John Dewey's Great Debates--Reconstructed

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CHAPTER 1
Introduction:
The Nostalgic Pragmatist

> When it is acknowledged that under disguise of dealing with ultimate reality, philosophy has been occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions, that it has sprung from a clash of social ends and from a conflict of inherited institutions with incompatible contemporary tendencies, it will be seen that the task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day.
> –J. Dewey (1996, MW 12:94)[1]

> Nostalgia is unbecoming to pragmatists, who are supposed to look forward rather than back.
> –R. Rorty (1995, xi)

Despite Richard Rorty's claim that "[n]ostalgia is unbecoming to pragmatists," even the most forward-looking among us, whether pragmatists or not, must sometimes look to the past in order to appreciate our present situation. Though likely related, this truism is not merely a rehashing of George Santayana oft-repeated warning that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Historical inquiry is a sifting operation, a matter of selecting and emphasizing that which is vitally relevant given the inquirer's current concerns. In John Dewey's words, historical inquiry and reconstruction help us to "to clarify . . . [our] ideas as to the social and moral strifes of . . . [our] own day." In that spirit, this project charts a path through two of Dewey's actual debates with his contemporaries, Leon Trotsky and Robert Hutchins, two imagined debates with philosophers who criticized Dewey's ideas after his death, E.D. Hirsch and Robert Talisse, and two projected debates in which Dewey's ideas offer a rich alternative in nearly intractable present-day controversies: controversies over home schooling and recent U.S.

[1] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. In-text citations are to the collected works of Dewey as they appear in the text of the three chronological series (convention is EW=Early Works, MW=Middle Works and LW=Later Works, followed by volume: page number), volume and page number. Dewey, J. *The Collected Works of John Dewey: The Electronic Edition*, L. A. Hickman, editor (Charlottesville, VA: Intelex Corporation, 1996).

foreign policy. My central claim is that the enterprise of reconstructing Dewey's historical debates, posing Dewey-inspired (or Deweyan) responses to his more recent critics and situating Dewey's ideas in contemporary debates is a worthwhile endeavor.

Why John Dewey's Debates?

Confirming the moniker of "America's philosopher of democracy," John Dewey engaged in a series of public debates throughout his lifetime, showcasing his thought in action.[2] In the 1910s, he engaged in a debate with Randolph Bourne over whether American engagement in the First World War was defensible on pragmatist grounds. He famously debated with Walter Lippmann in the 1920s about the proper role of citizen in a democracy. In the 1930s he would bring his analytical and rhetorical skills to exchanges with Leon Trotsky and Robert Hutchins. Later, in the 1940s, he would criticize Franklin Delanore Roosevelt's presidential platform as well as America's imperialist ambitions in South America. These debates made Dewey a household name and a renowned public intellectual during the early to mid-twentieth century, a time when the United States fought two World Wars, underwent an economic depression, experienced explosive economic growth and spawned a grassroots social movement that eventually came to characterize the politics of an entire era: Progressivism.

Besides Dewey's relevance to the history of American thought, his legacy pervades contemporary philosophical movements across several continents. Joseph Margolis calls this capacity to challenge and unite otherwise disparate philosophical traditions "pragmatism's advantage" (2010, p. 1). Likewise, Deweyan pragmatism's advantage resides in the calling it

[2] Sidney Hook calls Dewey "The Philosopher of American Democracy" in the last chapter of his intellectual biography of Dewey, alluding to Dewey's own description of Ralph Waldo Emerson. *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait*, xi-xviii (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), p. 226. George Herbert Mead also claims that "[i]n the profoundest sense John Dewey is the philosopher of America." "The Philosophies of Royce, James, and Dewey in their American Setting," *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 40 (1930): 211-231, 230-231.

generates, a calling to challenge philosophers to make their concepts and frameworks do the "work" of addressing current social, scientific, aesthetic, technological, educational and political problems. It is this calling to confront the standard philosophical traditions and provide the conditions whereby philosophy can be made more relevant that motivates many contemporary pragmatists and Deweyans. John Herman Randall was well aware of this calling when he declared that the "best way to honor Dewey is to work on Dewey's problems—to reconstruct his insights, to see, if need be, farther than Dewey saw."[3] What better way, then, to honor Dewey than to apply his method of reconstruction to his own historical debates, as well as to imagined debates with his posthumous critics and to recent debates he never foresaw? In other words, why not test the relevance of Dewey's philosophical ideas while attempting to remain faithful to, rather than radically departing from, their meaning in Dewey's historical context?

Pragmatism and the Past

Despite Rorty's caveat that "nostalgia is unbecoming" for the pragmatist, critics past and present have faulted Dewey's theory of historical inquiry for failing to take the historian's task seriously. Metaphysical and epistemological realists, or philosophers who believe that physical objects exist independently of human thought, have long associated pragmatism, and especially Dewey's pragmatism, with idealism, or the position that objects depend for their existence on human minds, ideas and the relations of those ideas. By tying pragmatism to idealism, realists have been able to argue, sometimes convincingly, that a pragmatist theory of history cannot explain how we come to know the past as it actually happened, or history without the mediation of present needs, concerns and interests. In a typical passage of *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*

[3] James Gouinlock, "Introduction," in *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, edited by J. Gouinlock, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, xix-liv, liv.

addressing historical explanation, Dewey disagrees with the historical realists: "It is certainly legitimate to say that a certain thing happened in a certain way at a certain time in the past, in case adequate data have been procured and critically handled. But the statement 'It actually happened in this way' has its status and significance within the scope and perspective of historical writing. It does not determine the logical conditions of historical propositions, much less the identity of these propositions with events in their original occurrence" (LW 12:236).

David Hildebrand's essay "Progress in History" is probably the most authoritative recent treatment of the realist critique of Dewey theory of historical inquiry. He recounts these criticisms with an eye to "explicate Dewey's position on past knowledge" and its relevance to "inquiry, experience, and the denotative method."[4] Among Dewey's realist critics, Arthur Lovejoy could not see the value in a theory of history that "present"-izes the past, rather than appreciates it as self-standing realm of truths. He insists that Dewey's account of historical knowledge as mediated by the present cannot account for the operation of transcendent reference, or accessing past events through pure retrospection.[5] Instead, a pragmatist theory of history inevitably filters the past—otherwise finished, complete and isolated—through a contemporary framework and thus prevents the historical inquirer from unearthing the past-in-itself. C.I. Lewis went one step further and alleged that Dewey's theory sinks historical inquiry into a relativist quagmire. Epistemologically-speaking, historians have little chance of reaching consensus on

[4] David Hildebrand, "Progress in History: Dewey on Knowledge of the Past," *Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2001): 167-202, 168. For a critique if Hildebrand's position, see Shaun O'Dwyer, "Pragmatism and Anti-realism about the Past," Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, vol. 46, no. 3 (2010): 401-422. For a third perspective, see Randy Auxier, "Dewey on Religion and History," *Southwest Philosophy Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (January 1990):45-58. Id., "Foucault, Dewey and the History of the Present," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2002): 75-102.

[5] Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Present Standpoints and Past History," in *The Philosophy of History in Our Times*, edited by Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1959), pp. 173-187. Lovejoy's position can be traced back to what has, since the 1830s, been referred to as Rankeian positivism, emphasizing inquiry into "the particular in and by itself," or the past "as it really was." Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, edited by G. Iggers and K. von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1973), p. 30.

what they know about the past, for each distorts historical truth through the medium of their own present interests. Ethically-speaking, Dewey's account neglects the pure intellectual pursuit of past knowledge for its own sake, spoiling the sanctity of historical inquiry by making it an instrument for the satisfaction of current needs and concerns—what is sometimes called "present-ism." Defending Dewey, Hildebrand identifies the error in Lovejoy and Lewis' approach: "Try as we might to make our investigation of a past as thorough and objective as possible, we cannot create an Archimedean point that replaces our living standpoint, nor can we re-create the complex factors which made that past event unique."[6] Both engage in a quixotic quest for historical certainty, attempting to re-enact a past that can only be appreciated by the lights of the present.

Although Hildebrand's analysis exposes the epistemological and metaphysical dimensions of the realist critique, what it unfortunately neglects is the historical dimension. Indeed, two of Dewey's more persuasive realist critics, Burleigh Wilkins and Henry Hodysh, were historians, not philosophers. They were concerned with the implications of Dewey's theory of inquiry for the study of history or historical inquiry. Recounting their objections brings greater force to the realist critique, revealing how their disagreement with pragmatists, generally, and Dewey, specifically, amounted to more than an intramural or "merely" philosophical debate. Wilkins accuses Dewey of conflating a useful instrument in the historian's tool bag: "Dewey 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."[7] What Dewey ignores is the difference between raw evidence of what happened and the historical inquirer's interpretation of what happened in light of present concerns. Likewise, Hodysh sees in Dewey's writings a tendency to

[6] Ibid, 183.

[7] Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, "Pragmatism as a Theory of Historical Knowledge: John Dewey on the Nature of Historical Inquiry," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 64, no. 4 (July 1959): 878-890, 880.

blur the boundary between facts and values. Historical judgments impose a "direction of movement" on past events, infusing them with present beliefs and values, especially a democratic reform agenda: "In doing this, he [the historical inquirer] must assess and interpret actual history and project the direction of movement to an as yet unknown but in some ways predictable future—a future which must account for continuous reconstruction of the idea of democracy."[8] Thus, the historian becomes a partial judge, an activist and reformer, not an impartial spectator, honest historian and reporter of past events. Unfortunately, Dewey's theory of historical inquiry, on Hodysh's and Wilkins's reading, the revision of history to meet present needs and what David Fott calls a "doctrine of historical relativism."[9]

While Wilkins and Hodysh's critique has merit, it is not as devastating a blow to Dewey's theory of historical inquiry as one might expect. If anything, it sets certain constraints on the process of historical inquiry—constraints, for instance, of intellectual honesty and sensitivity to the original social-cultural context. If the historian relies too heavily on present intellectual frameworks, she risks producing a heavily filtered and potentially distorted interpretation of the subject matter before her. For instance, a contemporary commentator would make a critical error by understanding Plato's *Symposium* through the post-Freudian category of homosexuality, rather the ancient Greek notion of homoeroticism.[10] Besides the matter of historical accuracy, a related concern is whether constraints should be imposed from outside inquiry, as fixed limits on the

[8] Henry W. Hodysh, "Historical Theory and Social Change in John Dewey's Philosophy," *Educational Theory*, vol. 20, no. 3 (July 1970): 245-252, 251.

[9] David Fott, *John Dewey: America's Philosopher of Democracy* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), p. 117.

[10] This analogy is suggested in Christopher Gill's introduction to his translation of Plato's *Symposium* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. xiii. A similar example can be found in the first chapter of Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, wherein he states that it would be an error to interpret ancient attitudes and rituals as anticipating more recent advances in scientific method: "To treat the early beliefs and traditions of man as if they were attempts at scientific explanation of the world, only erroneous and absurd attempts, is thus to be guilty of a great mistake" (MW 12:81).

conduct of historical inquiry, or should emerge from the process of inquiry itself. For Dewey, constraints on inquiry should be an outgrowth of the process itself. Hodysh and Wilkins argue that these constraints must be exogenously imposed and thus fixed limits on the process; for if they are internal to the process, the meaning of historical events become merely how the contemporary historian happens to interpret them, not what they actually are, or what they are in-and-of-themselves. Hidden within this argument is the assumption that human are capable of transcendent reference, that is, the ability to get outside of our present circumstances and gain privileged access to a pure realm of facts about the past. To see why Dewey disagrees with Hodysh and Wilkins, it is helpful to examine his theory of historical inquiry in more detail.

Dewey's theory of historical inquiry is closely connected to his conception of logic as a general theory of inquiry, or a way of discerning the basic pattern underlying all problem-solving activity. The generic steps of inquiry resemble those of the scientific method. Nevertheless, inquiries, generally, and historical inquiry, specifically, do not occur in a sterile laboratory or cultural vacuum. In Dewey's words, a "cultural matrix" provides the rich context for logic understood as inquiry, "a mode of activity that is socially conditioned and that has cultural consequences" (LW 12:28). Dewey remarks that history is always about a past recalled for the sake of present concerns and interests: "We naturally remember what interests us and because it interests us. The past is recalled not because of itself but because of what it adds to the present" (MW 12:80). At the start of inquiry generally, as well as historical inquiry specifically, the inquirer experiences a "felt difficulty" or state of imbalance in a situation. In the case of historical inquiry, that problematic situation is usually characterized by discord between artifacts or evidence of a past event and our present interpretation of that event. A state of doubt results from the need to understand the disruption or hitch in the overall situation. The inquirer frames the problem, makes observations, collects data, deploys hypotheses, tests hypotheses and

attempts to restore balance to the previously disrupted situation. Inquiry involves finding the intermediate terms, or intervening means, between an uncertain past and, comparatively-speaking, a more stable and certain present. In the case of historical inquiry, Dewey notes that "[i]maginative recovery of the bygone" has the "status . . . of an instrument" (MW 10:10). Means, goals and limits emerge out of the process itself (or endogenous to it), not outside or prior to it. Imposing exogenous constraints, as Hodysh and Wilkins propose, artificially restricts the scope and efficacy of problem solving, artificially pre-determining its course and obstructing the development of more effective tools and solutions. At the end of inquiry, the process, if successful, "terminates in the institution of conditions which remove the need for doubt" (LW 12:15). What unifies the situation, or returns it to a balanced state (a qualitative whole), is the inquirer's judgment. Though never final or infallible, the adjudged outcome receives its warrant from evidence discovered, hypotheses confirmed and experimentation successfully performed—that is, through rigorous and intelligent inquiry. According to Dewey, "the writing of history is an instance of judgment as a resolution through inquiry of a problematic situation" (LW 12:231).

Does Dewey's theory of historical inquiry justify a revisionist approach to writing history? Since historical inquiry is both backward and forward looking, the answer must be in the negative. Although Dewey emphasized the role of present problems and tools as limits in shaping judgments about the past, he did not overlook the need for inquirers to interpret past problems relative to a particular historical context, viz. the social, political and cultural conditions in which they emerged. Evidence of this sensitivity to historical context can be witnessed in Dewey's writings, particularly two passages, one in the *Logic* and the other in an essay that was itself a historical inquiry. In the *Logic*, Dewey states:

> When we look back at earlier periods, it is evident that certain [contemporary] problems could not have arisen in the context of institutions, customs, occupations, and interests that then existed, and that even, if, per impossible, they

> had been capable of detection and formulation, there were no means available for solving them (LW 12:481-482).

Likewise, in Dewey's essay on Hobbes's political philosophy, he warns of the "natural" temptation to temporally relocate past ideas into the present, failing to appreciate them in their proper historical context:

> It is the object of this essay to place the political philosophy of [Thomas] Hobbes in its own historical context. The history of thought is peculiarly exposed to an illusion of perspective. Earlier doctrines are always getting shoved, as it were, nearer our own day. We are familiar with the intellectual struggles of our own time and are interested in them. It is accordingly natural to envisage earlier thought as part of the same movement or as its forerunner. We then forget that that earlier period had its own specific problems, and we proceed to assimilate its discussion to our present interest. Hobbes has been especially subject to this temporal displacement (MW 11:18).

So, the charge that Dewey's theory of historical inquiry licenses historical revisionism or wholesale relativism cannot withstand the overwhelming evidence of Dewey's statements to the contrary. Dewey was especially sensitive to the need to constrain interpretations of past events and problems by being attentive to their context, or the facts of the historical situation in which they first emerged.

How to Reconstruct a Debate--Pragmatically

According to Michael Sullivan, "[p]ragmatists, far from being unconcerned with the past, must be particularly sensitive to it."[11] To a large extent, our interpretations of past events condition current attitudes, habits and beliefs, as well as our efforts to improve present conditions through future-directed action—a past-present-future continuum that leads Colin Koopman to

[11] Michael Sullivan, *Legal Pragmatism: Community, Rights and Democracy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 49.

conceive pragmatism as a process of transition, reconstruction and meliorism.[12] If Dewey's theory of historical inquiry has any value, then contemporary pragmatists should find it a useful resource in exploring the meaning of Dewey's own debates. In this vein, I propose that we reconstruct his debates, reflexively applying Dewey's theory of historical inquiry to past events punctuating the American pragmatist's public life. Although I refer to these episodes as "Dewey's great debates," they are not intended to exhaust those engagements that are worthy of reconstruction. Rather, they should be treated as demonstration projects, tentative, fallible and meant to inspire other studies of Dewey's public involvements through the reflexive application of his theory of historical inquiry. As we will see, one contemporary Dewey scholar, the late Michael Eldridge, has already undertaken this important task in a way that is orthogonal to my approach.

So, how do we reconstruct one of Dewey's great debates pragmatically? Dewey defines "historical inquiry" as "an affair (1) of selection and arrangement . . . (2) . . . controlled by the dominant problems and conceptions of the culture of the period in which it is written" (LW 12:236). Historical inquirers select and arrange evidence, inevitably privileging their present concerns and interests while studying the past. Questions about why, for instance, Brutus killed Caesar produce narratives in which the inquirer reveals the meaning of Brutus and Caesar's actions not as they *actually* occurred, but as attributed to them through reconstruction of particular spatial-historical events—what might be called a Brutus-killing-Caesar event. Dewey writes: "Event is a term of judgment, not of existence apart from judgment. The origin and development of the Appalachian Mountain Range is an event, and so is the loosening and rolling of a particular pebble . . . That these are distinguished as particular events involves human

[12] Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 11-14.

judgment as to their 'event-ness'" (LW 12:222). Selecting a past event as worthy of study presupposes an act of historical judgment and thus a human judge, but not a realm of pure facts separate from human judgment. Despite the claims of historical realists, history cannot be accessed through transcendent reference or copied as if it were a catalogue of facsimiles of events in a bygone era.[13] Dewey was well aware that the present inevitably influences interpretations of the past, such that the present becomes, so-to-speak, the present-in-the-past and the past the past-in-present. In one sense, inquiry's passage through the filter of the present is inevitable, for a particular inquirer brings her present beliefs and attitudes to the activity of selecting, organizing and interpreting relevant historical facts. However, what is far from inevitable, but still tempting, is that the inquirer treats historical facts outside of their proper context and with intellectual dishonesty, delivering self-serving judgments about the past—or what some would call "revisionist history." To avoid this pitfall, constraints on inquiry must arise from inquiry itself—from what Dewey calls "inquiry into inquiry" (LW 12:12).

Dewey's notion of "ends in view" suggests a bias toward the present or "present-ism" in setting goals for inquiry. Ends in view do not belong to the future or past, but are always implicated as means in the present situation.[14] In the process of historical inquiry, ends in view are shaped both by the inquirer's present attitudes, habits and beliefs as well as by contemporary

[13] Dewey's contemporary, George Herbert Mead, and more recent philosophers of history, R. G. Collingwood and E.H. Carr, agreed with Dewey in his criticism of the historical realists. For Mead, what makes the past real is not the historiographer's ability to transcend the here-and-now and discover a past reality, but that she offers an interpretation responding to present problems. David L. Miller, *George Herbert Mead: Self, Language and the World* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1973), pp. 172-187. For Collingwood, the past is never immediately experienced, but is always mediated by present ideas, and thus must always be mentally re-enacted. *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 282-302. Daniel Dummet claimed that "the past has no independent reality." Truth and the Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 74. E.H. Carr insisted that whether "consciously or unconsciously, [history] reflects our own position in time." *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 5. This anti-realist position on the epistemological and metaphysical status of the historical past is approvingly called "historicism," and disapprovingly referred to, usually by realist critics, as "historical relativism."

[14] Hans Joas and Jens Beckert, "A Theory of Action: Pragmatism and the Creativity of Action," *Transactional Viewpoints*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2002): 1-4.

circumstances. For Dewey, then, historical inquiry involves *both* construction and selection, transformation and discovery, *in* the present and *about* the past:

> All historical construction is necessarily selective. Since the past cannot be reproduced in toto and lived over again, this principle might seem too obvious to be worthy of being called important. But it is of importance because its acknowledgment compels attention to the fact that everything in the writing of history depends upon the principle use to control selection (LW 12:234).

The historian chooses which elements of past events to emphasize, or bring into the foreground of inquiry, and which others to de-emphasize, or push into the background.[15] For Dewey, selection operates at multiple levels, including the choice of (i) the problems or subjects of inquiry, (ii) the hypotheses or theories that guide inquiry, and (iii) the historical and cultural reference points of the investigation itself.[16] Ideally, out of this process emerge historical reconstructions fitted to "the standpoint of the present," yet still respectful of endogenous constraints on inquiry, such as intellectual honesty and sensitivity to the socio-cultural context in which the historical event occurred (LW 12:234).

Michael Eldridge's essay "The Teachers Union Fight and the Scope of Dewey's Logic" illustrates how one of Dewey's past engagements can be reconstructed in a pragmatic-reflexive fashion. By turning Dewey's own logical theory of inquiry back upon one of Dewey's own engagements, Eldridge shows that the American philosopher did not always practice what he preached.[17] Eldridge's inquiry differs from the first two reconstructions offered here in that his

[15] The history teacher is also saddled with this difficulty of which facts to shine a spotlight on and which not. Michel Foucault called this the problem of the "document": "[I]n a history course, you are asked to learn certain things and to ignore others; thus certain things form the content of knowledge and its norms." *L' Achéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977 [1969]), p. 219. Cited in Auxier, "Foucault, Dewey and the History of the Present," 91.

[16] Sidney Ratner, "Dewey's Contribution to Historical Theory," in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*, edited by Sidney Hook (New York: The Dial Press, 1950), pp. 134-152, 146-7.

[17] Michael Eldridge, "The Teachers Union Fight and the Scope of Dewey's Logic," in *Dewey's Logical Theory: New Studies and Interpretations*, edited by F. Thomas Burke, D. Micah Hester, and Robert B. Talisse (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), pp. 262-274.

addresses an "internal dispute," whereas mine speak to Dewey's public debates. In 1932 and 1933, three years after he had retired from teaching, Dewey agreed to chair a grievance committee for the New York Teachers Union. Competing for influence in the union were two groups, the Progressives and the Rank and File, who regularly disrupted meetings and sought to undermine the union's leadership. The committee issued two reports, authored by Dewey, in which it suggested that a delegate group be assembled, a rule for suspending members be incorporated and, in a separate, report a list of charges against six members of the two radicalized union groups. When the union's president called a vote to expel the first of the six, he called for the constitutionally required two-thirds majority, unaware that the committee had recommended the lesser punishment of suspension, requiring only a simple majority. A breakdown in communication between the Dewey-led committee and the general meeting chair resulted in a costly procedural error. Once the first vote for suspension failed to pass the super-majority threshold, the cases against the other five members were thrown out. Eldridge evaluates the outcome of this historical event: "Dewey's moderating committee report was less effective than it might have. Thanks to the mistakes of the chair, his supporters, and Dewey himself, the radicals were able to avoid being disciplined. Dewey's effort to find sufficient common ground for the union to proceed was compromised."[18]

What Eldridge's treatment of the Local 5 Teachers Union debacle reveals is how the standards of Deweyan inquiry can be reflexively applied to an historical event in Dewey's lifetime. Though it was not a public debate, the event nonetheless represents an engagement in practical politics and an opportunity, though partly wasted, to showcase Dewey's theory of inquiry in action. Dewey's theory of inquiry outlines the generic steps by which an inquirer

[18] Ibid, p. 264.

transforms the existential conditions of the problematic situation, making "an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to covert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (LW 12:108). Unfortunately, in this case, Dewey's committee could not solve the problem, an unruly minority in the Teachers Union that hampered the organization's effectiveness, since it could neither coordinate with other parties (viz. the Union leadership and general meeting chair) nor settle on a process for addressing the problem with suitable and agreed-upon means (whether suspension or expulsion of the six members). In Eldridge's words, "Dewey, the advocate of openness and communication, acted inconsistently with his own beliefs by failing to execute appropriate existential operations directed by the ideas in which the deliberations of his committee terminated."[19] Although to act inconsistent with one's deeply-held beliefs is not unique to Dewey's experience, the force of Eldridge's critique comes from the fact that it originates internal to his philosophical framework. Consequently, making careful reconstructions of Dewey's historical engagements can be a potent strategy for assessing the value of Deweyan pragmatism. Moreover, such a strategy is sure to resonate with those contemporary pragmatists who wish to take Dewey's ideas seriously, whether as calls for social action, guides for practical problem solving, or ways of increasing philosophy's relevance in public discourse.

Historical, Imagined and Projected

In the six chapters that follow, I undertake a series of historical reconstructions. They fit into three categories. The first two chapters are treatments of Dewey's *historical* debates, one with the Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky and the other with former University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins. As mentioned, these reconstructions of actual debates are not

[19] Ibid, p. 266.

intended to exhaust all of Dewey's great debates. Dewey engaged in significant exchanges with other public figures, such as Walter Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr and Randolphe Bourne, to name only a few.

A possible criticism of my approach is that I am using the term "reconstruction" improperly, or at least not as Dewey originally employed it. Some Dewey scholars assume that reconstruction is merely a place-holder for inquiry. Others contend that reconstructive efforts only apply to present conditions, thereby excusing pragmatists from the task of reconstructing past events (perhaps a concession to Rorty's point that "[n]ostalgia is unbecoming"). Still others claim that reconstruction is solely intended to transform antiquated philosophical concepts into ones better suited to the conditions of the modern, scientific age—as Dewey set out to accomplish in his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. However, if one reads the 1948 preface to the same work ("Reconstruction as Seen Twenty-five Years later"), it becomes evident that *reconstruction* had a more generic meaning for Dewey:

> From the position here taken, reconstruction can be nothing less than the work of developing, of forming, of producing (in the literal sense of that word) the intellectual instrumentalities which will progressively direct inquiry into the deeply and inclusively human—that is to say, moral—facts of the present scene and situation (MW 12:269).

On its face, this passage appears to support the objection that reconstruction only applies to the present, never to the past. However, several pages prior to the above passage, Dewey insists that "the work of reconstruction takes serious account of how and where systems of the past indicate the need for reconstruction in the present" (MW 12:259). So, reconstruction involves the transformation of present, but often to resolve past problems, or at least tensions indicated by "systems" in the past. While the systems Dewey refers to could be philosophical systems *only*, the later passage reveals that they are, instead, systems of ideas *generally*. Reconstruction is an activity closest to what Dewey calls "imaginative recovery," reclaiming "the bygone [which] is

indispensable to successful invasion of the future" and has the "status . . . of an instrument" (MW 10:10). Reconstruction, then, applies to more than philosophy proper, encompassing any subject that is "deeply and inclusively human"—that is, normative or value-laden. So, rather than a place-holder for inquiry or inquiry-directed activity, reconstruction is a generic adjunct to inquiry, a matter of developing instruments that guide inquiry into moral subject matter, whether past or present, philosophical or non-philosophical or, more typically, concerned with that which passes between them.

The second category of reconstructions is the *imagined* debate between Dewey and those who criticized his work long after he passed in 1952. Once again, these reconstructions are not intended to be exhaustive, for Dewey has had his fair share of post-mortem critics as well as defenders. In chapter four, I consider E.D. Hirsch's critique of Dewey's educational ideas as well as the implications of a Deweyan response for the recent online literacy debate. In chapter five, the target is a claim by a more recent detractor, Robert Talisse, to the effect that Dewey's notion of democracy is incompatible with political pluralism. My motive for imagining a Deweyan response to these critics is *not* simply to defend Dewey, and it is definitely not to claim that he was infallible. In several of his own engagements (for instance, the Local 5 Teachers Union debacle and, as we will see in the next chapter, his critique of Trotsky's Marxism), Dewey clearly erred. My motivation, more importantly, is to show that reconstructing responses to his recent critics is a worthwhile endeavor, for the exercise potentially reveals (i) the *sui generis* quality of Dewey's ideas and (ii) the distortions that can result when those ideas are filtered through more contemporary frameworks.

The next two chapters reconstruct contemporary debates by injecting Dewey's seminal ideas, demonstrating how the discourse can be steered in a more productive direction. First, the debate over the Bush Doctrine in American foreign policy receives attentions, followed by the

debate over homeschooling. I call these projected debates, since they *project* Dewey's ideas into contemporary controversies and suggest ways of ameliorating or resolving the problem by addressing its underlying conditions, not its superficial symptoms. Unlike some contemporary pragmatists, I believe that Dewey's writings offer sufficient resources to address historically-rooted problems, and that while seeking assistance from other philosophers and their approaches—e.g., Michel Foucault and his genealogical approach—can be a fruitful exercise, it is by no means necessary.[20] Recruiting Dewey's ideas as resources to address recent debates does not defy the rule against exogenous constraints on inquiry, so long as we call the results of these historical inquiries "Deweyan," not "Dewey's." In this way, we admit that our judgments are fallible, that our portraits of Dewey are always, to some degree, caricatures of the original.

In reconstructing Dewey's great debates—whether historical, imagined or projected—and evaluating the Deweyan results, the words of John Herman Randall should inform our work. Randall tells us that the "best way to honor Dewey is to work on Dewey's problems—to reconstruct his insights, to see, if need be, farther than Dewey saw."[21] What follows is as much a call for Deweyan pragmatists to engage in historical inquiry as it is a set of inquiries into Dewey's past engagements and an attempt to demonstrate the enduring relevance of his ideas. Even though philosophical pragmatism emphasizes the forward-looking dimension of human experience, it is not, as Rorty suggests, "unbecoming" for pragmatists to inquire into the past. Indeed, it is, as Sullivan reminds us, imperative that they remain "sensitive to it." Burleigh

[20] For the opposing view, particularly that Dewey's pragmatism ought to be supplemented by Foucault's genealogical method, see Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*, pp. 195-233, and John Stuhr, *Genealogical Pragmatism: Philosophy, Experience, and Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 181-204. Still, Auxier rightly notes the similarities between Dewey and Foucault, particularly in their approaches to historical inquiry and how those approaches affected their personal biographies: "Dewey and Foucault were not driven away from the academy and the political culture of their times by their views of history, but right into the midst of it." "Foucault, Dewey, and the History of the Present," 79.

[21] Gouinlock, "Introduction," liv.

Wilkins was well aware of this need when he wrote: "A step backward is often necessary if we hope eventually to continue forward, as mice in mazes, and men too, have learned."[22] This book is an invitation to all those thinkers inclined toward philosophical pragmatism to step back as a way of moving forward, to embrace a more nostalgic form of pragmatism, and thus, in Randall Auxier's words, to appreciate "that Dewey's philosophy *is* historical (in a very real and important sense)."[23]

[22] Wilkins, p. 889.

[23] Auxier, "Dewey on Religion and History," 45.