A Dogma Not Worth Exhuming: Empiricism in Language, Intelligence, and Thought[1]

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I will demonstrate that a central presupposition of Barrow's *Language, Intelligence, and Thought* (1993) is the empiricist dogma that there is "some fundamental cleavage between truths which are *analytic*, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are *synthetic*, or grounded in fact" (Quine, 1953, p. 20). The analytic/synthetic distinction survived after Quine's revolutionary work only as a pragmatic tool for distinguishing language users' intentions in given contexts. However, in Barrow's recent book, the intrinsic, fundamental distinction as found in logical empiricism has been exhumed. Reliance on the dogma, I contend, threatens the positive aspects of many of Barrow's ideas. The role for philosophy of education in scholarly research on intelligence, which Barrow wishes to articulate, cannot be founded on an unsound philosophical theory. The empiricist dogma that the analytic and synthetic differ fundamentally is not worth exhuming.

I will give a very brief overview of the main points of Barrow's thesis, and mention several caveats about the overall agenda, though the latter will not be pursued in depth. Thence, I will turn to the main task of showing how the empiricist version of the analytic/synthetic distinction is presupposed in much of Barrow's argument. Finally, I will provide a brief sketch of how to study language, intelligence, and thought without the empiricist dogma.

An Overview with Caveats

I take Barrow's main points to be these four: (a) we should conceive of education as the development of understanding; (b) understanding comes in eight basic varieties, corresponding to eight developed traditions of enquiry—namely, those that deal with scientific, philosophical, mathematical, historical, aesthetic, moral, religious or metaphysical, and literary questions; (c) understanding corresponding to these eight traditions of enquiry is the only educationally interesting and relevant notion of being intelligent; and (d) developing intelligence, or understanding, in the sense defined above is equivalent to developing individuals' linguistic capacity.

I have three caveats that are significant enough to mention, but are not related closely to my central point. First, in my judgement, the most interesting thesis is the fourth—namely, that understanding in an educationally defensible sense should be equated with developed linguistic capacity in the eight traditions of inquiry. The idea is that learning science, for instance, involves far more than rote learning of facts, formulae, and definitions. It also involves grasping what we might call "the metalanguage of science"—notions of evidence, justification, observation, theory, causal generalization, hypothesis, and so on—and grasping the implications of this metalanguage for distinguishing between what we know with certainty, tentatively, or as conjecture. Curricula in science and other subjects sadly lack a focus on such a metalanguage.