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Why is there no “Progress” in Philosophy of History?

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Why is there no “Progress” in Philosophy of History?

1. Introduction

Let me begin this blog post with a little anecdote. In 1994 Hans Kellner and I conceived of the plan to publish a collection of essays on the state of philosophy of history at that time. We dressed up a list of philosophers of history we might invite to contribute to the collection. We asked these potential contributors whether they would be willing to write an essay on existing philosophy of history from their own point of view and, next, what expectations they had for its future development. We hoped, of course, that the then most influential philosophers would graciously accept our invitation. So Arthur Danto was at the top of our list: after all, what book has been more influential than Arthur Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History* of 1965 – with the possible exception of Hayden White's notorious *Metahistory* of 1973?¹ So I wrote to Arthur Danto whom I knew fairly well and with whom I was on friendly terms. But, alas, he politely rejected our invitation. But as we all know: never take no for an answer. Hence, when even a second request did not yield the desired result, I pressed the matter a little further, until he finally complied with our request.

In fact, I was not much surprised by Arthur's reluctance to write an essay for us. For during one of our encounters he had told me that in the very rare cases that the topic of the philosophy of history was mentioned at meetings of the American Philosophical Association (APA), his colleagues always reacted in much the same way you could expect the musicologist to react to the phenomenon of military music. That is to say, they knew of its existence, but were completely unwilling to take it seriously. Amusingly put, to be sure, but not exactly the kind of thing you like to be told as a philosopher of history yourself. Anyway, the essay Arthur wrote for our collection contained a passage amply confirming the picture:

[...] I can think of very little in the philosophy of history from the middle of the 1960s to the present. Somewhere someone sometime in the last decade must have written about explanation, even about historical explanation – but I cannot think of an example offhand. (It should be noted that, as editor of the *Journal of Philosophy* I see a fair sample each year of what philosophers offer as their most advanced work: my esteem is that a contribution on any aspect of the philosophy of history occurs at a rate of one per thousand submissions). It is not just that the topic is under extreme neglect. It is, rather, that there is hardly any room in the present scene of philosophy for discussion of its issues. So to find someone actively working

at them would be almost to encounter a historically displaced person, like someone doing abstract expressionist canvasses as if the whole subsequent history of art had not taken place. Or like encountering Japanese soldiers on some obscure atoll who never found out that the war had ended.²

Needless to say, the question is whether Danto's not so flattering characteristic of what philosophy of history was around 1995 is true as well of what it is like nowadays. As I must confess, in my view the present state of philosophy of history is even worse than in 1995; though there are some signs in the last few years suggesting that things might change for the better.

2. Hayden White's writings and his personality

Most important in blocking progress in philosophy of history have undoubtedly been Hayden White's writings and his personality. I mentioned already his *Metahistory* of 1973. As we all know this voluminous and highly influential study strongly advocated the use of the instruments of literary theory for an analysis and a proper understanding of the historical text. As White put it: "[...] in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterpart in literature than they have with those in the sciences".³ As will be clear from this quote, White wanted to study the historical text in the same way literary theorists investigate novels and poetry because he was convinced that the textual structures of the historical text and of the novel should be basically the same.

Moreover, note that though he recognized that historical texts are as much *invented* as *found*, the focus in the quote is exclusively on the "invented" and not on the "found".⁴ Indeed, in all of his career as a philosopher of history White never paid any attention to the latter dimension of the historical text, whereas it is the most trivial of all truisms about historical texts that historians writing them want to find out above all "the truth" about the past – or as Ranke somewhat clumsily put it "wie es eigentlich gewesen". I deliberately placed "the truth" here in quotation marks since I'm well aware that defining it for historical writing is far from easy.⁵

Nevertheless, doing justice to the past is the primary aim of the historian; putting his conclusions in the language best suited to conveying them to his readers only comes second. And if the historian has to deal with that problem – and an important problem it surely is, no doubt about that! – his primary aim will be clarity, conciseness, comprehensiveness, accessibility and the avoidance of possible

misunderstandings – hence, surely *not* what White had had in mind with his tropology. If, as rarely turns out to be the case, the historian's book is considered not only a most successful historical study but a literary masterwork as well, he will welcome and graciously accept the latter compliment but not see it as a contribution to "the truth" of his work.

This is certainly not to deny the claim that there may be a continuity between style and content in historical writing, nor that to the extent that this happens to be the case White's advocacy of a literary approach may yield interesting results. Even more so, I have applied White's method myself on several occasions. To mention just one example, I was profoundly struck by the omnipresence of the figure of paradox in Tocqueville's *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, his *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* and in his *Souvenirs* and to what extent the historical and political content of these works depended on that figure of speech.⁶ But we cannot remain blind to the fact that White's approach works best, if not exclusively, for the historians of a more remote past: indeed, no account of Gibbon's *Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire* can afford to ignore that the figure of irony powerfully contributes to its content or that the pathetic and heated prose of Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution Française* is crucial to his depiction of the quasi-divine march of "le peuple Français" through its history. Or think of Carlyle's appeal to the rhetoric of a fire-and-brimstone preacher in his history of that same so sublime event.

But the closer one comes to the present the less room there is for a stylistic analysis of the historical work à la White. Or to formulate it more fruitfully and adequately: historical works lending themselves to the literary approach recommended by White ceased to be written with and after the professionalization of historical writing. Admittedly, even now it may still be remarked in the review of a historical work that is elegantly or poorly written; but then rather by way of an afterthought than as a comment on the scientific value of that work.⁷ Stylistic elegance will never be more than an icing of the cake and remain devoid of any cognitive significance. In sum, the value of the approach to historical writing proposed by White is doubtful already, but it can deliver interesting results, if any, only if applied to historical work antedating the professionalization of historical writing. Hence, to a time when historical writing was still regarded to be an art or a branch of rhetoric rather than the science that it became with Ranke's historicism. Indeed, since his essay *The Burden of History* of 1966⁸ – his earliest pronouncement on historical writing – White has always been quite open about his contempt for

professionalized historical writing. Similarly, his *Metahistory* and some of the essays he wrote in the 1970s all had in common the reactionary and Quixotic hope to make contemporary historians abandon professional historical writing and to return to the days of the Gibbons, Tocquevilles and Michelets. But as was to be expected no historian paid any attention to his pathetic exhortations. In his excellent book on White, Herman Paul described this sad falling out of White and the historical profession as follows:

[...] *Metahistory* was perhaps the last occasion on which White invited *professional* historians to change their mode of realism. In the 1980s White came to the sobering insight that a non-ironic realism is more likely to be found outside the historical discipline. Encouraged by the rather enthusiastic reception of his tropology among students of literature, White began to put his hope more in novelists and film directors than in historians. Whereas [...] he continued his battle against irony with undiminished zeal.⁹

Now, recall that I said at the beginning of this blog post that philosophy of history has been led astray since the 1980s by both White's writings *and* his personality. Indeed, White's near to total domination of philosophy of history for almost four decades can only properly be explained if his personality is taken into account as well. The body of his work is not awfully large and does not show much development but rather a 'horizontal' proliferation, so to speak, into different directions. It had the character of a number of interesting suggestions, ordinarily dropped again as soon as they had been proposed, rather than of a sustained effort to develop one or more lasting insights. That White's work nevertheless continued to enthral philosophers of history for so long – down to the present – has much to do with the fact that he was present at literally just every event where philosophers of history gathered together – wherever in the world such meetings took place, for he was always invited to join – that he always presented himself there as the natural leader of the club and decided what topics were or were not suitable for discussion and how one ought to think about them. The role of the alpha male fitted him perfectly well and the idea that it was, in fact, a bit odd to grant it to him so unreservedly occurred to none of the participants at such occasions.

The price to be paid for this was that philosophy of history became wholly estranged from professional writing of history and that it was simply "not done" to be interested in anything as banal as the actual practice of the writing of history, in how historians argue their claims, in the nature of historical debate or in the issue

of the growth of historical knowledge. The example set by White was decisive here: he regarded all that is involved in professional historical writing as unworthy of proper historical thought; and many, though not all philosophers of history took over White's ban with the end result that progress in philosophy of history came to a standstill.

For think of this. There is an intimate tie between progress in a certain discipline and the philosophical reflection on that discipline. The explanation is that the cognitive peculiarities of a discipline manifest themselves clearest in how new knowledge is acquired, in the process of the establishment of new insights, the scientific debate on them ending – if all goes well – with the unanimous recognition that the insight succeeded in contributing to the growth of disciplinary knowledge and to that of scientific progress. We need only think of the philosophy of science to recognize to what extent new philosophies about scientific progress, on the one hand, and the growth of scientific knowledge itself, on the other, are inextricably interrelated. A philosophy of science that ignores the growth of scientific knowledge gets nowhere. This may explain why Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* of some sixty years ago was such a *succès de scandale*: he even *denied* that there should be such a thing as scientific progress and by doing so also robbed philosophy of history of science – its very *raison d'être*. Philosophers (of science) therefore reacted as if stung by a wasp and within some ten years nothing was left of Kuhn's idea of scientific revolutions and of his incommensurability thesis.¹⁰ And so it is in history: progress in philosophy of history is impossible as long as the postulate of the growth of our knowledge of the past is not accepted. The former truly presupposes the latter. This, then, may explain why during the Whitean regime in philosophy of history no progress was, and could be made.

3. The omission to define what historical writing is

I ended the previous section insisting on how crucial the notion of disciplinary progress is to the possibility of progress in the philosophical reflection on that discipline. Let us look a little closer at this and take, once again, philosophy of science as our example. One of the nice things about science is that one need not even think twice about how to identify progress in the sciences – that is, where to find it and what it looks like. If we take the exact sciences as our example, scientific knowledge is always expressed in terms of mathematical equations, such as $F = m \cdot a$ or $F = g (m_1 \cdot m_2) / r^2$. Now, think of the following example. At the end of the 19th

century the problem of black body radiation was discussed. Planck finally succeeded in finding the correct equation for it, namely his famous formula $\rho(\nu, T) = \frac{h\nu^3}{(\exp(-h\nu/kT) - 1)}$. But before him Josef Stefan and Wilhelm Wien had proposed slightly different equations for $\rho(\nu, T)$. This, then, is the prototypical form progress takes on in the exact sciences: scientific knowledge is expressed by means of mathematical equations relating a number of variables; and progress is achieved if, after a number of tentative efforts, scientific debate finally gives way to the correct mathematical description of some natural phenomenon. In sum, the philosopher of science need never be in doubt about where to look for scientific progress: just look at the equations!

But, alas, it is radically different in the case of historical writing. Historical works typically take the form of books of sometimes over several hundred thousand words. They differ dramatically from the kind of text found in a scientific journal. However, one might argue as follows: even a scientific text will always contain a certain amount of natural language, albeit it is incomprehensible to the layman because of the terminology that is used in it. But, as the argument goes on, the mathematical equation is, in the end, the only thing that counts: it is, so to speak, the text's conclusion. And it could be argued, next, that here we have, after all, a similarity between the scientific and the historical text. For historical texts *also* permit conclusions. Moreover, works of history ordinarily end with a conclusion. So is the historian's conclusion not his analogue of the scientist's mathematical equation? And, more importantly, should we, therefore, not focus on the conclusions of historical texts in order to trace historiographical progress?

Well, according to Louis O. Mink we shall have to abandon the idea. Mink quite convincingly argued that there are no "detachable conclusions" (to use his terminology) in historical writing:

But despite the fact that the historian may 'summarize' conclusions in his final chapter, it seems clear that these are seldom or never detachable conclusions: not merely their validity but their meaning refers backward to the ordering of evidence in the total argument. The significant conclusions, one might say, are ingredient in the argument itself not merely in the sense that they are scattered through the text but in the sense that they are represented by the narrative order itself.¹¹

Hence, the historian's conclusions are always inextricably tied to all that led up to it. The conclusion refers to what it concluded and vice versa; you can never pull the two apart from each other. So that sends us back to the totality of the historical text again and, hence, to the fact that it is the historical text *as a whole* – and not

any identifiable part of it – that is the vehicle for progress in historical writing and the growth of historical knowledge.

The point I want to make here is that in the case of the exact sciences we all know that the mathematical expression of a new scientific theory is the vehicle for the progress it embodies, whereas in the case of historical writing you find yourself confronted by such huge, formless and unwieldy things as texts of up to many hundreds of pages. How on earth can we get a hold on such unmanageable textual monsters? That's a good question, and my claim is that philosophers of history have always been insufficiently aware of the real size of this problem.

Let me put it this way. Suppose someone points to a certain person and then tells you: "explain this!". What can you do? You will then probably respond with questions such as: "what do you mean? Do you have in mind his desperate look? Or what made him do that worked out so badly, or so very well? Or what he did with his rare musical talents? Or how evolution could result in a *species* of which he is a specimen?" And so on.

So that's the problem. Indeed, we can be sure that historical texts are *somehow* the vehicles for the growth of historical knowledge. OK. But we will be unable to move any further until we have proposed some (preliminary) axiom, definition, conception, or have formulated some assumption of what a historical text basically *is*. Only after we have such an axiom, definition, etcetera – whichever we believe to be best – can we try to infer from that definition an explanation of all the phenomena we know of historical writing, of historical explanation, discussion or, indeed, of the growth of historical knowledge. As long as we have no such definition (and of which we can only hope that it is well chosen) we can go on talking about historical texts till the cows come home, but without making any progress in our reflection on the nature of historical writing. How could the geometrician ever come to any interesting and valid observations about the circle without having first defined it as the set of all the points with the same distance from some other one (i.e., its centre)?

So the philosopher of history has, in fact, *two* problems instead of just *one*. In the first place he is confronted with the difficult problem of deciding on the best and most fruitful way to define the historical text. A problem he must handle with the greatest care and attention, for all that he is going to say next will depend on just *this*. And only then does the second problem arise: how to account for all we know from the practice of professional historical writing on the basis of this definition. This, then, is where the philosopher of history finds himself in a basically more

complicated position than his colleagues in the philosophy of science: the philosopher of the exact sciences has to do with the second problem only. The answer to the first one has already been given to him: namely, the mathematical equations in the physicist's texts.

Philosophers of history never made any progress since they always ignored the first question. For example, Hayden White simply decreed that in all the relevant aspects historical texts are identical with those of the novel. It need not surprise that he thus reached the most absurd conclusions about historical writing in which no practical historian could ever recognize himself. Similarly, others such as C.G. Hempel decreed that the historical text is identical with the kind of explanation we would give if our car failed to start on a cold morning. Others again – such as Collingwoodian hermeneutics or philosophers inspired by phenomenology – simply assumed that historical texts are identical with the kind of explanations we may give for what happens to human beings in ordinary human life. And then there were those who claimed that the historical text is essentially a narrative and should be investigated accordingly. And one can go on like this for quite some time. The effect of all these proposals was invariably similar to what happens if a stone is thrown into a pond: it begins with an impressive splash, then you see for a brief time some ripples on the pond's surface after which everything is again as it was before: universal silence. Small wonder, then, that there was no progress in philosophy of history!

4. Philosophers versus historians

This brings us to a somewhat delicate issue – namely, an assessment of philosophers of history themselves. Whereas the philosophy of science, of mathematics, of the arts, of politics, of theology and – needless to say – of language often attracted the best and most influential philosophers of our time, this was not the case with philosophy of history since World War II. Arthur Danto and the wholly unknown and unnoticed Peter Munz¹² being, arguably, the only exceptions to the rule. From the perspective of philosophical sophistication philosophers of history rarely exceed the level of uninspiring mediocrity. It is true, some of them were experts in a certain field of philosophy but, if so, never the inventor of new and influential vistas there. It pains me to have to state such a thing – but there it is. And my assessment is, obviously, not awfully remote from Danto's remarks about philosophy of history and its practitioners that I mentioned

at the outset of this blog post. That said, I offer my sincerest apologies to colleagues whom I may have offended with this disappointing observation.

Anyway, the observation is on point since it is an additional explanation of why no progress has been made in philosophy of history since the work by Arthur Danto and Louis O. Mink. For what is the mediocre philosopher, with a merely average talent for philosophical originality, expected to do if confronted with historical writing? The first thing to come to his mind will undoubtedly be to see where and how he can apply to the writing of history the kind of insights he acquired when doing philosophy. I shall be the first to admit that this is certainly not a bad idea at all and that it did result in some valuable and interesting views about the writing of history. However, needless to say, there are limits to this. These limits are defined by where the writing of history can only with difficulty, or perhaps even no longer at all, be fitted within the matrix of existing and fashionable philosophical conceptions. Philosophy of history will then inevitably remain biased in the sense that it will be open to only those aspects of the writing of history that can be fed unproblematically into the machinery of existing philosophy (of science and language, to mention the two most obvious candidates). And one will then necessarily remain blind to those aspects of the writing of history that are not to the taste of that machinery. The result will, of course, be a more or less unhappy caricature of what historical writing really is about.

Now, normally historians themselves are wholly indifferent to what philosophers of history assert about their profession – a very wise attitude, I venture to say. But it may happen that they take notice of their meditations especially when these have taken on the proportions of truly grotesque distortions of the practice of their discipline – as was the case with Hayden White and his followers. They will then feel the quite understandable urge to defend their discipline against what they correctly regard as outrageous and irresponsible nonsense. But, alas, ordinarily, this doesn't make things much better. For one they will then more often than not be confronted with the stunning phenomenon that sometimes the greatest and most brilliant historians write things about their discipline that even an undergraduate philosophy student could make mincemeat of. Similarly, there have been great scientists, such as the brilliant astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington (1882–1944) who defended views on the nature of science that each philosopher of science would speedily and effectively reject as nonsensical. In fact, there is nothing odd or even merely surprising about this: the simple truth being that doing science and doing philosophy (of science or of history) are two wholly different things. You can be a great scientist and, at the same time, a very poor philosopher of science; and,

inversely, an influential philosopher of science may lack all that is needed to do valuable scientific research. This is not to deny that historians sometimes write most sensibly about their own discipline – Richard J. Evans’s *In Defence of History* of 1997 being a good example. But such books fail as soon as some more abstract and theoretical issues come to the fore.

As this simple observation makes clear, the debate between historians and philosophers of history often degenerates into a hopeless *dialogue de sourds*. They simply speak different languages. Clearly, the only way out of this impasse is to be found in scholars who are trained in *both* historical writing *and* in philosophy. All the more so, since philosophers are by training more open to the realities of scientific research than to those of the practice of history. Recall, in this context, that even a dumbo can see that scientific knowledge is expressed in terms of mathematical equations, whereas stating that historical knowledge is expressed in terms of historical texts is surely correct – but badly in need of a lot of further specification. It is, therefore, part of the nature of historical writing that only scholars familiar with the finesses of both historical writing and those of contemporary philosophy will be capable of formulating valid and valuable insights into the nature of history – whereas a philosopher of science may capture some interesting truths about science even if he is not a scientist himself. Not so surprising therefore that – at least in my view – Arthur Danto (1924–2013) and Peter Munz (1921–2006) were the best philosophers of history of the previous century.¹³ The philosopher of history is a historian – and then he will fail as a philosopher – or he is a philosopher – but then he will have insufficient understanding of the indeed rather subtle and not easily perceptible peculiarities of the writing of history. Only if he is *both*, will his findings meaningfully contribute to the philosophical reflection on the nature of historical writing. But such people are relatively rare. One more reason, therefore, why little or no progress was made in philosophy of history in the last four decades.

5. Philosophers of history don’t listen

Let me qualify this observation straightaway: philosophers of history aren’t deaf, so if you tell them something, you can be sure that they hear you. But there is a difference between hearing and listening. Listening means that you pay close attention to what you hear and are prepared and capable of reacting adequately to it. Now, only too often this is not the case with philosophers of history. Or, to put it with more precision, they tend to listen very selectively. Recall that the so fractious given for all philosophers of history is the historian’s text. That is the starting point

for all philosophical reflection in historical writing. And, next, as we saw in section 3, this fractious given has the unpleasant property of not providing any indication of how best to approach and analyse it philosophically. It's like walking around a castle without finding a door or any other means of entry. So the philosopher of history seems condemned to use a bit of violence at some specific place and force his way into the interior of the castle. Some did this, as we have seen, by stating that the historian's text gives a causal explanation, others that we should rely on probabilistic explanation, others again that we should see past human action as if it were a text to be interpreted, and yet others that the historical text is a narrative in the way that we might narrate things that had happened to us, and so on.

Now, the funny thing is that after having entered the castle of the historical text by their own means, philosophers of history no longer care that their colleagues gained entrance through some other door. And what these colleagues say and write about what the castle of the historical text looks like – if seen from their perspective – they ordinarily regard as mere static that is not their business and should therefore be filtered out. This, then, is what I mean by saying that philosophers of history don't listen to each other. This is bad enough already, of course. On the other hand, it must be conceded that in our age of specialization the phenomenon is anything but exceptional.

However, things are worse than this. For it may happen that if one of these "specializations" can be shown to be hopelessly misguided by irrefutable argument, its practitioners nevertheless simply go on doing what they always did as if the irrefutable argument were "just one more opinion". As in our time of "fake-news" it is also often said that hard scientific fact is "just one more opinion". Needless to say, all intellectual progress either in the sciences, in history or in philosophy (of history) will be impossible if this kind of intellectual nihilism becomes fashionable.

But, alas, so it is in certain circles in philosophy of history. The prototypical example here is Collingwood's well-known re-enactment theory (let me add straightaway that my target here is Collingwood's re-enactment theory only and I have no wish to pronounce here on other aspects of his historical thought). Collingwood formulated the idea as follows:

So the historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, tries to understand these actions, that is, to discover what thoughts in Caesar's mind determined him to do them. This

implies envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is *the re-enactment* of past thought in the historian's own mind [my italics].¹⁴

All readers of this blog will be familiar with Collingwood's re-enactment theory; so it would serve no purpose to explain it here. Anyway, it is easy to show what is *irretrievably* wrong with this "idea of history". In fact, the decisive argument against it was already put forward almost two centuries before Collingwood's *Idea of History* in Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on Civil Society* of 1767:

Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design. [...] It may be affirmed of communities, that they admit of the greatest revolutions where no change is intended, and that the most refined politicians do not always know whither they are leading the state by their projects.¹⁵

That is to say, we may intend to do one thing (Ferguson's "human design"), but by acting accordingly often achieve something entirely different (his "the result of human action"). The insight is known as the doctrine of the unintended consequences of intentional human action.¹⁶

Hence, even if we grant to Collingwood that it should be possible for the historian to re-enact in his own mind the thoughts of a historical actor (which is already a most generous concession!) the problem still remains that all the *un-*intended consequences of the historical agent's action definitively drop out of the domain of history. And with this, in fact, all of History. For History is essentially a looking at the past from a perspective that was not accessible to the historical agent. History is about the *past*, and not about the *present*, after all. History is basically written *ex post facto*. And only *after* an action has been performed (and thus became a thing of the past), only *then* can these unintended consequences of human action manifest themselves and thus become the self-evident focus of the historian's interest. Next, these unintended consequences cannot *eo ipso* be explained by having recourse to the intentions of historical actions. It's a matter of simple logic that the unintended consequences of the actor's actions cannot be part of his intentions. They are after all *unintended*, aren't they? So with his re-enactment theory Collingwood unwittingly succeeded in eliminating all of History. One more dramatic exemplification of unintended consequences of intentional human action, one is inclined to comment.

There is a passage in Danto's unsurpassed *The Transfiguration of the Common Place* demonstrating how absolutely crucial the issue at stake really is:

And something of the same sort is true for the historical period considered as an entity. It is a period solely from the perspective of the historian, who sees it from without; for those who lived in the period it would be just the way life was lived. And asked, afterwards, what it was like to have lived then, they may answer from the outside, from the historian's perspective. From the inside there is no answer to be given; it was simply the way things were. So when the members of a period can give an answer in terms satisfactory to the historian, the period will have exposed its outward surface and in a sense be over, as a period.¹⁷

This is one of the best things that has ever been said by a philosopher of history; it confronts us with the profoundly unsettling paradox that a period will never know the truth about itself. Contrary to our expectations and to what even mere common sense (and Collingwood) seems to suggest, each period lives in ignorance about itself and it is only *later*, after the period in question has come to an end that the truth about it can become known.¹⁸ Or to put it all differently, as long as one *lives* in a period, there is still no *history* of that period: then there is only the present comprising in itself all the things of which the people in that period will say that they *exist*. And they were undoubtedly right when saying as much. However, as Danto argues, it becomes different if we move on to a later period. Only then can we argue about the past, only then can books be written about it, books of which we may even say that they express the historical truth about that period. But at *that* time the past period discussed in these books no longer exists itself. To put it with a dash of paradox: *historical reality only comes into being when the past no longer exists*.

This, then, is what Collingwood and his many followers have never been able to grasp. And now comes the point I wish to make. You can tell these many followers of Collingwood as many times as you wish 1) that there *are* these unintended consequences, 2) that it follows from the very notion of "unintended consequences" itself that they must remain forever unknowable if one focuses, with Collingwood, on intentions exclusively and, hence, that 3) history necessarily remains incomprehensible and unexplainable if one takes Collingwood as one's guide for our understanding of history – and then you will find that each time you tell them this, they are at a loss for words and have no answer to your argument. Nevertheless, after having returned home, or to their office, these followers of Collingwood will have wholly forgotten again their failure to cope with your argument; they will sit down behind their PC and calmly write one more book or

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essay singing the praises of Collingwood's re-enactment theory, as if your discussion with them had never happened. Now, this I find incomprehensible. It is as if there were a group of "physicists" around somewhere declaring science from Newton to the present irrelevant for an understanding of nature and who therefore stubbornly continue alchemy as it was practised in the 15th and 16th centuries. The unwillingness or incapacity of the followers of Collingwood to recognize what is the simple truth fulfils one (at least me) with a feeling of profound despair and hopelessness.

And I end this section by explicitly defying all Collingwoodians to refute the argument expounded here – though I now already know that no reaction from them will be forthcoming.

6. Conclusion

On the foregoing pages I have explained why, in my view, no progress has been made in philosophy of history since the days of Arthur Danto, Louis O. Mink and Peter Munz. And why Danto's low opinion about it in 1995 is, alas, still valid some thirty years later. Though it may be that the future of philosophy of history nowadays looks somewhat brighter than until quite recently was the case: since 2015 three books have been published (by Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, Chiel van den Akker and Paul Roth)¹⁹ suggesting that "the times they are a-changin'", to quote Bob Dylan. But whether this promise of a better future will come true remains to be seen.

One might say: "so what; why should we care about a failed philosophical sub-discipline?" And, needless to say, there is much truth in this: there are more important things to worry about. But for two reasons this cannot be the end of the story, in my view. Firstly, at the end of section 3 I spoke of "the rather subtle and not easily perceptible peculiarities of the writing of history". Now, subtleties for the philosopher are what for the botanist is finding one or more new *species* of life on some hitherto undiscovered island in the Pacific. In both cases subtle differences may necessitate an entire revision of traditional conceptions. So, perhaps philosophy of history is a "Fundgrube" for new philosophical insights.²⁰

Next, the last sixty to seventy years have been much like the proverbial eye of the hurricane in the history of the West. It has been an age of relative rest and peace sandwiched between the horrors of the first half of the previous century, on the one hand, and the alarming shape in which our common future presents itself, on the other. Geopolitically a new struggle between democracy and the new

totalitarianism in Russia and China has announced itself; worse still are our prospects if what humanity does against global warming is too little and comes too late. Which no sensible observer will doubt for a moment to be the case. As long as we still lived in this eye of the hurricane History seemed to have come to a standstill and been transformed into an eternal present – as has indeed been claimed by Fukuyama and François Hartog. Though with much different arguments. In other words: History is back again or, as Zoltán Boldiszár Simon put it: “history moves again”.²¹ And with the return of History the reflection on History – hence, philosophy of history – has acquired a new urgency, as well.

Frank Ankersmit (1945) was Professor for Intellectual History and the Philosophy of History at Groningen University (The Netherlands). Central in his work is the notion of representation. In his writings he investigated the role of representation in three domains: 1) historical writing, 2) politics and 3) aesthetics. His main guide has always been Leibniz, who is generally seen as the most profound theorist of representation amongst the five to ten greatest philosophers in the history of Western thought. He recently completed his new book entitled *Historical Reality Only Comes Into Being When the Past No Longer Exists*.

Tags: Collingwood / philosophy of history / White

¹ Republished with a new introduction by Lydia Goehr and a new conclusion by Frank R. Ankersmit as Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; Hayden V. White, *Metahistory. Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University, 1973.

² Arthur C. Danto, “The Decline and Fall of the Analytical Philosophy of History,” in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner. London: Reaktion Books, 1995, 70–89 (see 73).

³ White’s chapter “The Historical Text as Literary Artefact,” in Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 81–101 (see 82).

⁴ Note that White liked to make a devious use of the ambiguity of the word “fiction”: it may mean something that is *made* (from the Latin “facere”), but it may also stand for the novel. Since we are all constructivists nowadays each philosopher of history will agree that the historical text is *made*, but you need to be a follower of White to believe that there should be no relevant differences between the novel and the historical text.

⁵ See for my view of this issue the part entitled “Leibniz and Historical Representation” in my forthcoming book *Historical Reality Only Comes Into Being When the Past No Longer Exists*.

⁶ Frank R. Ankersmit, “Tocqueville and the sublimity of democracy. Part 1,” *The Tocqueville Review* XIV, no. 2 (1993), 173–201; Frank R. Ankersmit, “Tocqueville and the sublimity of democracy. Part 2,” *The Tocqueville Review* XV, no. 1 (1994), 193–218; Frank R. Ankersmit,

“History and/as cultural analysis. Gibbon and Ovid,” in *The practice of cultural analysis*, ed. Mieke Bal. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 102–117; Frank R. Ankersmit, “Bilderdijsk conceptie van de historische tijd. De ‘Monadologie’ als model,” in *Romantiek en historische cultuur*, ed. Jo Tollebeek, Frank R. Ankersmit and Wessel E. Krul. Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij Groningen, 1996, 65–81; Frank R. Ankersmit, “Tocqueville and Flaubert in 1848. The Sublimity of Revolution,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 37 (2016), 253–273. Finally, I argued elsewhere that Huizinga’s *Waning of the Middle Ages* was, at least partly, based on a most personal “experience” – a “historical sensation”, as Huizinga called it himself – of the art of the Van Eycks and, next, that Huizinga solved the problem of how to translate a historical experience into language by making use of the literary style that was introduced by the so-called “Tachtigers” (i.e., a literary movement in the Netherlands of the 1880s as inspired by the novelist and literary critic Lodewijk van Deijssel). See my *Sublime Historical Experience*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 and the enlarged and improved Dutch version of that book *De Sublieme Historische Evaring*. Groningen: De Historische Uitgeverij, 2007.

⁷ I know of only one exception: Kellner’s chapter “Disorderly Conduct. Braudel’s Mediterranean Satire,” in Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 153–189.

⁸ Republished as chapter “The Burden of History,” in White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 27–51 (see esp. 31 ff.).

⁹ Herman Paul, *Hayden White. The Historical Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011, 80.

¹⁰ The thesis was effectively and peremptorily refuted in Davidson’s chapter “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth & Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, 183–199. Crucial in Davidson’s argument is the fact that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted reality; and because of this we can only be “words” and not “worlds” apart – as Kuhn believed. See Zammito’s unsurpassed account of the history of post-positivism in his John H. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes. Post-positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, especially chapters 3 and 4.

¹¹ Louis O. Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” in *Historical Understanding*, ed. Brian Fay, Eugen O. Golob and Richard Vann. Ithaca/London: Cornell University, 1987, 79.

¹² For Munz, see my “Peter Munz and Historical Thought,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 15, no. 3 (2021), 378–395.

¹³ Danto studied history at Wayne State University (with the legendary William Bossenbrook, who also had Hayden White as a student); Munz studied history and philosophy (with Popper) at Canterbury University in New Zealand and philosophy at Cambridge (with Wittgenstein). Whereas Danto soon abandoned history, Munz became an accomplished medievalist before he definitively (re)turned to philosophy in the middle of the 1970s. The third most important philosopher of history of the previous century – Louis O. Mink – studied philosophy at Hiram College and at Yale. As far as I know, his interest in philosophy of history grew out of his philosophical preoccupations without being the result of a confrontation, in some way or other, with the realities of the practice of historical writing. But I must confess that I lack reliable information about Mink’s intellectual biography.

¹⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, 215.

¹⁵ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 (1767*), 119.

¹⁶ The notion of unintended consequences has attracted surprisingly little attention. Notable exceptions are Hegel (an eager reader of the writings of the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Ferguson) who granted to unintended consequences the central role in his philosophy. The sociologist Robert Merton perfunctorily discussed them and, more recently, Jon Elster. The notion played a certain role, though, in discussion in law about the attribution of guilt. As far as I know the notion was never thoroughly analysed in modern (philosophy of) history. Merton preferred the term “unanticipated consequences” to “unintended consequences”. Clearly, the term “unanticipated” has a cognitive dimension – suggesting that unanticipated consequences occur because of a lack of knowledge of the consequences of a certain action. And in the essay he devoted to the unanticipated consequences of purposive action he discussed what forms this lack of knowledge might take. (See Robert K. Merton, “The unanticipated consequences of purposive social action,” *American Sociological Review* 1 (1936), 894–904.) Without downplaying the importance of this issue, the problem with this approach is in my view that it subordinates intentions (or purposes) to knowledge, whereas intentions precede the issue of knowledge. Knowledge only becomes relevant after an intention and the consequences of its implementation have come into being. I therefore prefer the notion of “unintended consequences”. Even more so, in my view one can consistently speak of unintended consequences even when the agent is fully aware of them, but nevertheless performs the action causing these unintended consequences, since his fear of them is less than his desire to effect what he expects from his action. For example, if one uses drugs in spite of being perfectly aware of the dangers of doing so. And if these dangers finally materialize, I would not hesitate to describe them as “unintended consequences”: for when using drugs it was, after all, not the drug user’s intention to ruin his health.

¹⁷ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1983, 207.

¹⁸ Here we may recognize the fatal naivety of Collingwoodian hermeneutics: by demanding the historian to re-live or to re-enact the past Collingwood unwittingly demonstrates his belief that the truth about a period of the past lies in that past itself. A very plausible view, but, again, all wisdom about history and historical writing begins with the awareness that – and why – the belief is fatally wrong. The truth about a period is only revealed to us (by the historian) after it has become part of the past.

¹⁹ Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015; Chiel van den Akker, *The Exemplifying Past. A Philosophy of History*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018; Paul A. Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020, xii. See my review of the two books: “A Narrativist Revival?,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 15, no. 2 (2021), 215–240.

²⁰ And in my forthcoming new book mentioned in note 4 I argue as much.

²¹ Zoltán B. Simon, “History set into motion again,” *Rethinking History* 3 (2015), 651–667; Zoltán B. Simon, *History in Times of Unprecedented Change. A Theory for the 21st Century*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 41–50.