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Philosophy in Transition: Dewey’s “Lost” Manuscript

Abstract: The intention of this essay is to offer a reading of Dewey’s recently found manuscript (considered lost for decades) *Philosophy Unmodern and Modern* as a kind of philosophical history leading up to the formulation of the key problems to be addressed by the general framework of Dewey’s cultural naturalism. It is argued, firstly, that cultural naturalism has direct implications for the way that we think about history, and that Dewey’s recently recovered manuscript reflects this in its conception of the purpose and mode of historical reconstruction. Secondly, the essay presents a synoptic overview of the historically emergent thought-conditions structuring, according to Dewey’s narrative, the possibilities of the philosophical discourse of modernity. In conclusion, it is argued that cultural naturalism allows us to move beyond these problems by a radical revision of the terms in which we construe the idea of “persons.” Specifically, instead of thinking about persons in terms of embodied minds we should start thinking about them as participants in histories, carving their individual paths through the world of events, with their existence being *essentially* both temporal and social. It is also suggested that this view of persons allows us to outline a promising account of the notion of human freedom, couched in terms of historical social agency.

1.

Sooner or later historical thought finds itself at the end of a story; and then it starts anew by placing itself in the middle of another one. (Contrary to the popular conception of things, one cannot ever really start at the beginning for, back then, there is as yet no story to be had.) We must distinguish, therefore, between these two coordinated moments of historical operation: the first one (of termination and recollection) belonging to the idea of historical tradition, and the second (of a renewal) – to the idea of interpretive history.

Historical tradition is what we ordinarily find in a history textbook , a narrative report of an accepted fait accompli. It is the mode of being of history which gives rise to the illusion that history is past retrieved as it once had been: to what Paul Roth calls the “woolly mammoth view of history,” meaning the tendency to imagine the past as frozen in time, patiently awaiting the historian’s spade and brush. Here, all the stories have run their course and, soaring over the scene at dusk, we suddenly see everything illuminated and revealed to us in its true colors. Interpretive history, on the other hand, begins by un-ending a story, by opening it up in the now – *now* that there is new evidence, *now* that we thought of a different explanation, *now* that our interests have changed, *now* that we have a new pressing need, *now* that we are caught up by new hope or despair. When interpretive history had run its course, its results get deposited as part of an historical tradition – which is a record of cases closed to be perhaps one day reopened by a searching hand.

As such, interpretive history always has what one may call a philosophical element: for it addresses the past only insofar as this past bequeaths some problem to the present, the solution to which – however vaguely anticipated – appears to hold the key to our future vision of history as well as our own historical future. If philosophy is understood, in the pragmatist spirit, as an effort to formulate the intuited problems of the present in a way that would sketch out a reasoned path to their eventual resolution then the renewal of history – which lies at the heart of contemporary historical research – always has an essentially philosophical dimension.

We now have before us a newly minted edition of a book-length manuscript by Dewey, titled *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*: the work which he struggled with during the years of war without ever being able to bring it to a close, the work believed to had been irretrievably lost for more than half a century. It remains to be seen what impact it will have on Dewey studies in general but, for someone concerned with the philosophy of history, one point stands out immediately: what we have before us is Dewey’s history of philosophy. According to Phillip Deen, the scholar who discovered and edited the manuscript, this *is* actually the way that Dewey thought about it, with the added emphasis on the idea of providing a *social* interpretation for this history.[[1]](#footnote-1) Deen’s own feeling is that what we have, as a result, amounts to a detailed, if somewhat loosely structured, fleshing out of the general framework of “cultural naturalism,” which was central to the sense and direction of Dewey’s work.[[2]](#footnote-2) The connection between cultural naturalism and history, as I have recently argued elsewhere,[[3]](#footnote-3) is not an accidental one, because Dewey’s conception of history, both as a process and as a mode of inquiry, results directly from considering the relationship of human beings to their past (and to their future) in the light of the double articulation of their nature. One may argue, then, that with this new manuscript we are coming full circle so as to consider the emergence of cultural naturalism in the light of a historical reconstruction conducted in accordance with its principles.

Briefly, we could characterize cultural naturalism as a commitment to the underlying continuity between the cultural and the natural modes of functioning, without the reduction of the former to the latter.[[4]](#footnote-4) This continuity, in turn, is taken to consist in the organism’s propensity to integrate its experience with a view to appropriate action or response.[[5]](#footnote-5) The distinguishing feature of the properly human way of functioning, however, consists in the fact that it is determined “not by organic structure and physical heredity alone but by the influence of cultural heredity.”[[6]](#footnote-6) In other words, qua human beings we belong to a social cultural world, which cannot be understood apart from its enduring in time, and, therefore, possesses an indispensable historical dimension. To live socially, in the properly human sense of the term, means to have come (or to have been brought) together, for better or worse, so as to now be jointly engaged (whether cooperatively or antagonistically) in deciding the shape of “our” (somewhat inadvertently) shared future. Therefore, according to Dewey, social phenomena can be seen to possess “the qualities that make [them] distinctly social” only when viewed within an historical perspective.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The implications of this view for writing history are easy to name but difficult to spell out. First of all, history has a narrative, transitional structure: it is a thing of *histories*, not merely occurrences; it follows a course of events instead of merely collecting and tabulating them as one would do with non-historical data.[[8]](#footnote-8) The element of temporality by itself, however, is not sufficient to capture the specificity of history, for we still need to distinguish between narrating a course of events and merely recording sequential states of affairs. Writing a history, as Dewey reminds us, requires a delimitation of its subject-matter.[[9]](#footnote-9) Describing a given state of affairs is already a selective process, for one needs to determine what is significant and exclude everything which does not pertain to the key themes thus identified. Describing a *course* of affairs then imposes an additional selection requirement, namely, to run its course, it has to have a beginning and an end. Deciding where to start and where to finish introduces an additional selective pressure since, in a way, one is inclined to privilege the events which *lead* us from the initial state of affairs to the final. This decision, moreover, should not be arbitrary, although it is very difficult to say what constitutes the criteria of non-arbitrariness in this case. We can write the story of the rise and fall of the Roman empire, or the story of Caesar from Rubicon to Pharsalus, or a detailed story of his tryst with Cleopatra, but it probably would not make much sense to write history from Caesar to the massacre of Katyn. Yet, even this possibility cannot be ruled out with complete confidence.

Our problem is that the events we are interested in do not come labeled as beginnings or ends, yet an arbitrary imposition of such labels would also seem somehow counter-intuitive. In order to address this problem in accordance with Dewey’s view, we may want to begin always by placing *ourselves* in the middle of the story that we are intending to tell , for the past “is of logical necessity the past-of-the-present, and the present is the-past-of-a-future-living present,”[[10]](#footnote-10) so “all history is necessarily written from the standpoint of the present.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The only question that remains is what are we to make of these obscure pronouncements.

We could begin to pursue the answer by asking a different question: namely when does it make sense to enquire into the past of our present? Posed thus, the question does not have a determinate answer: there are multiple legitimate reasons for enquiring into the past – from nostalgia, to legal debates, to politics of identity, or simply on the account of vain curiosity. A better question is when do we feel *compelled* to enquire into the past? The answer to this question seems to be “whenever we are dissatisfied with our present, whenever it turns out different from what we hoped it would be.” If I intended to go to a drinking establishment, and find myself sitting at a bar, there is no obvious need for me to ask how I got there. On the other hand, if I intended to go to work, and here I am – sitting at a bar, the question of how I got here acquires a certain urgency. We ask after the past of our present when the present confronts us with a problem: when it surprises us, disappoints us, or both.

Our present always extends itself indefinitely into the past. Grammatically it would be more correct to describe our present as “present perfect”: we have been sitting at this table, we have been suffering from an economic downturn, and we have been arguing about the existence of god. Our present stretches anywhere from a few seconds to several millennia, and beyond. What gives the present a focus which renders it capable of being a fixed point of departure, is the present problem which is starting to take a recognizable shape. Once this is in place, our interest in the past reaches only as far as the roots of the problem go; it is this that provides us with a criterion of where to begin our story. And once we arrive at a vantage point from which we seem to discern the solution that at least provisionally satisfies us, this particular story ends. *This* is probably as much objectivity as one can get in the business of assigning beginnings and ends to our narrative.

Some will quite reasonably object that the description provided does not fit the ordinary work of a historian who, after all, is not solving practical, but historical problems. The distinction is misleading: an historical problem is precisely a practical problem for an historian. It arises out of the present state of research, out of the research conducted thus far, which gives rise to a sense of dissatisfaction with what has been attained and incites the historian to envision a different state of affairs as the outcome of his research, whether it would be the strengthening of the currently prevalent story or its amendment.

What throws us off here, possibly, is the idea of historical research as re-enactment, whereby historians catapults themselves mentally *out of the present* and into the thicket of the past. Re-enactment is a heuristic device which prompts the historians to imagine that some past present is their own, in an effort to identify the problem with which a particular historical character was struggling at that time. However, even in the case of re-enactment, whatever clues are obtained from this mental exercise are brought to bear on the present problems of research, and not on the existential conflicts of the past. The present is never lost sight of because history is the relationship we form with the past in the light of our present.

2.

Dewey’s manuscript is ostensibly a history of modern philosophy; however, it is not a typical history – one would not want to use it in a classroom as a conventional introduction to philosophy from Descartes to Kant. What one ordinarily expects is a survey of problems that the moderns struggled with: presented in their own terms, or in elucidating paraphrase, along with the solutions which were offered, as well as the analysis of reasons why some of these solutions succeeded and others failed. So what one is left with, at the end, is a kind of enumerable philosophical inheritance: a good score of classical arguments, some clever intellectual strategies, a few examples of misconceived problems, and a list of genuine problems with which philosophers continue to struggle to this day. On such a view of history, the times may change but the problems don’t. Although lifted from a worldview almost entirely unlike our own (What is it like, for example, to be raised by the Jesuits in the first part of the seventeenth century? Or to instruct Queen Christina in metaphysics?), philosophical questions, apparently, stand crystallized outside of time: we do not need to make them our own, they are eternally ours, give or take an occasional update in terminology. Unless that were the case, one may begin to wonder in earnest whether the questions that tormented the wig-wearing men of the past should interest us in the least – us who have a difficult time believing in divinity, us who stand in the presence of a mature natural science, us who, after all, are well off and have so many more entertaining things to do. Nor would we be able to find a good warrant for our confidence that we mean the same things as these men did when we use the same words: surely, say, what they then meant by “soul” couldn’t have exactly been what we now mean by “mind”!

Dewey, on the contrary, composes his philosophical history Dewey-style and that, as we have already seen, requires us to begin with some problem that is pressing upon us in the present. The problem, if one were to venture a guess on the basis of Dewey’s exposition, is one of philosophical dualism: not a dualism of convenience or of ontological generosity but a painful cleft in our thinking which is always torn between two incommensurable worlds in each of which, taken separately, it finds itself bewilderingly at home. The terms of the various dualisms we are enmeshed in matter less than the recurring split itself, for the trouble is not with any of the terms, but with the sense of the fundamentally ineliminable metaphysical division designated in their pairing – division that unexplainably prevents us, in various ways, from making our world whole. In Dewey’s opinion, these conflicts are still our own simply because we still have one foot in modernity, while the other is poised to carry us into the future that remains more divined than defined. This is so because modernity is essentially a moment of transition: from a worldview that we are no longer capable of entertaining in earnest to the promise of something different and new, which we have not yet attained. We are now at the point where, pace Dewey, those who continue to live in the past must surely be dreaming, but “those who live with a sense of definitely achieved present exist in a state of hallucination.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Thus, the sense of a traumatic split that characterizes the modern consciousness has its antecedent and its analogue in the historically and sociologically concrete sense of crisis generated by our inability to reconcile the old and the new, to complete the transition from one to another. Philosophers may imagine that modernity was a product of reason liberating itself from the fetters of prejudice and tradition;[[13]](#footnote-13) however, in reality, according to Dewey, our present sense of intellectual distress is due to the fact that, while practical life liberated itself from tradition and prejudice, philosophical reason remained insecurely tethered to both. While science was transforming all aspects of practical life, the moral and normative sphere, embodied in prevalent customs and institutions of the time, remained almost entirely unaltered, generating a sense of an insuperable conflict.[[14]](#footnote-14) With moral and scientific aspects of culture appearing to be irreconcilably at odds,[[15]](#footnote-15) the immediate vocation of philosophy was to try and find a route to, an ostensibly impossible, reconciliation.

 Philosophically, what needed to be reconciled, as Dewey points out in his earlier work, were “the picture of the world painted by modern science” and “the earlier picture which gave classic metaphysics its intellectual foundation and confirmation.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The struggles of modern philosophy, then, are symptomatic of this sense of human wandering between the two worlds:[[17]](#footnote-17) between one that we can no longer deny and one that we do not yet have the emotional strength to abandon. This is why “modern philosophies are more notorious for raising problems than for offering solutions.”[[18]](#footnote-18) For Dewey, the way forward was clear: one needed to find out “how far customs can become intelligent” and how scientific habits can be “integrally incorporated in other forms of habitual behavior.”[[19]](#footnote-19) However, modern philosophy, somewhat understandably, chose a different track: instead of submitting itself to an apprenticeship in the new modes of inquiry, philosophy set out to vindicate the old metaphysics, which, in contrast to the “dry, thin and meager scientific standpoint”[[20]](#footnote-20) has been “integrated into emotionalized imagination as well as institutionally incorporated.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Hence, a modern philosopher always finds himself “distracted”: trying to hold on to the “tradition of prior great systems” while gradually yielding to the influence of “living contemporary beliefs.”[[22]](#footnote-22) “The course of modern philosophy,” Dewey concludes, “presents then a confused mixture of enduring habits and slow attritions.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The idea of a conflict between the fondly embraced tradition and the advance of practically certified knowledge is not a new theme in Dewey, nor does he believe the conflict to be confined to modernity. Tradition, as “an abiding framework of imagination,”[[24]](#footnote-24) reflects the internal structure and the emotional life of a social group: its moral habits, its aspirations and dreams, its deepest anxieties and fears.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is “what gives life its deeper lying values.”[[26]](#footnote-26) This shared story, according to Dewey, this social myth, when “ordered by the needs of consistency in discourse, or dialectic, became cosmology and metaphysics.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The living experience which brings the community in touch with the actual facts of the world exerts a constant pressure on this imaginary structure; and the task of philosophy, for centuries, has been to find “a rational justification of things that had been previously accepted because of their emotional congeniality and social prestige” in the face of this pressure; hence, its emphasis on the value of a system and its “over-pretentious claim to certainty.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The distinguishing feature of modernity, in this context, is that, for the first time in history, the accumulated practical knowledge overtakes the prestige of the dialectically embalmed tradition, laying claim to an equal, if not superior, authority in the minds of the foremost theoretical thinkers of the time.

Thus, while there is a retrograde impulse in modern thought, there is also an attunement to a fresh impetus and a fresh theoretical promise of novel developments. Having identified the sources of modernity’s nostalgia we must not forget to pinpoint the springs of its cheerful hope, for modernity, predominantly, is a time of hope – a time of belief in the powers of individual minds, a time of belief in progress, a time of an eager anticipation of the impending change.[[29]](#footnote-29) And while Dewey does remark that “any attempt to tell the direction in which modern philosophy has tended to move lands us at once in a highly controversial field,”[[30]](#footnote-30) a few trends seem to have a particular hold on his attention. Specifically, he compliments the modernity’s privileging of the public space, of bringing things into the open.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is, of course, an essentially democratic tendency, for it makes accessibility a criterion of truth, gradually displacing the inveterate notions which define everything significant and valuable in terms of exclusive access. The second salutary tendency of modernity, then, is also democratic in flavor, since it substitutes for universal cosmic ends and purposes the aspirations and purposes of concrete human individuals existing in time.[[32]](#footnote-32) The promise of modernity for Dewey, therefore, can be summed up in the promise of human freedom. Hence, the story of how modern philosophy has bungled this promise is also a tale of the pitfalls we need to avoid in trying to recover it. Having thus situated ourselves with a view both to our past and our future, we are now in a position to narrate, with Dewey, a synoptic history of modern philosophy in a way that renders this history meaningfully our own.

3.

Dewey’s story begins with a contrast between two different ways of thinking, originating in the social reality of the ancient world: the organic view associated with agricultural activities, and the mechanical view emerging from the development of arts and crafts.[[33]](#footnote-33) The former view assigns to nature its own intrinsic ends, suggesting that the wisest thing for us to do is to adjust the best we can to the natural course of things; the latter, strives to subjugate nature and matter to a course (or courses) arising from our own volition and purpose. By the time that Plato arrives on the scene, this intellectual dichotomy is sufficiently sharpened to give rise to the question of whether human art and skill is to be subordinated to nature or to claim supremacy over it.[[34]](#footnote-34) Plato’s solution to this impasse was to appoint the demiurge as the supreme artist and to instruct the human artisan to undertake a thorough tutelage at nature’s school of design.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Next comes one of the two main culprits of the story – Aristotle (the other one will be Kant.) It must be said that Dewey’s reading of Aristotle as presented in the manuscript is extremely controversial . However, since our primary interest is to follow the story and to see where it leads, we will proceed along with Dewey’s interpretation, without questioning its “historical” legitimacy. The idea that the universe is governed by reason, put forth by Plato as a bold hypothesis, is taken for granted by Aristotle. Moreover, Aristotle does not seek the image of reason in the intricate yet imperfect workings of nature: for him the image of reason is given ready-made in the newly developed logical theory of discourse. According to Dewey, Aristotle never doubted that “logic corresponded exactly to the ontological and cosmological structure of Nature,” which only awaited the work of definition and classification in order to fully submit itself to the implacable rule of syllogism.[[36]](#footnote-36) Consequently, philosophical tradition that grows out of Aristotle preoccupies itself primarily with trying to fit nature into the “discursive frame.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

The problem, or the mistake, according to Dewey did not consist “in the perceived link between reasoning and knowledge but in the severing of the theoretical from practical knowledge.[[38]](#footnote-38) The intellect no longer needed to model itself on nature, for it received *its own* autonomous foundation in the theory of reasoning. Hence, from now on, intellect (or reason) could pursue an inquiry into its proper essence on a purely theoretical plane, all the while presuming that the practical, natural world cannot fail to be organized around the internal principles of reason uncovered by these theoretical pursuits. Reason, then, first came to know itself in its own sphere, turning to the outside world only to seek its own reflection. Instead of posing a challenge or a test, the external world was there merely to confirm and illustrate the intellect’s rational intuitions. In a social world where those occupied by the matters sublime had no need of applying themselves to the conduct of practical affairs, the untethered theoretical knowledge was at liberty to sail ever further away from the swampy shores where thought was forced into commerce with the muck of everyday living.

The true heroes of modernity are the merchant, the engineer, and the sailor; the star-gazing philosopher of the schools gets dragged into it reluctantly and in dismay. The rapid rise of the mechanical arts, developing trade, religious ferment, political restructuring, and the discovery of new lands unrecognizably transformed the world that narcissistic philosophical speculation had long passed beyond. Physics established itself confidently in the place that was scornfully abandoned by metaphysics. And the people that inhabited this new world were so absorbed by their bustling human microcosm that they were cheerfully prepared to lose sight of the perspective afforded upon their lives by placing oneself in the remote empyrean. Philosophy has found itself, quite literally, out of touch. It has not been relinquished, however, as it perhaps in good part deserved to be.

What rescued it from utter irrelevance was the essential link to the moral establishment still maintained on the basis of the old, slowly eroding institutions. What Dewey seems to be suggesting, then – even though undoubtedly this only one among the possible interpretations of his complex text – is that the mindset of a modern philosopher was largely determined by the need to come to terms with two curious circumstances of his situation: a) that the practical, material, immediate world suddenly stood over him as something strange, entirely surprising, unwilling to bend itself to his expectations, best understood by those who seemed to care least for the internal peripeteias of abstract reason b) that despite his stuttering posture in this world at hand, he nonetheless had to maintain an air of serene confidence with respect to murky matters of moral and spiritual import. Philosopher solves the first problem by re-interpreting his own epistemological alienation as an intrinsic feature of the human condition,[[39]](#footnote-39) and spares his moral authority from the gnawing skeptical doubt by segregating the moral from the physical realm. Moreover, these two accomplishments turn out to be symmetrical, for both are simultaneously secured by featuring as the centerpiece of one’s philosophy the separation between mental and the physical; a separation well grounded in and sanctioned by the religious tradition,[[40]](#footnote-40) consecutively re-interpreted as the separation of subject and object (reflecting the alienation of human spirit from the material world) and separation of mind from body (reflecting its alienation from its material self). This, then, completes the Deweyan story of the unseemly genesis of the key source of problems in modern philosophy: that is, the predicament of the alienated intellect which mistakes *itself* for a person and its plight, for the human condition.

Dewey’s philosophical analysis of the problems of modern philosophy occupies much of the manuscript and cannot receive anything like the treatment it merits in this sketch. Since our interest here is in the historical narrative aspect of the work, the omission should not prove too damaging. It is hard to say that Dewey’s treatment of Kant and the great modern thinkers is entirely even-handed. For example, while Dewey is certainly right to emphasize their pre-occupation with discovering the first principles of knowledge, thereby grounding concrete knowledge in the a priori metaphysical assumptions about the inherent powers of reason,[[41]](#footnote-41) his insistence that they showed remarkable indifference to the knowledge simultaneously generated in specific disciplines appears transparently inaccurate.[[42]](#footnote-42) Descartes, Locke, Kant, and the rest appear, in fact, to be rather well-versed in the natural science of their day. Along the same lines, one could suggest that the moderns’ search for the first principles, aside from having the aim of aggrandizement of theoretical reason and philosophy, was also driven by an interest in making knowledge into a systematic pursuit, as opposed to a collection of local and somewhat unrelated achievements. However, the outline of the key problems remains rather clearly articulated throughout, and, if this pronounced emphasis appears as a bias, we do need to remind ourselves that Dewey writes the history of moderns from the vantage of the problems that they have bequeathed to us, as opposed to a balanced chronicle of all their struggles and inventions.

These problems, once again, consist, firstly, of the separation between the non-physical mind and the physical body,[[43]](#footnote-43) paralleled by the conception of an epistemic subject poised over and against its objects,[[44]](#footnote-44) followed by the reification of the objective realm into a mind-independent reality which poses its riddles to the mind without any reference to its concrete situation and external circumstances.[[45]](#footnote-45)

4.

No doubt a plausible case can be made for thinking that modern philosophy attempted to cure the ailing head by severing the neck. The question is how are we to proceed in the light of this realization. The terms of the resulting dichotomies are deeply embedded in contemporary philosophical discourse; and while a good number of people in the profession may be decidedly discontent with, say, the mind body-dualism, the majority would rather see the problem solved on the existing terms, instead of regarding these very terms as deeply misconceived and moving past them in accordance with Dewey’s proposal. Where he sees a mistake most see a mystery or a puzzle. To muster convincing reasons, one needs to advance a compelling alternative proposal or, at least, a roughly adumbrated sketch, from the perspective of which the defects of the present terms in which these problems are set become apparent. This, however, is precisely the part where Dewey’s manuscript feels determinately unfinished: while there are scattered hints which point us in the direction of his cultural naturalism – they are no more than an anticipation, and so the story never quite rounds out. What follows then, is a very rough reconstructive outline, which draws, in part, on Dewey’s earlier work for inspiration, and the function of which is merely to indicate an approximate manner in which a cultural naturalism may tackle the problems bequeathed to it by the story told thus far.

In the light of the preceding discussion, it seems to me that we should identify as the focal point of the cultural naturalist framework the idea of a “person,” since it is precisely this idea that, on Dewey’s account, ends up being repeatedly dismembered in modern thought . Cultural naturalism, in other words, turns around the question of how the being of human persons is possible in the natural world. We begin, then, by asking ourselves about the notion of “persons” that emerges from the philosophical history we have traced, and about the ways in which this notion falls short of adequate or desirable.

According to Dewey, the most unwelcome development to issue from modern thought was the philosophical doctrine of individualism.[[46]](#footnote-46) Philosophers’ exclusive interest in consciousness encouraged a peculiar view of a person as, essentially, an embodiment of detached reason. [[47]](#footnote-47) In becoming thus individuated, reason becomes coupled to the motivational structures, sufficient to recurrently set it in motion, and discovers that the external world, which it heretofore contemplated as the object of knowledge, can also be treated as a source of endless satisfactions for its newly acquired desires. A practical individual thus constituted, according to Dewey, can only be thought of as “some thing whose pleasures are to be magnified and possessions multiplied.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

One immediate consequence of this view is that it reduces all social relationships to mechanical exteriority. Since everything qualitative and immediate gets pushed into the impenetrably private personal space,[[49]](#footnote-49) all social transactions must de facto be conducted in an objective and objectifying mode, touched up, for reasons of marketing, with individually customized emotive hues. Within the purview of such a mechanically constituted sociality, the existence of experienced consciousness tends to transfigure itself into a hard problem: for it is not quite clear why, in order to successfully carry on in this fashion, one would need to experience anything at all. Another mystery that springs up is that of personal freedom. Whether one believes that the norms of conduct should derive from reason alone, or from reason applied to the calculation of practical losses and rewards, individual freedom can manifests itself, within this framework, only as an imperfection or a downright breakdown of rationality. When both are avoided, either one behaves like any rational man would, or perhaps one faces a choice between two equally rational options, at which point the way in which the choice is actually made, on the criteria proposed, simply does not matter. Accordingly, if freedom is understood to be the basis of a unique individuality, within such a scheme, it can only be conceptualized as a privation. But then, one is tempted to say that freedom which manifests itself only in the liberty to depart from the course that would have been charted by wiser individuals is not a true freedom at all – at best it amounts to an indulgence or a concession granted to the residual element of capricious childishness retained in the mature stages of responsible adulthood.

To recover a fuller sense of personhood, according to Dewey, we would need to start thinking of persons in terms of personal histories, in terms of, as he puts it, biographies.[[50]](#footnote-50) Here, much more than some abstract notion of individuality is at stake. To attain to personhood, says Dewey, one needs to begin performing a “representative function” within a society.[[51]](#footnote-51) By doing so, one ties one’s being irrevocably to that of other people, one starts to see oneself through the eyes of others, inserting one’s sense of self – what one is – into a constant dialectical interplay with what one is recognized to be. From that point on, all the world is a stage, and social institutions which exist in order to stage this world, exist thereby in order to create and transform individual personalities.[[52]](#footnote-52) To be a person, in other words, one needs the atmosphere of an historical *Lebenswelt*, i.e. a world in which one thinks and acts – as opposed to the world where particles collide and compounds become oxidized – a world, that is, in which one could envision, prospectively or retrospectively, a meaningful and continuous course of life. It is, more or less, the world of things that we ordinarily think and talk about. For Dewey, it is the world of events.

With “events” instead of “objects” filling the role of *ens ultima*, many of our previous problems fall by the wayside, and *that* is where cultural naturalism derives its decisive advantage. The physical object does not disappear, instead it becomes a constituent within the larger framework of an event. Thus, while an event comes about when something of importance transpires in the sphere of human concern, ordinarily it involves a physical, objective side which it is occasionally expedient to isolate, sometimes all the way to the complete exclusion of its socio-cultural significance.[[53]](#footnote-53) Instead of starting with the physical and building up to the cultural, we begin with the cultural and arrive at the physical within it by a process of abstraction. Resistance to this view, wherein objects seem to materialize only correlative to our needs and interests, arises from the habit of thinking about Physical as a whole, as a correlate of an equally all-embracing Reality. Dewey’s view, on the other hand begins by asserting that reality is made up of concrete transactions, within which we can distinguish concrete physical components. As long as we concentrate on the “diversified concretes,” he maintains, “the vexatious and wasteful conflict between naturalism and humanism is terminated” (RP 174).

A further, potentially problematic, feature of his view, consists in the fact that events do not exist in their own right, instead they arise as a result of human judgment.[[54]](#footnote-54) An event does not transpire until it becomes an acknowledged fact by someone who, in countenancing it, takes up “a *commitment*  from which something follows.”[[55]](#footnote-55) The typical events of which the reality of a particular individual tends to consist are a function of a social group to which she belongs[[56]](#footnote-56) and its “customs determining methods and tests for belief.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Instead of wondering how knowledge can correspond to the real, says Dewey, we take for real “whatever is substantiated in concrete cases as worthy of credence in distinction from errors and illusions that have been or that might be entertained.”[[58]](#footnote-58) One may demur, here, on the grounds that such an instrumentalist take on knowledge betrays the ideal of objectivity which has so fruitfully governed the past advance of the natural sciences. However, such a worry would be misplaced: for the ideal of objectivity is not abandoned but reinterpreted. Thus, instead of construing it in terms of a futile allegiance to an object as it exists independently of our efforts to know it, cultural naturalism interprets objectivity as an interest in advancing knowledge for its own sake, independent of our immediate needs and purposes.[[59]](#footnote-59) The reason we can do this is that history (and, above all, the history of science) has demonstrated to us the value of pursuing the development of a particular perspective on things for the sake of curiosity alone, that is for the sake of extending a particular way of looking at things as far as it can go, as well as remedying internal imperfections that this pursuit is felt to generate. The value of such enterprises, according to Dewey, consists in the fact that they open up new possibilities for life and thought, and discover unanticipated consequences and ends.[[60]](#footnote-60)

What drops out, then, is not the commitment to aspire to epistemic impartiality in our inquiries and research standards but the idea of reality as an a-temporal unity which it is the job of knowledge to faithfully reflect. Instead of picturing reality as a magnificent tableau to be scaled and crisscrossed by the diligent work of researcher seeking to encase it in a systematically woven spider-web of well-formed propositions, we can see our knowledge as advancing by leaps and bounds, as new kinds of interactions become assertably real (and therefore possible) by coming into view of our human community. Our reality, on Dewey’s view, is in part a function of the paths that we, individually and collectively, decide to traverse. “The living creature, as he puts it, “undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience.”[[61]](#footnote-61) And from the viewpoint of experience, time is real: for what comes after a particular experience – especially an experience of knowing or understanding – may not have been possible before it. Cultural naturalism, then, includes an ineliminable temporal dimension for, in the continual change which constitutes the course of activity[[62]](#footnote-62) or a course of life, one continues to arrive at the junctures where some possibilities may close and others may open up, where one may come out of a situation and pass on to something entirely new. All of our possibilities are never com-possible at the same time.

If we were to capture the essential temporality of the world that we live in, according to a cultural naturalist, one is tempted to suggest simply saying that we live in history. Declarations of this sort tend to leave a bad taste in one’s mouth. For, as long as history was thought, like reality, in terms of a grand unity, marching triumphantly onward and occasionally resting on a dusty bookshelf, an ordinary person seemed to have no choice but to be dragged along by it like a reluctant dog tied to a moving cart. The only thing that made such a prospect somewhat tolerable were the tales of the extraordinary, of individuals who rose above history to shape its course. But, then, one always did feel a tinge of romantic exaggeration in those tales, and a social scientist was always justly suspicious of their extravagant claims. Cultural naturalism, however, knows not of any such history – existential pluralism is in its very bones. As mentioned at the outset, history is a thing of *histories*. Dewey’s own expression, “succession of histories,” appears misleading in this regard.[[63]](#footnote-63) He would be better off borrowing an image from Peirce and portraying history as a rope in which different histories, like different strands, compliment and interpellate each other, with the end and the starting point of each deeply embedded in the thickness of contemporaneous social fabric constituted by the conglomerate of historical processes simultaneously running through it.

The essentially heterogeneous constitution of the historical world is precisely the feature which enables it to be, first and foremost, a world of human freedom. As Dewey explains, what distinguishes a genuinely free action from an automated habit is the fact that, in the case of a habit, the preceding state unconditionally determines the current activity, whereas in the case of a free action one responds to the preceding state with a view to continuing towards a certain future.[[64]](#footnote-64) In other words, one could think of a free action as one which seeks to use an occasion so as to contribute to an on-going singular history.[[65]](#footnote-65) Individual life or a career can be seen as one such history.[[66]](#footnote-66) But, throughout a life-time, most of us get a chance to contribute to histories of the most variant sorts. Once we choose to insert ourselves in the middle of a history, we inevitably become subject to its internal constraints; but the future of most histories we take part in is open, and, above all, we are always free in choosing which histories we elect to insert ourselves into. Here is one place where the rules do not apply all the way down. Histories are made – they are neither destined, found, nor observed. Ordinary histories are daily made by ordinary people who, in making them, exercise their unique freedom. However, even in the most solitary and original of our enterprises, we can never lose sight of other human beings: for invention of new possibilities depends upon language,[[67]](#footnote-67) and language is impossible without people who use it to express their dreams and their despair.

The intention of this brief overview was to give one a sense of the anticipation, in the light of which Dewey’s treatment of the history of modern thought would appear warranted and to the point. As such, it admittedly is somewhat skimpy, for it was meant to show more than, at present, can be prudently explained. It was aimed at conveying a single master theme that, to my mind, emerges from Dewey’s narration: that, in order to accomplish *our* modernity, we should stop thinking about individuality in terms of numerically distinct minds confined to the mutually exclusive bodies, and to start thinking instead about the existential pluralism of history and the inalienable temporality of human existence. Dewey’s “lost” manuscript, then, does much to bring us to the consciousness of our present, leaving behind the unseemly thought-habits of the unmelodiously unmodern past.

1. Phillip Deen, “Introduction” in John Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), xiii-xl, xv [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ibid., xiv [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. **Self-ref** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Dewey, *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1938), 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, 1916), 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dewey, *Logic*, 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ibid., 501 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ibid., 227 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ibid., 221 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ibid., 238 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ibid., 235 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ibid., 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ibid., 92-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ibid., 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1920), 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. ibid., 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ibid., 148 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Dewey, *Reconstruction*, 211 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ibid., 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ibid., 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Dewey, *Reconstruction*, 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 8 & *Reconstruction*, 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ibid., 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 88 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Dewey, *Reconstruction*, 20-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. ibid., 47-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. ibid., 169 & 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ibid., 67; Compare *Reconstruction*, 70 & *Experience and Nature*, 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ibid., 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ibid., 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ibid., 274-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Compare Dewey, *Unmodern*, 97-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. ibid., 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. ibid., 164 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. ibid., 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. ibid., 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ibid., 136-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. ibid., 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. ibid., 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Dewey, *Reconstruction*, 194 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Dewey, *Experience*, 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 187 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. ibid., 189 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Dewey, *Reconstruction*, 194-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Compare Dewey, *Unmodern*, 294 & 316 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. John Dewey, “The Practical Character of Reality” (1908) in J. McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 222 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. ibid., 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. ibid., 158 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. ibid., 250 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. ibid., 251 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Dewey, *Reconstruction*, 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 222 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Dewey, *Experience*, 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 259 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. John Dewey, “Time and Individuality” (1940) in *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 224 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. ibid., 219 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Dewey, *Unmodern*, 274 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)