Avoiding Philosophy's "Bipolar Disorder": Elgin's Revision of Epistemology

Nakia S. Pope
The University of Virginia

Catherine Elgin sees a deep division in philosophy, one that threatens to at best paralyze and at worst wreck the discipline. Philosophy's "bipolar disorder," as she puts it, is between absolute and arbitrary: "Unless a position is grounded in agent-neutral, determinate facts, it is right only relative to a perspective that cannot in the end be justified."[1] She argues, not unlike the pragmatists, that this dualism can and should be reconciled. It should be reconciled because it prevents philosophy from recognizing and dealing with certain complexities of human life. It can be reconciled using a constructive epistemology grounded in the concept of reflective equilibrium.

I examine Elgin's treatment of philosophy's disorder and her constructivist cure that rests on the idea of reflective equilibrium and a new look at truth and justification. While I am encouraged by Elgin's account, I see problems in how she represents our epistemic situation. She treats us as too much of a *tabula rasa*, ignoring our position within systems of thought. Additionally, her constructivist epistemology is overly cognitive, ignoring many of the human complexities she wishes to address. As a corrective to Elgin's oversight, I rely heavily on John Dewey's work, specifically his notion of the "engaged subject" fully present in the world, but also draw on James and Rorty.

Elgin gives a brief epidemiology of philosophy's disorder beginning with the logical positivists. With their goal of eliminating nonsense from the cognitive realm, they divided philosophy into two realms: the cognitive and everything else. Within the cognitive realm, things were absolute, while outside they were arbitrary. Since that time, the absolute/arbitrary split has framed almost every significant philosophical argument in some way, to philosophy's detriment. It prevents philosophy from "seeing how fact and value intertwine, where art and science intersect, how human agents contrive categories, set standards, define goals, and thereby fix the frameworks within which objective judgments can be made."[2] What is needed is some resolution of this dualism that will allow philosophy to get on with other important business.

Elgin's account purports to do just that by offering an epistemology grounded in reflective equilibrium. Reflective equilibrium is a desirable feature of a system of thought, in much the same way that correspondence with the world is the desirable feature of a system for someone interested in certainty. A system in reflective equilibrium supplies justification for judgments. Judgments are made with an eye toward how they contribute to the overall equilibrium of the system being used. According to Elgin, "A system of thought is in reflective equilibrium when its components are reasonable in light of one another, and the account they comprise is reasonable in light of our antecedent convictions about the subject at hand."[3] Elgin

thus introduces two major criteria for reasonableness of a given system of thought. A system of thought is in reflective equilibrium when the components of that system — beliefs, propositions, values, and principles — support and reinforce other components of that system. This criterion is an internal criterion and applies to what a new belief must do to gain admittance to a system of thought. The system as a whole, then, is reasonable if it corresponds with "antecedent convictions" — basic beliefs about the material the system of thought is constructed to manage.

Elgin begins with antecedent convictions and activity. Individuals have certain convictions that will be preserved if they stay out of the way. We hold on to those convictions, says Elgin, that do not impede our activity. This is not a very stringent criterion for keeping a belief. If I believe that the moon is made of cheese, for example, this does not impede the majority of my activity. While this is a very weak beginning for an epistemic standard, Elgin is quick to point out it is just a beginning. We have to start somewhere, so why not start with the convictions we have and our rudimentary reasons for having them? In this way, she permits a host of beliefs to come to the table. The fact that a conviction does not interfere with our activity is some reason to accept it. Elgin does state, however, that "having some reason to accept a sentence is far from having sufficient reason."[4]

As these initially tenable convictions are grouped together, they begin to form a mutually supportive network, gaining additional tenability. Because they are now in a network, convictions can draw upon other convictions for support. They can rely on more than just failing to impede activity; they can turn to other convictions as well. In the process of constructing this network, some convictions may have to be modified or rejected. My "moon is made of cheese" conviction may not fit with other convictions, such as "Neil Armstrong brought back rocks from the moon," so one of these has to be modified in order for the network to be built. Which one gets modified depends on a variety of factors, including the presence and number of other convictions I have on the subject.

Judgment begins to enter the picture here. A system of thought contains not only a network of tenable convictions, it also contains category schemes for organizing, classifying, and individuating. "Every experience, thought, observation, and idea involves conceptualization," says Elgin, which is "the imposition of a scheme of categories that structure the domain, highlighting some aspects, obscuring others."[5] These schemes both organize and individuate objects: "Individuation depends on systemization. In structuring a domain, we mark out individuals and kinds. We thereby determine what counts as the same thing, what counts as a different thing of the same kind, and what counts as a different kind of thing."[6] An object's definition depends on one's initially tenable commitments and the category scheme used in its classification. Judgment is applying these schemes to our initially tenable convictions as well as new experiences in order to sort, classify, individuate, and group.

The third component to a system of thought is the set of principles, standards, and methods that guide the organization of the system. In addition to the already discussed network of initially tenable commitments and the various category

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schemes used in organization, these principles, standards, and methods reflect the desired ends of the system of thought; they are reflections of value. They help to determine what beliefs are modified in the event of conflict and how category schemes are constructed. They also are involved in judgment, insofar as their influence is felt in the category schemes of a system. These principles, standards, and methods give us criteria for the formation of a category scheme. A scheme's worth, says Elgin,

> depends on its utility, an effective scheme being one whose organization of its realm suits our purposes. Rightness of categorization thus consists neither in blind fidelity to tradition nor in accord with an antecedent metaphysical order, but in meshing with other tenable commitments to promote tenable ends.[7]

The ontology of an object is relative to its place within a category scheme, so an object's identity is influenced by the purpose of the scheme that classifies it. The principles, standards, and methods of a system express the ends toward which a system of thought aims.

Elgin emphasizes that all of this — the composition of a category scheme, an object's place within it, the judgments that place one within the other, and the ends to which the system is directed — should be as fallible as those initial commitments. All is subject to revision if things go awry. Any given scheme may not be suitable for our purposes or may not actually do what we developed it to do.[8]

The relationship of the various components of a system of thought is key for reflective equilibrium. A given system contains tenable convictions, expresses certain aims and values, and has a variety of category schemes. All of these are in a constant process of negotiation. Given category schemes are formed in relation to the ends of the system. They organize convictions according to those ends, but new convictions may force modifications in the scheme if the ends are to be met. Similarly, convictions, once organized, may cause modifications in the principles that reflect the ends of the system. This constant process is reflective equilibrium.

Internally, coherence is important to a system of thought. A new belief should cohere with the established system in order to be admitted in. For some beliefs, this is not a hefty requirement; they already fit well with established beliefs. But what if we experience something that causes us to question previously held beliefs? If our system is flexible, then we are willing to revise it in light of new evidence. Our system may have to be rearranged a bit to accommodate something new.[9]

What of the problem that a system may cohere but be wrong? Elgin is quick to point out that coherence may be necessary for a system of thought, but does not provide sufficient grounds to support or hold on to a system. Coherence supplies justification within a system. A belief is justified to the extent other beliefs within a system of thought support it or simply fail to contradict it. The system itself may be flawed, however. It may have undesirable consequences or be constructed in such a way that it thwarts the ends it was supposed to facilitate. Justification of a system is supplied by that system's link to the initially tenable commitments out of which that system sprang. I may be initially committed to my belief that the moon is made

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of cheese, but I may also be committed to beliefs about the value of intersubjective agreement. If no one ever agrees with my beliefs about the moon, and agreement is important to me, then I may question the system that encompasses my moon beliefs.

Justification of a system, just like justification in a system, is not an all-or-nothing affair, but rather a process of negotiation. It's in a state of flux as new beliefs are added and subtracted, as systems are put to new uses and encounter new situations. Justification of a system occurs as the system is tested against our initially tenable commitments. These commitments may be "factual" ones, as well as commitments to certain "values." When a system of thought fails to match any of these commitments, it looses some of its justification.[10] For Elgin, multiple means of justification emerge, all of which may contribute little bits of a belief's overall standing. There is no magic bullet of justification. Beliefs receive justification as a result of cohering with other beliefs within a system. That system is justified to the extent it is consistent in achieving the ends it sets for itself. Intersubjective agreement via trustworthy means can supply still further bits of justification. All of these bits may accumulate over time, making an unfounded assertion into a tenable commitment. Thus, justification becomes a process, changing over time as new evidence comes to light, rather than an all-or-nothing quality or singular event.

Elgin's epistemology is constructive in that it holds that standards of judgment, even in matters of truth, are built for various purposes. Certain knowledge is not her goal, rather understanding is. Statements admitted to systems of thought are all given provisional status. Error is tolerated and even used as a tool for furthering inquiry.[11]

Elgin's constructivism is not without its flaws. From a foundationalist perspective, especially, there is much with which to argue. My own criticism, however, centers on what I see as Elgin's narrow focus on the cognitive, rather than the active, aspects of inquiry. Of course, inquiry is a cognitive endeavor, yet it often has active, physical aspects as well. I turn to John Dewey's emphasis upon the physical interaction between organism and experience as a corrective.

Too Much Thinking, Too Little Doing

Elgin has us begin *in media res*: we simply have these commitments that are pre-systematic conceptions of things. They are successful so long as they do not impede activity. They group together into systems and theories and form the foundations, albeit shifty ones, of more complex systems of thought. This is what I find most problematic about Elgin's view. I believe she fails to acknowledge how engaged we are. She claims to begin her theory with where we are at — with initially tenable commitments that form the basis of systems of thought. She then proceeds as if we construct the systems in accord with our various ends and values. This is still a very disengaged subject, however. "Where we are at" is immersed in the stream of experience, with all its vicissitudes and physical demands.

Very little attention is given to how initially tenable commitments come about: We, according to Elgin, just have them. I find this problematic, not out of a desire for an ultimate foundation, but rather because I see a tension in Elgin's view. She says we begin *in media res*, but her theory seems to suggest that we start our system

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building from scratch with our initially tenable commitments as the raw material. I argue that we are indeed *in media res*, not simply because we have some commitments in need of systemization, but because we already have systematic habits of thought. What's more, thought is just one type of activity. We have all sorts of physical demands, which we often respond to with systematic habits of action. Dewey and James would argue that these systematic habits of action come first, that they form the basis of who we are — a subjectivity that grows and changes as we navigate the stream of experience.[12]

We are born into systems. We acquire habits of thought and action before we are conscious of their acquisition. Time and time again, Elgin returns to science as her primary example of a system of thought. But I do not construct science. It is there already. Personally, I have little say in what constitutes science and what does not. Nor do I have much initial say in other, deeper habits, like those of behavior, logic, and language, that frame and define almost all inquiry. These habits have a deep hold of who I am, as they constitute the way in which I see and interact with experience. This is what Richard Rorty, whom Elgin criticizes as being overly arbitrary, is getting at with his emphasis on contingency.[13]

In his work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* Rorty identifies three areas — language, selfhood, and community — that ought to be seen as contingent. By "contingent" he means, "it could have been otherwise." Inspired by James and Dewey, Rorty wishes to abandon our search for standards that are "out there" and own up to the notion that "truth" simply applies to sentences we have found useful. Language, community, and the self are creations with a history and have thus been subject to the vagaries of chance. Rorty wants us each to become "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires — someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance."[14] Things could have been different and thus nothing — not certain sentences, not our own identities — has any firm metaphysical**,** absolute support. Rorty does not speak directly about habits, even though that is what these contingent aspects are. The language I inherit from my community is a habit of speaking, understanding, and interacting over which I have little control. I am born into the contingent constructs of language and community. Without any transcendental or absolute metaphysics in which to ground my identity, I am contingent as well.

All of this is not to say that I am determined by these habits. As habits, some of them can be unlearned, mitigated, and perhaps overcome. Even the deepest habits, ones I cannot apparently escape from, can be better understood so I can recognize their limitations. These deep habits of action and thought can be seen as a big Cadillac I cannot get rid of because my parents gave it to me. As such, I have to drive it. This car has certain idiosyncrasies: It idles high; the breaks are soft; and it has a giant blind spot. As I drive it more and more, however, I better understand the limitations of the vehicle. I know to apply the breaks early and to look over my shoulder when I switch lanes. I can even attach some of those small, extra mirrors that stick to the side mirrors to better cover the blind spots. Although I have to drive

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the car, the more I do, the better I understand the car and how it operates. The better I can then compensate for its limitations.

I participate in these conversations. I may engage in systems of thought that help to form the habits that frame my initially tenable commitments. While I do not construct science, if I participate in science as a discipline, I have some say in the constitution and conduct of science as a system of thought. My scientific work adds to the system. It may force revision of commitments within the system and it may even force reexamination of the initially tenable commitments that tether and justify the system itself.

Dewey and the Engaged Subject

For Elgin, initially tenable commitments serve as the basis for her epistemology, though she fails to give a thorough account of the origin of these commitments. Rorty would argue they come as inherited cultural frameworks, commitments our culture has made and then passed down. They are habits of thought. Habits receive considerable attention in Dewey's epistemology as well, although he supplements Rorty's emphasis on culture with a naturalistic emphasis. Habits are, Dewey says, "conditions of intellectual efficiency." They are patterns of behavior that have proven useful over time as an organism interacts with its environment. They are interactions with the environment that do not rely on conscious thought. Dewey compares habits to involuntary bodily functions, like breathing. An important part of this metaphor is not just that habits are unconscious and automatic, but that they involve an interweaving of organism and environment. Just as breathing involves air and the lungs, habits are an affair of both environment and organism.[15]

The interpenetration of organism and environment is an important theme throughout Dewey's work. Habits serve not only to allow the organism to cope with the environment, but in many ways they define the organism. We are our habits, our patterns of speaking, thinking, and acting. These are behaviors we have gained from our environment in order to better interact with that environment. This transaction, this interpenetration, marks an important difference between Dewey and Elgin. Dewey's focus on transaction gives his epistemology a much more active and physical feel. Dewey begins in activity as well, but in almost the opposite manner. Elgin's commitments are commitments because they do not impede activity. For Dewey, we are active creatures, and thinking begins when normal activity cannot proceed. Thought begins in activity that has run up against a problem.

Inquiry, for Dewey, is an active process that involves engagement with experience. Part of this process is certainly physical; inquiry is a process of movement, transaction, testing, tinkering, and trying out. Physical activity is present at the beginning, middle, and end of inquiry. Dewey gives us a subject fully engaged with experience, a subject that emerges in transaction with objects, not a subject encountering the world then withdrawing to construct ideas and systems. At the very least, we reengage the physical world with our newly constructed ideas about it; we encounter, withdraw, and then reengage. Elgin does not even get us back to the ground. We construct, but such constructs are responsible only to other constructs,

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in coherence within systems of thought or correspondence to initially tenable commitments.

Dewey also situates us in the middle of things, but his is an active, transactional approach rather than a constructivist one. We are in the middle of thought and action, or, as he says in a famous early essay, between stimulus and response. In "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," Dewey breaks with the traditional stimulus-response model. Such a model has an individual being poked or prodded by the world (a stimulus), then reacting in some way (a response). This model was unacceptable for Dewey. It maintained the strict dichotomies and reification of mind/world and subject/object. This old model, a holdover from pre-scientific philosophy, was not active enough. It confined action to a "response." This model failed to see that activity reached back to the stimulus and forward past the response. Hearing was an activity necessary to receive the stimulus of sound in order to "respond" by running away. The old model failed to account for the transaction between stimulus and response or subject and object.[16]

Instead of this separation, Dewey proposed that stimulus and response are mutually constructed in action. A creature is always in activity, or what Dewey, in this essay, calls "coordination," manipulating as well as reacting to events in order to achieve its ends. Activity flows; it is not broken up into the discrete components of stimulus and response. Dewey says, "response is not merely *to* the stimulus, but *into* it."[17] A response is not merely a behavior in reaction. There is constant activity, but a response is an attempt on the creature's part to change some aspect of the situation. It is a modification of behavior in an attempt to modify the situation, to bring the creature and its environment back into equilibrium. Thus, a response reaches back into the stimulus in an attempt to change things. In changing the situation, it also has the potential to modify future activity, as both the situation and the creature adjust.

"Stimulus" and "response" are only post hoc concepts, useful for analysis. They do not exist as entities or things-in-themselves. Dewey is clear on this point. "The fact is that stimulus and response are not distinctions of existence, but teleological distinctions, that is, distinctions of function or part played with reference to reaching or maintaining an end."[18] For the purposes of understanding a particular behavior, it may be useful to carve up activity. But it must be understood that stimulus and response are there only in relation to one another and to the ends of the creature.

Dewey's subject is much more engaged in the world than Elgin's knower. Dewey's is in the middle of experience, attempting to modify her situation as the environment changes her. To the contrary, Elgin's knower exists simply in a world of beliefs and systems of thought, distanced from the active and challenging physical world. Elgin's principle error comes from failing to see how *in media res* we are. On one hand, she fails to acknowledge our contingency: We do not construct systems of thought *ex nihlo*, but instead we are born into, attempt to modify, and, occasionally, rebel against the various systems we encounter. On the other hand, she does not

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fully acknowledge our embeddedness in ongoing experience, seeking to change things to our liking, acting, and reacting at the same time. Elgin provides us with a useful criticism of and alternative to the absolute/arbitrary dualism that has paralyzed philosophy. Her proposed solution, however, would be aided by being more physical.

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1. Catherine Elgin, *Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.

2. Ibid.

3. Catherine Elgin, *Considered Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), ix.

4. Ibid., 102.

5. Elgin, *Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary*, 16.

6. Ibid., 15.

7. Elgin, *Considered Judgment*, 105.

8. Elgin repeatedly emphasizes the tenability of the schemes, convictions, and systems she discusses. I believe this leads to confusion as she develops her account. While the tenability of a conviction — its ability to be held and defended — is an important feature, especially as systems of thought are developing, an equally important feature is the fallibility of schemes, convictions, and standards. All of the components of a system of thought, while certainly tenable, can also be fallible. They could be wrong, incoherent, and incompatible with each other. Thus, they can be given up. Elgin makes this point, but her repeated insistence on tenability obscures it somewhat.

9. I realize that I have shifted here from talking about "convictions" to talking about "beliefs." Elgin uses the terms almost interchangeably. It seems to me that while it makes sense to talk of "new beliefs," it sounds inappropriate to refer to "new convictions." I suppose you can have a "new conviction," but that sounds like a legal issue, not an epistemological one. Elgin also remarks that the degree of coherence within a system of thought depends on the ends of that system. Certain systems may be able to deal with contradictions between certain beliefs just fine, as in a religious system of thought that holds Jesus is both God and man.

10. For Elgin, the fact/value distinction is another symptom of philosophy's bipolar disorder. Our values determine which features of the world we select as important (the facts), just as our experiences within the world influence what we think is important in the first place (our values).

11. Elgin, *Considered Judgment*, 11–13, 120–122.

12. I also think the epistemological claim that we are born *in media res* has existential import. Saying we are born into the middle of things, that we acquire habits of thought and action even before we are conscious of that acquisition, makes the desire for and attempt at a life of authenticity that much more difficult. For the existentialist, it would be nice if we had the complete constructive power Elgin wants to give us. We are always bound in some way by our habits, even as we try to overcome them.

13. All of Elgin's talk about science as the paradigmatic system of thought may beg the question about whether there is a unified thing called "science."

14. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xv. Rorty's full discussion of contingency takes place in the first three chapters.

15. John Dewey, *John Dewey: The Middle Works 1899–1924*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 121.

16. John Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 136–141.

17. Ibid., 138.

18. Ibid., 143.

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