

## BREDO, DEWEY, AND THE PESSIMISTIC METHOD: A RESPONSE <sup>1</sup>

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That great Anglo-Irish thinker of the late nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde, defined a pessimist as “one who, when he has the choice of two evils, chooses both.”<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that Eric Bredo and John Dewey are pessimistic fellows. Dewey built a whole career on the basis of pessimistic resolution of so-called “dualisms”; whenever he was faced with two contrary opinions or schools of thought, neither of which passed muster, he would try to embrace both. The (neo-Hegelian) secret was to find a way of talking about the dispute in which the “truth value” of the views of both the opposing parties could be preserved. As is well-known, he discussed about forty dualisms in this fashion in *Democracy and Education*; and he gave a short but clear exposition and justification for his method in his essay “The Child and the Curriculum.”

There are signs in the present important paper that Eric Bredo is following in the master’s footsteps. He outlines two rival schools of thought about the nature of human cognition, and he ends (surprisingly, given the negative tone of much of his discussion of the traditional view that he deals with first) by wanting to keep the best of both worlds. Thus, although he lists an impressive number of weaknesses in the assumptions underlying the computational view of mind, weaknesses that all relate to its preserving the “subject/object” distinction, he ends by asserting that he does not want to abandon this view in its entirety. And although his exposition of “situated cognition” is much more favorable, in the end he does not throw himself in wholeheartedly with this rival school of thought. Dewey-like, his last few paragraphs assure us that *both* schools of thought have *something* going for them.

One cannot help thinking that in the last seventh of the paper (or thereabouts) we are witnessing something like the deathbed reformation of a sinner, who has happily led a life of excess until the last possible moment. For, as I have already suggested, in the first six-sevenths of his discussion Bredo seemed to be greatly taken with the situated cognition perspective, and it is evident that he relished its attacks on the antiquated distinctions drawn by supporters of the traditional symbol-processing or computational view. But, at the very last moment, he underwent a conversion to Wildean pessimism, and with his last breath he embraced *everything*.

To avoid the charge that I am shilly-shallying, let me say at the outset that I, too, am an admirer of Dewey. Thus, when faced with the following two alternatives — Bredo is right and Bredo is wrong — I have no hesitation at all in saying that he is *both* right and wrong. Bredo is right, in that he is justified in embracing both the computational and the situated views of cognition; he is wrong insofar as he is half-hearted about it. And since he spent most of his time explaining the deficiencies of the computational view, and extolling the virtues of situated cognition, I shall take pains to do the reverse. If this does not make him enthusiastically pessimistic, nothing will!

I only have space to make three and a half points.

First, Bredo tries to resolve the dualism by arguing that there would be no problem at all if the supporters of the traditional computational view regarded it as only a tool, as “useful for solving certain problems”; he suggests that supporters of the computational view should see it simply as

being useful for modeling “human capabilities on the computer.” This is, of course, to place all the burden in resolving the differences between the two rival approaches on the shoulders of those who hold the traditional view — they have to make all the sacrifices, just as Galileo was the one to make the sacrifice when the Inquisition told him to regard the Copernican view that he supported as being a mere computational device! It is worth recalling that Dewey would never recommend such a one-sided resolution to the debate, and he would share the price of compromise more equitably!

There is good reason to side with Dewey here, for Bredo has offered no compelling reasons for us to suppose that cognition cannot be *both* situated *and* computational. To say that cognition is situated is not to explain it — it is to locate it; it is not to tell us what is going on — it is to tell us where and among what the goings on are going on. To see that single-minded adherence to the situated cognition approach does not permit a theorist to make much headway in explaining certain important aspects of cognition (if you will pardon the double pun), consider the following:

Question: What was going on in Einstein’s head that enabled him to produce his General Theory of Relativity?

Uncautious Situationist Answer: There is no story to be told about what was going on in his head! He produced his theory because there was a particularly rich interaction between him and his typewriter.

Second, cognition is *something*; but as we have already seen, some supporters of the situated view are likely, in their enthusiasm, to dissolve it away into nothingness. The supporters of computationalism, on the other hand, in principle can agree that cognition is situated (although in practice the uncautious members of this tribe forget this fact), but they can also take a potshot at explaining *what* this situated cognition *is*.

Bredo makes a brief critical point about situated cognition that is worth developing. He remarks that “Lave and Wegner’s social view of learning, which sees it as distributed across persons and things, could be seen as denying internalization, thus eliminating psychological concerns entirely.” I offer my own “exhibit” from the writings of Lave; in the Introduction to her co-edited volume *Understanding Practice* (1993), she attacks the traditional view wherein “learning researchers have studied learning as if it were a process contained in the mind of the learner,”<sup>3</sup> and she distributes the learning process *across* persons and actions, as if there was no “internal” story to be told about learning or the psychological mechanisms that make it possible.

Dewey, of course, is an ancestor of the situationists, and it is worth examining one of his relevant statements:

Thinking, or knowledge getting, is far from being the armchair thing it is often supposed to be. The reason it is not an armchair thing is that it is not an event going on exclusively within the cortex or cortex and vocal organs....Hands and feet, apparatus and appliances of all kinds are as much a part of it as changes within the brain.<sup>4</sup>

And Dewey’s friend and co-author Arthur Bentley put it in a memorable way when he attacked epistemologists for turning the human skin into “philosophy’s last line of defense”; as to the issue of where knowledge was located, he pointed out that “nobody under the old procedure has ever given a coherent answer.”<sup>5</sup> Bentley suggested that we should think about this issue in terms of “the knower-known-knowing-knowledge complex.”<sup>6</sup>

Dewey and Bentley are in a better position than many of their situationist descendants, for these venerable ancestors do not deny that thinking is a process in the brain — Dewey wisely stated that it is a process that *not only* involves the cortex. In other words, Dewey and Bentley do not deny that there is an inner story to tell (about events within the human skin); they simply insist that there are other (and perhaps more interesting) elements in a wider story that also needs to be told to round out

the picture. Supporters of the modern situated view, however, often get carried away and suggest (as Bredo's mild criticism points out) that there is *no* inner story to be told at all — for cognition is situated, and takes place entirely in the interaction between the person and the wider social and biological and physical environment.

There are, of course, weighty considerations that can be put forward to support the view that there *must be* an inner story to tell about cognition, even if it is not the only story, or the whole story. I can only outline one of these, that follows up a point I made earlier: take Albert Einstein out of an advanced physics colloquium, and insert in his place a stuffed toy or an imbecile. Neither of the latter will make much of an intellectual contribution to the proceedings. But from the perspective of the overzealous supporters of the situated view, the substitutes should contribute — after all, they would be situated in precisely the same setting as Albert, who *was* contributing. Clearly, what is left out of the account given by the situationists is that there must be some capacity or ability or inner processing located within Albert Einstein, which is absent in the case of the substitutes; this process or capacity or processing must be part of the causal mechanism that enables him to make contributions to the colloquium. Quality of interaction among the members of the social group constituting the colloquium is vital, but there is something in each of the members of the group that *enables* them to interact in a quality manner. And that something probably is an inner, psychological something, that the computational school has made a brave (although not yet successful) attempt to elucidate.

Third, another and perhaps more moderate way to put all this is that, when at their best, the adherents of situated cognition are wanting to change the topic of conversation. For whatever reason, the issue of what cognitive or psychological or computational mechanisms are at work inside learners is of no interest to them; they wish instead to focus on the things that learners do as they use their hands and feet and voices and make use of the social resources available to them. (In this respect, contemporary situationists are very close to Dewey, who was never very much concerned about inner mechanisms.) But one can have this orientation, and initiate a new conversation, without suggesting that researchers who are interested in internal psychological mechanisms are deluded. In this respect, Bredo perhaps misled us by painting a picture of two warring camps — they are not at war, they are merely two groups engaged in different discussions.

My half point is this: if we are concerned to improve educational practice, and we want to be prudent about how we should invest our research and development efforts, we might be better advised to join the conversation of the situationists rather than that of the computationists. For the prospect of being able to micro-manipulate the internal information-processing of students is very remote; on the other hand, we might relatively easily be able to do something positive by way of restructuring the socio-cultural settings in which the cognitive work of our students is situated. At any rate, when it comes to educational reform, I would throw myself in with the supporters of situated cognition.

I believe that Eric Bredo has done us a wonderful service by skillfully laying out a set of intriguing issues. With respect to such a vital matter as the nature of human cognition, philosophers of education ought not to withdraw from the debates and sit on the fence — for, wherever cognition is situated, it is probably not situated *there!*

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1. I am indebted to Ray McDermott for valuable comments on an earlier draft.
  2. Jon Winokur, ed., *The Portable Curmudgeon* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 215.
  3. Jean Lave, "The Practice of Learning," in *Understanding Practice*, ed. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.
  4. John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, n.d.), 13-14.

5. Arthur F. Bentley, "The Human Skin: Philosophy's Last Line of Defense," in *Inquiry into Inquiries* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 204.

6. *Ibid.*, 205.

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