

Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

All Graduate Plan B and other Reports

Graduate Studies

5-1970

Carl L. Becker: A Philosophical Analysis

Reed Anderson Olsen
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Olsen, Reed Anderson, "Carl L. Becker: A Philosophical Analysis" (1970). *All Graduate Plan B and other Reports*. 641.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports/641>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Plan B and other Reports by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



CARL L. BECKER: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

by

Reed Andersen Olsen

Report No. 2 submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

History

Plan B

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

1970

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CARL L. BECKER: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20
VITA	21

CARL L. BECKER: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

In any study of American historiography, Carl Becker emerges as one of the more prominent historical philosophers. George H. Sabine suggests that interest in Becker's historical writing stems from three main characteristics. First, far more than most academic historians, he was a literary artist, using a very fine prose style which made enjoyable reading. Second, he had an unique understanding of the purposes which should guide and might set the standard of excellence in historical writing. Third, Becker had a broad and keen intellectual curiosity, enlightened by wit and irony and united with a deep moral conviction of the seriousness of the historian's calling and of the significance of history for a truly civilized society.¹

Charlotte Watkins Smith maintains that Carl Becker has a four-fold place in American thought. First, he holds a very commanding position among twentieth-century historians. "Whether the object is to praise the relativistic trend of American historiography (as it was with Harry Elmer Barnes in his History of Historical Writing) or to deprecate it (as it was with Maurice Mandelbaum in his Problem of Historical Knowledge), Becker's name is prominent in any study of the subject." Second, Becker was one of the very few historians in his day accounted a writer, a man of letters, someone worth reading for

¹ Phil L. Snyder, ed., Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. x.

pleasure. Smith suggests that he is as much worth studying as some of the nineteenth-century essayists who are read for their style. Third, Becker is accepted by professional philosophers as being one among them. Smith quotes Arthur E. Murphy who describes Becker as "A critical historian who is also, though he would perhaps not admit it, a philosopher," Fourth, "although Becker was a man of thought, he had sufficient imagination and judgment to appreciate the action and to allow for the compromises forced upon those who are making history instead of studying it."²

Carl Lotus Becker was born in Blackhawk County, Iowa, September 7, 1873, to a substantial, respected farm family. He had some firsthand experience of frontier life and grew to love the agrarian atmosphere, looking back on his boyhood with nostalgia. Although Becker was a quiet, introverted youth and stolid in appearance, the appearance was deceptive. Methodical habits, self-discipline and strong common sense characterized him all his life.

Becker's deep and abiding interest in history evolved while enrolled in a course taught by Fredrick Jackson Turner at the University of Wisconsin in 1894. "Until then I had never been interested in history, since then, I have never ceased to be so," Becker wrote to Turner in 1910.³

After I know not how long it dawned on me, and with what a joyous sense of emancipation, that Turner wasn't, that no university professor need be, merely a teacher . . . In this happy way I got a new idea of history. It was after all no convention

²Charlotte Watkins Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956), p. vi.

³Carl Becker's letter to Fredrick Jackson Turner, May 15, 1910, quoted in Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 6.

agreed upon by rote, but just the infinitely varied action and thought of man who in past times had lived and struggled and died for mean or great objects. It was in short an aspect of life itself, and as such something to be probed into, thought about, written about.⁴

Having made such a profound discovery, Becker delved into the study of historiography with all the fervor of his frontier upbringing.

Carl Becker's historical philosophy is a product of his age. He grew to manhood in a frontier farming area where a man was appreciated for his current contributions as opposed to his background. A frontiersman's character was judged by how hard he worked as well as his attitude toward his neighbors. A man's past seemed relatively unimportant. Becker's interpretation of history was comparable to this philosophy of man. A historical fact was a detail or idea in the mind of an individual which had been placed there because of a present need and not just because it was an event of the past.

In a letter to William E. Dodd, who was a good friend and colleague, Becker explained his reasoning as to the importance of history. He said there was a universal value in history and that all people regardless of their capacity need history:

"It is simply the need of a conscious creature, who has memory and who can anticipate the future, to enlarge his present perceptions by remembering things that happened in the past. The individual does this constantly, primitive people do it more or less unconsciously, and without much attention to accuracy. Critical history is simply the instinctive and necessary exercise of memory, but of memory tested and fortified by reliable sources. The facts may be determined with accuracy, but the 'interpretation' will always be shaped by the prejudices, biases, needs of the individual . . . history has to be rewritten by each generation."⁵

⁴Carl L. Becker, Everyman His Own Historian (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1935), p. 196-199.

⁵Carl Becker's letter to William E. Dodd, quoted in Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 85.

To read the works of Becker and to understand his philosophy, one must give up the traditional belief that history is everything that has happened as well as the events which have been recorded. Becker, in his article entitled, "What Are Historical Facts," refers to history as the memory of things said and done.⁶ In the book, Everyman His Own Historian, Becker does admit that there are two histories: "the actual series of events that once occurred; and the ideal series that we 'affirm and hold in memory.'" He states that it is the historian's aim to make the correspondence as exact as possible; but being forced to identify history with the knowledge of history, we must concern ourselves with history as we know it to be.⁷

Becker points out that history as it actually happened is absolute and unchanged, whereas the events we hold in our memory are "relative" and always are changing because of a refinement in our knowledge. This is a normal reaction in life, for as we gain additional knowledge, we make new judgments. When we make new judgments, our concepts and opinions take on new meaning although the facts still remain absolute. Becker defined history, for all practical purposes, as the "memory of things said and done." In putting history into its simplest terms Becker admitted that each person, Mr. Everyman, knows some history. It may not be a political history or English history, it could be personal history, but nevertheless it is history. The only prerequisite to being a historian is to have a memory. The "memory of anything said or done" is history.

⁶Hans Meyerhoff, ed., The Philosophy of History in Our Time (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), p. 122.

⁷Becker, Everyman His Own Historian, p. 234.

Becker admits to having two histories, but Burleigh T. Wilkins, in his biography of Becker, tries to point out that he actually has four histories:

(1) History as it happened; (2) history as it is remembered by Mr. Everyman; (3) history as it reflects the historians efforts to improve upon Mr. Everyman's memory; and (4) history as it ultimately proves to be useful and acceptable because and only because Mr. Everyman likes the way in which the historian keeps his accounts for him.⁸

Wilkins said history ought to be useful. It should enable us to understand ourselves as well as to understand others and to help us anticipate the direction of the social currents. With this description of the purpose of history he is in agreement with Becker's theory as expressed to Dodd.

Although Becker was not a logician, his ideas did not violate the principles of logic as expressed in the following summary of his ideas of history:

1. All men, primitive and civilized alike, want to know their past.
2. Certain things have been said and done in the past which have left traces in men's memories and in written records.
3. Some past events can be imaginatively re-created by interpreting those traces.
4. The extent to which the re-creation resembles the actual past event is something we cannot know, but it will depend upon (a) the quantity and quality of the records used, and (b) the quality of the imagination that does the re-creating.
5. Therefore, any re-creation of the past is only relatively true.⁹

Because of his approach to history, some professional historians thought Becker committed heresy against the profession. Becker

⁸Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, Carl Becker (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M. I. T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 205.

⁹Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 107.

possibly alienated other historians by referring to history as a myth. Speaking of the professional historian he claimed, "We are thus of that ancient and honorable company of wise men of the tribe, of bards and story tellers and minstrels, of soothsayers and priests, to whom in successive ages has been entrusted the keeping of the useful myths." Becker defined a myth as a "once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths."¹⁰

Webster's dictionary defines a myth as a traditional story, serving to explain some phenomenon, custom or any fictitious story. Had Becker used the term "historical novel" instead of myth, he probably would have received less criticism on this point. To use this terminology and explain it as free paraphrasing of one's own interpretation concerning what happened would put over the same thought in a more subtle manner. The obligation of the professional historian then is not to create, but "to preserve and perpetuate the social traditions; to harmonize, as well as ignorance and prejudice permit, the actual and remembered series of events . . . to the end that society may judge of what it is doing in the light of what it has done and what it hopes to do."¹¹

To quote Charlotte Wilkins Smith, "Moonshine or philosophy-- history or myth--what does it matter if it helps men to find 'enduring values' amid 'perishing occasions'?"¹²

¹⁰Becker, Everyman His Own Historian, p. 247.

¹¹Ibid., p. 248.

¹²Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 212.

Becker did not expect any historian to write a complete history of the past. This second impossibility due to the lack of facts as well as the personal biases of the historian. He believed one should bring to light, as unbiased as possible, the most interesting and important facts. Becker believed if the historian was interested in the subject, he could make it interesting for the reader. Becker made the following remark about the writing of history:

The art of writing, the written record which, by providing man with a transpersonal memory, will disclose to his view, for discrimination and appraisal, the mythical and the historic past, the familiar and the alien custom, the world as experienced and the world ideally conceived.¹³

Carl Becker did not advocate discarding the ideal of objectivity in writing for the sole purpose of influencing the future and he insisted that

No man can discard all his beliefs, prejudices and interests and so make objective judgments even about facts. Some of his beliefs are an essential part of the mind with which he judges. Therefore, let us not fool ourselves; let us not postpone making the best judgments we can until this impossible goal of objectivity has been reached. Let us write history that will be of use to the present generation, history which may influence what we do in the future because it helps us to understand what we have done in the past.¹⁴

Becker was an historicist in that he tried to project himself "under the skin" of the individuals about whom he was writing. If he did not feel he had enough empathy for the person, he did not write about him. When he read about someone and that person came alive in his mind, his pen recorded the unspoken desires and the inner ideas about the person. Becker tried to re-create a character of flesh and blood as he wrote his historical analysis of the past

¹³Carl L. Becker, Progress and Power (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1936), p. 37.

¹⁴Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 112.

events. An example of his sympathetic understanding is found in the notes Becker made while studying the Earl of Hardwicke. After reading quantities of papers of the eighteenth-century jurist, Becker confessed that the man was impossible to understand and thus concluded his study of him.¹⁵

In reading and studying the works of and about Carl Becker, one develops the feeling that he was a humanitarian. He stressed the helping and improving of mankind. He indicated that a historical fact, if it can be useful to mankind, is true as it is re-created in the mind of the individual who is about to use it. Becker realized that the greatness of the past came from the intelligence, integrity, and good will of man. Accordingly, George H. Sabine reported of Becker: "For him the test of a civilized society was the degree in which law and public authority rest on free discussion and voluntary consent, and he valued democracy because, with all its faults, it still offered the widest scope for intelligence and good will."¹⁶

Becker lived in a world of ideas and found interest in them as well as the human beings who created them. Becker believed new ideas were only old ideas put into a new perspective. He played freely with facts and ideas, trying to put old ideas into a new light. This is one reason why the same ideas emerge often in Becker's writings.

Becker's statements of historical relativism were among the first to be made in the United States and indicated his early dedication to the ideas of "present relativism." He concerned himself with facts

¹⁵Carl Becker's Notes, Drawer 10, quoted in Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 129-130.

¹⁶Snyder, Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker, p. xii.

as they related to the present need and demand of his society. Becker's selection of the facts depended on present demands which might not necessarily have concerned the event. Although a relativist, Becker did not discard all absolute concepts. Even though he left his religious attitude and background behind him during the early years of his career, one finds traces of the absolute in some of his writings. He believed some principles endured through all ages, and he did everything in his power to preserve them. These values were symbolized by the words of "liberty," "equality," "fraternity," "humanity," "toleration," and "reason."

Becker recognized the need for a continuous study of history to help the student relate the past to the present needs of society. He said one could not gain the full benefit from historical research unless that person did the research himself. We can capitalize on research done by the scientists; for example, we could use the discovery of the electric light since our entire society can benefit from the research of Edison and the other men in their perfection of this great gift to mankind. But in the field of historical research, we benefit much less if we use the research of others. When writing history, the facts, according to Becker, cannot be used until the historian can re-create the image in his own mind, and without the background one gains from personal research, it is extremely difficult to re-create that image:

"For if reason is a functional instrument, then it must have a function, and what function can it have if it be not to discriminate the relatively true from the relatively false, the dependable fact from the deceptive illusion, in order that the organism may pursue the better rather than the less good interest?"¹⁷

¹⁷Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 101.

"Becker's relativism is a modest philosophy akin to Justice Holmes' conception of truth as 'the system of my limitations.'"¹⁸ Just as the Judge limited his concept of truth, the historian also limits his conclusion to his knowledge of the subject material, his resources, his environment, his moral judgments, as well as his prejudices and biases. By "relativism" Becker meant that new histories replace the old, that what is included or stressed in the new histories depends in part upon the social situation of the historian.

"If relativism means more than this--if it means that a considerable body of knowledge, an increasing body of knowledge, is not objectively ascertainable, if it means a denial that the ideal of objective historical knowledge is possible of at least partial attainment--then I am not a relativist."¹⁹

Becker, as most, believed in many things simply because he could not help believing in them. In an unpublished article on historical evidence he declared: "'In this sense history is, as Charles Beard says, 'an act of faith.' But then no more so than all experience."²⁰

Becker's theory of pragmatism introduced another source of contention between himself and other historians. The question involved truths that are true and truths that become true simply because they are useful. After reading Becker's writings, one may question his ethics in regard to truth. Once again it appears to be his frontier heritage creeping out. A narrative is not necessarily true even if it does fit the situation, according to Burleigh T. Wilkins, who disagreed with Becker on this point.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁹ Carl Becker's review of Maurice Mandelbaum's, The Problems of Historical Knowledge, Philosophical Review, XLIX (April, 1940), p. 363, quoted in Wilkins, Carl Becker, p. 207.

²⁰ Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 120.

What Becker accomplished in his comments on historical facts and evidence amounted to the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth in historical inquiry. More accurately, he had set up a new correspondence theory in which the old ideal of a correspondence between the report and the reported is of necessity surrendered to a correspondence between the reporter (the historian) and what his reader (Mr. Everyman) regards as useful. If useful and necessary then, true, Becker had said this in 1910 in his essay, "Detachment and the Writing of History"; and this he simply repeated in the 1930's.²¹

Becker's philosophy of history moved him in the direction of religious skepticism, and in turn towards skepticism concerning all claims to absolute certainty, whether made by clergymen, philosophers, or historians. While attending the University of Wisconsin, he penned a "Wild Thoughts Notebook" which revealed his retreat from the "comfort of certainty" in things religious. However, Becker's skepticism alternated with faith, but whatever faith he felt was of a secular nature while his skepticism was aimed at all theories of knowledge that permit judgment of probable relationships of facts or judgments about values to masquerade as absolutes.

Burleigh T. Wilkins states that this inability of Becker's to find the hand of God in history would occasionally get him into difficulties with readers who supposed they could detect a note of irreligiosity in his writings.

Becker would, however, almost never strike an arrogant or dogmatic note in his disbelief in the supernatural, which may have offended the dogmatic believer even more. He simply affirmed that he was unaware of any divine plan for human beings and voiced the suspicion that the universe was indifferent to mankind, including Carl Becker.²²

In answering the charges concerning his skepticism, Becker may have made the following statement:

²¹ Wilkins, Carl Becker, p. 205.

²² Ibid., p. 21-23.

I venture to say that our knowledge of historical facts, as well as the inferences drawn from the facts, is relative and not absolute . . . If this leads to absolute skepticism, then all I can say is that absolute skepticism is what it leads to.²³

Concerning historical subjects, Becker developed a concept based on the idea that there was no single fact, that every fact was a compound of other facts. To understand why something happened, one had to know what made the facts that made the event occur. If the fact was unknown and could not be created as an image in the mind, then it could not be considered a fact. "The facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them, and into every fact that he creates some part of his individual experience must enter."²⁴

Because Becker believed that knowledge of historical facts was relative and not absolute, he concluded that a scientific formula for historical synthesis was neither possible nor necessary.

"Complete detachment would produce few histories, and none worthwhile; for the really detached mind is a dead mind, lying among the facts of history like unmagnetized steel among iron filings, no synthesis ever resulting, in one case or the other, to the end of time."²⁵

"The mind will select and discriminate from the very beginning. It is the whole "apperceiving mass" that does the business, seizing upon this or that new impression and building it into its own growing content. As new facts are taken in, the old ideas or concepts, it is true are modified, distinguished, destroyed even; but the modified ideas become new centers of attraction. And so the process is continued, for years it may be. The final synthesis is doubtless composed of facts unique, casually connected, revealing unique change; but the unique fact, selected because of its importance, was in every case selected

²³Carl L. Becker, "Commentary on Mandelbaum," MS Becker papers, quoted in Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 43.

²⁴Snyder, Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker, p. 12.

²⁵Ibid., p. 24.

because of its importance for some idea already in possession of the field. The original concepts, which give character to the entire synthesis, were contributed, not by the facts of the sixteenth-century, but by the facts of the twentieth-century."²⁶

Becker established the goal and obligation of the historian to discover and bring forth the facts of history. He admits that all the facts are not known to mankind, but the job of the historian is to gather as many of the facts as he can in order to re-create an event as accurately as possible. In his analysis of historical material, Becker asks three questions: (1) What is the historical fact? (2) Where is the historical fact? (3) When is the historical fact?

In regard to the first question, Becker's aim is to prove the point that there are no single facts. He uses what appears to be a simple fact, "Caesar crossed the Rubicon." To a student of history this fact has meaning because of the other facts concerning the great decision Caesar had to make at the river bank to march against the Roman Republic, which have already been instilled in his mind. More meaning comes to the individual when he understands that the Rubicon is a river separating the province of Gaul from Italy. To know why Caesar was in Gaul and to understand the orders he received from Rome will give the reader additional insight to the "simple fact." Without an understanding of other considerations, the statement, "Caesar crossed the Rubicon," has no meaning.

"Thus a simple fact turns out to be not a simple fact at all. It is the statement that is simple--a simple generalization of a thousand and one facts . . . which we do not for the moment care to use, and this generalization itself we cannot use apart from the wider facts and generalizations which it symbolizes."²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

²⁷ Meyerhoff, The Philosophy of History in Our Time, p. 122.

Becker goes on to say that the historian deals not so much with the event but with a statement concerning the event.

"When we really get down to hard facts, what the historian is always dealing with is an affirmation--an affirmation of the fact that something is true . . . For all practical purposes it is this affirmation about the event that constitutes for us the historical fact."²⁸

Where is the historical fact? Becker insists it is in the mind of the historian. If an image of the fact cannot be created in the mind of the historian, even though the event occurred, it is of no value to him, and the facts do not exist for him. "The facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them, and into every fact that he creates some part of his individual experience must enter."²⁹

In order to agree with Becker's answer to the third question, one must accept his first two answers that historical facts are the re-creation of affirmed events in the mind of the historian. The answer to the third question is that the historical event exists at the time it is used by the historian. Becker uses "when is" and not "when was" a historical fact to exemplify that the facts are still alive. To say "when was" would infer the fact no longer exists or that it is a "dead fact."

In studying this concept of historical fact a student must ask himself: Do I know all the true and useful facts? Does our society know all the truth about the past? If we do not know something, is it false? By a complete analysis of these questions a student of Becker can more easily grasp his philosophy of "relativism." He

²⁸ Ibid., p. 124.

²⁹ Snyder, Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker, p. 48.

did not profess that our society knows all the facts from the past; however, he did say we know many more than we are using. We use those facts we need to prove the concepts which our present day society is demanding be proven. The only time a good judgment can be made is when one knows and understands what he is judging. If we can not conceive of something, how then can we make a judgment concerning its being true or false. The facts we can envision in our minds and are relative to our concepts are our "true and useful" facts. When our society wants new interpretations, we will then use other facts and perhaps find new ones in writing our history and making our judgments of the past.

The validity of this philosophy may be challenged. Should people be given only the history they want to hear? One would probably have to say that perhaps to do so would be morally wrong. The practical answer would be yes. If we hope to benefit from past experiences, we need to study the experiences from which we can learn. It is true that history will not repeat itself, but by gaining knowledge from past experiences which are not unique to our "climate of opinion," we can be more aware of some of our present-day problems and be better prepared to meet them. Becker states that we cannot predict the future, but we can anticipate it by studying the similarities of events.

Regarding the assembling of facts, Becker said that the selection of which facts to use was the historian's most pressing problem. "The historian does indeed have a concept of the end, and he selects the facts that will explain how that end came about. But it is the concept that determines the fact, not the facts the concept."³⁰

³⁰Ibid., p. 24.

It is possible, then, that we could know the outcome of a history book before we read it, and surely the author knew the outcome before he started writing. Perhaps he did not know the details, but he knew the outcome. With this concept in mind, it would seem that the historian selects his facts to substantiate his concept.

There are two forces contributing to the selection of facts to be used. A quote from Becker can best illustrate this point:

"Our imagined picture of the actual event is always determined by two things: (1) by the actual event itself insofar as we can know something about it; and (2) by our present purposes, desires, pre-possessions, and prejudices, all of which enter into the process of knowing it. The actual event contributes something to the imagined picture; but the mind that holds the imagined picture always contributes something, too."³¹

What determines the images created in one's mind? Are these images based on present conditions or past events? One needs only to think of a historical fact in order to answer this question. For example, think of Martin Luther standing before the Diet of Worms. Without an historical background and understanding of the word, "diet," one would envision an entirely different image. When one thinks of a "diet" as being a German court of assembly, he will create a truer image of Luther being judged by the princes of Germany. This fact is brought to life, at least in our minds, by our knowledge of past events with an understanding of historical vocabulary.

Create an image of another fact such as prehistoric man preparing his daily food. Upon which facts can we base our assumptions. Do we know what his diet was and how he prepared it? Do we know how much he ate and how often? In order to create the image of prehistoric man, it is necessary to call on our present desires, prepossessions

³¹Ibid., p. 58.

and biases. Assuming these points, one would have to agree that images are the product of individual knowledge as well as one's purposes, desires, and prejudices.

Although Burleigh T. Wilkins disagreed with Becker's philosophy, the last paragraph in his book, Carl Becker, is proof that he admired and held him in high esteem as a historian. He points out that Becker was not an original thinker in any striking way, but an elegant one who used honest reasoning to gain his ideas. He does not hesitate to admit that Becker will stand among the better essayists of the time, and as one of the most accomplished writers of nonfiction in America.

He was more virtuous than vital, more philosophical than prophetic, but understanding is not always an inferior form of activity. He will endure for many years as a somewhat paradoxical example of his own Jeffersonian verity "that in the long run all values, both for the individual and for society, are inseparable from the love of truth, and from the disinterested search for it."³²

In Becker's own words one finds a self-evaluation:

"I am one of those who are more interested in finding out so far as possible what men are like and how they think than in 'doing them good,' which I rationalize by saying that the way I can do them the most good is to find out what they are like, what they do, and why they think it's a good thing to do."³³

George Sabine said the following about Carl Becker in the introduction to the book, Detachment and the Writing of History:

In truth it [Becker's philosophy] united two positions that are logically independent if not incoherent. His emphasis on what he called "relativism" seems to imply the dissolution of "absolute" ends or values which might define the direction of social progress, and repeatedly he used language which suggested that this was indeed his meaning. Yet his profoundest moral convictions were all on the side of a belief that some ideals--specifically those embodied

³² Wilkins, Carl Becker, p. 229.

³³ Carl Becker's letter to Thomas Reed Powell, December 3, 1944, quoted in Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 39.

in the democratic liberties--were in substance unchangeable and were indispensable, at least in a civilized human society.³⁴

In a final analysis of Carl Becker's historical philosophy, one would have to agree that there is considerable merit in it. It seems to be more reasonable than a scientific theory because no one can hope to know exactly what happened hundreds of years ago. Men cannot agree on what happened yesterday, hence an exact scientific theory would be of little value. The scientific method can be trusted in the scientific fields, but it cannot be trusted when human beings are involved. We cannot tell the reactions of the English people in 1215 because we cannot tell our own reactions at any given time.

A philosophy oriented to religion would not be acceptable because there are so many different ideas to consider. One could probably never develop an universal historical philosophy based on religion which would be accepted by all cultures.

Becker's philosophy comes as close as possible to an universally accepted doctrine. The people of the world can relate history to their present needs. They can orient it to their culture and background.

Becker's relativist theory gives the history student a motive with which to study. One must have a goal in order to achieve from his study just as the historian had a goal in writing the history. That which is relative to his life and environment determines his goal.

In summing up his thoughts about Becker, Burleigh T. Wilkins says that a man does not attain immortality during his own lifetime, and it seemed unlikely that Becker would ever achieve such a high estate

³⁴ Snyder, Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker, p. xiv.

in the eyes of posterity. However, it is apparent that he will long remain a significant figure for students in American culture. "As a thinker he is, therefore, significant not for the conclusions he arrived at, but for the journey he made." Mr. Wilkins maintains that Becker was "both a weathervane and a countervailing force, a man of paradox torn between skepticism and faith, between pragmatism and a belief in the intrinsic worth of certain principles and modes of life."

One might disagree with Becker on innumerable points, which would not have offended him, and yet find him one of the most attractive if minor figures of our age. In the field of history, Becker's humane beliefs were reflected in his efforts to prevent the de-humanization of history, which might some day rank among our gravest errors.³⁵

Carl Becker was more interested during his last few years in history "regarded as the sense of the past" and how it could enrich and expand man's life. He felt that since man is the only creature that has a memory, he should use it for the purpose of enlarging the present and making it glorious.

How has man made his life glorious in past times? The springs of illusion and aspiration have nourished every product of man's intelligence. These are the sources of human power that Becker sought in individuals and nations and epochs.³⁶

³⁵

Wilkins, Carl Becker, p. 225-229.

³⁶

Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion, p. 210-211.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Becker, Carl L. Everyman His Own Historian. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1935.
- _____. Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.
- _____. Progress and Power. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1936.
- Meyerhoff, Hans, ed. The Philosophy of History in Our Time. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959.
- Smith, Charlotte Watkins. Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956.
- Snyder, Phil L., ed. Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1958.
- Strout, Cushing. The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.
- Wilkins, Burleigh Taylor. Carl Becker. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1961.

VITA

Reed Andersen Olsen

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Reports: Hydro-electric Power in Brigham City, Utah: Its Growth and Development.

Carl L. Becker: A Philosophical Analysis

Major Field: History

Biographical Information:

Personal Data: Born at Brigham City, Utah, November 24, 1936, son of Claudius B. and Maude Andersen Olsen; married Janice Leonard, April 12, 1957; three children--Bradley, Michelle, and Steven.

Education: Attended elementary school in Brigham City, Utah; graduated from Box Elder High School in 1955; received the Bachelor of Science degree from Utah State University in 1959, with a major in history and a minor in political science; NDEA History Institute, summer 1967; completed requirements for the Master of Science degree, specializing in history at Utah State University in 1970.

Professional Experience: 1960 to present, teacher of history, Box Elder High School, Brigham City, Utah; 1959 to 1960, teacher of special education, Box Elder Junior High School, Brigham City, Utah.