

# John Dewey on History Education and the Historical Method

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## **Abstract**

This essay constructs a comprehensive view of Dewey's approach to history, the historical method, and history education. Drawing on Dewey's approach to the subject at the University of Chicago Laboratory School (1896-1904), Dewey's chapter on the historical method in *Logic: A Theory of Inquiry* (1938), and a critique of Dewey's philosophy of history that appeared in the *American Historical Review* and the published response to this attack by Dewey's colleagues (1954), the author argues that Dewey consistently approached history in genetic and historicist terms.

Recent theory and research in historical education has focused attention on the structures, processes, and cognitive acts of professional historians. Proponents of historical thinking argue that authentic teaching in history should move beyond the mere memorization of facts and instead engage students directly in the interpretation of primary sources and the construction of original historical accounts. These scholars argue that by "doing history" through open-ended inquiry, students will discover the contingent nature of historical accounts, which is a more accurate reflection of the field. In particular, books like Howard Gardner's *The Disciplined Mind* and Keith Barton and Linda Levstik's *Teaching History for the Common Good* cite the work of John Dewey as a rationale for engaging students in meaningful historical inquiry. In light of the recent resurgence of interest in history education, an investigation of Dewey's philosophy of history and history education seems warranted.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1938 book, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey devoted an entire chapter, titled "Judgment as Spatial-Temporal Distinction: Narration Description," to the historical method. This chapter is most frequently addressed and cited when historians analyze Dewey's philosophy of history.<sup>2</sup> The literature on Dewey's philosophy

of history focuses on questions of whether or not his pragmatic views of history were relativistic, ambivalent, antagonistic, or adequate. For example, judging the efficacy of Dewey's theory, Burleigh Taylor Wilkins argues, "Dewey had closed the door to any effective distinctions between the finding of the historian and the reasons that lie behind his interest in any historical problem."<sup>33</sup> Wilkins considers epistemological dualism, which Dewey rejected, as a necessary precondition for effective historical inquiry. Likewise, Thomas Neill remarked, "Because Dewey thought of knowledge in terms of power rather than truth, he could not understand that historians frequently undertake inquiries without trying to prove anything."<sup>34</sup> Neill criticized Dewey's contention that trained historians could not transcend the social views and narrow interests of their time. For both of these critics, Dewey's philosophy of history was inherently relativistic and denied that historians could fully separate their understanding of the past from their own social milieus. While these critiques may indeed be accurate, they do not approach Dewey from the proper perspective, because they both view Dewey's philosophy of history as something fixed. However, Dewey viewed history itself in historicist and genetic terms. History was one thing for the elementary school student, another thing for the secondary student, and yet another for the professional historian. Dewey believed that the method and content of history was itself part of the process of growth.

In this essay, I suggest that to understand Dewey's philosophy of history fully, we must reconcile the view he put forth in *Logic* with his earlier views on how history was used at the University of Chicago laboratory school (the Dewey School, 1896-1904). I openly admit that I am constructing a consistency of views that Dewey never fully outlined. He always viewed his own thought in historicist terms; his ideas were never intended to be internally consistent, rather, each idea was introduced in the context of a particular issue and period. As Dewey admitted to a colleague in 1931, "I've worked out my views rather piecemeal and not always with consistency in detail."<sup>35</sup> I argue that the consistency of Dewey's thoughts on history can, in fact, be found in the piecemeal nature of his career, development, and philosophy. That is, he was consistent in that he consistently approached knowledge and problems in a historicist manner. This approach not only provides a more accurate depiction of Dewey's own thinking, but it better reflects his views on the discipline of history itself.

My account draws upon three areas of Dewey's career. First, I demonstrate how the cultural and industrial history of the race provided the underlying conceptual framework for the curriculum at the Dewey School (1896-1904). Next I outline Dewey's views on the historical method as presented in *Logic: A Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Finally, I focus on a critique of Dewey's philosophy of history that appeared in the *American Historical Review*—the flagship journal of the American Historical Association—in 1954 and the published response to this attack by Dewey's colleagues. Drawing on these three sources, I construct a comprehensive view of Dewey's approach to history and history education.

### ***History as Form and Content***

Dewey viewed the discipline of history in historicist and genetic terms. By this I mean that he considered the modern discipline of history a product of the historical development of the race itself, which he believed corresponded with the development of the child and adult. The past existed independent of cognition, but it only took on value and meaning when it was put to a particular use or framed in a particular narrative in the present. As a historicist, Dewey related all knowledge to prior knowledge, and as a genetic psychologist, he considered any historical assertion as having incorporative contextual meanings organized through distinct stages of consciousness. So, history did not have a single static meaning. Instead its meaning evolved as the race progressed, and, accordingly, its meaning evolved for an individual as she or he relived the history of the race. For Dewey, to understand any piece of knowledge and its relationship to an individual or society, one had to understand its history. Like many of his contemporaries, Dewey agreed that a theory of historical change was the key to understanding the present: “The great sciences of the present century have been the historical and social sciences, taken from a historical point of view.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise history was the key to conceptualizing the scope and sequence of the curriculum. As Dewey explained: “The problem of education—the problem of establishing vital connections between the immature child and the cultural and technical achievements of the adult life . . . continually increases in difficulty. It is coming to be recognized that the historical method, more than any one thing is the key which unlocks difficulties.”<sup>7</sup> Dewey viewed the past, organized around a narrative of social and intellectual progress, as the organizational scheme for his entire curriculum at the University of Chicago laboratory school. So, in this basic sense he was clearly not antagonistic toward history. However, he argued that teachers should only present those facts that presented insight into present life. His selection criteria for historical facts to include in the curriculum was self-consciously teleological and presentist. But, history for Dewey was a circuit, because the historical facts that were so crucial to his “reliving the race experience” curriculum were the products of professional historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, who were themselves the products of the latest stage of the race experience. So historical facts had two components, what Dewey called “content” and “form” values. As Dewey explained, the study of history should “introduce the child to a consciousness of the makeup or structure of social life,” as well as give him “command over, the instrumentalities through which the society carries itself along . . . The former is the content value and the latter is the form value.” The content of history (i.e., the facts) determined the form of history, but the form of history (i.e., method) produced the content. That is, through a study of the content of history, students learned how and why the historical method (form) had come about, but the content of history about which these students learned was itself the product of the historical method—both sides of the circuit needed to be taught simultaneously. As Dewey explained, “Studies cannot be classified into form studies

and content studies. Everything has both sides.”<sup>8</sup> To address both sides of history, Dewey insisted that teachers should not approach the content of history as static, predetermined facts, but rather as a set of simplified, unraveling processes involving concrete problems and tools corresponding with the development of the race, which aligned with the developmental stages of the child. Thus, the history of the race dictated the selection of “content,” and the developmental level of the child dictated the appropriate “form” the content took, as the latter recapitulated the former.<sup>9</sup>

The Dewey School curriculum was organized as a carefully selected reenacted history of the human race. Regarding the selection of content, Dewey explained that the “type phases of historical development may be selected which will exhibit as through a telescope, the essential constituents of the existing order.” Regarding the organization of this content, Dewey insisted that “a study of still simpler forms of hunting, nomadic and agricultural life in the beginnings of civilization; a study of the effects of the introduction of iron, iron tools, and so forth, serves to reduce the existing complexity to its simple forms.” The idea was that the historical content presented to students would not be historical as such, but rather would be presented as immediate problems, which also happened to have historical significance. After students had mastered the corresponding form and content for each stage, they would eventually arrive at the modern stage, which included the introduction of the techniques of the professional historian—the stage that included inquiry for an expert audience. However, students would only appreciate the techniques of the historian if they were viewed as a natural progression from prior social forms. “With increasing mental maturity, and corresponding specialization which naturally accompanies it,” Dewey explained, “these various instrumentalities may become ends in themselves.” The study of history as its own end—as an abstract means of understanding and appreciating the value of the past—was a product of the final stage of development. Living through (or experiencing) the history of the race represented the key to appreciating the “organic relationship to real ends and values” inherent in the final stage. However, Dewey insisted that the content and form of this final stage should not be taught directly during prior stages. Instead, this appreciation could only take place after previous stages had been “adequately lived through.”<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Stages of Consciousness and Growth***

The stages that a child progressed through were products of the biological and social inheritance, but they began with the biological. As Dewey explained, “all conduct springs ultimately and radically out of native instincts and impulses.” Therefore, teachers needed to “know what these instincts and impulses were in order to know what to appeal to and what to build upon.” All historical content was “empty . . . until it is made over into terms of the individual’s own activities, habits and desires.”<sup>11</sup> For most readers, *School and Society* presents the fullest description of Dewey’s stages and how he coordinated race activities to each epoch.<sup>12</sup> “Many anthropologists have told us there are certain identities in the child’s interests with those of primitive life,”

Dewey explained in this widely read text, “There is a sort of natural recurrence of the child mind to the typical activities of primitive peoples.”<sup>13</sup> Thus he established the recapitulational link between development of the individual and race, which had been outlined by many leading anthropologists and psychologists of the period.

*School and Society* related how, through the coordination of social occupations to the past, “the historic development of man is recapitulated.” Based on his scheme, Dewey coordinated specific content with each stage. Dewey considered his coordinations “tentative” and provided a defensively worded caveat about how difficult his work at the Dewey school had been in light of his administrative duties and lack of adequate resources. Nevertheless, he identified the first stage (age four to eight) as “characterized by directness of social and personal interests, and by promptness of relationship between impressions, ideas and action.” The subject matter included those objects and activities in the immediate social surroundings of the student that could be translated into play, stories, and art. Historical occupations such as cooking and weaving best fit these criteria.<sup>14</sup>

The second stage (age eight to twelve) included a “growing sense of the possibility of more permanent and objective results and of the necessity for the control of agencies for the skill necessary to reach these results.” Dewey found that social processes of American history best matched with the characteristics of this stage. In this epoch students acquired the use of letters and numbers as “the tools which society has evolved in the past” and “the keys which will unlock to the child the wealth of social capital which lies beyond the possible range of his limited individual experience.” This was the stage that most schools had gotten wrong. Dewey insisted that without an intrinsic appreciation of the symbolic systems (i.e., numbers for mathematics, letters for literacy, maps for geography) and their historical and present use, all future abstract study would be disconnected and dull. Therefore, the ultimate goal of stage two was to convince the child that he did not need to be a passive recipient of others’ knowledge, he had “the power or skill which he can now go ahead and use independently.”<sup>15</sup>

The third stage, according to Dewey, was characterized by mastery of “the methods, the tools of thought, inquiry, and activity, appropriate to various phases of experience, to be able to specialize upon distinctive studies.” Regarding this stage, Dewey related how in 1899, when *School and Society* was first published, his school had not “been in existence long enough so that any typical inferences [could] be safely drawn.”<sup>16</sup> However, by 1906 Dewey school teacher, Laura Runyon, had worked out much of the curriculum for this third stage. In her masters thesis, Runyon provided a rich description of the history curriculum for these older students of “the reflective age.” The students at the Dewey school were led through the social life of the Jamestown settlement, the life of John Smith, the development of law and government, the settlement of New England, fur trading, the Revolution, and westward expansion. She described the Dewey school approach in the following way: “[the student] is studying the life of a people, the problems they had to face, and how they succeeded. He constantly contrasts the past with his own present life, and so gets

a deeper understanding of the present. He finds the meaning for much of his present life in the past and, hence is constantly reading into his daily life the new value derived from his study.”<sup>17</sup> Although “the reflective-age” students were essentially covering the same content of traditional schools, the Dewey school students allegedly gained greater appreciation and value from the historical content because they had the stage-appropriate learning of previous years as a foundation. Throughout the progression through these stages, the goal of the teacher, Dewey insisted, was to “protect the spirit of inquiry, to keep alive the sacred spark of wonder and the fan the flame that already glows.”<sup>18</sup>

In an essay titled “Mental Development,” Dewey briefly outlined the fourth stage of development—adolescence or youth—which extended to age twenty-four. This last stage, Dewey explained, marked “the epoch of securing the final adjustment on the part of the individual of himself to the fundamental features of life.” Students at this stage fully appreciate the social inheritance of the race and sought to contribute to it in some way. “In history,” Dewey explained, “the tendency at this time is to see larger wholes, to try to gather together facts otherwise scattered and to mass them as parts in the comprehensive whole.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, students seek to bring order to the overwhelming mass of facts the world presents. This was the stage of the historian. Students and adults at this level learned how to construct new knowledge for the sake of learning and growth.

The objective of this section was not so much to outline the specifics of each stage, but rather to demonstrate that Dewey was a genetic psychologist. Although this term would later be associated with Jean Piaget, Dewey subscribed to the beliefs that humans progressed through observable sequential stages of consciousness, that each stage emerged as an inherited impulse further subordinated by the physical and social environment, that each stage incorporated the prior stage, and that each stage corresponded with the social development of the race. As Dewey explained, “For in the truly genetic method, the idea of genesis looks both ways; this fact is itself generated out of certain conditions, and in turn tends to generate something else.”<sup>20</sup> In the next section, I will argue that the historical inquiry of professional historians described in *Logic*, is best understood as the fourth stage of development, which is the construction of knowledge to be used by others. Thus, the impulse of curiosity becomes more socialized as it enters the fourth stage of “consciousness of calling or function.”

### ***Dewey on the Historical Method***

Dewey’s overall view of history was outlined in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, one of his most accessible works. Even though the essays are only tangentially about historical form, it is the book with the most historical content in it. In the first two chapters, Dewey traced the interrelationships between the changing social, industrial, and intellectual currents of the past, thus historicizing them in their own periods. The great thinkers and their findings, he argued, were products of the social context

that produced them. Philosophy had always evolved as the social and intellectual conditions changed in light of innovation. Positivism, idealism, and empiricism were all appropriate, even ingenious, philosophies at the times in which they were constructed, but they were no longer appropriate in light of the current situation. Dewey's main objective in this work was to free man from the philosophical habit of viewing things as being fixed, essential, or static. "A philosophic reconstruction which should relieve men of having to choose between an impoverished and truncated experience on one hand and an artificial and impotent reason on the other," Dewey concluded, "would relive human effort from the heaviest intellectual burden it has to carry."<sup>21</sup> Reconstruction of philosophy, for Dewey, would include the acceptance of the contingent, evolving nature of knowledge reflected at the fourth stage.

Thus, for both the historicist and genetic elements of Dewey's thought, history was the key to appreciating the nature of any issue or content. As Dewey explained, "History sets forth the temporal background, the evolution of the gradual control of the activities by which mankind had enriched and perfected its experience."<sup>22</sup> In *Logic*, Dewey again reasserted his beliefs about the circuitous, contingent nature of historical knowledge. "The fact that history as inquiry which issues in reconstruction of the past is itself a part of what happens historically," Dewey insisted, "is an important factor in giving history a double meaning." As outlined above, for Dewey history has both a form and content element, which each evolved over time in relation to one another. As the discipline of history (form) became more rigorous, the findings of the historical method (content) became more nuanced. Therefore, history is both "that which happened in the past and it is the intellectual reconstruction of these happenings at a subsequent time." As Dewey argued, the writing of history "is itself a historical event."<sup>23</sup> Not only had the method of historical writing evolved in the past, but it was destined to evolve in the future as well.

Dewey did not limit his description of stage-four historical thinking to what historians did. He outlined three distinct types of historical thinking: personal recollection, those events that did not fall under personal recollection, and narrative accounts of historians. He addressed each in turn, presumably because to many these historical forms moved along a continuum of greater and greater validity from personal testimony to collective memory to historical construction. Dewey's first step was to dispel the notion that personal memory as a form of experience was inherently any more accurate than the other forms. Memory, like all knowledge, was contingent. Dewey insisted that the affirmation of a personal recollection still had to extend beyond the individual's experience to achieve its meaning because its affirmation had to make reference to a temporal and spatial context from which it emerged. "For the point that every temporal proposition is a narrative proposition," he explained, "means that the proposition is about a course of sequential events, not about an isolated event at an absolute point in time."<sup>24</sup> That is, every recollection was part of a larger temporal sequence that framed it and a broader social context that gave it meaning and made it something to recollect. On the other hand, historical judgments outside of recollection, Dewey continued, are not rela-

tive to the time and space in which they occurred, instead they are “mediated by conceptions drawn from prior experience” derived from the social inheritance of the race. Thus, Dewey dismissed the pure validity of both personal and collective memory as a means of representing the past because both forms were relational to previous knowledge and context—a position fully consistent with his historicism. All facts had to be related to other facts, nothing could be considered in isolation.

Regarding the third kind of historical thinking, judgments of historians, Dewey was more specific and critical. Since history could not be fully and thoroughly represented, choices had to be made by the historian. “Like all data they [historical judgments] are selected and weighed with reference to their capacity to fulfill the demands that are imposed by the evidential function,” Dewey insisted, “*All historical construction is necessarily selective.*”<sup>25</sup> Dewey argued that there were three specific ways in which historical constructions were selective. First, the historical actors make conscious and unconscious selections about what artifacts and documents to preserve. The entire past is not available en masse, only those portions that were in some way preserved or made to be accessible. For example, my depiction of Dewey’s thought on the historical method is already shaped by what topics he chose to write about in letters and professional papers. Any thoughts and conversations Dewey had that may have been relevant to my inquiry, but were not recorded, are lost forever.

Second, the historian was selective in his choice of topic, approach, and periodization. As Dewey explained, no historical facts belong solely to one approach: “There is no event which ever happened that was merely dynastic, merely scientific or merely technological.” The facts themselves did not reveal when to begin or end an event or period, or what was or was not significant to it. Again, my choice to write about Dewey’s relationship to history and the historical method (as opposed to, say, moral education or logical thinking) has guided the sources at which I have chosen to look. This form of selection takes place before actual historical research even begins. On the other hand, the third form of selection occurs during and after historical inquiry; it is the choice of what facts to include in a narrative and how to relate them to one another. “Probably nowhere else is the work of judgment in discrimination and in creation of synthesis as marked,” Dewey insisted, “as in historical evocations.”<sup>26</sup> Historians rip facts from the textual and temporal contexts from which they emerge and place them in a new narrative context of their creation. For instance, I have represented Dewey’s 20-page chapter on the historical method in only a few paragraphs and with only a handful of direct quotations. This process, Dewey pointed out, includes a great degree of judgment and discrimination on the part of historian—a process that, for the most part, is never explicitly stated by historians.

Dewey’s description of stage-four historical thinking could be taken two ways. Either it was an appreciation of the tortuous and difficult task performed by professional historians in the writing of history, or it was a direct attack on the claims of objectivity being put forth by many scholars in the field. Perhaps the most

provocative accusation issued by Dewey in *Logic* was: “The notion that historical inquiry simply reinstates the events that once happened ‘as they actually happened’ is incredibly naïve.” This was the position that incited the objections of historian Chester McArthur Destler, who wrote a critique of Dewey’s pragmatic approach to history for the *American Historical Review* in 1950.

### ***The Destler Affair***

Dewey’s pragmatism was developed in the 1890s and 1900s during what Alan Ryan called the high tide of American liberalism.<sup>27</sup> However, by the 1950s the tide had receded. The most relevant new context for Dewey’s ideas was the Cold War, a time when many politicians and theorists were hesitant to adopt anything short of absolute, transcendent faith in the principles of American democracy. Americans no longer defined themselves as the frontier of progress, but rather as the preservers of democratic principles and rights. They defined themselves against Communism, a term which, after the Second World War, had been conflated with Nazism into the broader notion of totalitarianism. What both Nazis and Communists had in common was their use of a singular, state-sponsored history as a means of constructing and justifying the reforms of the current regime. Under totalitarian governments, historical inquiry was not open-ended. Instead it was dictated by the needs of state. As a result, truth was subjugated to the needs of the present. Despite Dewey’s repeated assertions of the importance of democratic means, not just ends, many such as Chester McArthur Destler thought that the totalitarian approach to history sounded too much like Dewey’s pragmatic approach to history. Destler found Dewey’s approach inappropriate and even dangerous in the postwar world.

Accordingly, in his 1950 article, “Some Observations on Contemporary Historical Theory,” Destler pointed his attack directly at Dewey and his like-minded colleagues. Destler insisted that American relativists like Dewey “have neglected to indicate to prospective converts the intimate relation that the new Continental historiography ha[d] borne to the origins of fascism.” As Destler explained, “the adoption of subjectivist-presentist-relativism as the basis of historical theory contributed to the rise of Fascism and Nazism and their conquest of the universities.” As a result of Dewey’s approach to history, Clio had been tuned into an instrument of propaganda. Destler traced this presentist approach to history, not to only to Dewey, but also to Carl Becker, Charles Beard, R. C. Collingwood, and Benedetto Croce—the Italian theorist, who according to Destler was, “abysmally and contemptuously ignorant of modern science.” For Destler, these theorists had essentially cognitivized history by turning it into something that exists only in the heads of historians; they had turned history from something about which historians think into something that was nothing more than thought itself. Destler insisted that if history were to remain less than a tool for the state, it needed to be based on the scientific method and accept objectivity as its major goal. Destler declared that in *Logic*, “a major source relied upon by the new historiographers,” Dewey outlined

his position that history was unavoidably and inherently permeated with the needs and thoughts of the present.<sup>28</sup>

The Destler essay was intentionally provocative. Guy Stanton Ford, the editor of the *American Historical Review*, allegedly admitted that the Destler piece was “rotten” but he hoped that it would spark a debate about the philosophy and logic of history.<sup>29</sup> Before he even read it, Dewey’s initial response to Destler’s attack was to link it to Cold War irrationality. “There is of course a general wave of attack on every form of relationalism now,” Dewey remarked to Merle Curti, “[a] not so intelligent way of meeting the Bolshevik absolutist brand, I suppose.”<sup>30</sup> In letters to four of his colleagues about the Destler essay, Dewey quipped that, “McCarthyism isn’t confined to politics.”<sup>31</sup> Beyond this initial response, Dewey was “quite literally flabbergasted—both at the philosophical position attributed me and his account of my supposed influence over historical writers.”<sup>32</sup> As time passed, he became more and more disturbed by Destler’s accusations and sent notes responding to Destler’s essay to several of his colleagues, including Curti, Harold Taylor, and Joseph Ratter. Dewey denied that he was telling historians how to do their job. Instead, he explained, “I take for granted the works of historians and attempt to set forth its implications for logic as concerned with a theory of knowing as when knowing is treated as [an] existing and observable body of knowledge.”<sup>33</sup> Dewey insisted that he was ignorant of Croce’s views on history, and that he doubted the influence of Croce on Carl Becker, Charles Beard, and the new historians. “Unless the validity of his attribution of Croce’s influence on Bread & Becker can be made out,” Dewey wrote, “his whole essay is convicted of sloppy unhistorical writing—badly stated dishonesty.” Dewey regarded Destler’s depiction of his views as a caricature and concluded: “All the evidence shows that D has never even read Chapter XII [of *Logic*].”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Destler’s footnotes demonstrated that he had cited Dewey second- and third-hand; he did not engage with the primary texts of Dewey or most of his other targets.

After reading the Destler attack, Harold Taylor wrote Dewey that the essay was “beneath contempt and is merely a bad joke on the editors.” He assured Dewey that “anyone with half a brain who reads the piece will recognize it as an uninformed and ignorant person, and most of us do not think of his attack as being of any consequence.” He asked Dewey for permission to “do something about it.”<sup>35</sup> Over the next few months, in consultation with Dewey, Taylor, Curti, and Randall worked a rebuttal to the Destler essay. At this time, Dewey was elderly and making frequent trips to the hospital, and so his colleagues took the Destler attack personally. Early drafts of the rebuttal were long and angry, but after several revisions, they decided on a shorter piece that merely corrected the errors made by Destler. The letter to the editor of the *American Historical Review*, signed by Merle Curti, Bert James Loewenberg, John Herman Randall, Jr. and Harold Taylor, was published in January 1951. The letter describing Dewey’s philosophical views on history reflected a clarity and brevity of which Dewey was incapable. It represented, perhaps, the clearest statement of Dewey’s views on history and the historical method.

The authors asserted that Destler had misrepresented the ideas of Beard and Becker, but in the case of Dewey, Destler had distorted his philosophy “beyond recognition, either by its author or by any informed philosopher.”<sup>36</sup> They insisted that Dewey’s position was simple: historical facts gain their meaning from the way they are used by historians. This did not mean that these facts did not exist independent of historians. This was somewhat of a misrepresentation of Dewey’s actual position, because in *Logic* Dewey had deliberately avoided use of the term “fact,” using “judgment” instead, a choice that had created much of the confusion. Nevertheless, Dewey’s colleagues insisted that Dewey “was not a subjectivist.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, they pointed out, on numerous occasions, Dewey had specifically written against the purely subjectivist position.

Dewey’s theory of knowledge, the letter explained, substitutes “ideas” for subjectivist mental states; these ideas are “are psychical data, capable of being observed, since they exist spatially and temporally. They are not the sole property of a subject, nor do they ‘represent’ objects.” These ideas are not transcendent; they are themselves historical events. The inappropriate use of relativism by Destler, the authors asserted, “is used as a condemnation, rather than a description of Mr. Dewey’s views. . . . His relativism is not temporal it is logical.” Dewey did not believe that history is merely a set of symbols in the historian’s mind, but instead contended that the logical organization of the past into a narrative is an event that takes place in the historian’s mind as she or he subordinates it for social use. Dewey pointed this out, not to deny the goal of objectivity, but instead to aid historians in their attempt to achieve greater clarity and consistency. “He is of course aware of the historians’ biases,” Dewey’s colleagues insisted, “but it is to achieve greater objectivity, not to subvert it, that he cautions us to be aware of them.”<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, according to Dewey’s colleagues, Dewey’s position could be summarized with three basic assertions. Historical knowledge is most useful when it provides insight into a current problem, history is always written from a present point of view, and all knowledge, including historical knowledge, is contingent.

Despite the sloppiness of Destler’s argument, it was Dewey’s second assertion—that history is always written from the present point of view—with which Destler had the biggest issue. However, the letter by Dewey’s colleagues never fully addressed it. Destler, along with subsequent critics of Dewey, insisted that historical inquiries could take place for the sake of the past without any implicit links to the present. History could be purely descriptive; it was not always driven by a present problem. In *Logic*, Dewey was unclear about whether or not he was referring to a historiographical problem or a social one. This was because, to Dewey, social and historiographical problems were circuitously intertwined. Historical form and content evolved together in relation to their contexts.<sup>39</sup>

In his discussion of the Destler article, Dewey repeatedly mentioned how disappointed he was that the *American Historical Review*, the top journal in the field, published Destler’s article. Dewey had always been attacked by ideologues

who objected to his ideas, but what concerned him so much was that the process of peer-review—perhaps the greatest achievement of the professionalization of the disciplines—seemed to be breaking down. Dragons, which he believed had already been slain, were reappearing. “I’ve seen resort to philosophical controversies in the case of second and third class writers,” he confessed to Curti, “but . . . I am surprised to find [it] in a serious historical review.” Dewey wondered, had Destler written a critique of Einstein’s theory of relativity, would the *Journal of Physics* accept and publish it? As he expressed to Harold Taylor, Dewey was disturbed less by “Destler’s fantasy” than he was by “the fact that a reputable organ would publish it & others be disturbed by it.”<sup>40</sup> Dewey’s disgust with the poor judgment of the *American Historical Review*, which, according to Dewey, had given “a quasi-endorsement to the article,” was preempted by the publication of an equally disturbing article on his views the year before. In *The Journal of Philosophy*, Mary Brodbeck argued that Dewey’s instrumentalism was inherently idealistic and could not shake the remnants of rationalism.<sup>41</sup> The publication of Destler’s essay, Dewey remarked to Arthur Bentley, “made Brebeck & the editors of the Jn of Philosophy, look . . . respectable.”<sup>42</sup> To Harold Taylor, Dewey added: “The more I read the Destler Article the worse it shows up. As with the Brodbeck article, I blame the editors more than the writers.”<sup>43</sup> Dewey favored the proposal of new ideas, even bad ones, but he counted on the social and intellectual feedback of peers to sort, mold, and correct them. The Brodbeck and Destler essays concerned him about the efficacy of this process.

Dewey was obviously worried about the legacy of his ideas and that of the logical methods he so arduously supported. In 1950 Dewey was at the very end of his career; he passed away two years later. While Dewey had withstood attacks throughout his career, he had generally witnessed a gradual acceptance of his view by many leading scholars and intellectuals. By 1950 this trend seemed to be reversing. Dewey, so attuned to the changing conditions of the day, perhaps predicted an inevitable backlash against instrumentalism after his passing. The Destler affair not only represented Dewey’s final effort to clear his name and clarify his position, but it demonstrated the intensity of the devotion of his friends and their willingness to come to his aid.

### ***Was Dewey Antagonistic to History?***

So was Dewey antagonistic to or ambivalent about history? Not really. The past was absolutely central to Dewey’s philosophy. He envisioned history in historicist terms, as form and content in continuous and coordinated growth. The discipline of history as practiced by professional historians was the latest and most advanced form of history, but not the only or even necessarily ideal way to approach the subject. Unlike Destler, Dewey was not interested in issues of whether higher stage forms of history produced greater validity and accuracy than prior stages, because such a discussion presumed a dualistic positivistic outlook that his instrumentalism rejected. The primary objective of *Logic* was to describe how the professional

historian went about creating and warranting his assertions. It was a descriptive approach, not necessarily a prescriptive one. He wanted to make explicit a logic that was implicit in the historical method. In *Logic* Dewey was describing history at fourth-level consciousness, but Destler wanted to bring the discipline back to third-order consciousness—to a world of determining static truths. The logic of history was warranted only in how it related to the present level of consciousness, which was always in a state of continuous growth.

The other major disagreement with Destler was Dewey's refusal to separate historical form from historical content. For Destler, form, which was solely in the head of the historian, was applied to the content of the past, which was distinct and separate. Dewey, on the other hand, viewed the two as circuitous; they could not be separated at any stage. According to Destler, the better a historian got at the form of the professional historian, the more accurate she or he got at portraying the content of the past. In contrast, Dewey avoided any reference to accuracy or validity. Instead he viewed each stage as a more nuanced, socialized, and democratically informed consciousness. Each stage incorporated the prior one. History was a series of stages that recapitulated the evolution of the race, and it would continue to evolve as such in the future. "History cannot escape its own process," Dewey argued, "It will, therefore, always be rewritten."<sup>44</sup> As we now know, the onset of critical theory, feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodernism—manifestations of fifth-order consciousness—during the second half of the twentieth century has proved Dewey correct in this prediction.

In fact, references to "the postmodernist turn" have led some curriculum theorists to cite Dewey as a rationale for more inquiry-based learning in history education because the idea of "historical facts" seems outdated in the postmodern world. However, Dewey would not have supported introducing postmodernist methods or content to students in the elementary and secondary schools because he first wanted students to master the content and form of traditionalist and modernist approaches to history before they engaged in postmodernist ones. "The mind at every stage of growth has its own logic," Dewey insisted in 1933 in his revised version of *How We Think*, "The only way in which a person can reach ability to make accurate definitions, penetrating classifications, and comprehensive generalizations is by thinking alertly and carefully at his own *present* level."<sup>45</sup> Both the positivism of Destler and the postmodernism of contemporary critics are just stages of social and individual growth that can be subsumed within Dewey's overall historicist and genetic psychological scheme. Above all else, for Dewey, history education needs to be developmentally appropriate.

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## Notes

1. See Sterns, Seixas, and Wineburg, *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*; Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind*; Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*; and Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*.

2. See Ratner, "Dewey's Contribution to Historical Theory"; Wilkins, "Pragmatism as a Theory of Historical Knowledge"; Neill, "Dewey's Ambivalent Attitude"; Austin, "Dewey's Consistent Attitude"; Blau, "John Dewey's Theory of History."

3. Wilkins, "Pragmatism as a Theory," 880.

4. Neill, "Dewey's Ambivalent Attitude," 137.

5. Dewey to Charles W. Morris, 16 June 1931 (record 08009) in *Correspondence*.

6. EW 4: 218.

7. MW 2: 309.

8. Dewey, "Ethical Principles," 18, 24.

9. Fallace, "Repeating the Race Experience"; Fallace, "John Dewey and the Savage Mind"; Strickland, "The Child, the Community, and Clio."

10. Dewey, "Ethical Principles," 21, 25.

11. *Ibid.*, 27, 28.

12. Descriptions of Dewey's ontogenetic stages appear in slightly different forms in "Educational Psychology: Syllabus of a Course of Twelve Lecture-Studies," and "Pedagogy IB 19: Philosophy of Education, 1898-1899," in EW 5 and "Mental Development," in MW 1.

13. Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, 48.

14. *Ibid.*, 20 111.

15. *Ibid.*, 111, 115.

16. *Ibid.*, 115.

17. Runyon, "Teaching of Elementary History," 54.

18. Dewey, *How We Think*, 30-33.

19. MW 1: 215, 217.

20. MW 2: 301.

21. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 101.

22. MW 6: 401.

23. LW 12: 235, 236.

24. *Ibid.*, 227.

25. *Ibid.*, 232, 234.

26. *Ibid.*, 235.

27. Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide*.

28. Destler, "Some Observations," 525, 504, 515, 517.

29. Ford is quoted second hand by Harold Taylor in a letter to Dewey, 26 October 1950 (record 12308) in *Correspondence*.

30. Dewey to Merle Curti, 11 May 1950, (record 13795) in *Correspondence*.

31. See Dewey to Merle Curti, 12 June 1950 (record 1394) and John Dewey to Harold Taylor, 14 June, 1950 (record 14259), John Dewey to Lyle K. Eddy, 15 June 1950 (record 14710), John Dewey to Arthur Bentley 19 June 1950 (record 15868) in *Correspondence*.

32. Dewey to Merle Curti, 12 June 1950 (record 1394) in *Correspondence*.

33. Dewey to Merle Curti, n.d. June 1950 (record 14002) in *Correspondence*.

34. Dewey to Merle Curti, 7 June 1950 (record 14001) in *Correspondence*.

35. Harold Taylor to Dewey, 20 June 1950 (record 12119) and Taylor to JD, 5 July 1950 (record 12155) in *Correspondence*.

36. Curti, Loewenberg, Randall, and Taylor, "Communications," 450.

37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 451.
39. The evolution of the form and content of the historical method has been well-documented. See Novick, *That Noble Dream* and Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*.
40. Dewey to Harold Taylor, 14 June 1950 (record 14259) in *Correspondence*.
41. Brodbeck, "The New Rationalism."
42. Dewey to Arthur Bentley, 19 June 1950 (record 15868) in *Correspondence*.
43. Dewey to Harold Taylor 28 June 1950 (record 14261) in *Correspondence*.
44. Dewey, "Logic," 238.
45. Dewey, "Why Reflective Thinking," 213, 214.

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