

Historicizing Dewey?

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[Developments over] a half-century... have demonstrated the need for a reinterpretation of Dewey's basic insights by, and for, a new generation.¹

In *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* Ian Hacking presents the case of the seventeenth century conception of "idea" from Thomas Hobbes. In the idiom of that day, "[our] ideas are all right as they stand.... Trouble comes when you replace the train of thought by the train of words... [since] we should strip our thought of as much... [public] language as possible."² Two difficulties for readers are demonstrated: First, how to get minds of the twenty-first century around a seventeenth century "idea," and second, what it means to historicize philosophy, that is, to attempt to understand presently writings from the past.

The issue of historicism is raised in the engaging essay on the empiricisms of Liberty Hyde Bailey and John Dewey from John Azelvandre. As I do, he recognizes that the meanings of words change over time, that language is not perennial but time-bound. Azelvandre's own example is Bailey's term "sympathy." He writes, "The usage of this word has altered over the years, and we must try to reconstruct a sense of its force and meaning in Bailey's time." Significantly, Azelvandre problematizes Bailey's term and even distinguishes its early twentieth century usage from that of an earlier Adam Smith. However, he does not also question Dewey's notions of experience and empiricism. I believe that Dewey's philosophy — both its content and method — must be historicized.³

One step is to agree that philosophical contents change relative to changing contexts. This premise is substantiated in 1919 in Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. From the 1948 re-introduction, he asserts:

[P]roblems and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises, and that accordingly, its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute a crisis and a turning point in human history.⁴

Dewey's "reconstruction" of philosophical content is illustrated throughout his writings in a quasi-dialectical, re-interpretive process resulting in new conceptions.

One can follow in general Dewey's own philosophical process, but it too needs historicizing. Suggestions come from such fields as history and literary criticism; one useful source is theorist of history, Hayden White's essay, "The Context in the Text." He posits that distinct historical purposes lead to different temporal and methodological stances. From out of historiography, two purposes are to reconstruct or explain and to interpret or speculate.⁵

As a start, this division suggests analyses for philosophical reading: studying of contexts and their changing conditions, especially to ascertain agreed upon "breaks," making strange the meaning of terms in "common," and locating writing within different theoretical traditions, being cognizant of specific differences. The analyses

just suggested seek an interpretive answer to an implicit question that remains: to separate the present from the near past. One result of such processes has been my experiment of writing texts of Dewey and Derrida against each other in a “logic of juxtaposition.”⁶ While Azelvandre’s task is not quite the same, I believe attention to historicizing Dewey is necessary for any present day reader and reading task.

1. Larry A. Hickman, *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), ix.

2. Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 17, 16.

3. This is a “new” historicism, contra the nineteenth century foundational and teleological view of history.

4. John Dewey, “Introduction: Reconstruction as Seen Twenty-Five Years Later,” *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), v-vi. See also Dewey, “Experience and Nature,” *The Later Works, 1925-1953* vol. 1 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).

5. Hayden White, “The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History,” *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), 188.

6. Although an argument for historicization is not offered, see an example in Lynda Stone, “Come Again the Ghosts: Dewey and Democratic Education by Derrida,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 16, no. 1 (2000): 41-68.