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Categories of Historical Thought

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Abstract This paper argues that the identity of history as a discipline derives from its distinctive combination of intellectual assumptions, or categories. Many of these categories are shared with other fields of thought, including science, literature, and common sense, but in history are understood in a unique way. This paper first examines the general notion of categories of historical understanding, then scrutinises some of the specific categories suggested by classic authors on the philosophy of history such as Dilthey and Collingwood. More recent works by Goldstein, Oakeshott, Bevir, and Tucker are treated as contributions to the same discussion. It concludes that the various categories these writers have proposed are neither trivial nor incompatible and that when collated they do indeed compose a framework capable of characterising historical thought.

Keywords Philosophy of history · Categories of historical thought · Categories · Oakeshott · Collingwood · Dilthey · Goldstein · Bevir · Tucker · Kellner · Pompa · Neo-Kantianism · Kant · Historical concepts

Historical Categories

This paper argues that by treating historical understanding as a unique combination of otherwise largely non-unique categories, some of which are shared with science and others with literary endeavour, it is possible to show precisely why history is distinctive and irreducible. To that extent, it endorses the conclusions of such notable philosophers of history as John Passmore and Frank Ankersmit, both of whom have claimed that history derives its distinctiveness as a discipline from a unique

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combination of properties also found elsewhere, specifically the literary and scientific fields.[1]

However, this view does not command universal assent. Some of the most influential philosophical attempts of the past generation to capture the distinctive character of history have proceeded by assimilating history exclusively to one or the other of these fields. First, Carl Hempel tried to show that history shared in a unified logic based on the physical sciences; later, Hayden White and Hans Kellner attempted to identify it with a broader narrative form of understanding.[2] These attempts to treat history as purely either an 'art' or a 'science' ultimately proved unpersuasive precisely because of their one-sidedness. A satisfactory solution must seek to combine the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of both the scientistic and narrativistic accounts.

The categorial approach to historical understanding that will be explored here has in fact supplied much of the vocabulary of later twentieth century philosophies of history. The literature contains abundant references to a 'category of historical thought', or to a 'framework', or to a 'generalized regulative principle' of historical thinking, or to 'the conceptual and logical articulation' of history, or to its 'logic', or to the 'forms of reasoning' and the 'grammar of the concepts' it involved, and so on.[3] But because this vocabulary of categoriality has often gone unacknowledged, a brief review of its history, its limitations, and its relationship to modern philosophy should help to explain why it is worthy of more explicit pursuit.

First, its history. The categorial approach to philosophy is as old as Aristotle's search for concepts of universal application,[4] but in the modern world, it is most famously associated with Kant. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* differed from

[1] Passmore argues history is 'neither literature nor science, but [shares] some of the properties of both': see Passmore, J. (1974). The Objectivity of History. (In P. Gardiner (Ed.) *The Philosophy of History* (p. 160) Oxford: Oxford University Press). Ankersmit claims philosophy of history should retain 'what is right in both the scientistic and the literary approaches to history and [avoid] what is hyperbolic in both': see Ankersmit, F.R. (2001). Six Theses on Narrativist Philosophy of History. (In G. Roberts (Ed.) *The History and Narrative Reader* (p. 237) (London: Routledge).

[2] Hempel, C. (1942). The Function of General Laws in History. *Journal of Philosophy*, 39, 35–48; White, H. (1973), *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press); Kellner, H. (1989), *Language and Historical Representation Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).

[3] Walsh, W.H. (1974). Colligatory Concepts in History. (In Gardiner, op. cit., p. 132) refers to a 'category of historical thought'; Berlin, I. (1974). Historical Inevitability. (In Gardiner, p. 163) to teleology as a 'category or a framework in terms of which everything is…conceived' in history; Nagel, E. (1974) Determinism in History (In Gardiner, p. 193) and (1959). The Logic of Historical Analysis. (In H. Meyerhoff (Ed.) *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (pp. 203–16) (New York: Doubleday) refers to 'the conceptual and logical articulation' of history and to a 'general regulative principle' of history; Nowell-Smith, P.H. (1977). The Constructionist Theory of History. *History and Theory*, 16 (1977), *Beiheft* 16, *The Constitution of the Historical Past*, 2, to the 'logic' of history; and Bevir, M. (2002). *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (p. 9) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) to the 'forms' and the 'grammar' of history.

[4] Aristotle, *Categories*, Bk. I Ch. 4, proposed ten categories 'that are in no way composite', conventionally translated into English as substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and affection. There is some dispute over whether 'where' and 'when' would not be better translations for 'place' and 'time': see Lang, H. (2004). 'Aristotle's Categories "Where" and "When" (In M. Gorman and J. Sanford (Eds.) *Categories Historical and Systematic Essays* (pp. 21–32) Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press).

Aristotle's *Categories* in locating the categories within the subject rather than the structure of reality itself, but the focus of attention was the same; he was as concerned as Aristotle to identify categories common to all forms of thought. Indeed, the specific categories Kant identified were significantly similar to those proposed by Aristotle, even if they were now held to be native to the knower rather than the known.[5]

Kant's self-proclaimed 'Copernican Revolution' should therefore not disguise the fact that both he and Aristotle considered it impossible to think without categories. If this is correct, the reason for pursuing the categorial approach to history should be clear; it presumably follows that it is impossible to think *historically* without categories. History can no more do without quality and quantity and so forth (or indeed without laws of thought such as the principle of non-contradiction) than can any other type of thinking.

As for the limitations, neither Kant nor Aristotle found space for a theoretical treatment of historical thinking. It is difficult to see how the teleological framework of Aristotelian thought could be modified to accommodate modern historical thinking, but Kant's post-Hegelian followers did try to reconfigure the shape of the critical philosophy, which already recognized that the varying forms of thought (moral, scientific, religious, philosophical, and aesthetic) each possessed a particular 'logic' of their own, in order to get history to fit.

The chief fruit of this almost exclusively German effort by writers such as Windelband, Rickert, and Simmel in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was to establish history as a 'human' as distinct from a 'natural' science (*Wissenschaft*), the prime example of a kind of thinking qualitatively distinct from that found in, say, physics.[6] Windelband, for example, based his distinction between 'idiographic' and 'nomothetic' sciences on the position that 'One kind of science is an enquiry into general laws. The other kind of science is an enquiry into specific historical facts'.[7]

However, these neo-Kantian writers never provided a thorough elaboration of the *combination* of categories that made 'idiographic' enquiry distinctive. Of course, individual candidates were proposed; for example, all derived the category of 'value' from the particularity or uniqueness of historical facts in an effort to explain the

[5] Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B, §§ 40, 46, 106, proposed space and time as well as four groups of three categories [categories (1) of quantity: unity, plurality, totality; (2) of quality; reality, negation, limitation; (3) of relation: inherence and subsistence, causality and dependence, community; (4) of modality: possibility–impossibility; existence–non-exsistence, necessity–contingency). For a recent discussion of the historical relationship between the Kantian and Aristotelian categories see Longueness, B. (2006). 'Kant on *a priori* concepts: The metaphysical deduction of the categories'. In P. Guyer (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Kant and modern philosophy* (pp. 129–68). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[6] Guy Oakes has introduced the work of these neo-Kantians to the Anglophone world via a number of important translations: see for example Simmel, G. (1977). *The Problems of the Philosophy of History An Epistemological Essay* (New York: The Free Press); Windelband, W. (1894). Rectorial Address, Strasbourg, 1894, *History and Theory*, 19 (1980), 169–85; Rickert, H. (1986). *The limits of concept formation in natural science.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Windelband (1894) (p. 175).

cultural importance of history.[8] Windelband, for instance, believed that 'All purposeful activity in human social life…is…dependent upon the experience acquired as a result of historical knowledge'.[9] As we shall see, though, such views have been as much of a hindrance as a help insofar as they failed to distinguish critical–historical from experiential-historic perspectives on the past.

Finally, the broader relationship to modern philosophy. Kant himself referred to the categories 'variously as concepts, rules, principles, and functions'; what all these terms had in common was that they ascribed to the categories a 'purely formal character'.[10] For Kant, it seems, the categories do not exist as such; they are a philosophical device to illuminate the brute fact of consciousness. But in considering the status they might have today, we must take into account the emergence of the philosophical problem of language.

Kant, like Aristotle, still thought of language as largely transparent, but in the aftermath of the twentieth century we must regard the search for the categories that make a discipline distinctive as equivalent to the search for the rules governing intelligible utterance within it. The justification for talking in terms of categories is the utility of such language in allowing us to grasp the kind of thinking history involves and to distinguish it at the same time from other disciplines. There is, nevertheless, continuity with the Kantian approach insofar as categories continue to be regarded as conceptually rather than chronologically prior to experience, and to that extent we may agree with Kant that categories are the products of reason itself.

For modern philosophers of language such as Carnap and Quine, the meanings and truths of a discipline are always relative to a particular 'framework'. So, Carnap argues that we can only speak about the existence of entities of a given kind in relation to a framework that is essentially a system of linguistic rules. And according to Quine, we cannot say that physical objects are absolutely real; they are simply 'convenient intermediaries' or 'irreducible posits' that are 'comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer'.[11] Again, the 'internal realism' proposed by Putnam insists that asking what objects in the world consist of 'is a question that only makes sense to ask within a theory of description'. The obvious analogy is with the past of historical events; on such a view, these would have no existence outside the framework of historical discourse.[12]

This comparison with internal realism demands some caveats. We must distinguish the claim that history is one of a number of frameworks from explanations of how it is that historians and their subjects have conflicting viewpoints of their own. If we are to talk in these terms, we must be clear that we

[8] Windelband (1894) (p. 182); Rickert, H. (1986) (pp. 99–106); Simmel, G. (1977) (pp. 155–60).

[9] Windelband (1894) (p. 182).

[10] Quinn, T. (2004). 'Kant: The Practical Categories' In Gorman and Sanford, *Categories* (p. 83).

[11] Quine, W.V. (1951). Two Dogmas of Empiricism, *Philosophical Review*, 60, 20–43; Carnap. R. (1950). Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 4, 20–40.

[12] Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason, Truth, and History* (pp. 49–50). Cambridge: CUP, is quoted in Lorenz, C. (1998). Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for "Internal Realism" In B. Fay, P. Pomper, and R.T. Vann (Eds.), *History and theory contemporary readings* (pp. 342–76). Oxford: Blackwell at p. 343 n. 6 as part of an attempt to explain how the fundamental historical disagreements of the so-called German *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s were possible.

are interested in the rules of the framework itself, and not in the existence of a plurality of views on the part of those who either employ the framework or figure within it. It is the categorial framework that enables such a plurality of views to exist at all.

In light of all this, let us notice some of the categories other than 'value' that have been said to give history its unique character. There is general agreement that 'truth' is an essential category.[13] The criteria for historical truth include such questions as whether or not an historical hypothesis can be confirmed as fitting with existing historical truths, and whether or not it is productive of further historical truth. There is an undeniable similarity between the internal realist position and the categorial approach, insofar as both encourage a pragmatic and verificationist attitude towards historical truth.

Dilthey's master category of 'meaning' is another common candidate; likewise his suggestion of 'action'.[14] Collingwood's proposals of 'evidence' and 'imagination' also demand discussion.[15] Goldstein shares Collingwood's stress on 'evidence', and has in common with Oakeshott the belief that there is a distinctively historical category of 'pastness'. Oakeshott and Passmore both propose the category of 'event', and Oakeshott adds some other candidates; 'situation', 'change', and 'contingency'.[16] Though they interpret it very differently, Oakeshott and Hempel agree that 'cause' is a category of historical thought; Gorman and Bevir both insist on the need for 'fact' and 'objectivity'; and Tucker has recently suggested that 'probability' merits inclusion.

Although no single philosopher has included all of these concepts in their set of historical categories, there is nothing obviously contradictory in granting all of them a constitutive role in the framework of historical thought. There remains the question of the relationship between them. Categories may be ordered hierarchically according to their degree of generality, in the way that 'blue' can be seen as a species of 'colour' which in turn is subordinate to 'space'. As we are working within the notion of 'history', no such hierarchical arrangement is needed here (though 'history' itself is presumably a category that finds its place within the more general class 'thought'); we may simply review their claims to inclusion in turn.

Meaning and Context

The concept of meaning, a feature of both science and literature, seems equally essential to history. Historical works, simply from their titles, clearly claim to be *about* something—*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, or *The Thirty Years'*

[13] Gorman, J.L. (1998). Objectivity and Truth in History (In Fay, Pomper, and Vann, *History and Theory* (pp. 320–41) Oxford: Blackwell, 1998; Bevir, M. (2002).

[14] Rickman, H.P. (ed.) (1962). *Meaning in History: W. Dilthey's Thoughts on History and Society* (London: George Allen and Unwin).

[15] Collingwood, R.G. C. (1989). *The idea of history.* Oxford: OUP.

[16] Oakeshott, M. (1983) *On history.* Oxford: Blackwell; Passmore, J. (1987). 'Narratives and Events', *History and Theory*, 26, *Beiheft* 26, 68–74.

War, or *The Making of the English Working Class*.[17] The problem of reference posed by statements about the past has long been recognized in Anglophone philosophy in the context of epistemology. For example, in their study of the 'meaning of meaning' Ogden and Richards recognized the complexity of historical meaning: 'There may be a very long chain of sign-situations intervening between the act and its referent: word–historian–contemporary record–eye-witness–referent (Napoleon).'[18]

Though Ogden and Richards did not draw sceptical conclusions about historical knowledge, the impossibility of directly comparing an historical account with its subject-matter raises the question of the nature of the referential aspect of historical meaning. Their suggestion was that there is ultimately a real referent for historical statements (in this case, the long-dead Emperor of the French); but how useful is a referent which necessarily lies entirely outside our experience? Tucker has recently highlighted the problem by citing Dummett's claim that 'statements about the past are not assertoric…because there are no clear truth conditions that would allow or disallow us to assert them'.[19]

However, this sceptical problem only arises if historical knowledge is understood on the analogy of a report about sense-data. This idea of historical reference implicitly assumes the soundness of the realist hypothesis that if one had been present at the time in question, then a given event would have been directly observable in a manner analogous to the events of our present experience. But a glance at the titles mentioned above shows this is an inadequate characterisation of historical thinking. One could never have literally observed economic or cultural movements like 'the making of the English working class' or 'the Renaissance' that took place over generations or even centuries, even if one were able to travel back in time.

As Collingwood put it, 'the past is never a given fact which [the historian] can apprehend empirically by perception. *Ex hypothesi*, the historian is not an eyewitness of the facts he desires to know'.[20] Historians often write their works long after the events which they purport to explain, and such works contain, as Danto pointed out, 'sentences which…give descriptions of events under which those events could not have been witnessed'.[21] It is for such reasons that the categorial approach favours the idea (advanced by writers like Oakeshott and Goldstein) of the historical past as a construction assembled from evidence.[22]

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[17] The titles of works by J. Burckhardt, C.V. Wedgwood, and E.P. Thompson respectively.

[18] Ogden, C.K., and Richards, I.A. (2001). *The meaning of meaning a study of the influence of language upon thought and of the science of symbolism*. In J. Constable (Ed.) (p. 30). London: Routledge.

[19] Tucker, A. (2004). *Our knowledge of the past* (p. 255). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; the reference is to Dummett, M. (1978). *Truth and Other Enigmas* (pp. 358–74). Boston: Harvard University Press.

[20] Collingwood (1989). (p. 282).

[21] Danto, A.C. (1965). *Analytical philosophy of history* (p. 61). Cambridge: CUP. Danto acknowledges, of course, that narrative sentences are not exclusive to historical works, and this means that they cannot, simply as such, be among the categories that define the framework of historical thought; presumably only those narrative sentences expressing an understanding of the past in terms of its own past are eligible.

[22] 'The historian's business...is to create and construct': Oakeshott, M. (1989). *Experience and its Modes* (p. 93). Cambridge: CUP.

What Dummett himself seems latterly to have concluded is that not that statements about the past cannot be true, but that the truth of statements about the past depends on 'what is, can be, or could have been verified'.[23] If this is correct, the philosopher of history can remain agnostic about the reality of the past while preserving the possibility of historical knowledge on other terms. Yet the problem of reference is only one aspect of the problem of historical meaning. There is also the problem of sense; historical works, as well as referring to past events, contain interpretative judgments about them.

Consider, for example, the statement that in the second half of the eleventh century, 'The life of solitude, the religious life divested of those corporate ties which had stamped the old monasticism, began to appear with a new attractiveness'.[24] It contains a comparative judgment about a change in the relative appeal of forms of religious life in the medieval era that is only intelligible if our ability to grasp the shifting world-view of people in the past is accepted; and our ability to grasp their changing world-view in turn relies on our ability to grasp the relevant structures of that world itself—in this instance, the institutions and practices of monasticism.

Here the hermeneutic tradition associated with Dilthey becomes relevant. Dilthey was quite in agreement with modern philosophy about the importance of language. 'No grammatical relationship is more important than predication in the sentence', he declared.[25] But a satisfactory concept of historical meaning must also incorporate the idea of a 'life-category' (as Dilthey would have it), that is, a particular set of historic circumstances.

This does not ignore the fact that many of the meanings with which historians are concerned are non-literal; some are even extra-linguistic. Consider a sentence like 'Dutchmen were the first in the history of art to discover the beauty of the sky' that forms part of a discussion of seventeenth-century landscape painting.[26] This judgment may or may not be correct, but it is not obviously nonsense; it at least appears to tell us something about when and where an important shift in the European aesthetic sensibility towards nature occurred. It is also clearly analogous to the idea of the heightened attraction of a life of monastic solitude; it describes an alteration in belief that can only be made meaningful if we invoke the entire frame of reference, or world, to which it belonged.

The significant difficulties with the hermeneutic tradition in its original form are familiar. For example, Dilthey's hermeneutic theory stressed the notion of *Verstehen*, or understanding, which he took to be the 'process by which an inside is conferred on a complex of external sensory signs'.[27] In this way one could supposedly reason back to the inner life of historical agents in a manner analogous to that in which we

[23] Dummett, M. (2004). *Truth and the Past* (p. 92). New York: Columbia University Press.

[24] Southern, R.W. (1993). *The Making of the Middle Ages* (p. 215). London: Pimlico.

[25] Dilthey, W. (1989). *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. In R.A. Makkreel and F. Rodi (Eds.) (pp. 448–50). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[26] Gombrich, E. (1995). *The Story of Art* (p. 418). London: Phaidon Press.

[27] Dilthey, W. (1996). *Hermeneutics and the study of history.* In R. A. Makkreel & F. Rodi (Eds.) (p. 236). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

allegedly infer the feelings of our contemporaries, a process that Collingwood called 're-enactment'; the belief that 'to know another's act of thought involves repeating it for oneself'.[28]

This approach over-emphasized history as the study of rational, conscious, and voluntary action and resulted in an untenably truncated model of historical thought. Not only is much action not rational in any strict sense, much of history is not limited to the study of action. We have already noted that historical movements include events that no-one intended, that were in the mind of no-one who lived through them, and that may take place over centuries.

Further, the situation of the historian, as Tucker points out, is never as simple as the classic hermeneutic situation of 'a reader, a text, [and] the relationship between them' might suggest. In history we are always faced with 'a community of interpreters, their theories, and sets of documents'.[29] Nevertheless, Tucker's admission that 'the world is not a text, but it can be interpreted as texts' gives considerable support to the idea that both the sense and the referents of historical knowledge are grounded in a particular 'reading' of our present experience.

Making sense of historical events thus seems to require the further category of context (in fact, Ogden and Richards argued that all meaning requires a relevant context, and it is notable that their nominalism did not prevent them sharing Dilthey's respect for Kant).[30] The rule of St Benedict or a landscape painting by van Ruisdael must be examined in conjunction with other evidence relating to (at least) medieval monasticism or Dutch painting if their meaning is to be understood.

Collingwood's 'logic of question and answer' gave this idea of context a prominent role. He was convinced that no utterance can be understood historically except as both a response to some prior statement and an invitation to further discussion.[31] This idea is easily extended by analogy to include artistic conventions, ethical disputes, and scientific practices. The indispensability of context is only underlined by the consideration that in order fully to understand what was said, it is also necessary to understand how and why it was said.

Under the influence of Austin and the later Wittgenstein, Skinner showed in the later 1960s how the idea that meaning is a function of usage could be applied to historiography; so-called 'Cambridge intentionalism' developed to put this insight into practice.[32] But since Skinner and his associates have concentrated on the history of political thought, it bears repeating that not all contexts are linguistic; some are visual, some are material, and all are, to a greater or lesser degree, transient. Moreover, the relationship of text and context is not fixed; what from one point of

[28] Collingwood (1989) (p. 288).

[29] Tucker, A. (2004) (pp. 259–60).

[30] Ogden, C. K., and Richards, I. A. (2001), mention context and interpretation at pp. 73, 75, 78; they describe Kant as 'constantly on the verge of approaching the central issues of interpretation' at p. 94.

[31] Collingwood, R.G.C. (1967). *An autobiography* (pp. 29–43). Oxford: OUP.

[32] Skinner, Q. (1969). Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas. *History and Theory* 8, 3–53; (1970) Conventions and the understanding of speech acts. *Philosophical Quarterly, 20*, 118–38; (1971) Performing and explaining linguistic actions. *Philosophical Quarterly 21*, 1–21.

view is the context may itself become the subject of historical investigation, and vice versa.[33]

Nevertheless, all historical contexts are alike in being more or less spatially and temporally extended and in both containing and being themselves composed of utterances, artefacts, and events. The essential nature of context as a category of historical understanding becomes clear if we assume its absence; the absurdity of trying to understand a text (or any other artefact or activity, whether practical, theoretical, or artistic) out of all relation to other texts is apparent as soon as we imagine the attempt. If, in defiance of logic and nature, the Mona Lisa were to suddenly appear in a world in which there were no other paintings or drawings, and in which the inhabitants had no idea of painting or drawing, it would seem absurd to them, and it certainly could not belong to a history of Renaissance art.

Evidence and Action

The category of context in turn implies that of evidence, because it is from evidence that contexts are built up. Evidence is clearly an important category for scientific and practical as well as historical thought, but what distinguishes the historical interest in evidence is that it is a relationship to things in the present in virtue of their origin in the past, and excludes any attention to its contemporary relevance. The scientific and practical interest in evidence takes exactly the reverse form; evidence is only significant insofar as it bears on our current projects or experiments.

However, something's being evidence cannot, Goldstein made clear, be an empirical property. Something's being red, or heavy, is a perceptual quality, but its being evidence is a quality of another kind altogether.[34] Evidence is a stipulative category; nothing is evidence unless and until it is considered as such, though something may be designated as evidence without its being clear exactly what it is evidence for. As Oakeshott pointed out, any given object can be evidence for indefinitely many events; a cannon can provide information about the history of metallurgy and of ballistics as well as about warfare, and a pair of trousers about trade and textiles as well as fashion.[35]

Only those things in the world that can be understood in relation to meanings, purposes, or designs, can be deemed to be evidence. The natural environment and members of the animal kingdom may be considered as historical evidence, but only insofar as they preserve traces of occupancy or landscaping or breeding. Evidence is thus entirely artefactual; it is composed exclusively of the products of human doings, be they writings, images, or objects. This remains true even when the events elicited

[33] Contextualism as a method must be distinguished from context as a category of historical thought. It is one thing to insist, when considering best practice, that historians must proceed by seeking out the context of their evidence; but the claim that there can be no history without the category of context being presupposed is another, and logically prior, claim.

[34] Goldstein, L. (1980). Against historical realism. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 40, 426–9.

[35] See, for example, Oakeshott, (1983) (p. 57).

from the evidence are not themselves purposive, voluntary events, as in the case of a long-term economic or demographic trend.

The precise nature of the evidence will rarely if ever be clear at the outset; some of what was initially deemed relevant will be rejected, and new evidence discovered. And at least in the case of more recent historical periods where much more of the past survives than for earlier eras, no single historian is any longer in a position to assemble all the relevant evidence—although it is not clear that the notion of there being a fixed totality of evidence in relation to any particular field of history makes unqualified sense, as each generation tends to find new questions to ask that result in things becoming evidence which were previously overlooked.

In every case, evidence is always the product of intelligent agency, even when inadvertent. That agency or action is required as a category of historical understanding is clear if we contrast the circumstances that have given rise to historical evidence with those needed to produce natural events. There are countless biological, chemical, and physical events constantly occurring in the world, but none of these are, in themselves, of any relevance for historical understanding. As Pompa has argued, that the agents appearing in historical narratives were physiologically like ourselves is presupposed in historical thought; but this truth remains trivial unless the causal processes of their material being impacted on the reasons for their actions—the porphyria of George III, Nietzsche's syphilis, De Quincey's opium addiction.[36]

This is not to deny the significant similarities between history and the natural sciences. All human and natural sciences are rational, critical, sceptical, and inferential in their approach to knowledge. Tucker has recently demonstrated the affinities between history, on the one hand, and evolutionary biology and linguistics on the other; all three can be described as sciences which are 'historic' and chronological in character.[37] At the same time, this does not abolish the difference in kind between, say, history and biology.

We may agree with Tucker that both the human and the natural sciences contain disciplines that aim to understand the original causes of events about which information has only been preserved in the form of tokens of evidence of common causes (such as history and biology), and disciplines that seek to explain the similar effects of shared types of causes (such as sociology and mathematical physics). It remains the case, however, that a token/type distinction which allows disciplines to be grouped according to whether they pursue general or particular forms of knowledge supplements rather than abolishes the distinction between history and other kinds of thinking.

In history (and indeed sociology) intelligent agency is an indispensable notion, but it is irrelevant to biology, linguistics, and mathematics. We assume that historical agents were aware of their own actions, just as we do in ordinary life. Circumstances in which we consider that someone is not aware of what they are doing, ranging from inattention to insanity to sleep-walking, are notable precisely because they are abnormal. Inextricably linked to the idea of someone's doing something is their

[36] Pompa, L. (1990). *Human nature and historical knowledge Hume, Hegel and Vico* (pp. 7, 223). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[37] Tucker (2004) (pp. 46–91).

knowing what they are doing; we attribute to them a subjective or inner awareness of themselves which can only be denied to them in principle at the cost of reducing them to an automaton.

People can be mistaken or deluded about what they are doing; but this reinforces rather than undermines the attribution of self-conscious intelligence to them, and there is no bar to historians discovering that this was the case other than lack of evidence. Whatever is done is assumed to have been done for a reason, which does not exclude its having been done on a whim, or for pleasure, or for no other reason than the doing of it. Some action can no doubt be interpreted in utilitarian terms, but no action can be interpreted as purely mechanical (even habit is learned), and it is only through action that what for the historian is evidence can come into being.

Indeed, a single piece of evidence—a parish register—implies not just one action, but many; the recording, often by more than one hand, of many events over a considerable period. In fact, it implies more than just an action; it supplies evidence of customary and even institutional structures (the practice of recording such significant moments in communal life as births, deaths, and marriages; the existence of the church).

Situation and Event

Hence the need for the category of a situation, or a relatively stable and enduring context. Any piece of evidence implies not only the action which immediately gave rise to it but also the existence of particular circumstances. A painting testifies not only to the artistic labour that went into it but to a world of makers and sellers of canvasses and of paints, artistic patrons, and a viewing public. A coin implies an entire network of economic and political relations, and not merely the existence of the man or machine that stamped it.

Yet a situation, as Oakeshott points out, is inherently unstable. Like a snapshot, there is an implied 'before' and 'after' which the situation tacitly alludes to but does not encompass. What is required, therefore, is a further category, that of an event, or a series of situations succeeding one another.[38] The notion of an event is a central one in historical understanding, but both science and literature also clearly entail some concept of an event. More is required if we are to pick out the specifically historical conception of an event.

Historical events clearly resemble events in the natural sciences in that they are chronologically ordered, but they also differ in important respects. For one thing, they are outcomes of confluences of circumstances in which voluntary action has played some ineliminable role. This is clear not least from the fact that it is meaningful to say of at least some historical events that they were not outcomes that somebody wanted; it is not meaningful to say this of the evolutionary process or of changes in the sounds of speech.

There is, moreover, a continuity in the historical conception of events that mirrors the flow of practical experience. Oakeshott used the metaphor of a dry stone wall to

[38] Oakeshott (1983) (pp. 53–62).

convey what he called the 'contiguous' or seamless nature of the 'causal' relationship between historical events. He believed that historical understanding presupposed that events lead immediately on to one another, and that their consequents were treated as exclusively the products of their antecedents.[39] There is no need, in other words, to reach outside the confines of historical understanding, either towards some external teleology (Christian revelation, the progressive unfolding of *Geist*, dialectical materialism), or towards a 'strict' concept of causal explanation as allegedly found in the natural sciences.

Cause and Probability

Much of the controversy over the place of causality in history has surely been due to the fact that in English the word is often used as a synonym for 'reason', and can therefore refer to an understanding of why something occurred rather than an explanation. Hempel and others attempted to interpret history as a form of explanation in a strict sense in which an *explanans* and an *explanandum* are joined by a law or laws of physical behaviour.[40] But this overlooked the fact that history invokes specific circumstantial reasons rather than generic physical factors as 'causes'.

In response to criticism, and reflecting the fact that physical science itself had moved away from a causal to a probabilistic approach to explanation, Hempel abandoned his initial strategy of treating history as a kind of retrospective prediction that a certain class of event would have occurred as too deterministic. On the probabilistic view, one is not claiming that history aims to show how, given certain causes, a certain kind of event must have occurred; only that a quantitative value can be given to the probability of a certain kind of event having occurred.[41]

Hempel was not entirely wrong to think that retrospective predictions are a feature of historical thinking. Historians do make predictions of a sort that can be fulfilled, though one must take account of the way in which these are tensed in order to appreciate their nature; they are always in the past perfect subjunctive, to the effect that were such and such to have been the case, then something else would also have been the case.

Take the classic example of Giesebrecht's judgment that several different writings must have used a common source.[42] We may consider this a prediction about the kind of evidence that would need to be found in future to confirm it, but it differs completely from a prediction in the ordinary sense of a forecast about the future. Rather, it is concerned with what happened prior to the events the historian is

[39] Oakeshott (1983) (p. 94).

[40] Hempel, The Function of General Laws in History.

[41] For the probabilistic version of the covering law theory see Hempel, C. (1963). Reasons and covering laws in historical explanation. In S. Hook (Ed.) *Philosophy and history: A symposium* (pp. 146–63).

[42] Johnson, A. (1926). *The Historian and Historical Evidence* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), gives the example of Giesebrecht at p. 17. It was picked up in Goldstein (1962), 'Evidence and events in history', *Philosophy of Science*, 29, 175–94, at 181, and resurfaces in Tucker (2004) (p. 134).

interested in. We understand texts A, B, C, and D historically by postulating the existence of a text T written not later but earlier than texts A–D.

Moreover, Hempel's revised position still failed to address the fundamental difficulty that history is not interested in the probability of kinds of event occurring, but in the events that did in fact occur; not in the possibility of 'revolutions', but in the actual French revolution. Nevertheless, the emphasis recently placed on probability by Tucker has some virtue.[43] One does not need to employ covering laws, deterministic or probabilistic, to recognize that judgments of relative likelihood regarding the outcome of a historical process are a prerequisite of historical knowledge.

Of course, the same difficulty occurs with the English word 'probability' as with 'cause'; there are more and less scientific interpretations of its meaning. 'Probability' as used in ordinary language is synonymous with 'likelihood', whereas strict probabilities must be mathematically expressible. What historians are doing in weighing up relative possibilities is arguably not best thought of as computing probabilities. Certainly, the reliability of any belief can be assigned a value between 0 and 1, but this still requires translation into the 'more likely' or 'less likely' of ordinary language before it can recognizably belong to the structure of historical judgment, and any notion of mathematical exactitude has to be given up. There is an important place for mathematical and statistical techniques in historical methodology, but that is a different matter; we are concerned here with how best to represent the nature of historical judgment.

Still, a stress on probability emphasizes the conditional and mediated nature of all historical judgments; our knowledge of the past, because it is inferential, is always liable, at least in principle, to revision. Many historical judgments must, given lack of evidence, remain tentative; in many other cases it is impossible to pass judgment at all about what happened for lack of evidence. Furthermore, the notion of probability also makes clear the need for the category of change. What is not a probability for historical judgment is that *nothing* happened next; even where what happened next is thought of as things having remained the same, this is always at least implicitly acknowledged as a change, because it is assumed that things could have been different.

Change and Narrativity

The notion of change presupposed in history might therefore seem Heraclitean; past reality has been simply a constant flux, 'one damn thing after another'. But this view overlooks the relative stability of historical entities already remarked on in relation to situations and events. There is a conception of change in which absolute difference prevails so that nothing whatsoever of what was there before remains. But this is not an historical conception of change; or at least, it marks the limiting case. A biography ends when an individual dies; a history of the Roman empire terminates when it 'falls', whatever the date of that event.

[43] Tucker (2004) (pp. 92–140).

Obviously it is possible to write histories of entities that have as yet met with no definitive conclusion; a history of Christianity that aimed to be truly comprehensive would have to be continued up to the present day. But change is not excluded from this account simply because the phenomenon concerned persists into the present; and in any case the important point is that change as a category of historical understanding does not preclude, indeed it even implies, a significant degree of pattern, stability, and order in the past. Anything else would not accord with our ordinary experience.

It is largely the world of ordinary experience as it existed in earlier eras that history makes intelligible to us, and historiographically it is well established that history as a discipline first emerged in part due to the recognition that it had undergone a major change. By the eighteenth century it was recognized that there had been a fundamental break with the medieval world and that all remaining traces of it were only vestigial.[44] Koselleck has highlighted the Enlightenment's increasing awareness of itself as a qualitatively distinct epoch, expressed precisely in a different kind of expectation about the future to any that had gone before.[45]

Pompa has argued that the emergence of a sense of the profound difference or otherness of what had gone before is a sociological and contingent condition of history as a discipline. History seeks exclusively to understand from evidence how past changes or differences passed into one another, as distinct from being concerned with their significance or relevance for ourselves, and such a concern only emerged at a point when a discontinuity between past and present began to be felt. It is no surprise then that narrativity should have been made the master-category of historical understanding.

White and Kellner have both argued that history is fundamentally a form of story-telling that employs the same rhetorical tropes and genres as literature, and Kellner has even argued for a correspondence between Kant's tetradic presentation of categories and the four main rhetorical tropes he identifies.[46] Both White and Kellner, however, must ultimately be regarded as speculative rather than critical philosophers of history because of their shared insistence that the narrative form of historiography is not autonomous but determined by phases of social development that reflect the dominance of a particular literary trope.

At the opposite extreme, it has been questioned whether narrative is an historical category at all. Goldstein pointed out that there is a distinction to be observed between the logic of historical understanding, and the narrative form in which historians present their results. Moreover, it is possible to give an historical account of what we have called a situation, or a particular moment in time, that is not strictly narrative in form; there is, if the conception of a synchronic analysis is pushed to its limits, nothing going on to narrate. He thus concluded that narrative could not be fundamental to the logic of the discipline itself, however convenient it is as a form for presentation of its results.

[44] For the gradual emergence of the critical sense of the past and of modern historiography see Grafton, A. (1997). *The footnote a curious history.* London: Faber and Faber and Kelley, D. (2003). *Fortunes of history historical inquiry from Herder to Huizinga*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[45] See Koselleck, R. (2002). *The Practice of Conceptual History* (pp. 154–69) (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

[46] See White, H. (2001). The Historical Text as Literary Artefact. (pp. 221–36) In G. Roberts (ed.) 2001, and Kellner (1989) (pp. 244–245).

Yet we have seen that situations imply events, and events presumably cannot be historically understood unless, in some sense, they are composed into a story. There seems nothing fundamentally objectionable in describing history as a particularly exacting form of story-telling, *so long as* this neither confuses it with the pasts of fiction and common-sense nor ignores its truth value. Narrative appears to be the natural form of historical expression, and there is no obvious reason to reject it as an historical category.

Truth and the Historical Persona

There is an obvious problem raised by the existence of competing narratives of the same historical events—who is to say which is correct, or even that any is correct? Indeed, since its inception, one of the major tasks of critical philosophy of history has been to refute scepticism, both philosophical and popular, about the possibility of historical knowledge. If it were never possible to decide between rival historical accounts, the sceptic would have won the argument. Notoriously, we are not dealing with a demonstrative or deductive form of thought, so there can be no 'proof' of historical claims in that sense. But that does not mean we have to give up the idea of truth in history.

That 'truth' is a category of historical thought has been implied already. The possibility, referred to above, of confirming hypotheses like Giesebrecht's about the common usage by a number of later texts of a single earlier text already required it. To say that we know that the later texts all made use of the earlier is clearly to make a truth claim, however we understand the nature of truth.

One common conception of truth in historical thinking, often encountered in tacit form, is the belief that the truth of historical propositions must lie in the degree to which they correspond to some past state of affairs. In this 'picture theory' of historical truth, an historical account is allegedly true to the extent that it serves as a faithful image of what really was the case, in the same way that the historical proposition was supposed to derive its meaning from its relation to a past referent.

The picture theory is intuitively appealing, because it fits our common-sense ideas about the past. We often need, for practical purposes, to treat the past as if it were fixed and independently 'there'; doing so helps us to feel certain of our memories, for example. Yet as we saw in the discussion of historical meaning, this standard fails to capture the nature of historical understanding. Whenever an event is known as a result of its having been directly observed, the personal memories that are the ground of this knowledge must first be transformed into historical testimonies so that they can become part of the evidence. Historians writing contemporary history in which they themselves have played a part must give up the perspective they had as actors. Thucydides might be said to have adhered to this requirement for the historian to assume a distinct *persona* when he wrote of his own role in the Peloponnesian war in the third person.[47] It is unsurprising that Collingwood's former student, von Leyden, wanted to make 'the historian's standpoint' a category of historical understanding.[48]

[47] See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, IV. 104–108.

[48] See Von Leyden, W. (1984). Categories of historical understanding. *History and Theory,* 23, 53–77.

Not only must a theory of historical truth be able to incorporate this perspectival quality of historical thinking, it must also accept that the truth of historical propositions cannot rest on each having been independently confirmed by the knower. It has increasingly been recognized philosophically that the truths generated not just in history, but in the human sciences in general (and also in the natural sciences, come to that) presuppose the existence of a received tradition amongst a knowledge community, which sits in judgment on truth and falsity. Davidson's remark that truth 'is not a property of sentences; it is a relation between sentences, speakers, and dates' is particularly apposite in the case of history.[49] If the logical starting place of historical research is in evidence, its sociological starting place is the historical community.

Truth in history is not thereby reduced to whatever can get itself accepted as such, because no truth in history is ever accepted unconditionally. All historical truths also belong to what Bevir calls a 'web' of beliefs that is constantly being tested according to criteria such as 'accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, fruitfulness, and openness'.[50] Even those truths that are regarded as extremely well-confirmed remain liable in principle to revision. We may regard it as a practical certainty that we will never discover the Normans invaded England in 1067; but it will always remain possible in principle that we could.

As well as depending on the existence of a community which constantly scrutinises it afresh, historical truth also seems to presuppose that all historical accounts are mutually complimentary; each piece of historical writing is the illumination of a fragment of the *same* past. This means there can be no tolerance of historical relativism, or the claim that there is no standpoint from which one historical account can ultimately be preferred to another.

In practical life, there may be a case for a kind of ethical relativism if one accepts that there is no impartial 'view from nowhere' that can guide us in choosing between two differing moral outlooks, at least when taken in the abstract. But in history, the assessment of the community regarding such things as the fit and fruitfulness of an historical account will not tolerate simple contradiction. No historical question is irresolvable in principle save through lack of evidence.

Historical disagreements may arise for different types of reason.[51] Where one is unable even to establish an order of events, not even disagreement is possible, because one has no means of saying what occurred with any confidence. So all genuine disagreements presuppose either a shared or a divergent chronology. But no disagreement is ever merely chronological; that this date rather than that is the correct one is always consequential. It matters when a decree was signed or when a philosopher produced his manuscript because these events are part of meaningful

[49] Davidson, D. (1969). True to the facts. *Journal of Philosophy*, 66, 748–64. Davidson goes on: 'To view [truth] thus is not to turn away from language to speechless eternal entities like propositions, statements, and assertions, but to relate language with the occasions of truth in a way that invites the construction of a theory' (p. 754).

[50] Bevir (1999) (p. 311).

[51] For a recent detailed analysis of the causes of historical disagreement see Tucker, A. (2004), pp. 141–84.

world. 'If anything changes, then all other things change with it';[52] it is no longer a world in which *x* occurred, but a world in which *y* occurred instead, and this difference has ramifications.

Fact as Interpretation

Here, *x* and *y* stand not just for facts, but for interpretations. Or, better, *x* and *y* are at once facts and interpretations, there being no absolute distinction to be drawn between the two things; the facts are answers to questions about why a passage of human affairs unfolded as it did, and since this involves the study of subjectivity it is to be expected that there will initially be disagreement. Over questions of motive, for example, even an explicit declaration on the part of an actor that such and such was their motivation cannot simply be trusted, even if it is eventually accepted.

What is not questioned, however, is that there was a motivation (all intelligent action being presumed to be motivated somehow) and that it is possible, at least given certain conditions, to discover it. Or there would again be no question of a genuine disagreement in this sphere; it is only worth our disagreeing over Caesar's intentions if we both think that only one of us can ultimately be right. Asserting that the understanding of subjectivity is a feature of historical thought does not automatically mean resorting to *verstehen* or Collingwoodian re-enactment; the alternative is to claim either that there was no fact of the matter concerning Caesar's intentions, or that if there was, it is now unknowable in principle (rather than just because of lack of evidence), and neither of these positions seem plausible.

There is an entirely different class of historical disagreements relating to facts about things people could not possibly have known at the time, because they were in nobody's mind. There are, for instance, presumably facts of the matter concerning historical developments that occur only over the *longue durée.* Discovery of these facts has only been enabled by modern methods and technologies such as statistical analysis and computerisation, but they are none the less factual for that. To take, for example, statements about cycles of economic growth or contraction in Europe during the medieval era, something about which those living at the time could have known nothing (though they experienced their effects), it must still be possible to disagree about such events in the belief that the dispute is soluble if the right evidence can be found.

But if such disagreements are soluble, this only underlines that historical truth cannot depend on the picture theory, for no simple observation could confirm or deny the existence of an inferential entity like an economic cycle. Indeed, an historical fact, like truth or evidence, is not to be thought of at all in materialistic terms if we are to grasp its nature. It is a fact that the defeat of the Spanish armada was a major blow to the power of Catholic Spain in the sixteenth century, but there is

[52] McTaggart, J.M.E. (1995). The unreality of time. In R.L. Poidevin and M. MacBeath (Eds.), *The philosophy of time* (p. 25). Oxford: OUP. McTaggart was of course arguing that nothing does really change because time is unreal, but we are talking now of a logical change in the properties of the world of historical ideas.

nothing in the world one can point to in order to support this view, unless one has already accepted such categories as evidence and truth.

'Fact', then, turns out to be another of those categories shared by history with a number of other domains, but on which history imposes its own structure. Historical facts are the provisional results and starting-points of historical research; they do not have a free-standing, mind-independent status. Nor of course are they in any way atomic. It should be evident from the discussion of context that there can be no such thing as an isolated historical fact, and in the last resort historical facts are not to be distinguished from historical events; ultimately, the facts *are* the events.[53]

Pasts and Values

Historically, those favouring a categorial and constructionist approach to historical thought were associated with Idealism, but part of our aim is to illustrate that this is not a necessary connection; 'we can abandon realism without falling into subjective idealism'.[54] We have seen that the philosopher of history need not take sides over the ideality or reality of the past in itself. Yet the neo-Kantian and Hegelian insight that subjectivity must have a constitutive role in historical thought is nevertheless sound.

History must assume that 'no past happenings as such depend on anybody's subsequent thoughts about them',[55] in the sense that the meanings of past happenings and the reasons for their occurrence are postulated as independent of historical consciousness. But in this distinction a division between the subjectivity of the historian and the object of historical knowledge is already present. If we do not presuppose this division, we must acknowledge that the construction of the historical past is entirely dependent on evidential reasoning, for it cannot manifest itself unless the peculiar perspective or persona of the historian has a place in the intellectual life of a culture.

To common-sense intuition, this idea that the historical view of the past is a construction can be unsettling. In particular, the consequence that because the content of the historical past is dependent on our own critical subjectivity it is subject to change seems objectionable. The past, one wants to say, was what it was, entirely independently of anything we may later come to think about it. But what is being presupposed here is that the human world has a fixed meaning in the absence of interpretation.

This is surely incorrect; the natural order must no doubt be conceived of in this way, but what we are concerned with is existential fact. The meaning of life is very much what one takes and makes it to be, even if one remains unaware of one's active role in this process of meaning-creation. In fact, the past of personal memory also continually changes; it is simply that this change often goes unacknowledged lest it conflict with the goal of providing us with the continuity necessary for an integrated

[53] For a history of the concept of fact itself see Poovey, M. (1998). *A history of the modern fact problems of knowledge in the sciences of wealth and society.* London: University of Chicago Press.

[54] Dummett, M. (1959). Truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 59, 141–62, at p. 162.

[55] Von Leyden (1984), 54.

personality. But memory is, of course, ironically less reliable than the historical past, because it has not, as such undergone any process of critical scrutiny.

This contrast between a historical past and a common-sense view of the past clearly invites the question as to whether we are dealing with a plurality of pasts, or a plurality of perspectives on the past. Undeniably the safest course, as suggested above, is to argue that the logic of historical understanding does not commit us to any absolute beliefs about the nature of time; it is possible to remain agnostic on the question of whether there is a real past. It commits us only to a belief in the possibility of a plurality of attitudes towards past time.

There are nevertheless significant formal similarities as well as differences between the historical and common-sense views of time. Both presuppose, as we noted, that any given event occupies a position in a quantifiable succession of identical units of time that is permanently fixed; if event A preceded event B in this time series that will never change. Time in both cases is also held to be mono-directional; whatever the merits of metaphysical theories of time in which the postulated phenomenon of backwards causation allows the future to affect the past, such theories need not trouble historical thought any more than they trouble us in our daily life.

History also shares the common sense concept of time as divisible into three modes, past, present, and future. This tensed conception of time seems to require subjectivity in a way that the idea of time as a simple succession of units identifiable only as earlier or later, or before or after, one another does not. This view that a present seems to require people for whom it is the present has a long history: Saint Augustine was happy to accept that past, present, and future 'exist in the mind'.[56] Similarly, the historical past requires a community of historical authors and readers.

But perhaps the most crucial difference between the historical and common-sense attitudes to the past arises not in relation to the constructed character of the historical past but over the category of value. The neo-Kantians were not wrong in maintaining that value is an historical category, but it is necessary to distinguish, as they generally did not, between encountering the moral and ethical values of people in the past and applying one's own standards in judgment of them. Understanding much past behaviour historically relies on grasping ethical commitments different from our own. But this is an entirely different problem to the question of how we are to value and act on or respond to the past in our present; whether we are for or against the past.

The relevant or the significant past, in other words, is distinct from the historical past; the pasts of trauma, suffering, loss, guilt, joy, memorialisation, and celebration are all relevant and significant pasts, and for that very reason historic rather than historical. J.S. Mill's remark that 'The battle of Marathon, even as an event in English history, is more important than the battle of Hastings' because 'If the issue of that day had been different, the Britons and the Saxons might still have been wandering in the woods', may or may not be true, but it is not historical; it is about the relative significance of these battles for us today, and the difference they make to

[56] St Augustine, *Confessions*, XI. 20.

our present. It tells us nothing about why and how either Marathon or Hastings were fought, which is all the historian is interested in.

Similarly, Butterfield's question, 'Was Napoleon better than Hitler?' is not meaningless; but neither is it historical. As an ethical question, it can only be answered by the historic past; and if history could answer it, there would be no difference between the historical and historic conceptions of the past.[57] We are not suggesting that the ethical attitude towards the past is unimportant or dispensable; it is neither. It is a vital part of the present life of any civilized society that it pay attention to its past and its future. Nevertheless, the failure to distinguish the historic from the historical when treating of questions of 'value' continues to plague the philosophy of history.

Nietzsche acknowledged the distinction but still concluded that only the relevant past was of any interest; everything else was nihilistic antiquarianism.[58] Heidegger, likewise, was well aware of the difference between the past of historical scholarship and the historic past, but insisted that the former was dependent on the latter (and not really worth much philosophical attention). Between them, they set an unfortunate pattern for later 'post-modern' writers. Kellner, for example, consistently conflates the undeniably temporal and historic nature of ordinary experience with the past of critical historical thinking, attacking the idea of history as a 'Great Story' as if the ideal whole postulated by the notion of an historical past were identical with a hegemonic social myth.[59]

Providing a shared mythos, benign or otherwise, of the type that can unite an entire community is precisely what history cannot do. As soon as the past is consulted with regard to the needs of the present or the future it is no longer being understood historically. So-called speculative philosophy of history is always in the service of some practical political or ethical agenda for precisely this reason, and the teleology on which it necessarily relies excludes it from the realm of historical thought.

The practical use of the historical past lies in its contribution to education, and to cultural and self-understanding, rather than its utility in promoting social cohesion or as a guide to action. Perhaps the greatest illusion that historical thinking can dispel is that the past was like the present, an assumption that untutored common sense easily slips into. Thus, insofar as history has a political role to play in public life beyond the educational and cultural, it is as a destructive kind of censor; its business is to expose error, falsehood, ignorance, and illusion in claims about the past. 'What is to be done?' is a different type of question.

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[57] J. S. Mill and Butterfield quoted in Von Leyden (1984), 58, 65.

[58] Nietzsche, F. (1991). *Untimely meditations* (pp. 57–123). Cambridge: CUP.

[59] Heidegger, M. (1992). *Being and time* (pp. 444–49). Oxford: Blackwell. C Kellner, H. (1998). "Never Again" is Now. In Fay, Pomper, and Vann, *History and Theory* (pp. 225–44). Oxford: Blackwell, and Kellner, H. (1995). Introduction: Describing redescriptions. In H. Kellner and F. Ankersmit (Eds.), *A new philosophy of history* (pp. 1–18). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Lukacs, J. (2002). *At the end of an age.* New Haven: Yale University Press, and Sartwell, C. (2000). *End of story toward an annihilation of language and history.* New York: State University of New York Press are other recent examples of systematic confusion between history as a process and as a form of thought.

Objectivity and Contingency

History can only perform this public role if the constructed character of the historical past does not involve giving up its claim to objectivity; while to be a historian just is to assume a persona of a certain kind, this standpoint is never merely personal. If something is historically true, it is presumably true regardless of my contingent identity; my ethnicity, religion, gender, age, nationality, sexual orientation, etc., have no bearing on its truth or falsity. One is not 'writing for the brothers' (or the sisters, come to that). Controversies about the past stemming from contemporary issues surrounding personal identity may spur genuine historical investigation but in themselves grow from and serve practical needs and agendas. Such agendas are an inescapable feature of modern life, but failure to recognize them for what they are is inimical to genuine historical study.

Certain philosophical conceptions of natural scientific knowledge as the ideal form of objective thought were for long a source of misunderstandings. Of course, if one wishes to stress what is scientific in the broad sense about historical understanding, we have seen that one can emphasize the commitment to critical or sceptical rationality it shares with the natural sciences, but from this inquiry one can at best emerge with an understanding of what makes historical objectivity similar to other forms of objectivity, not what makes it distinctive.

As Passmore noted, a number of the criteria traditionally philosophically associated with scientific objectivity are simply inappropriate for historical understanding.[60] For example, insofar as objective explanation is confined to the idea of self-evident and deductively true statements, history clearly cannot be objective. Nor is it objective if objectivity requires 'data which natively confront us'; there can be no such historical data. Or if it is associated with 'atomic facts'; the essential contextualism of historical thinking precludes them. Or if it means not being selective; historians must select from amongst everything that was notionally going on in order to understand an event.

Amongst the negative conditions for the objectivity of historical accounts are that they exclude the personal prejudices of the historian and of his or her age (and to deny the possibility of this is to deny the possibility of successful self-analysis and self-criticism), and that they are falsifiable. A crucial positive condition is the basis of the account exclusively in criticism of evidence relating to a particular set of past events. But of course objectivity is no guarantee of truth or correctness in history; one can have judged objectively, at least by these criteria, and still be wrong.

Even an incorrect historical account involves the assumption that events are contingently related. That is, it presumes that everything could also have been different. We saw earlier how the idea of a plurality of possible outcomes was bound up with change and difference; it is also bound up with the notion of 'contingency', an historical category to which Oakeshott in particular drew attention.[61] 'Contingency' was originally a Kantian category, but in the *Critique of Pure Reason* it was opposed

[60] Passmore (1974). (pp. 145–60).

[61] Oakeshott, M. (1975). *On human conduct* (pp. 101–7). Oxford: Clarendon. See also Nardin, T. (2001). *The philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (pp. 162–6). Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

to necessity and used as a synonym for accident. An accident is in effect an event without a cause, something that has occurred entirely fortuitously or randomly. This is possible in life and literature, but it is not what the word must mean in connection with the logic of historical understanding. Any historical event is understood as the outcome of other antecedent events; an inexplicable event in history signifies a failure of historical understanding or a lack of evidence.

Oakeshott held that historical events were contingently related in the sense that they need not have taken the course that they did, but it was nevertheless understandable why they had done so. This may, or may not, be held to be equivalent to a belief that historical events are 'determined', depending on the meaning that is given to the notion of 'determinism'. All historical events are determined in the sense that that they could not have occurred without certain other specified events having preceded them; none are determined in the sense of being foreordained or necessary, even where what occurred could reasonably have been expected to have done so. Historical thought is consistent with a belief in a conditional human freedom.

Historical Imagination

The last of the historical categories that will be discussed here is imagination. Like all the other categories discussed, it has a complex history of its own,[62] but it is perhaps the most important because it is a requirement for historical readership as well as for historical research. Of course, the nature of the requirement is different in each case. As Collingwood put it, for the historical reader imagination is ornamental, but for the historian it is structural.[63]

We must distinguish historical imagination from other forms of imagination such as the literary. Following our discussion of value, it is clear that historical imagination cannot share the positive critical relation that at least some art bears towards contemporary reality.[64] It is the historic, not the historical, view of the past which performs that function. Nor can it have the purely expressive and emotional quality associated with Romantic art. Though it involves creativity of a sort, it is not the free creativity of the will. We are interested in imagination in respect of its being a 'vehicle of knowledge'.[65]

We must return for a final time to the Kantian tradition, in which imagination 'is clearly revealed to be a function of judgment as well as a faculty of sense'.[66] Our practical imagination, as Makkreel points out, would be useless if we could not recognize the present as continuous with the past; in an analogous fashion, historical

[62] Marshall, D. (1982). Ideas and history: The case of "Imagination", *Boundary*, 2, 343–59.

[63] Collingwood (1989). (p. 241).

[64] Casey, J. (1984). Emotion and imagination, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 34, 1–14.

[65] Moran, R. (1994). The expression of feeling in imagination. *The Philosophical Review*, 103, 75–106, at 106.

[66] Makkreel, R. (1984). Imagination and temporality in Kant's theory of the sublime, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 42, 303–15, at 304.

imagination presumably allows us to grasp the contingent relations that make a portion of the past continuous with itself.

If this is correct, then the category of historical imagination performs the kind of unifying and synthesizing function that Kant ascribed to his own categories. It provides us with a coherent representation of past events, though one in which a mental picturing of the past to oneself *qua* historian need play no role. In other words, it does not mean the historian 'sees' the past as the historical reader does; this is presumably the force of Collingwood's structural/ornamental distinction.

The imaginative representation of the historian is, in itself, entirely free from feeling. Insofar as we treat the past as a spectacle or a pageant to be applauded or deplored, we have abandoned historical imagination for imagining of another kind. The pleasure that undeniably accompanies both historical research and historical readership is of an intellectual rather than a sensual variety, which means that the continued existence of historical research depends ultimately on an educated public with an appetite for something other than bread and circuses.

The public can safely ignore the technical philosophical questions associated with the logic of historical knowledge; but without critical historical imagination public life would lack historical culture, and the only means of cultivating it is through that arduous form of personal liberation known as education. The historical aspect of that liberation involves emancipation from the particularity of one's own time and place through knowledge of the truth about the past. History remains the nearest thing yet invented to time travel, and like all travel, it cannot fail to broaden the mind. The power of this liberation is evident simply from the fact that it has so often been suppressed by regimes that find it politically inconvenient.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to resolve the lack of clarity around the idea of categories of historical thought by arguing that they are best thought of as rules governing the historical use of language. This strategy reflects a constructionist approach to philosophy of history that aims to circumvent the one-sidedness of literary and scientistic approaches and avoid the problems associated with both realism and idealism. To advance the discussion, it has proposed that the following concepts are all constitutive of a framework of rules characterising historical discourse: meaning, context, evidence, action, cause, probability, situation, event, truth, persona, past, narrative, fact, value, objectivity, contingency, and imagination.

These seventeen categories are not all absolutely distinct from one another; for example, we have seen that from a certain point of view an historical fact is identical with an historical event, and that actions and situations are themselves events of a more limited sort. It is not clear, however, that this is a shortcoming, as a critic would have to show that the boundaries of the categories of historical thinking must be sharply defined, and this is not obvious.

It is certainly the case that in other forms of thought, categories that are not absolutely clear at the boundaries do not lose their value as a result; the biological category of a species is a well-known example. For similar reasons, one would not wish to insist on an exact number of historical categories. For our purposes, it is

sufficient if the reader is persuaded that in common with all thinking historical thinking requires the use of categories, and that it makes use of a distinctive set of categories similar to those identified here.

If history is indeed a distinctive and irreplaceable source of knowledge, then, the future task of philosophy of history is to continue the analysis of the sources of this distinctiveness, and the most fruitful approach to this problem will be the examination of the particular combination of ideas that confirm it as such. A relevant criticism of this paper would involve either a complete refutation of the categorial approach to philosophy together with the provision of a sound alternative basis for historical thought (no small task), or a more systematic working out of the categories of historical understanding—both those it shares with all thought and those that differentiate it.