Dewey's Epistemology … *A Priori* or Bust?

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The first thing that comes to my mind as John Dewey's greatest philosophical achievement is his persistent critique of conceptual dualisms. I believe, if anything is to be taken from his prolific writings, we ought to remember that he spotlights the frustrating human tendency to approach problems with a "divide and conquer" attitude. I confess that my own early philosophical and educational trainings insisted on analyses being done in this way, so Dewey's resistance to this tradition of thought continues to haunt me, whispering as I write: "Find characterizations and complexity not certainty. Strive to live in the grey space, rather than settling for the black and white." I can say from experience that reconfiguring thoughts in this way is much easier said than done.

The *a priori*/*a posteriori* dualism in epistemology harkens back to this classic philosophical conundrum. While it is tempting to comprehend education as either/or, I suspect that for Dewey reality lies somewhere in the dissolution of any possible bar between *a priori* justification and experience. We can indeed interpret evidence of an *a priori* in his works, as Greg Seals does in his paper "'Education Itself' and Dewey's Use of the *A Priori* in Educational Theory." But should we label Dewey's theory accordingly? Must an *a priori* be found to match an *a posteriori* bent, or does this simple division yet again lead us into the abyss?

I can see in Seals's writing a shared Deweyan spirit for resolving age-old dichotomies, and it is my privilege to respond briefly here to his argument. In today's field of education, where it is all too easy to label Dewey as a progressivist or a pragmatist and leave it at that, Seals's work is commendable for honoring the deep and careful epistemological considerations of Dewey's words. Seals's position that Deweyan educational theory is *a priori* in the same manner as hybrid universal propositions is also a creative avenue through which to draw educators' attention toward Dewey's lesser-quoted but equally illuminating book

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Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (not to mention the intriguing maze that this clever new argument leads us through, which is educational on its own).

Again, Seals is correct on many important points. Readers of *Experience and Education* can be too quick to assume that Dewey rejects the *a priori* because of his clear emphasis on the process of learning *through experience*. There is certainly more to Dewey's educational theory than this. Consider, for example, Sidney Hook's introduction to *Experience and Nature*, wherein he follows Dewey's argument that scientific, empirical knowledge alone is not enough:

> If knowledge of the nature of the physical, biological, and social world is necessary to develop a reasonable way of life, why do we need anything more than the knowledge of special sciences and commonsense knowledge of ordinary affairs to guide us? … Dewey's answer is that certain misconceptions about the nature of knowledge, the nature of man, and especially the nature of human experience have prevented the fruitful application of such knowledge to human affairs; that certain traditional assumptions, drawn from philosophies of the past, and whose categories to some extent have entered our language, have generated insoluble problems, introducing unbridgeable dualisms between subject and object, the real and the apparent, the physical and the mental, man and nature, things of experience and things in themselves, the individual and society. This has resulted in consequence in making man a stranger in the world and the operation of human intelligence a mystery.[1]

Hook reiterates the necessity of both nature and experience in a metaphysics, saying: "Dewey regards this bifurcation between nature and experience as inherently untenable and as leading to conclusions that make our ordinary practical judgment incoherent."[2] For this reason, I can agree with Seals that Dewey must envision aspects of both nature and experience being involved in education, although as I shall elaborate in a moment, I interpret Dewey's attention to the "organic connection" as evidence of a more radical epistemology than Seals

concludes – one that would reject the traditional terms *a priori* and *a posteriori* altogether.

Seals is also right to begin this conversation early with a clarification of the multiple senses of the *a priori,* such as the metaphysical versus the methodological *a priori.* Unlike an ancient *a priori,* such as that seen in Plato's theory of recollection, or another metaphysical *a priori* synonymous with innate knowledge of things-in-themselves, a methodological *a priori* does not necessitate some supersensible realm wherein ideas reside. Instead, for example, the Kantian sense of *a priori* is represented by a list of "categories" that the transcendental ego imposes upon our sensory experiences. For Kant, our knowledge of things-in-themselves is rationally limited, so concepts like space, time, or causality that we subjectively apply when constructing our perceptions and experiences are *utilized a priori* rather than *a priori* preternaturally. Additionally, I am recalling Matthew Festenstein's description of two senses of the *a priori.* First, that something can be possibly known as an object, by say, a god of man or being with pure knowledge of all things-in-themselves as opposed to there being a knowing subject that is only trying to access the knowledge of that god/world to some extent. Second, that human rationality can comprehend some concept before experiencing. In this sense, *a priori* things act as foundational elements of human experiencing. Festenstein accurately recognizes these as "spectator theories" of epistemology that Dewey, the proponent of "doing and undergoing," would surely reject for privileging the role of the philosopher-mentalist.[3] Deweyan canon insists that knowledge is profoundly social and publicly observable.

Seals correctly identifies that critics of Dewey have nonetheless taken issue with his use of phrases like "education itself" or "just what education is," which appear as some reference to an *a priori*, either methodological or metaphysical. Seals knows he is not the only philosopher to find Dewey's language challenging to interpret. His citation of Hocking reminds me that many of Dewey's contemporaries (e.g., Santayana and Lovejoy) criticized his multiple books and essays for complicating matters; his words in one place did not seem to match those in another. Arthur Murphy complained that Dewey uses experience in two incompatible ways – naturalistic and immediate (with his

epistemology trying to set the tone for his metaphysics), much like the problem of the multiple *a priori* that Seals addresses.[4] To respond to critics, though, I would not first think to revisit Dewey's *Logic*. It seems to me that rather than look for individual reference points, we must turn our eye to Dewey's broader context and goals. Pragmatist epistemology is about the historical placement of experiences and bringing to light of principles taken for granted in our ordinary actions. This epistemology cannot be built upon the same set of principles that it attempts to reveal as incongruent. I worry that responding to the concern that Dewey harbors a latent inclination for the *a priori* by describing how he might position hybrid universal propositions as *a priori* in service of inquiry acts to reify this pesky dualism.

What if, instead, we use the behavioral psychology[5] terms of Dewey's time, and imagine the *a priori*/*a posteriori* as a case of nature versus nurture? Then for Dewey, nurture would mean the development of social experiences. From this we can see more easily that experiences cannot be opposed to nature. We need nature in order to nurture experiences. I think Dewey's *Experience and Nature* is most helpful here. Examine again this title – experience is listed *before* nature. I like to think that Dewey is cluing us in to the fact that nature cannot be *a priori* in any traditional sense. Nature cannot only be associated with permanence, Dewey argues, because the existence of any nature is as "precarious as it is stable."[6] Rationality cannot come before experience, because experiencing is the process of exercising our human nature.[7]

Dewey's choice of calling his educational theory "naturalistic empiricism" is another reason to comprehend his compound ideas in unison, in whole – without preference, temporality, or linearity – the import of human nature into experience and all experience as by nature.[8] Can we learn to think as Dewey does? Is it possible to get a grasp of his epistemology for our teaching and learning without falling into the usual traps? I look forward to the adventure of the attempt, and I want to extend my gratitude for Seals's contribution to the ongoing interpretation of Deweyan epistemology and for his refreshing introduction of Dewey's *Logic* into conversations on education.

1. Sidney Hook, "Introduction," in John Dewey, *John Dewey the Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 1: 1925, Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), ix-x.
2. Ibid., xi.
3. Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory: From Dewey to Rorty,* 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 4.
4. For more examples, see John R. Shook, *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 8-10.
5. See Jim Garrison, "Deweyan Pragmatism and the Epistemology of Contemporary Social Constructivism," *American Education Research Journal* 32, no. 4 (1995): 716-740.
6. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publishers, Inc., 1958), 44-45.
7. Traut reiterates that *a priori* knowledge does not provide material to justify empirical propositions. Matthew G. Traut, "The Foundations of Pragmatism: Reclaiming the Pragmatic A Priori," Ph.D. dissertation (Emory University, 2012).
8. See Dewey on primary and secondary experiencing: Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 39-41.