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Practical Wisdom. Or What Can and Should Philosophy of History Achieve?

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Practical Wisdom. Or What Can and Should Philosophy of History Achieve?

There is much that philosophy of history *can* achieve.¹ The books, articles, companions, lectures, and blog posts on the philosophy of history testify to that. Here I confine myself to discussing but one example – not a recent one – of what philosophy of history can and should achieve.

The Value of History-Writing

One of the few books in the Anglophone world dealing with philosophy of history is W.B. Gallie's 1964 *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*.² The book is now mostly forgotten, in part because it did not survive the criticism of what it became known for at the time: the idea of the followability of a story. Gallie was surprised to find that there was no philosophical account on the following and construction of historical narratives. Without such an account, he writes, the nature of historical understanding remains a mystery.³ Where his own account proved to be unconvincing, others succeeded in bringing to light the specificities of historical narration. Apart from the idea of the followability of a story, Gallie discusses the *moral value* of history-writing. This part of his book has always been overlooked.⁴ He argues that history-writing "can often help us decide which courses of action we are morally obliged to follow and which we are obliged to shun."⁵

At first sight, Gallie appears to be arguing for the pre-modern *exemplar* conception of history, whereby history is seen as a storehouse of examples of what to do and what to avoid.⁶ Discovering why this conception fell short is highly instructive. Firstly, the exemplar conception of history failed to account for socio-political changes over time, as the historicists have pointed out. Each socio-political circumstance is different and hence past examples of what to do are of little use outside of their specific historical context. The exemplar conception of history also failed to see that deciding what action should serve as an example was itself based on certain moral principles. So, it is the present judgement of the past example rather than the example itself that reveals what should be done and what should be avoided. And that is the sort of *presentism* that modern historians were wary of – and still are. Around 1800, the exemplar conception of history was therefore relegated to the dustbin of history, never to be heard of again.⁷

But Gallie has something else in mind.

He first of all states that the kind of moral choices he has in mind are connected to our involvement and belief in institutions and their worth. He does not explain what he means by institutions, but would agree, I think, with the definition of institutions as ensembles of practices understood in terms of types of normative behavior: things, for example, that are required, demanded, encouraged, or penalized. Think of ensembles of practices associated with a game of chess, attending the village fair, religious devotion, marriage, science, education, democracy, and so on.⁸ He then declares that historical understanding contributes to the testing and confirmation of our moral intuitions and insights. Two examples of what he has in mind are given. Suppose you are a disciple of Socrates, who was the first to teach that morals are autonomous. Or imagine you are a disciple of Galilei, the first exemplar of (modern) scientific inquiry. It would be rather difficult to assess the significance of their teachings at those very moments, or shortly after. One might perhaps accept their revolutionary novelty and admire them for their teachings, but it is clearly “far easier for us to see what Socrates and Galileo were respectively about than it was for the first of their disciples.” Gallie writes:

Looking back along the line of development that stems from either name, surely it is now far easier for us to know what we mean by the spirit of free criticism or by the method of ideal and real experiment. And is it not now, correspondingly, far easier for us to know what it is that we believe in when we say that we believe in the spirit of free criticism or in the spirit of experimental inquiry?⁹

The work of historians, who retroactively construct these lines of development, thus allows us to articulate our beliefs historically, and this, Gallie continues, leaves our generation

not only better equipped to defend the institutions and causes we believe in against polemical attacks, we are also in a better position to defend and discuss and reaffirm them to ourselves, to our critical perplexed selves, in moments – or decades or centuries – of difficulty, doubt and discouragement. In a word, it is often easier for us to act rightly because we have historical understanding to help us; or, conversely, historically understanding can sometimes help us to decide what we ought to do and to do it.¹⁰

We are now, for instance, in a much better position to *criticize* colonialism, gender inequalities, and racism compared to when these phenomena first emerged and were institutionalized, and better equipped to defend institutions that promote and secure the rights we hold dear. The type of histories that Gallie imagined in the early 1960s may not be those we would think of now: history-writing has changed

considerably in the last six decades. But Gallie's point still holds and is in agreement with what Frank Ankersmit, Joan Scott and Hayden White have more recently referred to as the politics of history-writing.¹¹ The topics historians choose to study and their motivation for doing so matter, as do the implications of their interpretation of the past, which they endow with authority. The insights they offer allow us, in Gallie's words, to articulate the institutions and causes we believe in historically and to criticize those we think should be rejected. They contain the practical wisdom that can "help us to decide what we ought to do and to do it." This is the sort of wisdom Aristotle referred to as *phronesis* and, in my view, explains why history-writing exists in the first place.

The point I wanted to make in this blog post is that the philosopher Gallie attaches a specific and important value to history-writing. His views are but one example of what philosophy of history *can* achieve. One can agree or disagree with these views, but demonstrating the value of history-writing is, I think, one of the goals that the philosophy of history *should* achieve.

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Tags: followability of a story / Gallie / history-writing

¹ I will not distinguish philosophy of history from theory of history here. I do believe, however, that theory of history should be philosophically informed, at least when philosophical propositions are made. This may seem obvious, but it is not. Cf. Frank Ankersmit's post, "[Why is there no "Progress" in Philosophy of History?](#)" in this blog.

² References are to the second edition, W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, second Edition. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

³ *Ibid.*, 12. In his blog post, Ankersmit likewise underlines the importance of understanding the specificity of history-writing.

⁴ Another chapter is a reprint of an essay Gallie is still known for: the idea of essentially contested concepts. *Ibid.*, 157-191.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶ See George H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History before Historicism," *History and Theory* 3, no. 3 (1964), 291-315, which is still the best text available on this conception.

⁷ Except for the variant Nietzsche would argue for in his *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*.

⁸ See J.L. Mackie, *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin Books, 1990, 80–82 for this definition of institutions.

⁹ Gallie, *Philosophy*, 138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹ See, e.g., several essays in Frank Ankersmit (ed.), *Historical Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001; Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History. Revised Edition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; and Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987.