

**Curtis Hutt.** *John Dewey and the Ethics of Historical Belief: Religion and the Representation of the Past.* SUNY Press 2013. 165 pp. \$75.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781438445694); \$26.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781438445687).

Historical beliefs seem to pose a unique epistemic problem, insofar as events in the past lack the immediacy and public quality of present experiences or the deliverances of scientific inquiry. Curtis Hutt presents John Dewey's approach to the justification of beliefs about the past as an overlooked option for two competing camps: scientific historiographers who maintain that the past is found, and historical relativists who maintain that the past is made, since historiographical work is always conditioned by present practices. Examining Dewey's 'Judgments Recognized to be Historical', Hutt provides an account of the justification of historical beliefs reconciling the situatedness of historians with their claims to objectivity. He leverages this account to offer an ethics of historical belief in the context of religious traditions. In doing so, Hutt places Dewey in the midst of ongoing conversations in religious epistemology. He considers whether religious adherents are entitled to certain beliefs about the past in virtue of those commitments' depth of ingression in their traditions and communities. Hutt argues that Dewey's approach denies those who wish to shield these beliefs from inquiry. The final analysis promises to establish Dewey as a critic of approaches to historical beliefs that ground justification on uninterpreted facts of the matter concerning 'what actually happened', and of 'new traditionalists', who maintain that a historical belief's coherence within a web of beliefs alone is sufficient for justification. Though I question the extent to which Dewey's ethics of historical belief differs from some of the positions presented, Hutt's volume establishes Dewey's relevance as a valuable resource in contemporary religious epistemology.

Hutt's opening narrative of 19th and 20th century philosophy of history focuses on a tension between those who see history as 'found', and those who argue it is 'made', revealing an epistemic difficulty for historical beliefs. Scientific historiographers like Leopold von Ranke saw historical study as a drive to find 'what really happened', affirming that historians could step back from their present beliefs and contexts to present a mirror of past events. Historical beliefs here are justified insofar as they are causally linked to some past event, as opposed to their relationship to present beliefs and practices. Others, like Hayden White, are impressed by the inability of historians to escape these contexts, arguing that a historian's data-selection will be conditioned by practices embedded in their present situation. Instead, they view historical facts as inexorably 'other' and thereby inaccessible. On this account, history is 'made', and historians can at best be clear about the biases behind their representations of the past. The positions frame Hutt's presentation of Dewey's account of justification and ethics of historical belief.

Hutt's Dewey acknowledges the critique of a Rankean program but resists the conclusion that beliefs about the past cannot be warranted. Chapter 2, 'Dewey and the Ethics of Historical Belief', features the book's central argument. On Hutt's assessment, Ranke and White share a common premise: that historical beliefs are not objective if not grounded 'in historical evidences which lead one to "what really happened"' (28). Against Rankeans, Dewey maintains that evidence-selection and practices of historical research shape the work and results of historiography. Hutt argues that Dewey cannot accept that the past is 'found', since there are no uninterpreted facts against which to check one's knowledge. However, Dewey thinks that we can submit historical beliefs to the kind of inquiry that enables warranted belief in other domains. Thus, history is not simply 'made' either. Hutt nicely summarizes the point: 'Dewey never doubted the achievements of the experimental

method and suggested that historians take note' (31). He argues that historians, like scientists, can develop hypotheses about the past, designing experiments and inquiries that test these hypotheses, warranting belief in what likely happened. On Hutt's reading, Dewey affords a response to propagandists. Their claims about the past are equally subject to inquiry as claims in other domains, and are justified or warranted insofar as they survive inquiry-processes. Inquiries are conditioned by present beliefs and aims, and Hutt rightly recognizes that the account entails that historical beliefs are justified by reference to present beliefs.

In this chapter, readers might press for further illustrations. The central example is geology, where scientists' hypotheses about the past can be tested by drilling 'test wells', and the data gleaned from these wells can confirm or disconfirm these hypotheses (32-3). As the book moves into discussions of religious epistemology, one wonders what inquiry into claims about miracles might involve. In particular, since inquiry is necessary for both historians and ordinary believers to be justified, the work invites consideration on how these forms of inquiry might diverge.

After outlining his interpretation of Dewey on the justification of historical beliefs, Hutt acknowledges divisions in Dewey's legacy on justification. He is right to suspect that Dewey's readers might be suspicious of presenting Dewey as an alternative to seeing history as either found or made. Many familiar with pragmatist traditions might balk at the emphasis on inquiry, looking instead to coherence within a set of practices for an account of justification, *pace* Richard Rorty. The third chapter, 'The Two Faces of Deweyan Pragmatism', attempts a recovery of Dewey on justification from Rorty and like interpreters. These figures minimize the importance of inquiry, instead casting justification as a function of social endorsement. Thematically, this chapter introduces a contrast of Hutt's views with Rorty's to carry through the discussion of the justification of religious beliefs about the past and the final chapter on the ethics of historical belief.

Having argued that Dewey maintains that historical beliefs are amenable to inquiry, and that the past is neither merely found nor merely made, Hutt turns to the religious epistemological project promised in the book's subtitle. The fourth chapter, 'Justification, Entitlement and Tradition: Debate after Dewey', traces a cluster of arguments that grant justification for some historical beliefs without reference to inquiry. The target of the final chapters is a group of views Hutt labels 'new traditionalism' (following Jeffrey Stout). He writes: 'New traditionalists describe religious believers as entitled to their sacred histories as long as these are consistent with other core beliefs and have not been negligently or disingenuously proposed' (63). Such figures include Alasdair MacIntyre, Eric Lindbeck and Nicholas Wolterstorff. New traditionalism incorporates some Deweyan elements, insofar as these views analyze justification 'in terms of their relationship to other beliefs formed in the context of specific communities and traditions' (79). Crucially, Hutt maintains the pragmatist responses from Rorty and Stout each concede that there are historical beliefs to which believers are entitled, granting at least a weak sense of justification without an appeal to inquiry, moving them closer to new traditionalism. This necessity of inquiry for justification, even within a community or tradition that denies its necessity, Hutt maintains, distinguishes Dewey's position.

The concluding chapter, 'Dewey and the Ethics of Historical Belief', argues that, unlike the new traditionalists and their pragmatist critics, Dewey is unwilling to grant deeply held, broadly accepted beliefs about the past even a weak sense of justification. Justification is reserved for those beliefs that have survived responsible inquiry. Entrenched beliefs that have not been subject to inquiry are thereby not justified. However, individuals are not necessarily epistemically blameworthy

for adhering to these beliefs. After all, their communities might not be conducive to having to confront problematic situations that propel inquiry. Thus, according to Hutt's Dewey, epistemic blamelessness and justification come apart. This distinction underlies an ethics of historical belief that cultivates an openness to inquiry and a sensitivity to potential defeaters articulated by outsiders to our communities and traditions. A Deweyan ethics of historical belief requires that we be open to submitting our beliefs to inquiry in communities composed of individuals with divergent interests and traditions.

Hutt's ability to trace the development of accounts of justification and corresponding pictures of the ethics of belief prompts the question of whether new traditionalists might move closer to Dewey's ethics. Some traditions might affirm that one ought to take a fallibilistic attitude towards central beliefs or principles. Possibly, those that do not are saddled with inconsistencies or are in a worse position to identify them. For instance, MacIntyre, taking Thomism as an example of a tradition, implies that competent students in the tradition demonstrate an openness to reinterpreting its core principles (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1990. 65-6). Readers sympathetic to new traditionalism might challenge whether this ethics of belief requires the distinction between justification and entitlement.

Hutt's volume will certainly be of value to those interested in Dewey's epistemology and philosophy of history. But the final examination moves toward involvement in a larger debate in religious epistemology. The book recovers pragmatist contributions beyond Rorty's insistence that we leave our religious commitments at home or Stout's concession that believers might be entitled to some beliefs without relevant inquiry. Hutt discloses Dewey's present relevance to religious epistemology, inviting readers to reflect on the value and possibility of inquiry across traditions.

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