

THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND ENDURING IMPACT
OF JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

by

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Abstract

John Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist, and leading figure in the progressive education movement that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While many are familiar with Dewey's educational philosophy and its aim to promote and improve America's democratic experience, few are familiar with the integral role that Dewey's philosophy of history played in his perceived need for a reconstruction in and of philosophy, in the development of his philosophy of education, and in the implementation of his philosophy of education at the Laboratory School. The focus of this thesis centers on this gap in our understanding of Dewey's philosophy of history and its implementation at the Laboratory School. Through a four-fold inquiry, I argue that at the heart of Dewey's approach to philosophy and education lay an intelligent understanding of past human growth, progress, and intellectual development with an overarching emphasis on knowledge as an experimental, experiential, and reconstructive process rather than as a product. This paper examines Dewey's unique history of philosophy, the development of his philosophy of history, the application of his ideas at the Laboratory School, and the trajectory of his philosophies of history and education over the last one hundred years.

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Introduction

John Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He made a monumental impact on these fields by reconstructing “modern” philosophy, contributing to the science of psychology, and emphasizing progressive educational reform during his 92-year lifetime (1859-1952). His contributions to these disciplines have endured well into the twenty-first century. Much has been written on Dewey’s pragmatism, functional psychology, social theory, and topics such as art, logic, and ethics; however, he is best known for his publications about education.

Those aware of Dewey’s educational writings are likely familiar with his role at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago from 1896-1903 where Dewey and his colleagues developed, tested, and perfected their psychological and educational theories. They are also likely familiar with Dewey’s well-known texts, such as *The School and Society* and *Democracy and Education*, which, according to the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education, emphasized “the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good.”¹ Dewey’s advocacy of democracy and democratic education were aimed at ensuring the existence of an informed, critical, and socially adept populace, which was just as vitally important in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as it is today. During that time, the novel realities of an industrial and scientific age resulted in a need for new ways of thinking, learning, and living that were capable of promoting individual and collective progress in the face of unprecedented change.

¹ John Dewey Project on Progressive Education, *A Brief Overview of Progressive Education*, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT.

While many are familiar with Dewey's educational philosophy and its aim to promote and improve America's democratic experience, few are familiar with the integral role that Dewey's philosophy of history played in his perceived need for a reconstruction in and of philosophy, in the development of his philosophy of education, and in the implementation of his philosophy of education at the Laboratory School. The focus of this thesis centers on this gap in our understanding of Dewey's philosophy of history and its implementation at the Laboratory School. Through a four-fold inquiry, I argue that at the heart of Dewey's approach to philosophy and education lay an intelligent understanding of past human growth, progress, and intellectual development with an overarching emphasis on knowledge as an experimental, experiential, and reconstructive process rather than as a product. This paper examines Dewey's unique history of philosophy, the development of his philosophy of history, the application of his ideas at the Laboratory School, and the trajectory of his philosophies of history and education over the last one hundred years.

Following a brief section on Dewey's intellectual formation and a longer section on Dewey's account of the history of philosophy, the third section is intended to be an in-depth inquiry into the development of Dewey's philosophy of history, which stemmed from Dewey's inquiry into the history of philosophy itself. This resulted in Dewey calling for a reconstruction in and of modern philosophy in a direction away from the realms of natural philosophy, metaphysical inquiry, and absolute truths, and rather towards a systematic, scientific, and historical inquiry into the human condition and human morals with the intent of serving as a philosophical compass allowing for humankind to enrich and perfect its experience in an industrial and scientific age when what Dewey calls "pre-scientific morals" were still the norm.

The fourth section will examine the implementation of Dewey's pragmatic and somewhat linear historicism at the Laboratory School. Dewey's philosophy of history paired with an emphasis on inquiry, growth, and repeating the race experience served as the foundation of the Laboratory School's curriculum. While it is popularly argued that Dewey was antagonistic to the discipline of history due to his refusal to accept static historical truths, Dewey's pragmatic historicism was in actuality the ideal means of embracing historical uncertainty as a means of better understanding the present and ensuring that uncertain experiences—such as the democratic experience itself—were continually enriched and perfected through the refusal to accept static, unchanging ideals.

The last section will examine the trajectory and fate of Dewey's philosophy of history and his educational philosophy in the years following their experimental implementation at the Laboratory School. In the decades following the Laboratory School experiment, the historical uncertainty embraced by Dewey could simply not be accepted in a world that wanted static truths in a time of political, economic, and social uncertainty. While Dewey did embrace historical uncertainty, there are in fact a number of fundamental Deweyan philosophical and educational truths that are still researched, admired, and utilized—while maybe not overtly, and to varying degrees—in the realms of twentieth and twenty-first century curricular and pedagogical design.

In terms of research, while scholarly interpretations of John Dewey's life and works played a vital role in informing my arguments, this thesis draws primarily from Dewey's published works. Dewey's "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" provided a great deal of valuable insight regarding Dewey's intellectual formation. An understanding of Dewey's intellectual formation is vital for an understanding of Dewey's passion for education,

emerging philosophical interests, and the fundamental role that an intelligent understanding of the past played in Dewey's perceived need for reconstruction in and of philosophy.

In terms of analyzing Dewey's history of philosophy and the way in which it reveals his philosophy of history, *Reconstruction in Philosophy and Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* were two major works that outline Dewey's pragmatic and somewhat linear historicism that when coupled with logical and systematic inquiry could harness an intelligent understanding of the past for intelligent human action in the present. Phillip Deen, historian and scholar of Dewey, provided additional clarifying insights that informed this thesis's arguments relating to Dewey's perceived need for a reconstruction in and of philosophy away from the more traditional philosophies of the past and rather towards a more pragmatic, modern philosophy that could serve as a moral human science.

Research into the application of Dewey's philosophy of history and philosophy of education focused primarily on *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago 1896-1903* by Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards. With Mayhew having served as the former vice-principal also in charge of curriculum development at the Laboratory School, and with Edwards having served as a teacher of history, *The Dewey School* provided many valuable insights into the workings of the Laboratory School and specifically how the school implemented its approach to teaching history. The portion of this thesis dedicated to analyzing the implementation of Dewey's philosophy of history at the Laboratory School was also aided tremendously by Thomas Fallace's work on Dewey's approach to history education and the historical method.

Another source that proved useful for both the application of Dewey's philosophy of history at the Laboratory School and for Dewey's enduring impact was *John Dewey's*

Philosophy of Education: An Introduction and a Recontextualization for our Times by Jim Garrison, Stefan Neubert, and Kersten Reich. The concise yet thorough nature of this recently published work provided insights into the purpose and nature of the Dewey School, lessons for the present, and the hermeneutic challenge that Dewey's holistic philosophical works present to readers.

Overall, the research process affirmed what Garrison, Neubert, and Reich called the "hermeneutic challenge" of Dewey's works, meaning that readers "must grasp all of him to properly understand the parts, and yet must grasp the parts to comprehend the whole."² This thesis argues that the "part" of Dewey lacking common understanding amongst his readers is his philosophy of history and the vital role that it played in Dewey's educational aims and curricular design at the Laboratory School.

² Garrison, Jim, Stefan Neubert, and Kersten Reich, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education: An Introduction and Recontextualization for our Times* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), x.

Intellectual Formation

A brief overview of John Dewey's intellectual formation is vital to understanding how and why Dewey became interested in philosophy, psychology, and education in the first place, as well as how his views in these three areas changed over time. Dewey's story began in 1859 when he was born in Burlington, Vermont to Archibald Dewey and Lucina Artemisia Rich Dewey.³ After attending Burlington Public Schools until the young age of fifteen years old, Dewey enrolled at the University of Vermont in 1875 and graduated with a bachelor's degree four years later.⁴

It was at the University of Vermont that Dewey was introduced to new ways of thinking that had a significant impact on his intellectual formation. Upon taking a physiology course with an assigned reading of Darwinian T.H. Huxley, Dewey writes that "It is difficult to speak with exactitude about what happened to me intellectually so many years ago, but I have an impression that there was derived from that study a sense of interdependence and interrelated unity that gave form to intellectual stirrings that had been previously inchoate."⁵ The intellectual stirrings prompted by Darwinian thought were contributory in the sense of turning Dewey's thinking towards the organic and unified as well as towards the interdependent relationship between an organism and environment. Dewey further explains that as a result of reading Huxley, he received "great stimulation from the study, more than from anything I had had contact with before; and as no desire was awaked in me to continue that particular branch of learning, I date from this time the awakening of a distinctive

³ Jay Martin, *Education of John Dewey*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵ John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in George P. Adams and Wm. Pepperell Montague (eds). *Contemporary American Philosophy: Personal Statements* Russell and Russell (1930): 13.

philosophic interest.”⁶ So while Dewey did not pursue the study of physiology or evolutionary biology, the philosophical ramifications of living in a Darwinian age peaked Dewey’s philosophic interests—so much so that Dewey later wrote an essay titled “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy” and discussed in numerous contexts the influence of Darwin upon philosophic thought and life in a scientific age.

While Huxley’s work awoke a philosophic interest in him, it would remain relatively latent while he taught high school for several years (two years in Oil City, Pennsylvania and one year in Charlotte, Vermont). It was during his third year of teaching back in Vermont that Dewey studied privately with his former teacher of philosophy, H.A.P. Torrey. In Dewey’s reflection upon the time spent with Torrey, he writes:

He was an excellent teacher, and I owe him a double debt, that of turning my thoughts definitely to the study of philosophy as a life-pursuit, and of a generous gift of time to me during a year devoted privately under his direction to a reading of classics in the history of philosophy and learning to read philosophic German.⁷

The importance of Dewey’s exposure to the history of philosophy while under the guidance of Torrey should not be overlooked, as it was not only what encouraged Dewey to embark upon the study of philosophy as a life-long pursuit, but it was also the exposure that prompted Dewey to simultaneously develop his own history of philosophy and philosophy of history (which will be expounded upon in the following section). It is also worth noting that while teaching, and during Dewey’s private study with Torrey, W.T. Harris, editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, published several of Dewey’s articles in the only journal at the time dedicated to the study of philosophy for non-theological reasons. Dewey writes:

⁶ John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," 13.

⁷ Ibid., 14-15.

“His (Harris’s) reply was so encouraging that it was a distinct factor in deciding me to try philosophy as a professional career.”⁸

With Dewey’s decision made to pursue philosophy as a profession, his next step was applying for a graduate program in philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. While attending Johns Hopkins, Dewey was influenced by several individuals: G. Stanley Hall, whose specialty was child psychology and whose experimental psychology revealed to Dewey the power of the scientific method when applied to the social/human science; Charles Sanders Peirce, who is considered by most as the originator of philosophical pragmatism (though James was the first to use the word in print in 1898)⁹; and George Sylvester Morris, whose Hegelian organic unity appealed to Dewey. While Hall and Peirce undoubtedly had an impact on Dewey’s intellectual formation, Dewey reflects most upon his time spent with Morris and his subsequent exposure to Hegelianism. In regard to Dewey’s time at Johns Hopkins and his time spent with Morris, Dewey wrote the following:

My earlier philosophic study had been an intellectual gymnastic. Hegel’s synthesis to subject and object, matter and spirit, the divine and the human, was, however, no mere intellectual formula; it operated as an immense release, a liberation. Hegel’s treatment of human culture, of institutions and the arts, involved the same dissolution of hard-and-fast dividing walls, and had a special attraction for me.¹⁰

This “dissolution of hard-and-fast dividing walls” played a significant role in Dewey’s organic view of both philosophy and history, and while Dewey was only a Hegelian early in his career, he would remain a dialectical thinker.

Outside of the collegiate setting, the influence of Jane Addams and the Hull-House on John Dewey is also fairly well known. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded the Hull-

⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁹ William James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” *University Chronicle* (September 1898): 287-310.

¹⁰ John Dewey, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 19.

House in 1889 to serve as a social settlement that provided social and educational services for the growing number of “new immigrants” entering Chicago from Southern and Eastern Europe.¹¹ The Hull-House was social in nature and its largely-immigrant learning community hinged on “learning from life itself,” which served as “a narrative reconstruction of experiential learning, through which past experiences may be integrated with present social realities.”¹² The experiential, adaptive, and pragmatic nature of education at the Hull-House appealed to Dewey who visited frequently, lectured occasionally, and eventually served on the settlement’s Board of Trustees.¹³ While spending time at the Hull-House, Dewey experienced its emphasis on experiential learning rooted in present realities, and the Hull-House may have, in some ways, served as inspiration and as a testing ground for Dewey’s theories on a comprehensive public education with social and democratic aims.

Several other instances of intellectual influence are worth noting, such as Dewey’s ten years at the University of Michigan and the influence of sociologist George Herbert Mead, who turned Dewey’s focus to the social nature of the mind and of the self. Dewey’s wife, Alice Chipman Dewey, whom he married in 1886, also shaped Dewey’s thinking. Alice was a progressive-minded woman who influenced Dewey’s thought in regard to social justice and societal issues, and some even suggest that the process of having and raising children influenced Dewey’s receptivity and interest in the psychology of young learners.

In terms of psychology, Dewey notes the vital influence of William James upon his philosophical thought, and he writes that William James’s *The Principles of Psychology* were “one specifiable philosophic factor which entered into my thinking so as to give it a new

¹¹ Bridget K. O’Rourke, “To Learn From Life Itself: Experience and Education at the Hull-House,” in *Jane Addams in the Classroom*, ed. David Schaafsma (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

direction and quality.”¹⁴ This direction and quality, while not the subject of this essay, were the objective and biological factors in James’s thought that progressively worked their way into Dewey’s ideas and, as Dewey writes, “acted as a ferment to transform old beliefs.”¹⁵

Dewey’s old psychological and philosophical beliefs would be transformed at the University of Chicago where Dewey accepted a position as the head of the department of philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy in 1894. It was at the University of Chicago that Dewey began to consider his philosophy of education and his philosophical theories in an increasingly systematic and experimental way as he had done, and would continue to do, with his philosophy of history.

¹⁴ John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," 23.

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

History of Philosophy

In order to understand Dewey's philosophy of history, one must first understand Dewey's history of philosophy. As previously noted, Dewey's inquiry into the history of philosophy while studying privately with H.A.P. Torrey was what initially whetted Dewey's appetite for a profession in philosophy. Dewey's exposure to Darwinian thinking as an undergrad, the somewhat evolutionary progression of the history of philosophy, and Dewey's dialectical and pragmatic tendencies all played a vital role in the construction of a unique Deweyan history of philosophy that subsequently reveals Dewey's pragmatic and linear historicism.

Dewey's history of philosophy is practical and relatively straightforward, but that is not to say that it is not critical or that it lacks complexity. Phillip Deen, historian and scholar of Dewey, writes that Dewey's history of philosophy "traces the rise of modern philosophy and the epistemological problem that forms its core. Ironically, the purpose of this genealogy is to show how deeply 'unmodern' modern philosophy is."¹⁶ Truly modern philosophy, the one called for in Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, is "one that overcomes the epistemological problem of relating *subject* and *object* by functionalizing and naturalizing the process of knowing."¹⁷ Ultimately, Dewey argued that the "process of knowing" should consist of a more pragmatic approach to gaining knowledge through experience and experimentation. Abstract metaphysical and epistemological inquiries of ancient, medieval, and "unmodern" philosophers were simply insufficient in terms of lacking the particular instrumentality needed to meet then-present needs.

¹⁶ Phillip Deen, introduction to *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012) XX.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Dewey writes that a necessary precondition for historical judgments—that is, the selective judgments made when developing a history of philosophy—is the “recognition of change in social states and institutions,” with the particular institution subject to historical inquiry being the various systems of philosophy that have existed and evolved for centuries and millennia. When examining various systems of thought from the past, Dewey stressed that, “even when these strains are woven together into an effort to construct a comprehensive strand that covers the movement taken to be relatively complete, the various strains must first be segregated and each followed through its course.”¹⁸ Dewey’s history of philosophy follows this suggested methodology of inquiry, beginning with mythologizing, transitioning to the philosophy of ancient Greece, the Medieval Church, and “modern” philosophy, prior to expounding upon the inadequacies of modern philosophy and the perceived need for reconstruction in and of philosophy.

Dewey’s history of philosophy begins with the primitive history of humankind, when philosophy as we know it did not exist. The general means of explaining human existence was animal tales, myths, and cults. Dewey writes that, “The material out of which philosophy finally emerges is irrelevant to science and to explanation. It is figurative, symbolic of fears and hopes, made of imagination and suggestions, not significant of a world of objective fact intellectually confronted.”¹⁹ While these means of explaining human existence were perceived as independent from truth, falsity, and rationality, Dewey at least considered them steps in the right directions towards philosophy proper in the sense that they helped to establish a certain shared social, emotional, and intellectual heritage from which a tribe or group of people’s thinking and perception of reality was shaped.

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), 234.

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 7.

Eventually, beginning with the sophistic movement in Greece and the emergence of philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Dewey argues that “matter of fact knowledge increased to such bulk and scope that it came into conflict with not merely the detail but with the spirit and temper of traditional and imaginative belief.”²⁰ This, according to Dewey, was the initial emergence and movement toward philosophy as we know it, with philosophy originally acting as a means of reconciling factual knowledge with religious, poetic, and imaginative views. It is known from the fate of Socrates that matter of fact knowledge at this time lost to the values of traditional belief, social esteem, and authority. While Dewey suggests that “tradition was noble in aim and scope,” he argues that it was “uncertain in foundation” and that “we must search out the reason of things, and not accept them from custom and political authority.”²¹ The account of Socrates’s life and death in Dewey’s history of philosophy illuminates the unfortunate end of a philosopher who left no traditional idea unchallenged, and whose philosophy presented potential reconstructive elements of reason and skepticism to which tradition and authority struck a reactionary deathblow.

The role and theme of classic philosophy then, beginning with Plato and Aristotle and continuing until Christian philosophy of Medieval Europe, was not to encourage philosophic behavior that was considered a danger to the body politic, but was rather to restore what had rested upon tradition and custom through “the very metaphysics of Being and the Universe,” which Dewey argued served as a “substitute for custom as the course and guarantor of higher moral and social values.”²² It is at this point in Dewey’s history of philosophy that he notes the initial emergence of philosophy’s perceived ability to offer direction regarding higher

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid., 17.

²² Ibid., 17.

moral and social values. The reconstruction of philosophy towards this end was ultimately Dewey's aim, but Dewey saw that the Greeks lacked a valid and systematic logic of experimentation and inquiry that handicapped their means of philosophizing. Dewey explained that "the most generously imaginative soul of all philosophy could not far outrun the institutional practices of his people and his times,"²³ and the institutional practices of this time that led to an invalid logic of inquiry stemmed from what Dewey called "a symptom of the leisure class disease."²⁴

Dewey goes on to suggest that the medieval mind "tended to look back to antiquity as the Golden Age of Knowledge...relying on sacred scriptures," and he criticizes this reflection and reliance upon established knowledge and ways of thinking by saying that "any logic which identified the technique of knowing with demonstration of truths already possessed by the mind, blunts the spirit of investigation and confines the mind within the circle of traditional learning."²⁵ Where the medieval church succeeded, however, was in unifying theory and practice—a synthesis that Dewey saw as lacking in the history of philosophy until this point. While a synthesis of sorts was achieved between medieval theory and practice, with theory being the revealed will of God and practice being a hierarchical society ordered according to this will, this synthesis proved to be limiting and inadequate for Dewey who was critical of tradition and custom's restrictive nature.

It was in the sixteenth and seventeenth century that custom and traditional beliefs clashed, and from their remains sprang new methods of philosophizing. Dewey writes that during this time, "the mind became used to exploration and discovery," and that "it found a

²³ John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910), 50.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁵ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 33.

delight and interest in the revelations of the novel and the unusual which it no longer took in what was old and customary.”²⁶ It was the psychological change brought about during the age of European exploration and expansion, not just of the world, but also of the mind, that brought about what Dewey perceived to be the needed change in how humankind viewed science and philosophy. It is worth noting, however, that even though these more modern philosophers replaced the medieval period’s cosmic order with human nature to a significant extent, they failed by overcompensating with highly introspective philosophies that separated the mind from nature—the very separation that Dewey perceived as a shift in philosophy back towards the metaphysical and epistemological rather than toward the practical and human.

At this point in the history of philosophy, Dewey recognized that despite the rapid advances in the sciences and in the attainment of knowledge, philosophers were asking if knowledge was even possible. In an era of modernity ushered in by scientific, technological, and industrial revolutions, Dewey called for a reconstruction in and of philosophy—a reconstruction that would free philosophy from its ancient-medieval inheritance and worn-out dualisms, and subsequently allow for a naturalistic, pragmatic, reflective, and critical theory of society, culture, and morals.

At the time when Dewey crafted this unique history of philosophy, humankind was faced with a number of questions, old ideas, habits, and predispositions that, as Dewey’s history of philosophy showed, could only be solved by replacing them with new questions and attitudes—specifically the new questions and attitudes brought about by the scientific

²⁶ Ibid., 40.

revolution, which, according to Dewey, “found its climax in the ‘Origin of Species.’”²⁷

Dewey’s writes that:

The conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years, the conceptions that had become the familiar furniture of the mind, rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defect and unreality.²⁸

Considering the fact that Dewey was born in 1859, the same year as the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Dewey’s upbringing was subsequently in the years when the very nature of science, religion, politics, and social relations were changing as a result of Darwin’s biological findings and their implications. The treatment of change and origin as signs of defect would no longer be the philosophical norm, but rather Dewey’s history of philosophy reveals that traditional philosophy’s assumption of the fixed and final as superior was a significant logical flaw.

The role of Darwinism in Dewey’s philosophy is evident through his unremitting emphasis on the human race’s “growth to the realization of its own perfection.”²⁹ The human species, if you will, is the only species conscious of its own existence and its ability to perfect its experience. If this process of perfection and growth is to take place, however, it is understandable that Dewey called for a reconstruction in philosophy towards solving society’s problems and perfecting human morals. If religion, custom, and tradition are anathema to scientific thought and solving societal ills in a scientific age, a reconstructed and more social philosophy is an understandable means of analyzing the human experience.

Dewey writes: “The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new

²⁷ Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

logic for application to mind and morals and life.”³⁰ The influence of Darwin on philosophy ultimately led Dewey to reach a conclusion on his aim for a reconstruction in philosophy, which was reconstruction in a direction away from conjectural metaphysical inquiries and hyper-introspective philosophies that do not meet present needs, and rather towards a philosophical inquiry into the human condition in an attempt to better understand human affairs and morals—the very subjects for which science alone cannot provide answers. It is through the combination of philosophy and science’s systematic method of observation, theory of hypothesis, and experimental test that Dewey aimed to develop a pragmatic and naturalistic philosophy that would prove its worth through the active adaptation to ever-changing human needs.

That being said, Dewey argued that it was the “*construction of a moral human science*” that would ultimately serve as “a needful precursor of *reconstruction of the actual state of human life toward order and toward other conditions of a fuller life than man has yet enjoyed.*”³¹ Dewey further explains that “one of the most immediate duties of philosophical reconstruction with respect to the development of viable instruments for inquiry into human and moral facts is to deal systematically with *human processes.*”³² And as is evident through an examination of Dewey’s history of philosophy, the human process most deserving of the systematic inquiry of the moral human science that is philosophy was history itself.

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

³¹ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, xxxvi.

³² Ibid., xl.

Philosophy of History

John Dewey's history of philosophy is valuable in the sense that it allows oneself to better understand Dewey's view of philosophy proper. It is also valuable in the sense that it allows one to understand Dewey's philosophy of history and what Dewey perceived to be history's inherent instrumental value. As noted, in a reflection upon his younger years, Dewey reveals that his exposure to the history of philosophy under the guidance of H.A.P. Torrey, then Professor of Philosophy at the University of Vermont, played a vital role in what Dewey called "turning my thoughts definitely to the study of philosophy as a life pursuit."³³ Prior to Dewey's time with Torrey, however, he writes with dissatisfied hindsight that the teaching and study of philosophy at the University of Vermont "had become restrained in tone" and had an "obvious tendency to rationalize the body of Christian theological doctrines."³⁴ It was not until Dewey was exposed to the instrumental value of a historical understanding of the progression and evolution of philosophical thought that philosophy became a worthwhile discipline that Dewey was willing to dedicate his life to pursuing.

The significance of history in Dewey's thought is also present through his own history of philosophy (expounded upon previously) that he repeats without tiring throughout a number of his most notable works, including, but certainly not limited to, *Reconstruction in Philosophy, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, and *Democracy and Education*. Through this repeated emphasis on the history of philosophy, one can see the value that John Dewey placed on the instrumental nature of history as a discipline for inquiry into the human condition. If a history of philosophy can, after all, be instrumental in the sense of shining

³³ John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," 14.

³⁴ Ibid.

light on the areas in need of philosophical reconstruction, it is understandable that the history of humankind would appear to Dewey as a collection of past experiences worthy of scrutiny and inquiry for the sake of not only gaining a better understanding of current human circumstances, but also finding solutions to present human ills and experiences—allowing for the instrumentality of historical knowledge to aid in the progression and growth of intellect, morals, and society at large.

While knowledge—specifically historical knowledge—had a great deal of instrumental value to Dewey, this value became even greater when viewed through the lens of pragmatism—a school of thought that considers thought itself as a tool for problem solving and action that establishes truth and meaning in terms of the success of an idea’s use and practical application. Historical understanding was not to be static, but was rather instrumental in the sense that the findings of historical inquiry would serve some pragmatic, practical purpose. In the era of Dewey, those tired of metaphysical inquiries that did nothing to alleviate the ills of post industrial-scientific-technological revolution society refreshingly welcomed Dewey’s pragmatism.

As we know from Dewey’s perceived need for reconstruction in and of philosophy, he argued that:

Problems and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises, and that, accordingly, its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute crisis and a turning point in human history.³⁵

In order for this reconstruction to take place, however, a philosophical and historical inquiry into ideological systems of the past was necessary to pinpoint the need for reconstruction in the present. While reconstruction in and of philosophy was overtly present in Dewey’s

³⁵ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, v-vi.

writings, Dewey's perceived need for a reconstruction in the philosophy of history is not self-evident, but was rather a symptom of Dewey's rejection of traditional empiricism and rationalism. In this sense, Dewey's history of philosophy, and subsequently his philosophy of history, revealed his pragmatic historicism—a means of viewing the past that is as much philosophical as it is historical.

Put simply, Dewey's view of history was that it is the process through which humankind had gained greater control of the world and perfected its desired experiences in the world in which it lived, and further, “the past is of logical necessity the past-of-the-present, and the present is the-past-of-a-future-living present.”³⁶ This view of the past, accordingly, leads Dewey to suggest that an “intelligent understanding of past history is to some extent a lever for moving the present into a certain kind of future.”³⁷ In this sense, the practical instrumentality of an intelligent understanding of history is ultimately the means by which humankind can enhance the current human experience while also determining how to progress into futurity. This implies that the relevancy of the past is determined by present and future needs, that history is necessarily selective, and that historical inquiry is the means of extracting history's instrumental value for pragmatic purposes aimed at guaranteeing progress and growth within the context of the human experience.

Most historians would agree that the past is in some way relevant to the present, but the problem that some historians have with Dewey's philosophy of history is its implication that the facts of the past are only relevant to the inquiry prompted by present human experience and need. Phillip Deen, editor of Dewey's *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, explains that, “in good pragmatic fashion, ever-developing consequences change

³⁶ John Dewey, *Logic*, 238.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

the meaning of the original event. So our past depends on our image of the present and future.”³⁸ This philosophy of history is problematic for some historians with a positivist worldview because it implies that history is not only necessarily selective, but also that the meaning of history is transient and that its certainty may be illusory.

Some historians, including Phillip Deen, argue that “all histories are selective” and that “this is not to say that history is whatever we make it, but that the historian is always swept forward by an evolving tradition in which the present leads us to alter what we take to be critical precedents.”³⁹ Dewey himself stated that, “the notion that historical inquiry simply reinstates the events that once happened ‘as they actually happened’ is incredibly naïve,” and that history has a double meaning, with those meanings being “that which happened in the past” and “the intellectual reconstruction of these happenings at a subsequent time.”⁴⁰ To be more clear, Dewey believed that the two elements that comprise this ‘double meaning’ of history are form and content, with form being the discipline of history itself (“the reconstruction of these happenings at a subsequent time”), and content being the findings of historical inquiry (“that which happened in the past”).

Further, and as is evident in Dewey’s history of philosophy, the chosen form of philosophy subsequently determines, to a significant extent, the content characteristic of that philosophy. Likewise, the form that the discipline of history takes directly determines the content or findings of the chosen historical method. As with Dewey’s inquiry into the history of philosophy that brought about the perceived need for reconstruction in and of philosophy, Dewey’s pragmatic historicism subsequently necessitated a restructuring of the discipline of history. In order to develop a historical understanding with any sort of instrumental value,

³⁸ Phillip Deen, introduction to *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, XXXVII.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, XXXVII.

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Logic*, 236.

Dewey deemed it necessary to transform the form and discipline of history away from that of creating narrative accounts of the past and rather towards the process of inquiry and the application of experimental logic to the past in order to more fully understand the present and promote the progress and growth of the human race.

While Dewey's perceived instrumental value of history has been emphasized, it has not been clarified that inquiry and instrumentalism are inextricably linked. The definition of instrumentalism itself entails inquiry, which can be seen through Dewey's following argument:

Instrumentalism means a behaviorist theory of thinking and knowing. It means that knowing is literally something which we do; that analysis is ultimately physical and active; that meaning in their logical quality are standpoints, attitudes, and methods of behaving toward facts, and that active experimentation is essential to verification.⁴¹

Following this mode of reasoning, history's meaning and instrumental value are gained only through the act of "doing" history, which entails logical inquiry into and active experimentation with evidence from the past. If Dewey's philosophy of history sounds scientific, that is because it is—at least in spirit. While Dewey writes that history is "to a very large extent concerned with establishing what happened at a given time and place," and is not necessarily scientific in nature, he does argue that the big question is "whether or not the *procedures* employed by historians precluded from having scientific quality."⁴²

As with Dewey's perceived need for a reconstruction of philosophy to aid in the betterment of the human race in a post-scientific age with pre-scientific morals, Dewey also perceived a need for a restructuring of historians' procedures in order to utilize the richness of the past for the betterment of the race. By 'procedures,' Dewey is again referring to the

⁴¹ John Dewey, "An Added Note as to the 'Practical'," Chapter 13 in *Essays in Experimental Logic*, Chicago: University of Chicago (1916): 331-2.

⁴² Dewey, *Logic*, 438.

form of history—with the form, again, being that which determines the content of history.

Dewey's form of systematic historical inquiry provides a clear and logical historical method that is more fitting in a scientific age. Dewey argued that:

Failure to institute logic based inclusively and exclusively upon the operations of inquiry has enormous cultural consequences. It encourages obscurantism; it promotes acceptance of beliefs formed before methods of inquiry had reached their present estate; and it tends to relegate scientific (that is, competent) methods of inquiry to a specialized technical field. Since scientific methods simply exhibit free intelligence operating in the best manner available at a given time, the cultural waste, confusion and distortion that results from the failure to use these methods, in all fields in connection with all problems, is incalculable.⁴³

According to Dewey, the “incalculable” cost of failing to utilize a system of logic based on scientific methods of inquiry in the field of history would continue to result in a number of cultural and social consequences, with the largest being an obscure, unsound, and incomplete understanding of the past, which would subsequently result in a confused and distorted present. Lowell Nissen, professor and specialist of the philosophy of science, suggests that:

John Dewey's avowed intention in developing his account of inquiry was to make the methodology of science available to other disciplines, with particular interest in terminating the endless controversy in philosophy and in making it possible for the progress common in science, particularly physical science, to be shared by the studies of how man might better live. By applying the methodology of science he hoped to achieve both an intellectual victory, and a cultural and humanistic one.⁴⁴

By applying the methodology of science to the discipline of history, Dewey's ultimate aim was to achieve such an intellectual, cultural, and humanistic victory. It is now possible to reflect upon Dewey's history of philosophy and its emphasis on the emergence of philosophical tendencies to synthesize the methodologies of scientific inquiry with sound logic to bring about intermittent intellectual, cultural, and humanistic victories over centuries

⁴³ Dewey, *Logic*, 535.

⁴⁴ Lowell Nissen, *John Dewey's Theory of Inquiry and Truth*, 7.

and millennia. The appeal of such victories to Dewey manifested itself in Dewey's own philosophy of history, which hinged on logical inquiry into the past for the sake of bringing about sustained growth and progress in both philosophy and history to understand how humankind might better live. In terms of historical inquiry, Dewey's historical method was primary concerned with social inquiry, as people are, after all, the subject matter of history. It was in John Dewey's laboratory school at the University of Chicago that Dewey's systematic method of historical inquiry and his human science that was philosophy would be put to the test to see if theory worked in practice.

The Dewey School

John Dewey's history of philosophy and philosophy of history have been examined thus far, but what has not been examined is the application of Dewey's philosophy of history within the curriculum and to the teaching of history itself at the Laboratory School. While Dewey was a philosopher in the truest sense, he was best known for his works in education, and being the pragmatist that he was, Dewey desired a means by which he could test his philosophical and psychological ideas through practical application. It was at the University of Chicago between 1896 and 1903 that the Laboratory School was opened and operated under the management of the University of Chicago's Department of Philosophy, Psychology, and Education—a department headed by Dewey himself. Katherine Camp Mayhew, vice-principal and head of curriculum design at the Laboratory School, wrote that the school had two main purposes: “(1) to exhibit, test, verify, and criticize theoretical statements and principles; and (2) to add to the sum of facts and principles in its special line.”⁴⁵ Without getting into the nuances of the specific psychological theories that were tested by Dewey and his colleagues, the aim of the theories being tested was “to discover and apply the principles that govern all human development that is truly educative, to utilize the methods by which mankind has collectively and progressively advanced in skill, understanding, and associated life.”⁴⁶ In other words, Dewey and his colleagues were most interested in maximizing learning through a philosophy of education that was developed, corrected, and tested through practical application.

Combining educational theory and practice, however, proved to be difficult. In a statement written for the authors of *The Dewey School*, John Dewey wrote the following:

⁴⁵ Mayhew, Katherine Camp and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago 1896-1903* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966), 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

The practical difficulties of creating a new school as compared with the formulation of theoretical principles was recognized from the start. The idea of education as growth was new. Since growth is the characteristic of all life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself; it goes on during the whole life span of the individual; it is the result of the constant adjustment of the individual to his physical and social environment which is thus both used and modified to supply his needs and those of his social groups. All these new theoretical statements presented practical difficulties. There were no precedents for this type of schooling to follow, and there was need to study the growing child in relation to his environment and to experiment with subject-matter and method to find what ministered best to his growth.⁴⁷

Despite the experimental nature of the Dewey School and the practical difficulties of putting theory into practice, the clear goal of optimizing intellectual and social growth both inside the school and throughout one's life allowed for consistency and a clear direction for curriculum design. It is vital to understand that the aim of education at the Dewey School was what Jim Garrison, Stefan Neubert, and Kersten Reich, authors of *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education: An Introduction and Recontextualization for Our Times*, call "growth through the reconstruction of experience," with Dewey perceiving "growth" as the "functional development in the ability to discriminate our environment and respond more intelligently to it thereby transforming the world as we transform ourselves."⁴⁸

In order for this new educational design to take hold, however, a certain degree of reconstruction was needed. As was evident in Dewey's history of philosophy and philosophy of history, and as argued in *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education*, it is necessary to "judge institutions, customs, and habits according to their benefit for human growth and the solution of actual and relevant problems."⁴⁹ Dewey's history of philosophy revealed the necessary judgment of past institutions of thought and custom in order to bring about a present-day reconstruction of the flawed aspects of those very institutions. Likewise, it was the institution

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ Garrison, Neubert, and Reich, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education*, xiii.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

of traditional education that Dewey and his colleagues brought under scrutiny when designing and developing the curriculum of the Laboratory School—a curriculum that focused on the examination of past experience and practice through the discipline of history to see how past development and growth of the human race can aid in a better understanding of then-present problems while also encouraging further and continued growth and progress from childhood to adulthood.

Thomas Fallace, Associate Professor in the Department of Secondary and Middle School Education at William Paterson University presents Dewey’s perceived problem of education as “the problem of establishing vital connections between the immature child and the cultural and technical achievements of the adult life.”⁵⁰ In regard to that problem of education, Dewey stated, “It is coming to be recognized that the historical method, more than any one thing is the key which unlocks difficulties.”⁵¹ It was the instrumental value of history that allowed for students to engage with the problems of the past as a means of not only reconstructing their understanding of past experiences, but to also serve as a vehicle through which students can study the growth, increased efficiency, and ability to intelligently respond to the circumstances of human existence.

As with how the subject matter of philosophy grows out of the strains and stresses of community life, the educational philosophy, the curriculum, and the actual study of history at the Laboratory School were designed with the then-present problem and social circumstances of industrialized society in mind. During a lecture on history in 1899, Dewey explained the following:

⁵⁰ Fallace, Thomas, “John Dewey on History Education and the Historical Method,” *Education and Culture* 26, no. 2 (2010): 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

History is a double history. On one side it is an external social history, the history of industrial society reduced to its simplest elements, and as the industrial phase of society and industrial problems get more and more prominent, it is certain that industrial history is going to play a larger part as compared with the older political and dynastic history, or even with the newer type of history where more attention is paid to general social development. . . . There is also a history of the intellectual development of man and thus is connected with the history of science. It gives us the evolution of practical intelligence, the evolution of intelligence as concretely used with reference to the problems of life and the environment, and the successive steps which have been taken to overcome the difficulties that present themselves, and in securing a continually better adaptation of means to ends, and also an increasing enlargement of the ends themselves.⁵²

Through Dewey's explanation, one can see the interconnected and organic nature of the Laboratory School's curriculum that used the then-present problems of industrialized society to encourage social, intellectual, and scientific inquiry. The evolution of practical human intelligence and an understanding of industrial and social history were to be experienced by students through the indirect sociology of history that served as the curricular bedrock at the Dewey School, and while history was only taught directly for several hours per week, the historicist and genetic approach characteristic of Dewey's thinking dictated how all other school subjects were taught.

In *The Dewey School*, Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards summarize the particulars of the history curriculum as follows:

The children who had followed the regular work of the school had spent one year on social occupations, one on primitive life, one on explorations and discoveries, one on Chicago and the Virginia and Massachusetts Bay colonies, one on the union of the colonies and the Revolution, one half-year on American history from the European point of view, one half-year on the formation of the American Constitution, the acquisition of new territory in the westward expansion, and the industrial development up to 1830, and one year on history review in preparation for college board examinations or on Roman history. The average time the younger groups spent on history was two and one half hours a week; that of the older groups was one and one half hours a week.⁵³

⁵² John Dewey, "Lecture XXVI: History," in *John Dewey: Lectures in the Philosophy of Education*, 1899, ed. Reginald D. Archambault. (New York: Random House, 1966): 257-8.

⁵³ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 322-324.

Mayhew and Edward's summary of the history curriculum provides a brief overview of the content of the curriculum, but it says very little about the method of teaching and learning history. In regard to the teaching and learning of history itself, and of course taking into account Dewey's knowledge on constructing a developmentally appropriate curriculum, Thomas Fallace writes that, "history was one thing for the elementary school student, another thing for the secondary student, and yet another for the professional historian,"⁵⁴ but that the approach to teaching and learning at the Laboratory School could be characterized as "repeating the race experience," with "the race" being the human race. Repeating the race experience and the study of history was introduced to students at the Laboratory School as early as kindergarten, with the rationale being that "to understand any piece of knowledge and its relationship to an individual or society, one had to understand its history."⁵⁵ Katherine Camp Mayhew wrote that history "is a means of affording the child insight into social life," and "is treated...not as a record of something which is past and gone, but as a way of realizing what enters into the make-up of society and how society has grown to be what it is."⁵⁶

This approach to repeating the race experience placed a significant emphasis on the social, intellectual, and industrial aspects of the past as students learned about developments in the cultivation of food, the construction of shelter and means of habitation, the development of clothing, and how the advancements and growth within these areas of life were tied directly to changes in the nature of occupations. In the Dewey School, history was

⁵⁴ Fallace, "John Dewey on History Education and the Historical Method," 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁶ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 29.

taught as “the story of man’s progress through invention, exploration, and discovery,”⁵⁷ and while the Laboratory School was in no sense a vocational school, placing a significant emphasis on the changing nature of occupations played an integral role for students within their repeating of the race experience.

The reason for an emphasis on occupations is expressed in *The Dewey School*, where Katherine Camp Mayhew wrote that, “The main hypothesis was that life itself, especially those occupations and associations which serve man’s chief needs, should furnish the ground experience for the education of children,”⁵⁸ and that “study in the sense of inquiry and its outcome in gathering and retention of information was to be an outgrowth of the pursuit of certain continuing or consecutive occupational activities.”⁵⁹ The early occupational focus at the Dewey School was itself a means of not only getting student interested in the past, but it was also a means of allowing students to see how the past can provide insight to the present needs and circumstances of then-recently industrialized society.

Mayhew wrote that as elementary-age students repeated the past experiences of farmers, miners, woodsmen, cooks, garment makers, craftsmen, or artists, they “sprang with the nimbleness of childhood out of the present complicated and dimly understood ways of present-day living into the ultra simplicity of the past, with its few and crude ways of meeting the same primal needs.”⁶⁰ It was the experiences of these students that convinced Mayhew and others at the Dewey School that the past was not dead to students, but that students “revived it by reliving it.”⁶¹ To further emphasize the perceived historical value of an occupational focus in the context of repeating the race experience, Katherine Camp

⁵⁷ Ibid., ix.

⁵⁸ Ibid., viii.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 310-311.

⁶¹ Ibid., 310-311.

Mayhew stated that, “the history of work becomes the record of how man learned to think, to think to some effect, to transform the conditions of life so that life itself became a different and less tortured thing and gradually took on, for some at least, comfort and beauty.”⁶²

While the teaching of history in the elementary grades and students’ subsequent initial experiences with repeating the race experience focused primarily on progressing through the states and stages of man’s development and growth, younger students did not take part in using history’s instrumental value to solve a specific problem or answer a specific question. Thomas Fallace writes that in the early grades at the Laboratory School, “an effective education required the individual to relearn the lessons of the race in a manner that corresponded with how this development originally took place”⁶³ prior to students being developmentally prepared for the abstract thought and hypothetico-deductive reasoning required for the more rigorous and nuanced aspects of historical inquiry.

In the later elementary and secondary years at the Dewey School when students’ experience with repeating the race experience furnished an understanding of the growth and progression of the human race from primitive man to that of civilized man, history was then presented in a way that Mayhew calls “less empirical and more a matter of authentic record, so that the question of definite recall of what has been studied comes into the scheme.”⁶⁴ An understanding of the evolutionary unfolding of past events and human experiences equipped students for the study of history proper. Students transitioned away from the method of reliving the race experience where they often answered how people of the past “might” have

⁶² Ibid., 314.

⁶³ Fallace, “Repeating the Race Experience: John Dewey and the History Curriculum at the University of Chicago Laboratory School,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 39, no. 3 (2009): 392.

⁶⁴ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 317.

addressed then-present problems and life circumstances, and rather began to focus on factual occurrences and why things happened the way that they did.

Even as students transitioned from repeating the race experience in younger grades to learning history in the more traditional sense from books and active experimentation with the historical method in the intermediate and secondary grades, the teaching of history was still that of an indirect sociology. Thomas Fallace writes that, “As the discipline of history (form) became more rigorous, the findings of the historical method (content) became more nuanced,”⁶⁵ and even as the discipline and methodology of history became more rigorous and advanced, Dewey’s progressive philosophy of history elicited opposition and resistance from more conservative historians and educators who disliked Dewey’s reconstructed study of the past that served as an instrument within and a facet of the broader curricular classification of social studies.

While Dewey’s decision to teach history as an indirect sociology was done intentionally with the goal of encouraging students’ growth through the reconstruction of their understanding of the human experience, many historians are opposed to the notion of using history as a instrument for present uses or as anything that goes beyond perceiving and or studying the past simply and solely as that which happened in the past. This conservative philosophy of history can be seen in historian Patrick Kenney’s article “Social Studies, John Dewey, and the Erosion of History,” where he argues that “social studies” and Dewey’s approach to teaching history was “probably the most educationally devastating curricular innovation to emerge from the progressive movement. It undermines and impoverishes

⁶⁵ Fallace, “John Dewey on History Education and the Historical Method,” 26.

genuine historical understanding.”⁶⁶ It was this notion of a “genuine historical understanding,” however, that was antagonistic to Dewey’s philosophy of history in the first place.

Recalling Dewey’s statement that “the notion that historical inquiry simply reinstates the events that once happened ‘as they actually happened’ is incredibly naïve,”⁶⁷ one can see that the pragmatic application of Dewey’s philosophy of history was in fact not solely focused on that which happened in the past, but was rather aimed at encouraging student growth through their ability to intelligently reconstruct the past for a better understanding of the present and the future. As with how Dewey criticized philosophizing for the sake of philosophizing, he was likewise opposed to studying history for the sake of studying history. In Dewey’s mind, history played a central functional role in all facets of life—a functional role that many historians deem a fallacious belief.

For Dewey, the question of history’s potential intrinsic value was not of primary importance. What was of primary importance, and what is abundantly evident through an analysis of the implementation of Dewey’s philosophy of history at the Laboratory School was that history held an instrumentality for present purposes strong enough to shape the entire curriculum of the Dewey School around repeating the race experience. The act of repeating the race experiences was intended to encourage students’ lifelong growth through their ability to reconstruct their experiences from an intelligent understanding of past human growth and development. In this regard, Patrick Kenney is again critical of Dewey when he argues that Dewey’s educational philosophy and philosophy of history resulted in teachers

⁶⁶ Kenney, Patrick, “Social Studies, John Dewey and the Erosion of History,” *Prospero* 19, no. 1 (March 2013): 30.

⁶⁷ Dewey, *Logic*, 236.

“focusing on methods and processes rather on substantive understandings. Consequently, the emphasis falls on developing generic skills, rather than on imparting subject matter.”⁶⁸

Kenney and other critics of Dewey could benefit from considering the aim of the Dewey School, which was not to produce professional historians, but was rather to cultivate the very “generic skills” that Kenney denounces. It was the skill of being able to understand past human growth and development and the skill of being able to reconstruct one’s own experience from that understanding that Dewey sought to instill within each one of his students. It was these very skills that would be of utmost importance for encouraging students to be critical, life-long learners that would help maintain the improve the democratic experience in America while also being better fit to face the unique life circumstances of living in a scientific and industrial age. And it was these skills that were progressive and ahead of their time, so far ahead of their time, in fact, that many educators are still attempting to understand and implement Dewey’s educational and historical practices more than a century after the doors to the University of Chicago’s Laboratory School closed in 1903.

⁶⁸ Kenney, Patrick, “Social Studies, John Dewey and the Erosion of History,” 31.

Enduring Impact

The enduring impact of John Dewey's life work is far-reaching and has influenced historians, educators, and philosophers both during Dewey's lifetime and in the years following his passing in 1952. While Dewey has been incredibly influential as a philosopher, it is specifically his philosophy of education, the practical and experimental application of that philosophy of education at the Dewey School, and the publication of various written works relating to those topics that are likely the most well-known and influential aspects of John Dewey's life work. While the reception of Dewey's thought and life work has not been accepted whole heartedly and has been met with a great deal of resistance by some philosophers, educators, and historians, many individuals still turn to John Dewey for insights regarding his approach to education.

When examining the enduring impact of John Dewey's thought and works, it is important to note that their reception depends largely on individuals' interpretations. Authors of *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education* argue that Dewey was "a holistic philosopher," which subsequently "presents readers with a hermeneutic challenge." As a result, they argue that readers "must grasp all of him to properly understand the parts, and yet must grasp the parts to comprehend the whole."⁶⁹ This is rather difficult to do, but the effort is necessary if one wishes to understand the meaning and aim of Dewey's thought and works. For example, if one wishes to understand Dewey the educator, it is necessary to understand Dewey the philosopher, the psychologist, and the social critic. Those examining Dewey would also benefit from developing an understanding of Dewey's perception of history, science, and culture, which all play a significant role in the unfolding of the active educational

⁶⁹ Garrison, Neubert, and Reich, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education*, x.

experimentation and the writing of Dewey's highly influential works during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Aside from understanding the many facets of John Dewey's intellectual contributions to philosophy, psychology, history, politics, and education, one must also consider how the social and historical contexts of Dewey's time affected the varied reception of his ideas. Dewey's ideas were developed and tested in dramatically changing times, and as we know from Dewey's own philosophical arguments, the content of Dewey's intellectual contributions was determined, in large, by the novel and ever-changing circumstances of his then-present existence. Dewey's philosophy and theories emerged during the times of uncertainty and change characteristic of industrializing society, of a world attempting to receive Charles Darwin's findings published in *On the Origin of Species*, and of a nation attempting to maintain its democratic experience in the wake of a civil war, two world wars, and severe economic recessions and depressions.

While many turn to Dewey for guidance and insight in the present day, those who experienced the initial emergence of Dewey's unique means of philosophizing, perceiving the past, and educating students exhibited mixed reactions to Dewey's thought and works. Historian Patrick Kenney is particularly critical of Dewey's influence on education and the study of history. He suggests that "while pragmatism sought to revitalize American Liberalism, it is ultimately destructive in civic culture, in that it dissolves national bonds, and denies any notion of a shared, collective history that is meaningful to individuals."⁷⁰ The manifestation of Dewey's pragmatism and its characteristic ability to embrace change, origin, and the unknown for the sake of progress while also perceiving that which is fixed and final as a logical flaw proved to be unsettling to more traditionalist and positivist historians and

⁷⁰ Patrick, Kenney, "Social Studies, John Dewey, and the Erosion of History," 36-7.

educators. In an age of unrest and uncertainty prompted by rapid change and a series of devastating national and global conflicts, Dewey's tendency to present history's meaning as transient and its certainty as illusory was unsettling in already uncertain times.

A shared, collective history was, and still is, meaningful to many individuals. What was most meaningful to Dewey, however, was not the ability to hold on tightly to a shared nationalistic history. Dewey sought to selectively view and reconstruct the past with the intent of applying history's practical instrumentality to solving and understanding then-present problems. Rather than seeking to maintain the established and traditional ideologies of the time for the sake of a sense of unity and certainty amongst the populace, Dewey sought to embrace a new ideology that would encourage potentially uncomfortable growth as opposed to comfortable ideological and societal stagnation.

In the years following Dewey's passing there were similar instances of mixed reactions and instances of resistance to Dewey's thought and its implications for established and popular ideologies. The authors of *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education* explain the reception of Dewey's thought as follows:

In the decades since his death in 1952, his influence waned in both philosophy and education because of the dominance of analytic philosophy (especially in the United States) and the turn in psychology and education first to narrow behavioristic and then to more cognitive approaches both of which underestimated the significance of experience and culture for education.⁷¹

It is evident that the mixed and waning reception of Dewey's thought and works both during his lifetime and in the decades following his death was and is due to a number of social, political, and ideological factors. As aforementioned, the social conditions of the time were not conducive to the widespread adoption and application of Dewey's pragmatism within the realm of education and specifically within the discipline of history, but that is not

⁷¹ Garrison, Neubert, and Reich, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education*, viii.

to say that Dewey's works were unpopular or that that did not spark a great deal of interest and curiosity.

Even when the societal and intellectual temper of Dewey's time would not allow for a whole-hearted acceptance of Dewey's pragmatism, experimental logic, philosophy of history, or educational practices, his works were far enough ahead of their time to elicit curiosity and interest to the present day. The world has changed to a significant degree since the experimental application of Dewey's philosophy of education at the Dewey School and the publication of numerous volumes on philosophy, psychology, and education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and as a result, the more recent reception of Dewey's thought has been more open-minded and reflective while also being less emotional and reactive.

One of the largest hindrances to the reception of Dewey's thought both during and after his lifetime appeared to be that of the unwillingness to embrace change and uncertainty due to what many intellectuals perceived to be a loss of culture and the destruction of a shared history. What modern intellectuals are beginning to realize to a greater extent is that certain aspects of Dewey's thoughts are actually conducive to promoting a sense of shared culture and history. This shared culture and history, however, is not one of a fixed and static interpretation of the past, but is rather a history of social, cultural, and intellectual growth and progression made possible by shared experiences. Jim Garrison, Stefan Neubert, and Kersten Reich write the following in regard to the role of experience and culture in Dewey's thought:

Dewey's theory of experience represents an important cultural turn in philosophy and provides a perspective of knowledge as an instrument in culture. In experience, we find a lot of cultural tools and resources that we can use in thinking and acting to creatively shape our world.⁷²

⁷² Garrison, Neubert, and Reich, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education*, 8.

Rather than knowledge threatening culture, Garrison, Neubert, and Reich argue that the knowledge attained from experience can be an instrument in culture. Dewey desired a time in which the knowledge attained from human experience could be used to shape the world to be that which humankind desires. It is in this present age and its culture of knowledge, if you will, that the growth of matter of fact knowledge and the subsequent change in individuals' perceptions of their past, present, and future can be used to bring about a culture of growth and progression.

The emphasis on experience as a means of gaining knowledge is a characteristic of Dewey's educational philosophy with which many educators are familiar, and with which an increasing number of educators are beginning to turn. As with during the era of progressive education, an increasing number of teachers, parents, and students are presently growing tired of what education has become. Garrison, Neubert, and Reich explain the reality of the current condition of the education system when they write that, "today's educational researchers and practitioners attempt to reduce pedagogy to rules, regulations, and empty rituals, which seek to maximize PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores as if the human mind and self was merely an array of numbers,"⁷³ which is just a partial depiction of what leads to the unimaginative rote learning and memorization that takes place in far too many classrooms.

Dewey opposed memorization and rote learning. He favored inquiry, higher order thinking, and experiential learning that encouraged sustainable and lifelong learning practices as opposed to short-term "cramming" that is characteristic of performance-oriented learning. Further, the aim of the Dewey School, and the aim of educators who deem Dewey

⁷³ Ibid., xi.

increasingly relevant in an era of standardization and teaching to the test, is to help student learn how to learn and how to learn most efficiently.

In hopes of maximizing student learning, a current educational practice that many teachers are attempting to get away from is the excessive use of textbooks in the classroom. There have been numerous books written about the detrimental effects of using textbooks as the primary means of conveying information to students. Works such as Beverlee Jobrack's *Tyranny of the Textbook: An Insider Exposes How Educational Materials Undermine Reforms* and James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* are just a couple of educational texts that, while published with the hopes of garnering headlines and attention, reveal how textbooks can misguide students with factually inaccurate or incomplete information. These texts also note that textbooks are often times not based on research about how students actually learn, and they often hinder rather than promote student achievement.

While some educators remain ignorant to the shortcomings of textbooks, Dewey understood these shortcomings over a century ago. In Eugene F. Provenzo Jr.'s "History as Experiment: The Role of the Laboratory School in the Development of John Dewey's Philosophy of History," he writes that "Textbooks were rarely used in history classes at the Laboratory School, since it was felt that they failed to provide classes sufficient insight into the types of problems the children were asked to consider,"⁷⁴ and that "Dewey's problematic approach to teaching history encouraged the use of primary source materials, which, of course, were rarely included in the textbooks of the period."⁷⁵ Primary sources are, to some degree, often included in twenty-first-century textbooks along with activities designed to get

⁷⁴ Eugene F. Provenzo Jr., "History as Experiment: The Role of the Laboratory School in the Development of John Dewey's Philosophy of History," *The History Teacher* 12, no. 3 (May 1979): 377.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

students to examine those sources, but that is not to say that the primary sources are always used to encourage historical inquiry and higher order thinking—especially in instances when teachers defer to allowing a textbook’s linear and somewhat authoritative interpretation of the past to do the teaching for them.

Fortunately, there are many educators and associations who aim to encourage systematic historical inquiry within history and social studies classrooms. Within the last few years, the National Council for the Social Studies has put forth *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*, which is the result of collaboration among fifteen professional organizations “committed to the advancement of social studies education.”⁷⁶ While there is debate over whether or not state standards should be used, the *C3 Framework* works with Common Core standards to encourage inquiry and higher order thinking within the disciplines of civics, economics, geography, and history.

The C3 Framework’s “Inquiry Arc” is what appears to be the primary means of improving the practical implementation of Common Core state standards in history and social studies classrooms. The inquiry arc consists of “four Dimensions of informed inquiry,” which strongly resembles the scientific method—an experimental method of inquiry with which Dewey was an advocate. The application of this systematic and somewhat scientific means of inquiry to the discipline of history and the social sciences seems to provide the skills, tools, and methods of disciplined thinking that are needed “in order to traverse successfully the worlds of college, career, and civic life.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013): 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

While some historians may oppose a framework that not only appears to be modeled after the scientific method, but also is one that requires significant inquiry into and the use of the social sciences, educators should recall Dewey's emphasis on applying the methodology of science to history and human science in order to secure what he called an intellectual, cultural, and humanistic victory. Dewey would have only considered the C3 Framework as a step towards this humanistic victory if it helped students learn to learn and encouraged them to be lifelong learners who continually grew from their ability to reason in a systematic and holistic way similar to that advocated by the C3 Framework. If used properly by teachers, the C3 Framework has the potential to teach students the historical skills of systematic inquiry that the student can then utilize throughout their entire life as they try to make sense of past, present, and future human experiences.

There are, of course many other educational initiatives that emphasize historical inquiry aside from the C3 Framework. For example, Stanford History Educational Group is primarily interested in conducting research related to issues of how history is taught and learned. Websites such as Teachinghistory.org provide teachers with engaging teaching materials, history content that goes beyond the textbook, and information on educational best practices related to historical thinking and analyzing primary sources. There are also a number of educational programs and resources put forth by the American Historical Association that encourage the study of history "to gain access to the laboratory of human experience."⁷⁸ The present day consideration of the history discipline as a "laboratory of human experience" sound remarkably Deweyan, as do the various educational initiatives mentioned with their emphasis on historical inquiry and higher order thinking. While Dewey

⁷⁸ Peter Stearns "Why Study History?" American Historical Association, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/why-study-history>.

is not directly cited in many present-day educational initiatives, it is safe to say that the spirit of Dewey is alive and well within numerous current educational reforms efforts that perceive history and the social studies as disciplines worthy of inquiry for the sake of better understanding present human experiences.

While Dewey has had many other enduring impacts that are simply not mentioned here, the enduring impacts mentioned have given a glimpse into the far-reaching effects of Dewey's philosophical and educational works. Dewey's insights are valued in this present age when educators and professional organizations seek to maximize student learning and student achievement. Even if educators are unable to escape the binding nature of standards and the pressure of high-stakes testing, they can still turn to Dewey for insights on how to encourage student growth both in the classroom and in the real world.

The word "experience" resounds within the mind of educators who truly desire to teach their students something worthwhile and relevant to the real world and real life experiences, but the notion of learning through experience is not enough. Teachers must understand Dewey's aim of growth and how history's practical instrumentality can help promote the aim of continued and lifelong growth through the reconstruction of students' experience if they are to achieve the humanistic victory of making the attainment of knowledge a natural process that is itself a deeply ingrained facet of a rich, productive, and progressive culture.

Conclusion

While this exploration of John Dewey's philosophical and educational thought has been by no means exhaustive, at this point it should be evident that Dewey's intellectual contributions were interconnected and manifested themselves both in his published works and through practical and experimental application. Dewey's pragmatism was a powerful shaping force that influenced all aspects of his thought. It determined how he perceived the history of philosophy, developed his own unique pragmatic historicism, and tested his diverse theories through practical and experimental application at the Laboratory School. Dewey's pragmatism and its emphasis on unifying theory and practice with the aim of continued growth through the reconstruction of past, present, and future human experiences gives value and credibility to Dewey's thinking. Ultimately, these efforts established Dewey as a philosopher whose theories and practices are as valuable in the present day as they were over a century ago.

It is the reconstructive aspect of Dewey's philosophy that makes it timeless, adaptable, and applicable to the ever-changing circumstances of human existence. The reconstructive aspect of Dewey's thinking presents itself most clearly in his history of philosophy, which reveals the reconstructive and subsequently instrumental nature of Dewey's philosophy of history. Further, understanding this revealed philosophy of history is vital if one desires to understand the curriculum design of the Dewey School, which hinged on repeating the race experience in order to foster within students a deep understanding of past human growth and development while also encouraging historical inquiry and active problem solving.

We are reminded in *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education* that, “what does not reconstruct itself will eventually undergo destruction,”⁷⁹ and it is the nature of Dewey’s philosophy of education and philosophy of history that allow for continued reconstruction dependent on ever-changing present needs and experiences. Going forward, we should remind ourselves of the necessity of continually reconstructing of our experience to bring about lifelong learning and lifelong growth.

⁷⁹ Garrison, Neubert, and Reich, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education*, 47.

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