Taking Experiential Givenism Seriously

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Abstract
In the past few years, a small but intense debate has transpired on the margins of mainstream scholarship in the discipline of Philosophy, particularly within the subfield of American pragmatism. While most philosophical pragmatists dedicate their attention to questions concerning how ideas improve experience (or the theory–practice continuum), those participating in this exchange have shown greater concern for an issue that is, at its core, a theoretical matter: Does the theory of experience espoused by the classic American philosopher John Dewey succumb to what contemporary analytic philosophers—for instance, Wilfred Sellars, Donald Davidson, and John McDowell—call the Myth of the Given? One commentator, Scott Aikin, claims that Dewey relied on noninferential and nonconceptual content or givens as perceptual inputs for cognitive experience. The upshot of Aikin’s objection is that these experiential givens constitute a proxy epistemological foundation for the beliefs that flow from inquiry—a position clearly in conflict with Dewey’s commitment to antifoundationalism. The objection assumes a slightly different form in the hands of another scholar of American pragmatism, Colin Koopman. Gregory Pappas and David Hildebrand respond to Koopman’s version of the objection. The goals of this article are to clarify the objection, highlight the stakes in the debate, identify misunderstandings of Dewey’s experiential metaphysics on both sides, and determine why the experiential givenism objection merits serious philosophical scrutiny in the future.

Keywords
experience, cognitivism, neuroscience, foundationalism, Myth of the Given, metaphysics, epistemology, John Dewey

On pain of the Myth of the Given, capacities that belong to the higher cognitive faculty must be operative in experience.

John McDowell (2009a, 2009b)

To avoid this foundationalism . . . contemporary pragmatists who are eager to revive the concept of experience must be on guard to not treat experience as a kind of ultimate given-ness against which we might be able to measure our truth claims.

Colin Koopman (2007, pp. 696-697; 2009, p. 84)

Introduction
In the past few years, a small but intense debate has transpired on the margins of mainstream scholarship in the discipline of Philosophy, particularly within the tradition known as American pragmatism. While most philosophical pragmatists struggle with questions about how ideas might improve experience (or the theory–practice continuum), those scholars participating in this exchange have shown greater concern for an issue that is, at its core, a theoretical matter: Does the theory of experience espoused by the classic American philosopher John Dewey succumb to what contemporary analytic philosophers—for instance, Wilfred Sellars, Donald Davidson and John McDowell—call the Myth of the Given? One commentator, Scott Aikin (2007, 2009), claims that Dewey relied on noninferential and nonconceptual content or givens as perceptual inputs for cognitive experience. The upshot of Aikin’s objection is that these experiential givens constitute a proxy epistemological foundation for the beliefs that flow from inquiry—a position clearly in conflict with Dewey’s commitment to antifoundationalism. The objection assumes a slightly different form in the hands of another scholar of American pragmatism, Colin Koopman (2009), who insists that invoking experience as an ultimate arbiter of truthfulness or moral value prevents Dewey from “seeing himself all the way clear of the givenism he was so careful to avoid in some forms” (p. 84). Contemporary Dewey scholars (hereafter “Deweyans”) who appeal to experiential givens risk resurrecting those same empiricist foundations that Dewey emphatically rejected, but sometimes lapsed into—foundations that would undermine the entire pragmatist project of philosophical reconstruction. David Hildebrand and Gregory Pappas (2010) respond to Koopman’s objection.

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with disbelief, noting that the Myth of the Given only applies to those knowledge claims that we would associate with epistemology proper, not the kind of noncognitive or primary experience so central to Dewey’s naturalistic metaphysics. The goals of this article are to clarify the objection, highlight the stakes in the debate, identify misunderstandings of Dewey’s experiential metaphysics on both sides, and determine why the experiential givenism objection merits serious philosophical scrutiny.

The article is organized as follows. The majority of the next section addresses what the “Myth of the Given” is, the ways in which it was formulated by analytic philosophers and, briefly, how it relates to philosophical pragmatism. In the following section “The Experiential Givenism Debate,” the debate over experiential givenism—a debate mainly between pragmatists—receives closer scrutiny, including accounts of the two main positions. The section “Dewey on Qualitative Thought” relies on a careful reading of Dewey’s essay “Qualitative Thought” to suggest the possibility that experience is phenomenologically, not empirically, given. In the section “Johnson on Embodied Cognition,” a more precise phenomenological account of Dewey’s theory of experience surfaces in Mark Johnson’s notion of embodied cognition. “Misunderstanding Dewey’s Experiential Metaphysics” reveals how several participants in the debate misunderstand Dewey’s theory of experience. The concluding section addresses the debate’s implications and why we might wish to take it more seriously.

What is the Myth of the Given?

While most (if not all) analytic philosophers believe that the Myth of the Given is a genuine philosophical problem, very few continental philosophers and pragmatists share their concern. Still, due to the ability of pragmatist ideas to cross, fuse, preserve, and influence multiple traditions—what Joseph Margolis (2010) calls “pragmatism’s advantage” (p. 1)—it is perhaps unsurprising that analytic pragmatists would attempt to square the Myth of the Given with pragmatist theories of experience (Ralston, 2011). In this way, the experiential givenism debate represents a vital link between the parallel traditions of analytic philosophy and pragmatism. I first briefly address the Myth of the Given exchange in the analytic philosophy literature before moving to the parallel debate in the pragmatist literature. My account of the Myth of the Given debates in analytic philosophy is not intended to be exhaustive. The extant literature on this topic is far too extensive to completely summarize here. Instead, mine is a synoptic account meant only to shed light on the experiential givenism debate in the pragmatist literature.

Imagine you are standing in an amphitheater and suspended above your head is a large green translucent cube. When you look up to observe the cube, you have a specific visual experience. Call this experience E. For clarity, think of E as having a list of phenomenal properties that compose its sensible/perceptual (or if you are a Kantian, intuitive) content: phenomenal property GREEN, phenomenal property LARGE, phenomenal property TRANSLUCENT, phenomenal property CUBISH, and so on and so forth. Traditional empiricists appreciate experiences such as E as the ultimate font of empirical knowledge. When a human observer has an E, she will typically form the belief that there exists a large translucent green cube above her. Why is this? There are two mental events and an inferential pattern at work here; experience E and belief B, such that an experience with the same set of phenomenal properties, that is, the same sensible/perceptual content, results in the same belief about that content. If the belief is put in form “That is a large translucent green cube up there,” then it has propositional content too.

One view (often ascribed to Donald Davidson) is that having some direct or nonconceptually mediated awareness of perceptual content, in this case E, simply causes a conceptual belief, in this case B. However, this view is problematic, as “it is a . . . Myth to think [that] sensibility by itself, without any involvement of capacities that belong to our rationality, can make things available for our cognition” (McDowell, 2009a, p. 2). Wilfrid Sellars’s (1963) solution is to substitute warrant for descriptive causation: “[W]e are not giving an empirical description . . . [but] we are placing it [the perceptual content] in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says” (p. 169). Sellars conceives the relation between experience E and belief B not as one of causation, but of justification “in the logical space of reasons” (Calcaterra, 2011, p. xix). However, the objection to Sellars’ account (often ascribed to John McDowell) is that perceptual experience is not thoroughly nonconceptual and noninferential content, subsequently carved up in a “space of reasons.” Hence, it is not made ready to receive conceptual content vis-à-vis the observing agent’s cognition; rather, experience comes to the agent with conceptual content already there. To appreciate the lesson of Immanuel Kant’s (1929) Critique of Pure Reason, “Thought without content is empty, intuitions without content are blind” (p. 93). Understanding involves the synthesis of intuitions and concepts, not intuitions alone. To claim that perceptual content is nonconceptual and thus experientially given, McDowell (2004) asserts, is to accept that “the space of reasons is . . . more extensive than the space of concepts” (p. 6). Surely this view is wrong, though, for concepts prefigure reasons. So, to preserve the reason-giving relation between E and B, experience must first be conceptually articulated, just as beliefs are.

One mistaken assumption is that givenism is identical to foundationalism. However, the two, while related, are nevertheless distinguishable. Whereas foundationalism structures the epistemic warrant for beliefs in terms of some noninferentially justified foundation (i.e., a basic or foundational belief), givenism points to the origin of the warrant as nonconceptual, noninferential content offering an “autonomous source of reasons” (Aikin, 2009, pp. 19-20). Moreover,
experiential givenism, though perfectly consistent with empiricist foundationalism, does not necessarily entail that same foundationalism. According to McDowell (2004), if we are to understand experience as “a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things area,” then how we determine the ways in which experience is tribunal-like depends on what is meant by the term *experience*, not *foundations* (p. xii; Houser, 2011, p. 65). For pragmatists, though, the worry is that by appealing to experience as the ultimate arbiter of epistemic claims, they are invoking experience as a primordial given, grounding knowledge on experiential foundations. Thus, their appeals to experience qua given are incompatible with their professed antifoundationalism (Margolis, 1984; Rorty, 1979; Rosenbaum, 2002).

**The Experiential Givenism Debate**

Although dispute over the Myth of the Given emerged in a vibrant exchange between analytic philosophers, including Wilfred Sellars (1963, 1997), John McDowell (2004, 2009a, 2009b), and Donald Davidson (1983), it has since crossed over to another philosophical tradition: American pragmatism. In this new domain, what has ensued is a smaller, though no less heated, debate between a select group of classical pragmatist and neo-pragmatist scholars. Classical pragmatists are those scholars who see themselves as expounding and extending the views of pragmatist figures such as William James, John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce, while neo-pragmatists have developed more syncretic forms of pragmatism (usually joined with strands of continental, analytic, and postmodernist philosophy). In “Pragmatism, Experience, and the Given,” Scott Aikin (2009) contends that Dewey’s experiential metaphysics invokes a noninferential, nonconceptual given, namely, the notion of experience itself. He isolates a single passage in Dewey’s oeuvre to demonstrate that the distinction between an empiricist and pragmatist theory of experience is one of degree, not kind:

> Empiricism is conceived as tied up with what has been, or is “given.” But experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with the future is the “salient trait.” (MW 10:6; cited in Aikin, 2009, p. 24)

While empiricists such as David Hume focus on “what we can understand in terms of the given,” pragmatists such as John Dewey emphasize “how it [the given] can be put to use” (Aikin, 2009, p. 24). The difference is between sensible content that updates our beliefs and sensible content that updates our beliefs for a specific purpose. On the pragmatist account, that purpose is use. Pragmatism is, then, only one step removed from empiricism in its treatment of experience as initially given. As Dewey denies that experience is “exclusively a knowledge affair,” Aikin (2009) reminds his reader that it “is at least partially a knowledge affair, and the DG [Doctrine of the Given] is an explanation of how that is so” (p. 24). The pragmatist emulates the empiricist, assuming that nonconceptual and noninferential perceptual content, that is, given, are raw material for an agent’s cognition, from which she draws inferences and carves up experience into increasingly complex conceptual and propositional content. The claim that experience is shot through with givens in this sense is, of course, a myth. As McDowell demonstrates, experience already comes to us flush with its own conceptual content. So, Aikin (2009) concludes that Dewey and some Deweyans fall into the trap of experiential givenism and foundationalism when they appeal to experience as grounding further knowledge claims and beliefs (e.g., “experience teaches us such-and-such”) as well as “some non-inferential cognitive input . . . necessary for inquiry” (p. 24).

Colin Koopman’s version of the experiential givenism objection, while similar to Aikin’s, is more sweeping in its scope. Pragmatism scholars lean heavily on experience that is had or felt (precogitively) as a justification for epistemic and moral claims resulting from rigorous inquiry. By choosing a nonconceptual ground (experience) for a knowledge-generating process (inquiry), they inadvertently succumb to the Myth of the Given. According to Koopman (2009), this is unsurprising, as John Dewey was prone to the same mistake. The essay that demonstrates Dewey’s flirtation with experiential givenism is his 1915 “The Logic of Judgments of Practice” (pp. 83-84). While Dewey initially argues against the possibility of immediate perceptual experience, he eventually lapses into talk of perceptual givens available for agents to take or select for use in cognition. Admittedly, Dewey’s notions of experience and inquiry were somewhat inchoate in this early essay. Still, Koopman warns, “givenism could creep back into Dewey’s theory of knowledge by way of his conception of those initial indeterminacies that in his mature epistemology and logic play the role of motivators for inquiry” (p. 84). When classical pragmatists build Dewey’s metaphysics of experience on the stilts of experiential givens, it is nearly identical to placing it on empiricist foundations. In Koopman’s words, it involves “putting forth their metaphysics in the wrong kind of way, such that their metaphysics resembles first philosophy more than it resembles a postulated tool of inquiry” (p. 83). Not only does the positing of experiential givens conflict with classical pragmatists’ antifoundationalism, but it also, and more devastatingly, undermines the entire pragmatist project of reconstructing philosophy as a historicist and meliorist enterprise. In the shadow of experiential givenism and empiricist foundationalism, pragmatist philosophy reverts to the same “quest for certainty” that Dewey so staunchly opposed.

To date, only two Dewey scholars, David Hildebrand and Gregory Pappas, have responded to Koopman’s experiential givenism objection. While it is far from complete, their review of Koopman’s book suggests some possible strategies for articulating a more comprehensive response. Hildebrand...
and Pappas (2010) summarize Koopman’s objection as follows: “The charge against CPs [Classic Pragmatists] like Dewey was that their use . . . of experience . . . encouraged them toward tacit acceptance of the trans-experiential ‘Given’ which Wilfrid Sellars warned about.” Instead of an original objection, they see it as a resuscitated or “repurposed . . . charge” that Richard Rorty made “against Dewey” brought to bear “against CP [Classical Pragmatism] in general” (p. 3). For Hildebrand and Pappas, the objection draws battle-lines between classical pragmatists, who lean heavily on Dewey’s unifying notion of experience, and neo-pragmatists, who are moved instead by more variegated appeals to language, culture, and discourse. However, the experiential givenism objection is clearly misdirected, they contend, as no conclusive textual proof of givenism or foundationalism can be detected in Dewey’s oeuvre. Moreover, Sellars’s Myth of the Given implicates knowing (or in Aikin’s words “a knowing affair”), not experiencing (in Dewey’s more totalizing sense):

"The target of Sellar’s [sic] critique is a certain conception of knowledge—experience in the modern sense; but this is not “experience” in Dewey’s dominant sense, namely, the best methodological starting point for a melioristic philosophy in a processual world. (p. 5)

Experience (or lived experience) offers agents a practical “starting point” from which to launch inquiries, solve problems, and improve life’s conditions, as well as a point to return to in a “processual world” of what Dewey called “doing and undergoing.” While Hildebrand and Pappas’s reply to Koopman clarifies the two positions in the experiential givenism debate, it only travels parts of the journey toward offering a full account of Dewey’s experiential metaphysics, let alone one that repels the experiential givenism objection.

Dewey on Qualitative Thought

One of the best single writings illustrating the technical nature of John Dewey’s (1996) theory of experience is his 1930 essay “Qualitative Thought” (LW 5:243-261). In contrast to the empiricism espoused by many early analytic philosophers, human experience does not begin with the reception of sensible impressions, sense data, or other atomistic elements in the experienced world, but comes to us in full bloom as qualities initially felt or had in a “situation” and later selected and determined as “objects in thought” (Dewey, 1996, LW 5:246). Throughout the history of philosophy, qualities have been relegated to a lower station relative to objects, concepts, and classes, whether properties of mind-independent objects (in realist metaphysics), predicates of actual or formal concepts (in Aristotelian and formal logic), or characteristics of classes (in set theory). Objects, concepts, and classes are distinctive and objectively quantifiable, whereas qualities are vague and only subjectively appreciated. However, as Dewey (1996) observes in his “stoical red Indian” example, the former fail to capture the experiential richness of phenomena:

Take the proposition: “The red Indian is stoical.” This is interpreted either as signifying that the Indian in question is characterized by the property of stoicism in addition to that of redness, or that he belongs to the class of stoical objects. The ordinary direct sense of the proposition escapes recognition in either case. For this sense expresses the fact that the indigenous American was permeated throughout by a certain quality, instead of being an object possessing a certain quality along with others. He lived, acted, endured stoically (LW 2:244).

According to Dewey, the experience of the stoic Native American is permeated through and through by a certain felt quality that is had prior to being selected, determined, and cognized. The experience occurs within the context of a situation, or “a complex existence that is held together in spite of its internal complexity by the fact that it is dominated and characterized by a single quality” (LW 5:246). The single pervasive quality is a quality of the total situation, not of the selected object. In contrast, the analytic philosopher understands the agent as having experience E, of which its phenomenal properties are Red, Indian, and Stoical. As the properties Indian and Stoical would, in all likelihood, be reducible to another set of more basic sensible properties, let us consider just the single phenomenal property of Red. In scientific parlance, the retinal and neuronal patterns indicate to the perceiver that the object is red. In the language of representationalist epistemology, the Red sense data or sense impression inside my head corresponds to the red object in the external world. However, the ordinary experience of the stoic Native American in its qualitative wholeness eludes detection, as the decomposed or analyzed experience cannot do justice to the experience that “[h]e lived, acted, endured stoically” (Dewey, 1996, LW 5:244).

How does Dewey’s essay speak to the experiential givenism objection? In short, Dewey believes that the primary reason analytic philosophers mistake the quality of a situation for a property of an object is that they subscribe to a very limited “subject-predicate theory of propositions” (LW 5:245). Critically important for this theory is the idea that the “subject is ‘given’—ultimately apart from thinking—and then thought adds to what is given a further determination or else assigns it to a ready-made class of things” (LW 5:245). Predication and classification are cognitive operations performed (or added) to a perceived object—once converted into the subject of a proposition, but initially outside the bounds of thought (i.e., nonconceptual). The simplest critique of this propositional theory of knowledge is that not all experience involves cognition. Some experiences are felt or had, not analyzed, or known. The more complex and forceful criticism is that the attribution of properties to objects in the absence any consideration for the quality of the total situation mistakes propositional knowledge for the method by
which it is obtained. The proposition is not given prior to thought (i.e., nonconceptually) as a sensible object of experience. Instead, the proposition is the outcome of inquiry, the result of selecting, determining, attributing, predicing, and classifying objects only after initially experiencing the situation permeated throughout by a certain quality. Appreciating experience as an assembly of preexisting objects to which agents attach phenomenal properties, as many analytic philosophers do, involves positing a given (or subject of propositional knowledge) and thereby ignoring the qualitatively rich background against which cognitive operations occur. Dewey’s (1996) point is that,

the selective determination and relation of objects is controlled by reference to a situation—to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality, so that failure to acknowledge the situation leaves, in the end, the logical force of objects and their relations inexplicable. (LW 5:246)

The problem of given-ness, according to Dewey (1996), lies not in the qualitatively rich experience that we initially feel or have in a “situation” and later select and determine as “objects in thought” and inquiry (LW 5:246). Rather, it lies in the faulty assumption that experience lacks these pervasive qualities, except insofar as we intellectually convert conceptual content into propositional form, attribute properties, and thereby transform that content into proper objects of knowledge. Therefore, the way in which Sellars frames the Myth of the Given, i.e., as a problem of how to ground knowledge in empirically present, nonconceptual content, fails prey to Dewey’s charge of given-ness (or version of the Myth of the Given), for it neglects the felt quality of the total situation out of which sensible content is only later discriminated.

Johnson on Embodied Cognition

While the strength of Dewey’s metaphysics resides in its ability to capture the qualitative immediacy of what is generically referred to as experience, it might appear weak as a factual-scientific explanation of embodied cognition. Mark Johnson addresses this shortcoming in his work on how cognitive science and neuroscience support Dewey’s theory of experience.

In Experience and Nature, Dewey argued for an emergent concept of mind, or what he calls “body-mind,” whereby anticipating future contingencies involves a reciprocal dance between brain, body, and nervous system, not merely conscious control over actions. For Dewey (1996), “body-mind” is

what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations [. . . where] “body” designates the continued and conserved, the registered and cumulative operation of factors continuous with the rest of nature, inanimate as well as animate; while “mind” designates the characters and consequences which are differential, indicative of features which emerge when “body” is engaged in a wider, more complex and interdependent situation. (LW 1:285)

Furthermore, he claims that,

when locomotor organs are accompanied by distance receptors, response to the distant in space becomes increasingly prepotent and equivalent in effect to response to the future in time. A response toward what is in the future is in effect a prediction of a later contact. (LW 1:197)

Consciousness for Dewey is the capacity for judgment formation. Dewey’s emergent theory of mind was not the product of armchair philosophizing, but the result of carefully translating research by members of the American school of neurology, including Adolf M. Child, C. L. Herrick, Henry Donaldson, and Frederick Tilney, into terms suitable for a lay audience (Dalton, 2002, p. 11). Unsurprisingly, more recent advances in neurological and cognitive science research have superseded these findings. Nevertheless, Johnson (2007) argues that recent studies, especially on brain architecture, “make sense of Dewey’s claim that our experience always begins with a pervasive unifying quality of a whole situation, within which we then discriminate objects, with their properties and relations to each other” (p. 100).

Johnson’s best evidence that brain science supports Dewey’s theory of experience comes from the work of cognitive neuroscientist Don Tucker. Tucker examines the architecture of the brain, noticing that there is a “core-shell structure” that supports a “higher” level capacity to think conceptually as well as a “lower” level abilities to feel and monitor. Johnson (2007) explains,

To vastly oversimplify, our brain developed through evolution by adding new structures and layers on top of more primitive parts shared with some other animals. The present-day result is a brain with core limbic structures (mostly responsible for body monitoring, motivation, emotions, and feelings) that are connected to “higher” cortical layers that have ever more differentiated functions, such as perception, body movement, action planning, and reasoning. One striking feature of this core-shell organization is that structures in the core regions are massively interconnected, whereas structures in the shell are sparsely interconnected. An important consequence of this is that there is more functional differentiation and more modularity of brain areas in the cortical shell than in the limbic core. (p. 100)

Organisms with this more evolved brain architecture can select, distinguish, and analyze objects, signify the meanings of concepts, and make inferential leaps, relying on the brain’s cortical shell, once they have felt (or had) an experience of the qualitatively whole situation, relying on the brain’s limbic core. Shifting between core limbic structures to shell cortical structures, the outcome is a two-level “core-to-shell movement of cognition” from detecting a single pervasive
quality in the situation to engaging in more advanced operations, such as conceptual thinking and ratiocination (p. 101).

As an outgrowth of this highly evolved brain architecture, sensorimotor trends structure the ways in which body-minds encounter environments, physically and conceptually. In what Johnson (2007) calls “image schemas,” we can identify “dynamic, recurring pattern[s] of organism–environment interactions” (p. 136). Our bodily architecture allows us to view objects in certain ways and then to extend these into higher level concepts and even inferences. For instance, the “CONTAINER image schema” permits us to conceive an object as being in another object, whether a fly in a bottle or a brain in a body (p. 139). Likewise, the “SOURCE-PATH-GOAL” schema allows agents to understand progression from an origin along a route as an advance toward the objective. As image schemas press the limits of our combined brain architecture and perceptual fields, they are neither restricted to the mind or the body; they implicate both. By synthesizing image schemas, Johnson notes, it is possible to understand more complex linguistic operations (e.g., into combines CONTAINER and SOURCE-PATH schema) and inferences (such as transitivity through double CONTAINMENT; pp. 139, 142).

What Johnson offers is no less than credible scientific support for Dewey’s theory of experience. Recent studies on brain architecture and function substantiate Dewey’s account of how experience ebbs and flow between its primary and secondary phases.

Misunderstanding Dewey’s Experiential Metaphysics

Having presented the Myth of the Given, the experiential givensm debate, one of Dewey’s best explanations of his theory of experience and Johnson’s evidence that the theory is scientifically warranted, I would like to return to the experiential givensm debate with the express purpose of identifying some critical mistakes on both sides. My intention is not to resolve the issue. Nor is it to defend classic pragmatists or Deweyans against neo-pragmatists. Instead, it is to provide a robust account of Dewey’s metaphysics of experience and then pinpoint some of the difficulties encountered by the debate’s participants. It is apropos that Dewey would devise a “metaphysics” for describing the generic traits or qualities of experience, rather than (pace McDowell) merely describing what we mean by the term experience or (pace Rorty) jettisoning the term metaphysics altogether.

Dewey’s metaphysics divulges the generic qualities and patterns that underlie our experience of the felt and known world. In the history of philosophy, brilliant figures, from Plato to Kant to Russell, were mistaken in claiming that cognition, knowing, or reasoning is either the predominant or the only feature of so-called real or really real human experience. Rather, it is a small part of our experience of the natural world and a single mode among many for appreciating what Dewey terms the “generic traits of existence.” “A naturalistic metaphysics,” Dewey notes, “is bound to consider reflection as itself a natural event occurring within nature because of the traits of the latter” (LW 1:62). As they are bound up with these generic traits, our experiences of natural events are objective and cognitively rich. However, objectivity here does not mean purely factual, impartial, a God’s-eye view or transcending all perspectives. The tendency to bifurcate our experience into categories of pure objectivity and plural, subjective perspectives is one that Dewey eschews in his naturalistic metaphysics. Instead, the cognitive foreground of analyzing and resolving problematic situations occurs against the noncognitive (or precognitive) background of a situation, initially felt or had and pervaded by a single unifying quality.

The degree of affectivity and qualitative wholeness versus objectivity and cognitive-richness is reflected in Dewey’s distinction between two phases of experience: (a) primary and (b) secondary. Only when humans are confronted with an entirely novel and problematic situation do they shift from “primary experience,” which is habitually “had” and mediated by previously formed habit, to “secondary experience,” which demands genuine reflection, “knowing” and inquiry. “The distinction between primary and secondary experience,” Dewey (1996) explains, “is one between what is experienced as a result of a minimum of incidental reflection and what is experienced in consequence of continued and regulated reflective inquiry” (LW 1:3-4). While the dominant mode of experience for Dewey is what Lenore Langsdorf (2002) calls “a complex affair of doing and undergoing . . . that is ‘felt’ rather than ‘known’” (p. 151), experience is nevertheless a cyclical, ebb-and-flow movement between precognitive or felt havings and cognitive knowings (Ralston, 2009, p. 191).

The outcome of each successful inquiry is that experience grows in ordered richness. Dewey (1996) defines inquiry as the “controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into a [determinate and unified] situation” (LW 12:55). “The existence of inquiries,” Dewey claims in the Logic, “is not a matter of doubt. They enter into every area of life and into every aspect of every area” (LW 12:105). In “secondary experience,” inquirers ideally achieve the objectives of inquiry and, consequently, deliver the objects or outcomes of inquiry to “primary,” practical, or everyday experience as settled meanings. The net result is that experience becomes enriched with an ensemble of intelligent habits (LW 1:379; Fott, 1998; Ryan, 1994). Enriched primary experience, or what Kenneth Chandler (1977) calls the “alpha and omega of all theorizing,” also renders ideational tools available for use or “ready-to-hand” (p. 51; Heidegger, 1962; Ryan, 2004, p. 20). So, once learned through focused inquiry these experiential lessons are stored or funded as resources in primary experience for use in future inquiries. Henceforth, they can be accessed and acted on easily, framing our ongoing experiences in intelligent and habit-governed ways. In the
language of cognitive neuroscience, those neural connections responsible for conceptual meaning at the shell cortical layers can in turn impact structures at the limbic level responsible for conceptual meaning at the shell cortical layers. The perceptually given is the foundation of empirical knowledge. The idea of observation . . . constituted by certain self-authenticating nonverbal episodes, the authority of which is transmitted to verbal and quasi-verbal performances . . . is, of course, the heart of the Myth of the Given. For the given, in epistemological tradition, is what is taken by these self-authenticating episodes. These “takings” are, so to speak, the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge, the “knowings in presence” which are presupposed by all other knowledge, both the knowledge of general truth and the knowledge “in absence” of other particular matters of fact. Such is the framework in which traditional empiricism makes its characteristic claim that the perceptually given is the foundation of empirical knowledge. (p. 77)

Notwithstanding a sophisticated Sellarsian account, the relationship between givenism and foundationalism is more often one of equivocation, not entailment. For the charges of givenism and foundationalism to stick (and by implication, the pragmatist’s project of philosophical reconstruction to fail), the critic must first substantiate the presence of a non-inferential and nonconceptual content to the given (concerning the origin of the warrant of belief) and, second, demonstrate that the structure of the warrant is identical to primary experience (hence foundational). Clearly, the critics have been unable to accomplish either. Until they do, the experiential givenism objection remains at best a dubious charge. Although a fuller case would need to be made, it appears that the structure of the warrant of belief is found in inquiry or secondary (not primary) experience. It is only by experimentally testing beliefs, on Dewey’s (1996) account of inquiry, that they become “warranted” or “warranted assertions” (LW 14: 168-9). As secondary experience is preempted by primary experience, this could lead to the conclusion that primary experience is the ultimate source of the warrant of our beliefs, and thus a version of the given. Once again, though, primary experience provides some of the conceptual resources for that warrant, and so cannot be the same nonconceptual given that worried Sellars, Davidson, and McDowell.

Conclusion

The experiential givenism debate still occupies a marginal place in mainstream Philosophy and American pragmatism
literature. So, what moves might shift it away from the margin and toward the center of concern? In the discipline of Public Administration, a similar debate emerged, but with a greater emphasis on the implications for the practice of governance. At the very least, a more practical orientation could nudge the debate beyond the current state of impasse. Given John Dewey’s concern for “the problems of men” (MW 10:42), it is unsurprising that classic pragmatist would prefer this route. However, it is also a suggestion that would likely please neo-pragmatists who, following Richard Rorty’s (1996) similar call, substitute “idealizations of our practices . . . [for] foundations for those practices” (p. 333). Likewise, Robert Brandom (2008) believes that a paramount concern for practice binds classical pragmatists and neo-pragmatists, Deweyans and Rortyans:

The only question that remains [once we eliminate questions of truth and objectivity] is one of social engineering: what shape do our practices need to take in order to institute this kind of normative status? This is a Deweyian question that Rorty would have welcomed. (p. 10)

The proposal to engage the practical side of experiential givenism will strike some as odd, though, as the debate occurs at such a high level of abstraction, insulated from the practical concerns of most nonphilosophers (perhaps reflecting its origins in analytic philosophy’s obscure epistemology literature). Nevertheless, there is some practical value to the proposal—value that becomes evident once we view it through the prism of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1922) aphorism of climbing a ladder. We must climb the ladder of a philosophical problem to eventually kick it away. In doing so, we therapeutically overcome it (Colapietro, 2011). Therefore, classic pragmatists, neo-pragmatists, and nonpragmatists alike should take this heretofore marginal debate seriously for at least two reasons. First, it highlights critically important issues at the intersection between two major philosophical traditions (analytic philosophy and American pragmatism) as well as two prominent branches of the same tradition (classic pragmatism and neo-pragmatism). Resolving the debate could potentially bridge gaps and facilitate conversation between these diverse traditions and branches, thereby making Philosophy as a discipline more inclusive—or what Koopman (2009) calls a “big-tent” (p. 48). Second, and perhaps more importantly, working through or getting over this theoretical debate (following Wittgenstein’s aphorism) could empower contemporary pragmatists, especially Deweyans, to return to what they arguably do best: the practical business of pragmatic inquiry or testing philosophical ideas for the sake of evaluating their concrete consequences in lived experience.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes
1. This is a selective account of the Myth of the Given literature tailored for the specific purposes of this article. For more extensive commentaries, see Foss (1968), Brandom (1994), Chisholm, (1964/1996), Sosa (1997), Bonevac (2002), Alston (2002), and Hanna (2011).
2. Citations to The Collected Works follow the conventional method, LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or EW (Early Works), volume/page number. For example, MW 10:354 refers to the Middle Works, vol. 10, p. 354.
3. Although Rorty (1979) extensively discussed the Myth of the Given in his first book, he never used it to criticize Dewey’s theory of experience. He did worry that Dewey’s experimental metaphysics, just by virtue of it being called “metaphysics,” would reinvigorate the foundationalist metaphysics of the past. This is likely what Hildebrand and Pappas are referring to when they claim that Koopman has “repurposed Rorty’s charge.”
4. This might be a slight overstatement in the case of Dewey’s theory of experience, as inquiry tests beliefs and thus is closer to what Sellars (1997) calls “the ultimate court of appeals” (p. 69).
5. A parallel debate about experiential givenism, antifoundationalism, and pragmatism was waged by pragmatists—most notably, Patricia Shields (2003)—and neo-pragmatists—especially Hugh Miller (2005)—concerned about the relationship between public administration theory and practice. For a summary of the debate, see Ralston (2010).

References


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