Distinctions, Dualisms and Deweyan Pragmatism:
A Response to David Carr

James Garrison
Virginia Tech

In *Democracy and Education* John Dewey declared, "At the present time the conflict of philosophic theories focuses on discussion of the proper place of vocational factors in education."[1] David Carr suggests that it still may, and I agree. Dewey realized that his claim could "arouse incredulity" since "there seems to be too great a gap between the remote and general terms in which philosophic ideas are formulated and the practical and concrete details of vocational education."[2] Recently Larry Hickman, the director of the Dewey center, has helped us see what Dewey was getting at. Hickman insists that "technological fields -- among which he included science as well as the fine and the vernacular arts -- formed the basis of and provided the models for Dewey's larger project; his analysis and critique of the meanings of human experience"[3] For Deweyans, all meanings are artifacts of social practice. Dewey was a social constructivist; that is why the daily details of vocational education were so important to him. Carr's suggestion that "the drawing of significant conceptual *distinctions* is arguably still the main stock-in-trade of professional philosophers" may render philosophy of education too remote from the detail of everyday educational practice. This view flirts with what Dewey, following William James, called the "intellectualist fallacy." Conceptual distinctions should not float above the practical life world like Aquinas's angels; abstract, transcendent and intellectually pure but unperceptive of the tangible ethical and aesthetic particulars below.

At the same time Dewey was writing *Democracy and Education* he engaged David Snedden in public debate regarding the type and level of vocational education. Dewey lost the political debate when the Smith-Hughes Act passed in 1917 thereby establishing the educational system we now call tracking. Dewey's opposition surprised Snedden. After all, did not Dewey make practical occupations, especially those of the home like cooking and sewing, the center piece of the Lab School at the University of Chicago? In an address entitled "Education for the Rank and File," Snedden drew on the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer in asserting that society, like nature itself, was governed by often harsh natural laws that must be obeyed. Snedden saw the ultimate aim of education as "the greatest degree of efficiency." This meant that for "the rank and file," that is, "those who do duty in the ranks…who will follow, not lead," efficiency required "utilitarian training which looks to individual efficiency in the world of work."[4] It is possible to draw merely conceptual distinctions in many places depending on our purposes. Dewey thought he saw a social class dualism in Snedden's distinction between vocational education for the rank and file and liberal education for the few that would lead. I wonder if Carr does? For Dewey, all meanings emerged from socio-cultural linguistic transactions. Concepts are cognitive meanings. For Dewey all conceptual distinctions ultimately rested upon historically contingent social (e.g., vocational) practices and were subject to political influence. Dewey warned against hypostatizing concepts abstracted from everyday practice.

To counter Snedden's Social Darwinism, Dewey drew his own distinction when he said "Education *through* occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method."[5] The distinction that Dewey wants to draw is between education *through* the occupations, something he supports for the kind of philosophical reasons discussed by Hickman, and education *for* the occupations, a kind of social predestinationism he entirely rejected. For

Dewey, the most important distinction to be drawn was not between liberal versus vocational education, but between liberating versus enslaving education.

Dewey believed it was very important to draw conceptual distinctions; he did, though, have a number of concerns about them. For instance, it is important to recognize that the soil for such distinctions is everyday social practice, and that eventually philosophical distinctions must return to concrete practice for their final adjudication. Further, we should recognize the historical contingency of our distinctions. For instance, Jane Roland Martin is laudatory of the connection Dewey made between the occupations of school and home, yet observes,

> The actual proposal Dewey made…does not address our own situation.…The radical change in education he proposed was to put into the school the occupations of the earlier home. The critical factor in the second transformation of America's homes is the removal of parents, not work.[6]

Deweyans may concede that Martin is correct and welcome her reconstruction. Influenced by historically emergent feminist interests, Martin's conceptual distinction should remind us that all logical separations are culturally contingent and may alter as new voices enter the conversation. Indeed, Dewey stated, "Logic is a social discipline…. Inquiry is a mode of activity that is socially conditioned and that has cultural consequences."[7] It is simply a mistake for anyone, including so-called Deweyans, to think that drawing conceptual distinctions must lead to "dualisms on the one hand or generate problem cases on the other," as Carr so aptly put it. Deweyans should cheer Carr's insistence on the importance of drawing proper conceptual distinctions. What concerns the Deweyan pragmatist is the tendency of *de dicto* logical distinctions to harden into *de re* dualisms.

Carr's second paragraph reminds us that the pragmatists commonly denounce the analytic-synthetic distinction as useless, but he quickly tells us that "it is not that the analytic-synthetic distinction serves no real philosophical purpose but that its purpose has been obscured by the failure of past philosophers to separate it from other quite different distinctions -- between the *necessary* and the *contingent*, the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, and so on." The pragmatist may acknowledge these vague, imprecise, and mutable distinctions are useful for quite a few practical purposes without according them any ultimate logical, epistemological, or ontological status. For instance, to comprehend Dewey's thought we must grasp the point of his recognition of "the ineradicable union in nature of the relatively stable and the relatively contingent" and the importance of observing that "necessity implies the precarious and contingent."[8] As one might glean from these brief dialectical fragments, Dewey was merely drawing a useful distinction in experience. He was not constructing a hypostatized dualism. To harden occasionally convenient distinctions into ultimate diremptions is to construct dualisms, but as Carr indicates, we should not confuse distinctions with dualisms.

It is clear from reading "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" that Quine does not see how we can ultimately separate the dubious analytic-synthetic distinction from the necessary-contingent, or *a priori-a posteriori*. Even if we could make these separations little would change. Most pragmatists, including Dewey, reject all three as untenable dualisms when granted ultimate logical or ontological status. They are just handy devices when they work. Quine's neo-pragmatic position currently holds sway among the overwhelming number of philosophers at this time. It delivered some of the most serious blows struck against logical empiricism. Explaining why this is so goes far beyond the limits of this brief response. There are two reasons for calling attention to Carr's discussion of the analytic-synthetic, necessary-contingent, and *a priori-a posteriori* distinctions. First, it is not at all clear to me that he needs them to draw his useful distinctions, yet he begins his paper with them. Second, as a Deweyan pragmatist I sense that Carr may comprehend the "relative and working" separations between analytic-synthetic, necessary-contingent, and *a priori-a posteriori* as hard and fast antitheses. Carr seems to want to rely on these three delicate and ultimately indefensible distinctions to help him derive his subsequent practically helpful distinctions. If so, then subsequent diremptions drawn from them may readily harden into needless dualisms.

Dewey declared, "Philosophic systems which make a hard and fast antithesis between terms which are related to each other in experience, are known as dualisms."[9] Carr's conceptual geography, however, draws useful distinctions between the academic and vocational as well as the intrinsic and instrumental. It is crucial, for example, to the architectonic of Dewey's philosophy that we may draw a distinction, *in* experience, between the logically instrumental and the intrinsically good or immediately aesthetic, but we must be careful to keep those distinctions in experience, not render them hard and fast, and not hypostatize them. As Dewey pointed out,

> For educational purposes, the opposite of dualism is not necessarily monism, but a philosophy which regards the distinction of antithetical terms…as relative and working not fixed and absolute, so that they are capable of coming together in a functional unity.[10]

As long as we do not lose functional unity in experience as we derive our distinctions, then we are all right. What is wrong with hypostatizing useful abstract distinctions is that even if this does not destroy functional unity it conceals the dependency of concepts upon practical experience by placing them in a transcendent reality apart.

Carr writes "it is proper for people to require quite different benefits from the experience of schooling and that there are therefore quite different reasons for including various subjects and activities in the conventional state curriculum." Not only the Deweyan, but say someone like Nel Noddings in much of her recent work, would support this practical, relative, and working distinction. When, however, Carr, in the very next sentence concludes that "human agents… require…some initiation into a personal appreciation of what is worth living for as well as some of the vocationally useful skills," we become confused. There is no reason that we cannot find vocational activities that are worth living for, that is, that are intrinsically good. Indeed, Carr elsewhere concludes that

> any human activity or enterprise whatsoever can be viewed as having theoretical *and* practical aspects, as amenable to study in either academic or vocational terms or as pursuable for its own sake or as a means to an end.

This is a fine example of drawing a distinction *in* experience without destroying functional unity. Having made the forgoing insightful observation, the reader is shocked to find Carr a few pages later saying, "As regards history and literature, for example, we are clearly dealing with activities which have genuine intrinsic value from an educational point of view but practically negligible utility or instrumental value." History is an immense instrument for political action and literature can be social action; just think about the work of Charles Dickens. It seems to me that Carr may equivocate between useful distinctions and dysfunctional, hypostatized, and even destructive dualisms. I hope not, but I am not sure.

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1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in, *The Middle Works, 1899-1924,* vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1916, 1980), 316.

2. Ibid.

3. Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1.

4. Cited by Walter H. Drost in *David Snedden and Education for Social Efficiency*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 43.

5. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 319.

6. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 7.

7. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1938,1981), 26-27.

8. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925, 1981), 56-57.

9. John Dewey, *Contributions to A Cyclopedia of Education*, in, *The Middle Works, 1899-1924,* vol. 6, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1916, 1980), 424.

10. Ibid.