

# Back from the Drift: Philosophy of History

## Introduction

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Received: 24 July 2008 / Accepted: 28 July 2008 /  
Published online: 19 August 2008  
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I am pleased to present here a collection of new articles in the philosophy of history based on papers presented at a workshop on the future of the philosophy of historiography that I organized at Queens University Belfast in the summer of 2007. The papers have all gone through an ordinary *Philosophia* refereeing procedure. The original versions of the papers were read during a short Indian summer of research in philosophy at that university, before a new regime interested in bureaucratic total control rather than research came into power and swallowed philosophy in a larger school that resembles the Czarist Third Bureau more than an academic institution.

The invited contributors are all relatively young and thus represent the future directions of research in this field. Though the contributors represent different philosophic orientations, perspectives, methods and interests, some common directions are apparent. They all address genuine problems in the philosophy of history such as the nature of our knowledge of the past and how should and do we explain past events, they all connect these issues with other issues and approaches from other philosophic sub-fields.

Since the sixties, some philosophers of history have undergone a process that resembles genetic drift in natural history: Some members of a species drift to a geographically isolated area and stop interbreeding with other members of the species. The special environmental conditions, together with genetic isolation accelerate a process of species differentiation between the parent species and the sub-population that drifted. The population in drift may either preserve archaic properties that the parent population does not, or it may mutate into several distinct species, each adapted to a particular niche in the new isolated environment. Either way, the species split and, over time, cannot reproduce together anymore. Something similar to genetic drift has happened in the philosophy of history since the sixties. Major parts of it drifted away from mainstream philosophy and either maintained some of the archaic properties of philosophy in the fifties and sixties, or developed

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in unique and unrelated ways. Either way, intellectual interaction and synergy ceased and mainstream philosophers were furnished with an excuse for ignoring the urgent relevance of the problems of the philosophy of history for their own concerns.

Not anymore. The papers published in this collection, as well as other recently published books and collections represent intellectual migrations of mainstream philosophers to the islands of philosophy of history and a return migration of philosophers of history to the philosophic mainland. Despite the temporary drift, boy! do they interbreed: Wonderfully well-adapted hybrids.

Giuseppina D'Oro, the noted author of a book on Collingwood, analyses the peculiarities of one drifted philosophic species, the one that perceives the task of philosophy as that of conceptual analysis. While mainstream analytic philosophy moved from conceptual analysis to metaphysics, some philosophers of history drifted on debating concepts such as explanation. Yet, D'Oro proposes a remedy to this unfortunate situation, a reintegration of the philosophy of history with the philosophies of mind and action, as both are concerned with psychological explanations of human action, whether in the past or in general.

Mark Day's "Our Relations with the Past" points to the possible benefits of integrating the philosophy of history with epistemology and philosophy of science. In his superb new Introduction to the Philosophy of History, Day further integrates the philosophy of history with practically all the sub-fields of contemporary mainstream philosophy, demonstrating their mutual relevance.

Luke O'Sullivan, an expert on the philosophy of Oakshott and an editor of his collected works, returns to the Kantian tradition in philosophy of history, searching for categories of historical thought. These categories, if they exist, may be shared with other fields of knowledge and thus in a Neo-Kantian spirit, O'Sullivan discusses possible divisions of knowledge and the uniqueness of history.

Jakub Capek, a Czech scholar, educated in Prague and Paris, who has just published a book on the philosophy of action in Czech and French, returns to the classical distinction between explanation and understanding, this time in the context of the philosophy of historical action. Capek attempts to draw a distinction between explaining and understanding an action, and examines what can happen when we attempt to explain and understand the same action.

The benefits of integrating the philosophy of history with mainstream philosophy are not unilateral. It is not only the philosophy of history that can benefit from advances in mainstream philosophy. Many aspects of philosophy depend on correct historical analysis: the integration of the philosophy with the history of science depends on well-justified account of the history of science. Universal claims in ethics and the philosophy of law and political philosophy depend as well on historical knowledge. Even metaphysic and epistemology have a history that should be consulted, and the history of philosophy as a sub-field of philosophy is torn between those philosophers who advocate authentic interpretations that capture the intentions of the authors or the perceptions of their readers at the time, and those philosophers who care only for a contemporary relevant interpretation of texts, irrespective of what their authors intended or could have intended. All these issues raise the specter of anachronism, the misunderstanding of the past in terms of the present. Yet, we cannot approach the past without some interpretative tools from the present. Therefore, the philosophical understanding of anachronism and which types

of it are particularly pernicious is one contribution the philosophy of history can make to other branches of philosophy. Nick Tosh, touches on these issues by criticizing relativism about the reasons historians attribute to past actors. “No historian enters the archive naked,” historians must employ interpretative assumptions. Tosh uses these assumptions to distinguish by comparison the assumptions of the practices of a radically relativist version of the sociology of knowledge in the history, sociology and philosophy of science, the “strong program.” Tosh thus demonstrates the relevance of the philosophy of history for debates in the philosophy of science and epistemology.

Adrian Haddock’s close reading of Arthur Danto’s classic *Analytical Philosophy of History* again combines aspects of epistemology with those of philosophy of action. While Haddock is sceptical of the success of Danto’s epistemic project, he does mine his magnum opus for valuable insights into the interaction between agency and knowledge and our representations of it.

While much of the classical discussions in the philosophy history attempted to construct or reconstruct the epistemology and forms of historical representations as a more or less unique kind of human science—hence the contemporary interest in combining the philosophy of history with the philosophies of mind and action—another strand of contemporary philosophy of history is interested in understanding the historical sciences, including not just human history but also natural history and geology, as distinct of the theoretical sciences like physics and chemistry. As Elliott Sober, Carol Cleland and myself have argued, the historical sciences are distinct in being interested in token events. The theoretical sciences are interested exclusively in types of events. For example, the historical sciences are interested in the French Revolution, the particular first carrier of a disease, the big bang that started the universe, and the particular ancestor of all the humanoid species. The theoretical sciences are interested in revolutions in general, in a type of virus, in the theoretical properties of singularities, and in Evolutionary theory in general. In this respect, the philosophy of geology is just as much a part of the philosophy of the historical sciences as is the philosophy of human history. The task of philosophy then is mostly epistemic, to discover how do historical scientists infer the descriptions of token events from evidence in the present. Robert John Inkpen, the author of a book on the philosophy of Physical Geography, suggests that this inference in the Geosciences is abductive, events are the best explanation of the evidence. Inkpen connects then the philosophy of history with Bayesian probability theory and confirmation as used often in the philosophy of science, demonstrating the similarities and differences between the theoretical and historical sciences.

The articles presented here offer then a variety of non-mutually exclusive promising approaches to the basic problems of philosophy of history. Many of these ideas and approaches can and should be developed further. The philosophy of history is still a small and exclusive club, but we do accept new members.