



Dewey: A Pragmatist View of History

Serge Grigoriev
Ithaca College
sgrigoriev@ithaca.edu

Abstract

Despite the centrality of the idea of history to Dewey's overall philosophical outlook, his brief treatment of philosophical issues in history has never attracted much attention, partly because of the dearth of the available material. Nonetheless, as argued in this essay, what we do have provides an outline of a comprehensive pragmatist view of history distinguished by an emphasis on methodological pluralism and a principled opposition to thinking of historical knowledge in correspondence terms. The key conceptions of Dewey's philosophy of history discussed in this paper – i.e. historical constitution of human nature, constructivist ontology of historical events, as well as the belief that the proper form of historical judgments is underwritten by the category of continual change – are discussed with a view to the current challenges in philosophy of history, e.g. the contest between naturalism and rationalism, objectivity and relativism, questions surrounding the function of narrative in history, and the relationship of history to the problems of identity and self-knowledge. The intended upshot of the essay is to suggest that Dewey's brief yet substantial analysis may be capable of supplying the guiding principles for articulating a viable and promising pragmatist (and naturalist) conception of historical knowledge.

Keywords

pragmatism, naturalism, history, correspondence, event

1

In 1959, Burleigh Wilkins wrote a paper criticizing Dewey for being a historical relativist, whose work is of no use to anyone “except for those who

delight in playing tricks upon the dead.”¹ The key offending feature of Dewey’s account, for Wilkins, is the claim that historical investigation is thoroughly conditioned by the present interests of the investigators. Dewey, says Wilkins, “has closed the door to any effective distinction between the *findings* of the historian and the reasons that lie behind his interest in any historical problem,”² thereby making the past perversely dependent upon the present.³ Within the context of his other writings, it is reasonably clear that Wilkins, here, is not simply taking issue with the mundane idea that histories are selectively inclusive depending on the author’s purposes, but rather with the view (which he ascribes to Dewey) that historian’s interests are partially constitutive of historical facts themselves.⁴ Admitting the latter possibility would undermine the notion of historical objectivity (understood in correspondence terms) which Wilkins aims to defend.

Wilkins, then, goes on to attribute the perceived failure of Dewey’s pragmatist approach to a preoccupation with “scientific logic or the ability to arrange particulars as instances of generalities or hypotheses,”⁵ and contrasts it with a supposedly more suitable approach, associated with the work of Collingwood,⁶ one that places emphasis on empathetic re-enactment and self-knowledge. In a way, then, Wilkins situates himself vis-a-vis Dewey in the context of the debates provoked by Hempel’s “The Function of General Laws in History,” with Dewey featured as a positivistically-minded naturalist, and himself as a defender of history’s methodological autonomy and objectivity. The significance of such a maneuver is two-fold, for the idea of general laws in history not only impinges upon the disciplinary autonomy, but also appears to challenge the role that historians had

¹ B. Wilkins, “Pragmatism as a Theory of Historical Knowledge: John Dewey on the Nature of Historical Inquiry”, *The American Historical Review*, 64 (1959), 878–890, p. 884.

² Ibid. 880. Italics are mine.

³ Ibid. 881.

⁴ In a book of a later date (B. Wilkins, *Has History Any Meaning? A Critique of Popper’s Philosophy of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978)) Wilkins engages Popper’s view of history. Popper, of course, insists that the writing of history requires selection (K. Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 121) which is informed by our interests in our own current problems (ibid. 268). Wilkins has some reservations about this, yet he does not accuse Popper of being a relativist. It is possible, of course, that his own views had changed in the interim.

⁵ Wilkins, “Pragmatism”, 887.

⁶ Ibid.

traditionally assigned to rational agency and free will. Hence, a defense of history's autonomy, in this context, may easily signal a commitment to positing some *sui generis* properties of human nature which defy the adequacy of any would-be naturalistic approach.⁷ And Dewey, of course, is a naturalist.

2

Dewey's explicit discussion of history is confined to two shorter pieces: some recurring observations in his *Ethical Principles Underlying Education* (1897) and a chapter in his *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (1938) titled "Judgment as Spatial Temporal Determination: Narration-Description." What we find there, unsurprisingly, does show some affinity with Hempelian themes. Thus, Dewey does consider social sciences to be "branches of natural science" in a broad sense; he does place a premium on law-like generalizations; and he does ascribe the "retarded state"⁸ of social research to a lack of "analytic discrimination" which, by reconfiguring the social situations so as to give rise to general hypotheses, could allow for prediction and evidential testing.⁹ This does sound like Hempel, indeed, but not everything

⁷ This is the line taken recently by D'Oro who reads Collingwood as a staunch proponent of the separation between the method "appropriate to an investigation of mind from the method appropriate to the investigation of nature," (G. D'Oro, "In Defense of the Agent-Centered Perspective", *Metaphilosophy*, 36 (2005), 662 & 666; G. D'Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 19 & 33). Collingwood, on her reading, offers a starting point for "the strong-minded anti-naturalists," (ibid. 139) by securing "a conception of a priority impervious to naturalization" (G. D'Oro, "Reclaiming the Ancestors of Simulation Theory", *History and Theory*, 48 (2009), 129–139, p. 139). I have argued at length for a more naturalist-friendly reading of Collingwood in print (S. Grigoriev, "Continuity of the Rational: Naturalism and Historical Understanding in Collingwood", *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2 (2008), 119–137), questioning the strict separation on which D'Oro insists. For the purposes of present discussion, it will suffice to point out with Goldstein (L. Goldstein, "Dray on Re-enactment and Constructionism", *History and Theory*, 37 (1998), 409–421, p. 413) that Collingwood "was not opposed to the discovery of regularities in human affairs", although I agree with Krausz that he did not consider scientific-style explanations characteristic of history (M. Krausz, "Historical Explanation, Re-enactment, and Practical Inference", *Metaphilosophy*, 11 (1980), 143–154, p. 143).

⁸ J. Dewey, *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1938), 487.

⁹ Ibid. 493–4.

about Hempel's position was problematic or unacceptable.¹⁰ Thus, Hempel is right that historical explanations frequently rely on law-like generalizations. Take, for example, the routine relationship between food supply and army morale.¹¹ His complaint that the hypotheses involved in historical explanations are frequently “not clearly indicated, and cannot unambiguously be supplemented”¹² is also a legitimate one. In fact, writing twenty years before the publication of Hempel's paper, Collingwood observed: “The nineteenth-century positivists were right in thinking that history could and would become more scientific. It did, partly as a result of their work, become at once more critical and trustworthy, and also more interested in general concepts.”¹³ “The historian,” says Collingwood, “does not remain at a level of thought below generalisation: he generalises too and with exactly the same kind of purpose”;¹⁴ the purpose, in Collingwood's view, being to explain individual puzzling events.

Hempel also insisted that it is “unwarranted and futile to attempt the demarcation of sharp boundary lines between the different fields of scientific research.”¹⁵ Dewey concurred, at least partially, claiming that the division of social knowledge into “a number of compartmentalized and

¹⁰ The problems of Hempel's proposal are by now familiar and well documented. Thus, Hempel's view of covering law as suggesting a “connection of an invariant sort” conflicts with his concession that in history it would not be reasonable to expect more than probabilistic laws (C. Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (1942), 35–48, p. 41). He is also wrong to claim that an attribution of a causal connection in an individual case must necessarily presume an existence of general covering law. Even in natural science, as Miller points out, there are received explanations that pertain to individual cases: e.g. Kepler's laws which describe our particular solar system. Finally, not only is the notion of causal explanation not properly analyzed by the covering-law model (R. Miller, *Fact and Method: Explanation, Confirmation and Reality in the Natural and the Social Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 34–57), the very project of introducing a general notion of explanatory adequacy, without any pragmatic relationship to what most scientists would consider appropriate in a given field at the time is problematic (Miller 26); and practicing historians put little stock in general laws.

¹¹ Hempel, “The Function”, 47.

¹² *Ibid.* 42.

¹³ R. Collingwood, “Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge” (1922) in W. Debbins (ed.) *Essays in the Philosophy of History: R.G. Collingwood* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966) 23–33, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 30.

¹⁵ Hempel, “The Function”, 48.

supposedly independent non-interacting fields” is a chief obstacle to progress in social inquiry.¹⁶ From a pragmatist viewpoint, there is no clear reason why we must believe that the findings of psychology or sociology should play no role in historical explanations instead of thinking that history has a *number* of special methods at its disposal, and that these could be further augmented by familiarity with the findings of other disciplines. In fact, even Collingwood seemed to oppose a principled distinction between different kinds of inquiry: “Must a distinction be drawn,” he asks, “between two kinds of knowledge called respectively History and Science? Such a distinction is usually made: we shall argue that it is illusory.”¹⁷ When both science and history are regarded as actual inquiries, he explains, the difference of method and logic wholly disappears.¹⁸ Thus, although Collingwood maintained that history has a special method of its own, on the issue of the continuity of the principles of inquiry, he and Dewey may stand much closer than Wilkins’ account appears to suggest.

3

Dewey’s intuitions about inquiry are informed by his “naturalist theory of logic” which postulates a “continuity of the lower... and the higher... activities and forms” while precluding a reduction of the latter to the former.¹⁹ On this view, the goal of a living organism immersed in its environment is to transform “a relatively conflicting experience to a relatively integrated one”;²⁰ i.e. to transform an experience of uncertainty into experiential pre-conditions of an integrated response, or action. This goal is shared by all living beings including rational ones. The brain, says Dewey, “frees organic behavior from complete servitude to immediate physical conditions” but does not remove the brain “from the category of organic devices of behavior.”²¹ “The nervous system is only a specialized

¹⁶ Dewey, *Logic*, 508.

¹⁷ Collingwood, “Are History and Science Different”, 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 33.

¹⁹ Dewey, *Logic*, 23.

²⁰ J. Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, 1916), 170.

²¹ J. Dewey, “The Practical Character of Reality” (1908) in J. McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 214.

mechanism for keeping all bodily activities working together”²² and “the brain is the machinery for constant reorganizing of activity so as to maintain its continuity”²³ and its adequation to the environment. Hence, the importance of generalizations, which can supply the foundation for the formation of interactive habits,²⁴ which render a certain type of situation more manageable every time by exploiting a similar pattern of response. Hence also the perceived continuity between natural and social sciences, for, even in a thoroughly socialized setting, we remain living organisms dealing with a series of problematic situations.

However, when it comes to humans, Dewey finds it necessary to qualify his position as “*cultural naturalism*.” What he means by that is that “the ways in which human beings respond even to physical conditions are influenced by their cultural environment”²⁵ insofar as what people do “is determined not by organic structure and physical heredity alone but by the influence of cultural heredity.”²⁶ Cultural existence, according to Dewey, is not something that is imposed on a human being from the outside: it is natural for human beings to live culturally, in communities bound by language and tradition.²⁷ Such a mode of existence transforms even the basic biological functions which acquire new meaning,²⁸ with “an incorporation within the physical structure of human beings of the effects of cultural conditions” so profound that “resulting activities are as direct and seemingly ‘natural’ as are the first reactions of an infant.”²⁹ In fact, Dewey speaks quite literally of “modifications wrought *within* the biological organism by the cultural environment.”³⁰ Insofar as we are biological beings thus transformed by culture, the shape of our inquiries also changes from its natural mode: our inquiries are usually shaped by and grow out of the particular culture which we inhabit, and the conditions which they modify are, for the

²²) Dewey, *Essays*, 208.

²³) *Ibid.* 209.

²⁴) Dewey, *Logic*, 32.

²⁵) *Ibid.* 42.

²⁶) *Ibid.* 43.

²⁷) *Ibid.* 19.

²⁸) *Ibid.* 57.

²⁹) *Ibid.* 43.

³⁰) *Ibid.*

most part, also cultural.³¹ Thus, even altering our natural conditions is usually a cultural, social project.

Furthermore, according to Dewey, social phenomena have an indispensable historical dimension, in addition to the ordinary instrumentalist one.³² The instrumentalist dimension establishes the continuity between the animal and the human; whereas the historical dimension is intended to capture the peculiar transformational role that (cultural) history plays in the constitution of human nature. To see ourselves as human, according to Dewey, is to see ourselves as a part of history; for without a sense of history in which we are caught up even at this very moment, social phenomena, on Dewey's view, lose "the qualities that make [them] distinctly social."³³ The historical dimension of human life, then, is irreducible. Dewey's quite explicit on this point. A unique sequence of events "as far as the latter is interpreted wholly in terms of general and universal propositions . . . loses that unique individuality in virtue of which it is a historic and social fact. . . . The [general] conceptions are indispensable as *means* for determining a non-recurring *temporal sequence*."³⁴ With regard to Wilkins' argument, this accomplishes a kind of reversal. It is not that history is off-limits because its subject matter – human nature – defies being known on the terms of natural science. On the contrary, because human "nature" is, at any given point, largely constituted by history, our inquiries into the pervasive cultural and social aspects of human life cannot succeed unless the methods of natural sciences are supplemented and informed by a historical perspective. Such is the first consequence of Dewey's cultural naturalism.

4

Returning to the charge of relativism, we can begin by noting that Dewey's pragmatist philosophy pre-supposes an interactive view of knowledge,³⁵ where to know means to establish a certain (favorable) relationship between

³¹ Ibid. 20.

³² The distinction is borrowed from J. Blau, "John Dewey's Theory of History", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 57 (1960), 89–100, p. 94.

³³ Dewey, *Logic* 501.

³⁴ Ibid. Compare this to Collingwood's view regarding the role of generalizations cited in the previous section.

³⁵ Ibid. 33.

the organism and its environment. Thus, to come to know something, on such a view, means to learn how to see it differently, to see it in a logically (and practically) structured way. Knowledge, then, necessarily results in a transformation of our relationship to that which is known. What precedes the operation of knowledge is an empirical, existential situation which has its own organization of a direct, non-logical character.³⁶ However, the only constraints that such an un-conceptualized situation can impose are of a brute and causal sort. The intelligible constraints, on the other, are a product of an analytic operation, undertaken with a view to enabling us to engage the situation in specific effective ways. We may want to change the situation, to describe it, to make predictions about it, to understand it in relationship to other situations. In every case, the way that we conceptualize the situation depends on what we want to do with it.

Dewey's theory of knowledge is intentionally opposed to the stance which assumes that "the ideal or aim of knowledge is to repeat or copy a prior existence";³⁷ a stance which he explicitly holds responsible for the "agnostic sting of the doctrine of 'relativity'".³⁸ The whole problem, on this view, only arises because different conceptualizations of reality, undertaken with different interests in mind, are obliged to measure up to some pre-conceptual vision of reality, of the kind that would be delivered by an impartial camcorder in the sky. But such a "kodak fixation"³⁹ of what is going on would not amount to knowledge – precisely because the operation of knowledge consists in relating the situation to us in some determinate fashion that allows us to interact with it in a desirable way. Knowledge, then, is not about copying – it is about problem-solving; and while each solution is relative to an envisioned problem, with respect to its problem it possesses a definite set of situation-related test-conditions that it needs to satisfy. By satisfying these conditions it establishes itself as warranted, and the terms in which the corresponding problem was conceived as real.

Dewey clearly believes that this pragmatist view of knowledge is especially applicable in social sciences and history. Thus, he explains that "judgments of practice and historical judgments" are "special instances of the reconstructive transformation of antecedent problematic subject-matter"

³⁶) Dewey, *Essays*, 6.

³⁷) Dewey, "The Practical Character", 215.

³⁸) *Ibid.*

³⁹) *Ibid.* 211.

which are formed “with *express* reference of entering integrally into the reconstitution of the very existential material which they are ultimately about.”⁴⁰ Moreover, according to Dewey, realism in social sciences (as elsewhere) does not “mean apprehension of situation *in toto*”⁴¹ but an analysis thereof with a view “to consequences that are affected by definite plans of dealing practically with the phenomena.”⁴² Since the problematic situation is always configured with a guiding interest in mind, we may be tempted to ascribe to Dewey a simplistic view that we should study history only in hopes of finding solutions to our present-day problems. This, in fact, is one of the principal educational uses of history that he envisions.⁴³ However, we may want to go beyond that and attempt to develop, instead, a pragmatist account of the historicity of human social experience, by asking what it means to see historical judgment “as a resolution through inquiry of a problematic situation.”⁴⁴

First of all, we must expect the past to be transformed as a result of historical judgment. For Dewey, this point is of crucial importance for explaining the distinction between “the intellectual reconstruction” and merely “that which happened in the past”;⁴⁵ between the idea of “it happened thus” historically speaking and the literal “it happened thus.”⁴⁶ Out of the two, only the former is of any interest – because only the former constitutes knowledge; while the latter remains mere existential dross. Thus, we do not begin with “things that happened” and build our historical understanding out of those. Instead, nothing determinate can be said to have happened, even in the case of our own past, unless it is related to other happenings in the light of the principles of historical knowledge. Events, on Dewey’s view, do not occur; instead they are constituted by either historical or quasi-historical operations; so “... what we know as past may be something which has *irretrievably* undergone just the difference which knowledge makes.”⁴⁷ “Unless the difference between existential change as barely existential and

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Logic*, 492.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 500.

⁴² *Ibid.* 512.

⁴³ J. Dewey, *Ethical Principles Underlying Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), 21–23.

⁴⁴ Dewey, *Logic*, 232.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 236.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 237.

⁴⁷ Dewey, “The Practical Character,” 211.

as subject-matter of judgment is borne in mind,” says Dewey, “the nature of *event* becomes an inexplicable mystery. *Event* is a term of judgment, not of existence apart from judgment.”⁴⁸

However, if events do not exist, unless as previously conceptualized, until some operations are performed in the present, does that mean that what happened before can be influenced by what comes after, that the past depends on the future? No, it does not. Knowledge of the past depends on the present – just as it should insofar as history (or the knowledge of the past) is a certain type of relationship that we have with the past in our present. Only if we think of historical knowledge in terms of correspondence, would we be tempted to conclude from this that our present academic proceedings wreak existential havoc in the land of yore.

Another potential problem, here, has to do with the fact that our leading principles of inquiry and our ways of classifying things do change over time meaning that, on Dewey’s view, historians will occasionally be unable to agree about what happened even when all the evidence is in. Such arguments do occur; but they are resolved not through a furious clash between competing events, but by the contest between the relevant standards of judgment. Once one of the competing standards is defeated (e.g. on pragmatic grounds of its inferior explanatory usefulness elsewhere), the corresponding candidate event simply dissolves. Such comparative judgments provide potentially the only working standard that offers in all areas of active research, not only in history.

A more interesting problem arises in connection with Hacking’s discussion of describing past intentional actions.⁴⁹ Identity of an intentional action depends upon the description under which it is performed: thus, the very same action could count as a betrayal or as an attempt to get help. The difficulty arises from the conjunction of three conditions: a) one may act intentionally under one description, while also performing, unintentionally,

⁴⁸ Ibid. 222. Among contemporary philosophers of history, Dewey’s constructivist view of “event” seems closest to the position of Paul Roth who similarly rejects the “correspondence theory of historical knowledge” (P. Roth, “Narrative Explanations: the Case of History”, *History and Theory*, (1988): 1–13, p. 2), and the view of events as existing prior to “theoretical specification” of them on which this theory is premised (ibid., 8).

⁴⁹ I. Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

an action under another description⁵⁰ b) unless the description is available to the agent she cannot be said to be acting intentionally under it⁵¹ c) new action descriptions become available through time. The curious result is that, in some cases, our way of describing the past action (say, as child abuse) is perfectly true of the past, yet the agent in the past could not have performed it intentionally because he or she lacked the pertinent descriptive category. Hacking's response is to say that intentional actions in the past should be regarded as indeterminate.⁵² By contrast, Dewey's position would seem to imply that *all events* in the past, including intentional actions, are indeterminate until we apply certain standards of judgment; and what standards are appropriate in a particular case would be determined by the prevailing disciplinary practices interpreted in the light of what we are trying to find out and why. For example, anachronistic judgments may be deemed improper for evaluating the agent's moral character and social reputation, and appropriate in explaining why their grown-up children reacted to them in a certain way.

5

Dewey's final contribution consists in his analysis of the conditions and form of historical judgment. History, according to Dewey, is ultimately concerned with change or, more precisely, with directional development.⁵³ This is why the proper form of historical judgment is a narrative proposition. Isolated change, even if it is recurrent, can be captured in other ways – for example by ordinary causal explanation. But history is not concerned with particular changes; instead it is concerned with changes continuing and building upon each other over time. This is why it is appropriate that historical judgment should take the form of a narrative proposition which is always “about a *course* of sequential events, not about an isolated event.”⁵⁴ The possibility of such judgments is, furthermore, predicated on the continuity which distinguishes the course of events from a mere

⁵⁰ Ibid. 235.

⁵¹ Ibid. 243.

⁵² Ibid. 244.

⁵³ Dewey, *Logic*, 227.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 227.

collection of occurrences.⁵⁵ This continuity amounts to more than the mere survival of some vestiges of the past into the present; instead, it is a question of logical form which “postulates a career, a course and cycle of change.”⁵⁶ Importantly, this continuity which subtends the narrative structure of history, is always a product of an historical judgment, it is not a property of the current of human life per se. Instead, it is the way we make sense of life from a historical or a quasi-historical point of view. Thus, we do tell stories that establish a narrative continuity between our actions in the past and our actions in the present, but we usually do not chose to act merely for the sake of producing a better story.⁵⁷

Historical narrativizing operation, then, requires a temporal “delimitation” of its subject matter, whereas “that which exists is, as existent, indif-

⁵⁵ Ibid. 229.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 236.

⁵⁷ The pragmatist view, then, is opposed to narrative realism as defended by Carroll and, most notably, Carr. Both argue for a kind of isomorphism between narrative and life itself. The reasons they give is that we plan our lives by means of “visualizing stories” (N. Carroll, “Interpretation, History, and Narrative” in B. Fay, P. Pomper & R. Vann (eds.), *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 34–56, p. 40) and that we “constantly” try “to occupy story-tellers’ position with respect to our own lives,” both prospectively and retrospectively (D. Carr, “Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity” in B. Fay, P. Pomper & R. Vann (eds.), *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 137–152, p. 145). Hence, the structure of narrative is supposed to be close to the “structure of action itself, from the agent’s point of view” (D. Carr, “Narrative Explanation and Its malcontents”, *History and Theory*, 47 (2008), 19–30, p. 20). That storytelling and daydreaming are central to our lives as sources of considerable intellectual satisfaction is not in question. However, life viewed in the light of narrative considerations denies us this kind of satisfaction: life is narratively frustrating. We favor stories because of their ability to produce a sense of intelligibility, often accompanied by a definite sense of moral valuation. This is why we often tell stories to rationalize our (somewhat questionable) actions. Yet, the stories we tell ourselves *in the process of acting* are not like that: they are always unsettled, never complete, progressively and inconsistently revised in the light of changing moods and circumstances. These narrative traces may well have an effect on our actions but only as partial constituents of a disorganized medley of antecedent conditions and considerations. Carr may be right that explanatory story “does not inhabit a different conceptual universe” than the “initial agent’s story” (ibid. 29), but the difference between a full-fledged narrative structure in one case and mere narrative elements of cognition in another is considerable nonetheless.

ferent to delimitation.”⁵⁸ This, delimitation, says Dewey, is “strictly relative to the objective intent set to inquiry by the problematic quality of a given situation.”⁵⁹ The explanatory structure of the narrative, then, results, just like any other explanation constitutive of knowledge, from the constraints implied in the conditions for a satisfactory resolution of a problematic situation. But a problematic situation is not given; it is a product of conceptually transforming an existential situation in a certain way. In the case of an environmental puzzle or a social conflict, existential situation can force itself on us in a way that points to some provisional conditions of finding a satisfactory resolution. In the case of history, *prima facie*, there is no existential situation of this sort: we can pick and choose our battles in the vast and shadowy landscape of the potentially available past.

Dewey’s answer is “all history is necessarily written from the standpoint of the present.”⁶⁰ The present, moreover, is not merely a problem field, but also a horizon within which the constitutive historicity of a properly human existence comes into its own: “the past,” says Dewey, “is of logical necessity the past-of-the-present, and the present is the-past-of-a-future-living present.”⁶¹ The present, in other words, is the point at which we are thrown into history, which flows from the past and issues into our future. Our human present, then, exemplifies the structure of historical judgment, which is grounded in the category of continual change.⁶² As for the forward-looking aspect of historical judgment postulated by Dewey, we can simply say that it is a result of the fact that who we are, while constituted in large part by the past, is also oriented towards the future which continually becomes our present before becoming our past. Along with the constructivist ontology of historical events, and a commitment to historical constitution of human selves, the belief that the form of historical judgments is underwritten by the category of continual change constitutes the third key postulate of the pragmatist approach to philosophy of history.

⁵⁸) Dewey, *Logic*, 221.

⁵⁹) *Ibid.* 222.

⁶⁰) *Ibid.* 235.

⁶¹) *Ibid.* 238.

⁶²) This point, it seems to me, is closely related to what Koopman calls the “transitionalism” of pragmatist philosophy (C. Koopman, “Historicism in Pragmatism: Lessons in Historiography and Philosophy”, *Metaphilosophy*, 41 (2010), 690–713, p. 691).

6

The past is a problematic *field* for us because its various aspects necessarily enter into the historical constitution of some (often important) aspects of who we are. The language in terms of which we think of social conflict, the mindset that prompts us to defend a certain philosophical dogma, the preferences that guide our choice of historical problems, and the principles we use to analyze them: all these things, down to the most mundane and everyday choices, are products of a history of solutions that have been offered to certain problems in our culture up until now. By re-thinking our history we re-construct it, and reconstitute ourselves in the process.

In advancing such a view, however, pragmatists must exercise extreme caution to distinguish their interest in historically informed critical reflexivity from the fashionable charms of genealogy undertaken in the name of self-creation. Thus, for example, Baert, whose inspiration is mainly *neo-pragmatist*, speaks of the purpose of social science as “self-knowledge, referring to the ability of individuals to question or re-describe themselves and their cultural presuppositions.”⁶³ This sounds close enough to Dewey’s view. However, Baert’s avowed interest is in “neo-pragmatist notion of edification”;⁶⁴ so he is concerned “not in what happened in history as such, but [in] how the past enables us to express ourselves differently.”⁶⁵ *That* is a much more radical agenda than a pragmatist position outlined so far could support. There appear to be good reasons to believe that people can in fact change who they are by learning to apply new descriptions to themselves;⁶⁶ yet there is no indication that a simple linear relationship obtains between the description applied and the resulting personality change. There is even less reason to think, that learning to express or see oneself differently is an unconditional good; there is no clear reason to prefer indiscriminately pursued self-reinvention to the arbitrarily maintained conservatism. More importantly, while self-edification may supply *a* motivation for historical research, such (auto)-didactic inspirations must take a

⁶³ P. Baert, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Towards Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 4 & 155.

⁶⁴ P. Baert, “Towards a Pragmatist-Inspired Philosophy of Social Science”, *Acta Sociologica*, 48 (2005), 191–203, 197.

⁶⁵ Baert, *Philosophy*, 142 & 155.

⁶⁶ I. Hacking, “The looping effects of human kinds”, in D. Sperber, D. Premack, & A. Premack, *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

back seat to the critical and exploratory dimensions of contemporary historical discipline.

The emphasis on the self, on identity, tends to blur the boundaries between history and memory resulting, as Megill points out, in *subordinating* the past to the present, usually at the expense of the critical aspect which distinguishes history from reminiscence.⁶⁷ When it comes to the public uses of history, such conflation is probably unavoidable; when it comes to philosophy of history qua a knowledge-generating discipline, it is best to carefully skirt the slippery slopes. In the context of Dewey's theory, then, we may want to avoid the language of "identity" and "self", and construe "who we are" in the more behavioristic terms of what we do, why we do, and how we do it. The point of education, according to Dewey, is the formation of character, which he defines as "power of social agency, organized capacity of social functioning" together with "social insight or intelligence," "social interest or responsiveness."⁶⁸ Perhaps, then, we could say that history aims at the formation and transformation of some aspects of character through examination and re-construction of their historical presuppositions.

7

Returning to Hempel, it is clear that the resemblance between his and Dewey's positions is largely superficial. Nonetheless, in passing beyond Hempel, as Miller reminds us, we still need to explain why "the causal patterns that historians employ are much farther from the covering-law model than physicists' and chemists'."⁶⁹ Miller's own response is that, insofar as historians are compelled to investigate questions of practical importance, they do not enjoy the freedom to select questions "susceptible to rigorous answers."⁷⁰ This is undoubtedly an important consideration; and within the terms of the pragmatist perspective outlined thus far we can try and supply yet another one. The belief in historical constitution of human

⁶⁷ A. Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 22.

⁶⁸ Dewey, *Logic*, 28.

⁶⁹ Miller, *Fact and Method*, 132.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 134.

selves forces us to reconsider the relationship between human nature and history: thus, instead of seeing history as a product of unchanging human nature, we become committed to seeing the present state of human nature as a product of history. Furthermore, there are two distinguishable senses in which human selves can be said to be products of their history: a direct causal sense, wherein the present appears as the product of the past, and a mediated historical sense, wherein our *accounts* of the past shape the present of who we are. Thus, as Hacking puts it nicely: “The soul that we are constantly constructing we construct according to an explanatory model of how we came to be the way we are.”⁷¹

Hempel’s covering laws, of course, pertain to natural kinds and not to individuals. Hence, the historical instability or variability of “human nature,” all by itself, may render the application of such laws problematic. Yet, all natural kinds are subject to some variation in their specific instantiations; we could even go so far as to say that natural kinds are routinely defined by suppressing the individual differences, which appear to be insignificant in comparison to the shared similarities. There is almost certainly a core of shared features – biological, psychological, populational – which have characterized human beings, without significant deviations, from the times of Caesar to our own day. Moreover, viewing history through a prism of “human nature” thus defined, we are almost certain to note some interesting patterns and arrive at some interesting conclusions – perhaps of a distressing and somber sort.

Nonetheless, such an exercise, at the present time, could not even come close to contending for the place of the dominant paradigm of historical explanation. Firstly, it happens to be at odds with our folk-psychological conceptions of individual agency. Secondly, it would almost certainly be powerless to explain or anticipate many of the events considered pivotal in history. (Just think of subsuming the reign of Henry VIII under a covering law!) Finally, our current folk-psychological conceptions of individual agency seem to jibe much better with the kinds of explanations that prove to be efficient in history. Hardly a surprise: for these conceptions are both a product of history and a reflection of the ways in which we have made sense of it thus far. This derivation yields little support for a claim to cognitive privilege, yet it does give rise to an interesting question. Namely, what

⁷¹ Hacking, *Rewriting*, 94.

kind of history would shape human species in such a way that individualistic explanations would seem, for the most part, to be more successful than general laws in accounting both for our history and our self-image?

The answer is, of course, the kind of history we have had so far. In that history, by virtue of the peculiar distribution of power secured by certain forms of social organization, momentous changes affecting entire populations depended disproportionately on the relatively unique properties of select individuals. There is no other species where the quirks of the few have had such an influence on the lives (and deaths) of the many. Insofar, as covering laws exclude such quirks by design, their explanatory function in history remains limited. This however, to all appearances, is merely a contingent fact: we could imagine (some have) a history which reflects (predominantly) the interests and propensities of the human species as a whole. Such a history, of course, would be much more amenable to being treated in terms of covering laws. The prospects for such a history, as of now, do not look promising: both because we cannot quite imagine a radically new yet workable institutional framework, and because, to a degree that individuals are capable of self-fashioning in the light of the past history, they are more likely to want to fashion themselves after the divergent and the outstanding than the ingloriously average. This, of course, may well change.

8

While the disproportionate influence of select individuals on the fortunes of mankind is a fact both important and fascinating, one should not forget that these individual contributions are only that – contributions – which have shaped history along with a host of other factors. On the pragmatist view, depending on the problems we set ourselves as historians, the study of actions of individual figures may be the focus of our attention or may turn out to be almost entirely irrelevant to our task. Moreover, even when analyzing individual contributions, there is no single analytic model to follow, for, in the context of historical research, such models (folk-psychological, psychoanalytic, decision theory, etc.) are only justified as problem-solving tools – not as accounts of the essence of rational agency or action. On this important point, Dewey's pluralistic philosophy has to part ways with Collingwood's conception of history.

Despite the juxtaposition suggested by Wilkins there are many affinities between Dewey and Collingwood. Thus, both maintain that history should be regarded as a process,⁷² rather than an assembly of events; and both tend to interpret this process as the coming into existence of the distinctive potentialities of human beings qua rational and cultural creatures,⁷³ with history being ultimately the history of the genesis of who we are.⁷⁴ Thus, according to Collingwood, “the historical process is a process in which man creates for himself this or that kind of human nature,”⁷⁵ and the value of history is “that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.”⁷⁶ The consequence of this is that we always and inevitably view the past from the stand-point of our concrete present.⁷⁷

Just like Dewey, Collingwood maintained that “copy-theory of knowledge” had been “discredited,”⁷⁸ and regarded the idea that “knowing makes no difference to what is known” as “meaningless.”⁷⁹ Hence, the only thing that can aspire to the status of knowledge, according to Collingwood, even in the case of our own past, is bound to be a reconstruction which needs to be supported by some external evidence.⁸⁰ What the experience is for the mind, and memory for the consciousness, for knowledge, says Collingwood, “is called history,”⁸¹ and it is an artifact of our reconstructive procedures.⁸² This is also what Collingwood means by his thesis of the “ideality of the past,”⁸³ which stipulates that history is not intent on “discovering what really happened, if ‘what really happened’ is anything other than ‘what the

⁷² R. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 97.

⁷³ R. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 98.

⁷⁴ R. Collingwood, *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 121 & 169.

⁷⁵ Collingwood, *The Idea*, 226.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 10.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 60 & 381.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 284.

⁷⁹ Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 44.

⁸⁰ Collingwood, *The Idea*, 293 & 296. Collingwood speaks of our past thoughts; but for him all knowledge of the past is knowledge of thought.

⁸¹ Collingwood, *The Principles*, 131.

⁸² Goldstein emphasizes this aspect of Collingwood’s thought in his critique of Dray. Collingwood, he insists always recognized that “historical factuality is contingent upon the practice of the discipline” (“Dray on Re-enactment”, 419).

⁸³ Collingwood, *The Idea*, 406.

evidence indicates’.⁸⁴ Hence, Collingwood’s view appears to resonate well with Dewey’s constructivism.

The key difference between the two positions emerges when we consider the object of historical study. For Dewey, historians can occupy themselves with any aspect of the past which appears relevant in the light of our social, cultural, or research interests. For Collingwood, on the other hand, history is always a history of thoughts,⁸⁵ and of events only insofar as they express thoughts.⁸⁶ His perspective, then, is radically agent-centric. From a pragmatist point of view, this restriction constitutes an unwarranted curtailment of our conceptual and methodological options. To be an object of an historical study, a thing or an event has to be brought into some relationship with some form of cultural practice – one cannot write a history of uncounted rocks on a distant sea-shore. In that sense, all historical objects are thought-dependent. Yet, it does not follow from this that the object of history consists solely in reclaiming thoughts of particular agents.

Additionally, the details of Collingwood’s account of re-enactment give one pause at times. Thus, when Collingwood says that past thought is “revived” not merely as “another of the same kind” but as the very “same activity taken up again,”⁸⁷ his theory begins to sound like an idealist version of correspondence theory. Should we, for example, assume that, although knowing always makes a difference to what is known, this is not so in the case of other people’s thoughts, which are, then, not known but, rather, “apprehended”? And when Collingwood says that this operation becomes possible because there is “a kind of pre-established harmony between the historian’s mind and the object he sets out to study” based on “common human nature uniting the historian with the men whose work he is studying,”⁸⁸ is he not, thereby, contradicting his own declarations about historicity of human nature? When faced with paradoxes of this sort, one is inadvertently reminded of Ricoeur’s admonition that “nothing has more

⁸⁴) Collingwood, “The Limits of Historical Knowledge” (1928) in W. Debbins (ed.) *Essays in the Philosophy of History: R.G. Collingwood* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), 99.

⁸⁵) Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 110.

⁸⁶) Collingwood, *The Idea*, 217.

⁸⁷) *Ibid.* 293.

⁸⁸) *Ibid.* 65.

harmed the theory of understanding than the identification . . . between understanding and understanding *others*.”⁸⁹

There appear to be some conflicting strands in Collingwood’s thought, and one’s sense of his position depends on the interpretation one favors. D’Oro’s reading of Collingwood as a rational action theorist,⁹⁰ who is “no soft naturalist”⁹¹ would place him most at odds with the pragmatist line; Stueber, who rejects the idea that all history is the history of thought⁹² and conceives of re-enactment in terms of situational analysis provides a more pragmatist-friendly outlook. My sense is that Collingwood would be better off being a kind of soft naturalist. His writings on methodology of inquiry, moreover, do bear an interesting resemblance to Dewey’s logic of problematic situation. Thus, Collingwood says that truth about the past belongs not to a statement but to an entire question-answer complex⁹³ – i.e. the complex of correlated findings and strategies of inquiry, which gradually unfolds itself in the process of inquiry. “Every actual inquiry,” says Collingwood, “starts from a certain problem and the purpose of the inquiry is to solve that problem; the plan of the discovery, therefore, is already known and formulated by saying that, whatever the discovery may be, it must be such as to satisfy the terms of the problem.”⁹⁴ Yet their differences on the subject of thought and agency may run too deep. At times one is almost tempted to distinguish between reflections of Collingwood as a practicing historian and his metaphysical attempts to establish “*a priori* the pure principles on which all historical thinking is to proceed.”⁹⁵ The latter project runs counter to the spirit of pragmatism, while the former appears to produce insights congenial to it.

⁸⁹ P. Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 131.

⁹⁰ My own reservations about D’Oro’s conceptions of agency and action interpretation were expressed in S. Grigoriev, “Beyond Radical Interpretation: Individuality as the Basis of Historical Understanding”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 17 (2009), 489–503.

⁹¹ D’Oro, *Metaphysics*, 95.

⁹² K. Stueber, “The Psychological Basis of Historical Explanation: Reenactment, Simulation, and the Fusion of Horizons”, *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), 25–42, p. 26.

⁹³ Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 37.

⁹⁴ Collingwood, *The Idea*, 312.

⁹⁵ Op. cit. W. Van Der Dussen, *History as a science: the philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 141.

9

Perhaps the chief conceptual merit of Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of history is that it enables us to recognize the essential historicity of human existence without relapsing to a pre-Darwinian conception of human nature. What may appear as its weakness is the radical pluralism which, in the eyes of some, may border on insupportable relativism. Such pluralism appears distinctly troubling in the light of the idea which, according to Megill,⁹⁶ has been shared until recently by most historians: that our inquiries into the past are oriented towards some overarching unity, to History as such. A pragmatist need not deny a role for such a conception, as long as we are prepared to admit that a unitary history, just like unitary language, is not something given but something posited; something which, nonetheless, imposes some definite limits on the scatter and inter-relationships of the heterogeneous descriptions that we are willing to tolerate at any given time.⁹⁷ Dewey's pluralism is neither unconstrained nor unruly. Moreover, aside from the heuristic top-down (philosophical) constraints, it is constrained at the base by the basic conditions of human communicative competence and practice. Meaning begins to spontaneously accrue to historical events starting with the time of their occurrence, and continues to do so as long as they remain in public memory. Passing theories which "naturally" suggest themselves (to the agent, the contemporaries, the descendants, or an historian) emerge as *prima facie* candidates for explanation, re-focused and re-negotiated in the process of an historical interpretation taking off. Practically speaking, an historical interpretation that flies in the face of most such passing theories without accounting for the apparent conflicts in a satisfactory way, probably has lower chances of being accepted.

Yet, admittedly, these constraints leave a lot of room for maneuvering and are usually negotiable. In part, this may be an inevitable consequence of the view that, historically, "what is" is always *what will have been*. As Dewey says, we are always in the business of making "provisional judgments" hoping one day to arrive at a "conclusive and complete judgment."⁹⁸ The important point is that the provisional nature of our judgments is no

⁹⁶ Megill, *Historical Knowledge*, 167.

⁹⁷ A distortion of Bakhtin's formulation regarding language, borrowed from J. Margolis.

⁹⁸ Dewey, *Logic*, 227.

reason for despair. Consider, by way of a conclusion, the following parable from Wittgenstein:

Imagine we had to arrange the books of a library. When we begin the books lie higgledy-piggledy on the floor. Now there would be many ways of sorting them and putting them in their places. One would be to take the books one by one and put each on the shelf in its right place. On the other hand we might take up several books from the floor and put them in a row on a shelf, merely in order to indicate that these books ought to go together in this order. In the course of arranging the library this whole row of books will have to change its place. But it would be wrong to say that therefore putting them together on a shelf was no step towards the final result. In this case, in fact, it is pretty obvious that having put together books which belong together was a definite achievement, even though the whole row of them had to be shifted. . . . The difficulty in philosophy is to say no more than we know. E.g. to see that when we have put two books together in their right order we have not thereby put them in their final places.⁹⁹

Perhaps in history things do not have to be much different than that.

⁹⁹) L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 44.