

Before Objectivism and Relativism: Dewey on the Meaning/s of Growth

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Naoko Saito offers us a thoughtful and earnest account of John Dewey's naturalistic conception of growth. Her main goal, as I understand it, is to rebuff those critics who regard Dewey's concept of growth as effectively directionless (of which there are many), while pointing us to a middle ground between freedom and control. She does this by revealing various sources of directive criteria in and around Dewey's robust notion of habit reconstruction. Overall, I find Saito's effort to parry Dewey's assailants substantively accurate. And yet it also seems to me somewhat incomplete, thus perhaps leaving Dewey unnecessarily vulnerable to continuing attacks.

In an attempt to fortify these areas of vulnerability, I would like to shift slightly the purview of Saito's discussion. For it is I believe only in grasping the full implications of Dewey's rejection of subject/object metaphysics, and his later appeal to a naturalistic metaphysics that the meaning/s of growth for Dewey comes adequately to light. First, a brief overview of Saito's essay.

Saito couches her discussion within the problematic tension between the child's freedom and the adult's control in moral education. After reminding us that Dewey rejects the kind of dualistic either-or logic that makes such problems appear an inevitability, she then argues that Dewey's "philosophy of growth" at once maintains the necessary directionality and is flexible enough to accommodate freedom and novelty. The key, Saito wants us to understand, is to see that freedom and control with Dewey are a function of situations and thus a function of one another, not of discrete, fully-autonomous subjects. They only become arbitrary (empty or oppressive, respectively) when improperly de-situated or when situations as a whole are miseducative. This is because situations, what Saito calls "the middle of things," are both partially determinate via social custom and preexisting habits (an element of stability), and partially indeterminate as a result of individual impulses and environmental change (an element of contingency). The reconstruction of habit, then, the means of growth "without fixed ends," is an active, intelligent adjustment to the environment within partially determinate and partially indeterminate problematic situations.

From this general process, Saito subsequently gleans several sources of corrigible directive criteria for growth. They are, in order of appearance: preexisting habits, as general "boundaries and channels"; ideals, as visions of a possible future; intelligence, as a means of redirecting and controlling impulses; "face-to-face intercourse" in democratic community, as a way insuring "participation in a common understanding" and the sharing of experience"; and social intelligence, as a means of testing and checking the impulsive behavior of the young.

Saito certainly gives us a lot to take under consideration here. And, indeed, Dewey's situated notion of growth is significantly more replete than many critics

would lead one to believe. Yet what Saito does not say enough about, I fear, is what growth actually consists in for Dewey, what it *means*. What, for instance, is the *meaning* of “growth in circles”? I want to ask. Additionally, we are told little as to how to discern whether our directive criteria are actually directing us in a constructive direction. Does the reconstruction of habit always constitute what Dewey calls “educative growth?”¹ To address this question we would seem to need some sort of framework for evaluation, and one that does not, as Saito says, perch us on the horns of an objectivist/relativist dilemma.

Saito’s essay itself appears to suggest the need for such a framework when it cedes to the “ambigu[ity]” of Dewey’s “middle position.” It is true, as Saito remarks, that critics many times misread Dewey, or fail for whatever reason to follow his recasting of the conventional terms of discussion on various issues. (Hence figures like Isaac Kandel and Boyd Bode are merely straw men here.) What those critics are looking for, in my experience, is quite often there to be found in Dewey, if not in the anticipated form. Nonetheless, questions still tend to linger as to whether the thing(s) looked for receives the required emphasis and can carry the weight necessary to do its job effectively. I have learned that these questions are worth taking seriously where Dewey is concerned. Still, I believe that an effective framework for evaluating the reconstruction of habit and interpreting the meaning of growth is in fact readily available in Dewey. To explain what I have in mind here, I turn now to the topic of metaphysics.

Saito accurately characterizes Dewey as an anti-dualistic pragmatist who views subject and object as purposive, analytic terms, not metaphysical givens. I would point out, too, that every one of the ostensible dualisms which she adverts to and then rejects — freedom/control, internal/external, emotion/reason, means/ends, mind/body, child/adult, self/other, egoism/altruism, individual/social, relativism/objectivism — is in some way underwritten and maintained by a general subject/object metaphysics. Dewey’s success in undermining this metaphysics is therefore crucial if things such as freedom and control are to pose only a practical problem and not an insoluble, theoretical one. And as J.E. Tiles rightly notes, one can easily provide an alternative “which amounts to little more than dualism back from the laundry”; or as Saito puts it, which “merely keep[s] a balance between two opposite positions.”² Thus instead of talking about going *between* the horns of dilemmas, *beyond* objectivism and relativism, *overcoming* dichotomies, or locating a *middle* ground, I prefer to speak of moving *before* or *behind* dilemmas, *dissolving* dichotomies, and locating an *alternative* ground. The difference, I believe, can make all the difference for understanding Dewey.

Dewey’s Darwinian-influenced principle of continuity is the linchpin of his holistic naturalism, his alternative ground. Broadly construed, it denotes the complex and potentially growth- and meaning-enhancing interactions constituting temporal processes. Following the notion of emergent evolution, Dewey claims that there is a natural or inherent continuity between matter, life, and mind (even given the intercession of language). This developmental continuity also however appears as a conservation of meaning and energy between the various phases of self-world

interaction, allowing for, but not ensuring, the successful reconstruction of habit or the achievement of a unified experience more generally. (Saito relates this as the “reorganization of a child’s experience in his or her interaction with the adult world.”) The model of growth implicit here receives its most detailed treatment in Dewey’s essay “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” where he critiques the subject/object presuppositions of stimulus-response theory.³

In a world substantially different from our own, though, growth of any sort would be a virtual impossibility. This is where the full implications of Dewey’s naturalistic metaphysics begin to emerge. For Dewey perceives that

there are two sorts of possible worlds in which [growth] would not occur. In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being. Equally is it true, however, that a world that is finished, ended would have no traits of suspense and crisis, and would offer no opportunity for fulfillment.⁴

Need or desire and its fulfillment would simply not exist in either of these alternative worlds. Instead of subjects and objects, then, Dewey offers us as “generic traits of existence(s)” the interrelated, complementary pairs stability and flux, regularity and contingency, and several other descriptors such as continuity, temporality, and quality. Because human nature for Dewey is continuous with nature in general, these traits set the conditions for learning and growth. In a word, they shape the human condition at the most basic level. Conceived as provisional instrumentalities, as tools of inquiry, the generic traits thus provide general guideposts for maintaining the continuity of nature and culture, for helping us foster, maintain, and evaluate the conditions of growth in our schools and elsewhere.

Another important aspect of the human condition, one similarly framed by these generic traits, is the native impulse to live with a funded sense of meaning and value. One might call it the “human *eros*.” (Democracy, for Dewey, is the form of associated living most responsive to the human *eros*.⁵) This desire for self-realization in and through the environment makes clear that growth and meaning enhancement are inseparable with Dewey; the one implies the other. To grow is to expand one’s palette of meaning-enhancing ways of interacting with the environment and vice versa. Accordingly, Saito’s “growth in circles” is I think best construed as growth in horizons of meaning, in perceived or felt connections and relationships between existential events. We can see also here that Dewey’s naturalistic metaphysics is ultimately a call to answer for our humanity, for the demands placed on us by a world that alternately facilitates and frustrates this human *eros*. It is doubtless a call for humility, assuaging the conceit of knowledge and subverting the quest for certainty. But it is likewise a call for direction: social and cultural amelioration, not an Einsteinian “theory of everything,” is Dewey’s avowed purpose in articulating an alternative to subject/object metaphysics. This brings us to what Saito poetically figures as “educating the heart.”

Since habits, as accepted or acquired meanings, inform and administer our various working capacities, the reconstruction of habit is the fundamental mechanism for fulfilling the human *eros*. Yet Dewey tells us that there are any number of ways of reconstructing habit within a given problematic situation, and some ways

lead more in the direction of educative growth than others. Educative growth enhances rather than blunts one's intellectual and emotional sensitivity to other people and things and thus one's ability to respond meaningfully to them. That is to say, it enhances one's ability to liberate the capacities of others and in so doing enrich the quality and meaning of their experience. The conditions of educative growth therefore require environments that initiate and support numerous, flexible, and diverse habits — habits which are at bottom social functions and social phenomena. To develop such habits, in accordance with the human *eros*, is necessarily to educate desire to pursue certain kinds of ends-in-view over others. This means that any directive criteria for constructing or reconstructing habit are inherently of moral consequence; indeed, they are for Dewey moral criteria.

Miseducative growth, on the contrary (if it can be termed as such), occurs when the reconstruction of habit tends to move in very narrow, inflexible pathways. One solves the problem at hand with no substantial liberation of working capacities or of meaning. Instead of acknowledging and establishing new and varied connections with the environment, it sacrifices present and/or future life possibilities to more isolated or parochial ends. We compel students to hone their problem-solving skills apart from any immediate sense of meaning enhancement, for example. Or, perhaps, the instrumental benefit of this activity is lost to a temporary excitation. Such an eventuality is a sign for Dewey that we need to evaluate or reevaluate the changeable directive criteria (for example, social customs, preexisting habits, linguistic practices, guiding principles or ideals, and so on) informing habit reconstruction, to inquire as to how they are interfering with the full growth potential of our students. Saito's essay helps us I think to see just how important these processes are for "perfecting democracy from within."

1. See John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol.14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 202.

2. J.E. Tiles, *Dewey* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 49.

3. Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" in *John Dewey: The Early Works*, vol.5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 96-109.

4. See Dewey's *Experience and Nature* in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol.1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 22.

5. See, for example, Thomas M. Alexander's "The Human Eros" in *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture: Pragmatic Essays after Dewey*, ed. John J. Stuhr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 203-22.