and their experience in relationship to it is foundational for moral educators to build a holistic virtue education.

Ideally, students possess the capability of closely attending to what is presented to their immediate experience (whether a text, dialogue, or an immersive experience in nature). Although this ability to attend could itself be characterized as a virtue, virtue is only more fully realized when the student can begin to have *moral* perceptions of what they experience. Qualitatively, moral perception goes beyond mere experience insofar as the student better perceives how to act in response to what she experiences. On this view, moral perceptions form the basis of just action. What can moral educators do to strengthen (or even rehabilitate) this innate capacity?

Considering the moral domain of environmental education specifically, it is true that student awareness and activism for environmental protections and stewardship has increased. However, it remains to be seen how well students are equipped to have rich personal experiences in nature that transform their ability to perceive it and their responsibility to the natural world. Drawing on Plato's poetic theory, John Dewey's theory of art as experience, and English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, I argue that the art of poetry has a unique power to (re)train students' perceptual capacities in such a way that allows them to experience the world with greater moral acuity. Although Plato does express concern for poetry's ability to shape students' perception in ways that could lead to moral decay, it was precisely poetry's "charm" that led him to encourage its use, so long as it proved beneficial to both the individual human and the city's "constitution." Assuming the poet's own virtue (which Plato especially helps us navigate), poetry's aesthetic power is its ability to help readers/listeners perceive the nature of the world in whatever state it is, which determines how human persons should respond. For Dewey, the "germ" of art is located in even the most simple of human experiences with nature, and that created art, including poetry, is the mature product of that human creative impulse that arises from aesthetic experience of the natural world. Here, we find the touchpoint between Dewey, Plato, and Wordsworth. Although each were operating under different metaphysical assumptions, they each argued that humans had latent capacities to experience the world in this way. Wordsworth saw poetic art as the creative communication of that experience in which the artist-poet fashions their holistic experience and perception of the world and its needs in relationship with humanity's needs that promotes the mutual flourishing of both. In so doing, the artist-poet invites us to train our moral perception for the same.