
Experience and the Growth of Understanding: A Book Review

Written by David W. Hamlyn

Reviewed by Mulugeta Yayeh*

Received: 17 February 2017; Accepted: 29 May 2018

Media: e-book, 124 pages

Language: English

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Year of Publication: 2010

ISBN: 0-203-86113-2 (e-book) 0 7100 8735 7 (Print)

Introduction

The book *Experience and the Growth of Understanding* was written by David W. Hamlyn (1924-2012), who was a professor of philosophy at the University of London at Birkbeck. Organized under 11 chapters, the book presents a critical examination of diverse issues pertinent to experience, understanding, learning, and knowledge. A close look at the 124 pages of the book reveals that the author's work could be put under two general themes. The first general theme, which is discussed in chapters one to four, was concerned with an assessment and critics of the author concerning the major epistemological views. Here he tried to thoroughly investigate great works of scholars with regard to the source of knowledge. In the second general theme, which is presented in the remaining chapters of the book, Hamlyn proposed his own views and suggestions on major issues of experience, and its relationships with understanding, knowledge, and learning. With an intention to ameliorate the "ego-centric view" of both traditional and modern theories of knowledge, Hamlyn explicates his own positions on diverse issues of knowledge and understanding.

*Asst. Prof., College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Bahir Dar University.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to acquaint readers with the major themes of the book and the philosophical positions reflected by its author. My reflections and comments concerning the merits and limitations of the book are also included. Finally, attempts are made to show the contributions and implications of this book to the field of education.

An Overview of the Book

Since long ago, the question whether knowledge is acquired from experience or other sources has been a major concern for philosophers. However, philosophers have been responding to this fundamental question differently. One important thing that the author had tried to address in this book, therefore, is the positions of the two major contending epistemological views that explain the source of knowledge. In line with this, the author has briefly summarized, at the beginning of the book, the views of *empiricism* and *rationalism*. The underlying assumptions of each epistemological view, concerning the source of knowledge, are briefly explained. In doing so, the author indicates that in empiricism, an epistemological view that gives due attention for sense-perception, *experience* is the major source of knowledge and understanding. In empiricism, as elaborated by the author, induction has a substantial place and knowledge, in general, is viewed as *a posteriori*. In contrast to empiricism, the author shows, rationalism considers *reason* to be the most important source of knowledge. Proponents of this school of thought, Hamlyn indicates, further contend that all of our ideas and knowledge are innate. The author also reminds his readers that rationalism gives much emphasis for deduction, and views knowledge as *a priori*.

In the next three chapters, i.e., chapters two to four, the author thoroughly explicates the essence and major assumptions of the three epistemological views. Here the author closely examined the works of Skinner, Chomsky, and Piaget, as representatives of the *Genesis without Structure*, *Structure without Genesis*, and *Structure with*

Genesis philosophical views respectively. In these chapters, Hamlyn tried to show the limitations of each of the three epistemological views. In doing so, the author generalized that all of the three epistemological views have failed to provide a satisfactory framework concerning the source of knowledge. Regarding this, Hamlyn boldly indicated his position as follows: *I believe that both philosophers and psychologists have too often ignored or failed to notice all that is essential to that framework* (p. 44). In short, in this part of the book, the author rejected the analyses given by proponents of the three epistemological views. He also concluded that their account of knowledge is too egocentric.

In the book, what one can easily understand is the fact that Professor Hamlyn was a sympathizer of the *Genesis* with structure epistemological view. However, Piaget's cognitive development theory was not entertained by him. In the book, the author criticized Piaget for not giving an adequate account of objectivity in his cognitive development theory. According to the author, concepts such as knowledge, truth, and objectivity have social nature. However, as he asserts, Piaget had overlooked this social aspect of learning. In line with this, Hamlyn even dared to generalize that *Piaget was a learning theorist, without a learning theory* (p. 35).

In the remaining chapters of the book, Hamlyn presents his own answer to the very philosophical question, *how is the growth of understanding through experience possible?* His intention here is to mitigate what he perceived as *the egocentric view of knowledge*, advocated by the three epistemological views. In doing so, he explicated his position concerning the general nature of experience and its relation to knowledge and understanding. In this regard, he generalized that perception (sense perception), which requires sense-experiences, is the foundation of understanding. For the author, perception involves the possession of concepts and understanding or knowledge of something. The role of concepts for understanding is given due attention by the author. Concepts, which are results of perception, are considered by him critical for the beginning of

understanding. In this regard, Hamlyn contends that “since having a concept implies knowledge and presupposes knowledge, it might seem that no concept can be acquired without pre-existing knowledge” (p. 66). He also states that knowledge acquisition involves the connection of items (new and old), and as a result, one cannot know or come to know one thing without knowing something. Through this, the author develops his own position concerning the general nature of experience and its relations with knowledge and understanding.

Learning was one of the issues that Hamlyn tried to address in this book. For him, learning means the connection between what one comes to know and what one knows already (p.68). He further asserts that learning is always and simply a matter of gaining fresh knowledge and understanding (p. 89). For him, in all learning, there is a kind of interplay between experience and understanding. Theories of language learning, especially the one advocated by Chomsky, were analyzed by the author so as to clarify the essence of learning. Teaching is also another important issue that gets due attention in this book. Of course, the author made a distinction between helping someone to learn and positive teaching. Most importantly, the author thoroughly discussed four principles that every teacher should know and put into practice. These are clear understanding concerning the aim of teaching, the content to be taught (curriculum), the techniques of teaching, and techniques to be employed in making a decision about aims.

Reflections, Concluding Remarks, and Implications

In this part of the review, I will reflect and comment on some of the issues that professor Hamlyn had expounded. My reflection will focus on the merits, contributions, and implications of the book for the field of education. Some comments on issues that I believe need further deliberation are also included here.

One of the merits of this book is its critical examination of the multifaceted issues of experience, understanding, learning, and

knowledge. Most importantly, the author had presented abundant historical analysis vis-à-vis contemporary debates concerning knowledge acquisition and learning. His analysis of the works of prominent scholars such as Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, Kant, Skinner, Chomsky, and Piaget are good examples in this regard. In so doing, the author had tried to show the historical roots of contemporary epistemological views/learning theories. He had also tried to compare and contrast the major positions of the three epistemological views. His attempts to explore the misconceptions and wrong beliefs that were propagated for many years are also worth mentioning.

The second merit of the book is that the author, in addition to critically examining and commenting on the works of prominent scholars, had also proposed his own views and suggestions on issues of experience, especially on its relationships with understanding, knowledge, and learning. His emphasis on the social view of knowledge and learning is of a paramount significance. According to Hamlyn, a social existence is a presupposition of the acquisition of knowledge. Put differently, in the book the author had convincingly showed that an individual cannot be said to know anything unless he or she is able to know things about other people. This analysis of the author, therefore, could be considered as a contribution in enhancing our understanding of the social aspect of learning and knowledge acquisition.

Third, the author's analysis of child development theories and language studies in relation to knowledge and language acquisition is another thing that deserves appreciation. Hamlyn's discussion on these matters implies that learning has to be considered as an interdisciplinary issue across different faculties of universities. In this regard, from the book, one can understand that diverse issues of learning need to be the concerns of philosophy and language studies as well. It also implies that professionals in these fields need to be responsible for the issue under discussion.

In sum, the author tried not only to critique and evaluate major epistemological views, but he also came up with his own positions that aimed to ameliorate the *weaknesses* that he identified. All these efforts of the author, therefore, will undoubtedly help readers, especially the novice, to have a better and balanced understanding of the basics of the three different epistemological views. Overall, in this philosophical work, Professor Hamlyn has tried to provide a logical answer for one of the philosophical questions, i.e., *how is the growth of understanding through experience possible?*

Regardless of the above merits of the book, I have also come across the following three concerns. First, I did not get the author successful in giving an adequate discussion on the works of many prominent scholars within each of the three epistemological views. As one can notice from the book, the author frequently mentioned the works of Skinner, Chomsky, and Piaget as the sole representatives of the Genesis without Structure, Structure without Genesis, and Genesis with Structure epistemological views respectively. Due to this, the positions of other famous scholars, under each epistemological view/learning theory, were not given adequate attention. In this regard, works of scholars on cognitive development, other than Skinner and Piaget were not given a substantial place. The works of Quire and Sellars, the two influential advocates of Rationalism (Structure without Genesis), were also ignored in the analysis of Hamlyn. Besides, the works of Bruner (e.g., his work concerning the inter-subjective nature of language acquisition) and Bryant (e.g., his work on early perception and understanding) were not given prominence while discussing the question of language acquisition. This problem, therefore, could be considered as one of the limitations of the book.

The second concern that I found in this book is the author's position on the issue of learning. In the book, the author openly denounced the importance of conditioning in learning. For Hamlyn, conditioning is not learning. Conditioning, Hamlyn contends, is not anything that in itself yields knowledge. This position of the author, therefore, seems

incompatible with the existing body of knowledge. This is because, with its own limitations, conditioning has wide recognition and application on diverse issues of learning.

Third, though Hamlyn has openly denounced many of the ideas of the three epistemological views, his thesis tends to reflect empiricism. This is because, as it could be seen from the book, the author now and then accentuated the importance of experience rather than reason, for knowledge acquisition. As frequently indicated in the book, the author emphasized the role of experience in the growth of understanding and knowledge. For the author, experience connotes some sort of understanding and knowledge so that he tends to view prior knowledge/understanding as the source of learning, understanding, and knowledge.

The book has far-reaching contributions and implications for the fields of education, psychology, philosophy, and language studies. The book is imperative in clarifying major issues of epistemology and identifying the strengths and limitations of each epistemological view. The book is particularly very important for students and practitioners of education in enhancing their understanding on issues of learning, teaching, and knowing. The issues that the author raised on learning, for instance, imply that the issue of learning is the responsibility of many fields of studies. The four major principles of teaching explicated in the book, I believe, are also of a paramount significance particularly to students of teacher education, curriculum, and instruction, as they have considerable implications in realizing the concept of effective teaching and ultimately in improving students learning outcomes.

Finally, I would like to invite students and professionals, especially with education, child development, language studies, and philosophy backgrounds, to read the whole book. This is because, as R.S.P., the general editor of the book at Taylor and Francis convincingly stated, *nowhere else will they find the issues concerning Skinner, Chomsky and Piaget discussed with such rigor and clarity* (p. ix). However, I

would also advise them to be aware of the following issues. To begin with, since the book is based on advanced epistemological thoughts and the works of some prominent scholars, any reader without some basic knowledge of philosophy/epistemology might not easily understand the analysis of the author. Besides, the reader needs to be mindful of the fact that the book is full of highly technical terms and jargons.