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Our Relations with the Past

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Abstract The approach that philosophers have taken to history has too often been one-dimensional. It is my aim in this paper to map out a future multi-dimensional philosophy of history, by invoking the notion of a relation with the past, and by arguing for the philosophical relevance of multiple such relations.

Keywords Philosophy of history · Testimony · Narrative sentences · Open narrative sentences · Metanarrative

The Future of Philosophy of History

The approach that philosophers have taken to history has too often been one-dimensional. It is my aim in this paper to map out a future multi-dimensional philosophy of history, by invoking the notion of a relation with the past, and by arguing for the philosophical relevance of multiple such relations[1].

Aviezer Tucker has pointed out that twentieth century philosophy of history was largely concerned with the *form* of historical accounts (Tucker 2004: 5–8, 185–6). This concern with form bridges two otherwise dissimilar phases of twentieth century philosophy of history: the hey-day of analytic philosophy of history in the mid-twentieth century, and the discourse-focused philosophy of history dominant in the last quarter of the century. In the first of those phases, the most pressing issue was the underlying form of historical explanatory statements; in particular, whether those explanations were of Deductive–Nomological form. In the second of those phases, concern shifted to the form of the historical account as a whole. The central question

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was the extent to which historical accounts shared the same form as literary narratives. Tucker's observation (intended critically) is one instance of my more general claim that the philosophy of history has tended to be overly one-dimensional. What is wrong with restricting one's philosophical approach in this way? It is not only that other aspects of the rich tapestry of historical practice are thereby ignored. More troubling is that by this restriction theoretical understanding of historical practice becomes *deformed*. Note, in particular, the peculiar wariness with historical truth that has resulted from an exclusive concern with the historian's rhetorical/ conceptual scheme. The historian's language is of philosophical relevance, though if regarded as of exclusive relevance threatens our epistemic and alethic connections to the past.

Tucker wants philosophers of history to forget about the form of historical accounts, and to focus instead on the justificatory relation of those accounts to the evidence. That justificatory relation can be usefully analysed within a general epistemic theory such as Bayesianism, a theory that permits precise and illuminating conclusions to be reached. But if the suggestion is that the evidential relation exclusively dominate philosophical attention, then the resulting philosophy would be as one-dimensional as the earlier form-obsessed philosophies of history. The first reason to be suspicious of this suggestion (and I suggest many more in what follows) is that the form of a historical account remains of philosophical interest. Philosophers of history should be concerned with historiographical competition: what it is that makes one history more preferable than another. Such competition is not just a matter of ensuring, as a strict Bayesian would insist, that one's historiographical beliefs are more probable, given the evidence, than one's competitors. In addition to being more probable, historical accounts tend to be favoured to the extent that they are precise, of broad scope, and consilient[2]. These aspects of the historical account promote understanding, rather than epistemic justification narrowly conceived. And at least the last of these demands that attention be paid to historiographical form.

In the remainder of the paper I move beyond the (broadly) epistemic relations between historian and past so far suggested, to relations that we can call evaluative, preservative, dialogic, material, and practical. I argue not only that there are such relations, but that they are philosophically noteworthy. That argument is premised on the philosophical relevance of the epistemic relations already noted, and turns upon showing that further relations are built upon, underlie, or are otherwise entangled with historiographical epistemology. Of particular interest to me is entanglement, and I shall pay most attention to the fusion of the epistemic with other relations. The relations to be invoked will, I suspect, move from those that are more familiar to philosophers of history, through to those that are more original and perhaps contentious.

[2] The tension between Bayesianism and *precision* is perhaps most easily demonstrated, given the *prima facie* inverse relation between precision and probability. That inverse relation highlighted by Karl Popper, when he noted that the imprecise predictions of (e.g.) astrologists were more likely to be confirmed than the precise predictions of (e.g.) physicists. Similarly, while it is impossible for evidence to render 'there were some Cathars in Montaillou' less likely than 'there were seven Cathars in Montaillou', the first proposition is not therefore necessarily more historically acceptable.

Beyond Epistemology

Historians *evaluate* the past in studying past actions and works, criticising or praising them on intellectual, ethical, or other grounds. That evaluation can be made quite explicitly, and in so far as that is the case one philosophical response is to insist that evaluation be kept apart from genuine historical practice. A noteworthy example of that philosophical approach stems from Max Weber's demand that scientists and social scientists produce work that is value-free (Weber 1949). However, restrictive philosophies of history of that kind are undermined by the typical fusion of the descriptive and evaluative in historical accounts. Thus, the historian need not explicitly evaluate the ethical behaviour of a past actor in order for their work to be evaluative, for it may be implicitly expressed by 'thick' terms like 'brave' or 'stubborn'. Likewise, intellectual evaluation is implied through the use of a term such as 'classical'. As Hans-Georg Gadamer pointed out, to refer to a period as 'classical', or to a work as a 'classic', is to do more than factually locate that period or work at a certain date. It is to imply that the period or work lies at some temporal remove to ourselves, but nevertheless has enduring power to speak to us and to provide a model for future activity (Gadamer 1989: 287–9). In addition to the implicit evaluation resulting from 'thick' historiographical language, we should remember that the historian's activity in selecting, excluding, and focusing so often expresses an evaluative stance.

Historians stand in a *preservative* relation with the past, preserving knowledge that has previously been acquired. This is an epistemic relation, though one that is crucially different to the critical epistemic relation introduced in the previous section. Through the testimony of others, one's own personal memory, and what we might call externalised memory (memory 'off-loaded' on to lists, books, and the internet), knowledge acquired in the past is retained and transmitted. It would be a mistake to assimilate the preservation of knowledge through testimony and memory to the critical inference of belief from evidence. Such an assimilation would require us to regard memory and testimony as present evidence, requiring relevant background knowledge if that evidence is to permit the inference of beliefs concerning the past. Yet that *evidential* picture of memory and testimony is simply untenable, as many recent writers have pointed out (for example Anscombe 1973, Coady 1992, Burge 1993). Consider testimony: we do, in fact, *un*critically accept the majority of testimony. Furthermore, it is impossible to imagine how we could avoid uncritically relying on the bulk of testimony we receive, without jettisoning vast swathes of our beliefs that we usually take to be justified. The insistence that all treatment of testimony must be critical is, says Coady,

> at odds with the phenomenology of *learning*. In our ordinary dealings with others we gather information without this concern for inferring the acceptability of communications from premises about the honesty, reliability, probability, etc., of our communicants. I ring up the telephone company on being unable to locate my bill and am told by an anonymous voice that it comes to $165 and is due on 15 June. No thought of determining the veracity and reliability of the witness occurs to me nor, given that the total is within tolerable limits, does the balancing of probabilities figure in my acceptance. (1992: 143)

Historians learn from the testimony of other historians and from the testimony of past writers, as well as by critical inference from evidence. One might be concerned that to accept the preservative relation—a relation that implies the uncritical acceptance of much testimony—would be to risk jettisoning the most valuable of historical skills, source criticism; to risk returning to that parody of mature history that Collingwood memorably labelled 'scissors and paste' (1994: 234-5, 257-61). That concern, however, is not warranted. Not everything we learn is correct, but all that follows from that observation is that the preservative (as any epistemic) relation is fallible. Given that the fallibility of the preservative relation can only be demonstrated by the critical treatment of testimony (or memory), should we not think that critical epistemology is therefore somehow foundational? No, because it does not follow from the necessity of critical reasoning in showing certain testimony to be *unreliable*, that testimonial *reliability* must therefore depend on critical reasoning (Coady 1992: 97). Finally, we should not think that to draw attention to the preservative relation is to deny that historians also use sources as witnesses 'in spite of themselves'—drawing inferences from that which is false and misleading, from what is avoided and suppressed—given the plurality of relations which it is my central aim to draw attention to.

Note that it is not the case that the beliefs acquired from an uncritical acceptance of testimony are *unjustified*. Such beliefs can be justified, though not by the recipient's treatment of testimony as evidence. Just as my justification of a fact remembered does not require a demonstration of the reliability of memory, so justification of a fact witnessed does not require a demonstration of the reliability of testimony. In the case of memory, my present justification is simply the justification that I possessed when the belief was acquired. Similarly, the justification of the recipient of testimony is the same as that of the testifier. If that claim is correct, then a fundamental principle of Enlightenment epistemology is undermined: that the justification for my beliefs must be (at least potentially) available to me, now.

Historians can be regarded as standing in a *dialogic* relation with the past, a suggestion which stems from Gadamer's attempt in *Truth and Method* to place dialogue at the heart of hermeneutics. In attempting to apply Gadamer's hermeneutics specifically to historical practice, the key challenge is to specify how historians can be meaningfully treated as entering into dialogue with authors and actors who are dead. I think that the most promising answer is to be found in emphasising the dialogic virtue of *openness*, and consequently focusing on the ways that the historian must be open to being challenged by the past. In this way, the dialogic relation becomes the inverse of the evaluative: here the past is allowed to evaluate the historian. In entering into a dialogue with the past, the historian is challenged by the past in two ways. First, previous historical enquiry sets the challenges that must be met by contemporary historians. Gaps in those past histories should be filled. Those previous histories should be challenged by showing how the new account can better account for present evidence, or more intelligibly tell what happened. And even where prior histories are not to be remedied or challenged in any way they must be 'engaged'; allowed to influence the topics and themes covered in the contemporary historical enquiry.

Second, the historian can be questioned by the past that is the object of historical enquiry. This second sort of challenge is easiest to appreciate in the interpretative

activity of an intellectual historian. Interpretation begins with some kind of puzzlement; a difference between the past writer being studied and the contemporary historian, such that the historian can agree that 'if I had been in that situation, I would not have done that, or said that'. It is that difference that permits the past work to question the historian. In a genuine dialogue, one recognises not only difference, but does not presume that one's own position will be the correct one prior to the dialogic process. The same goes when engaging in historical interpretation. One's own position is put into question as much as the other's. To interpret Aristotelian ethics requires recognising the fundamental differences between our (post-Enlightenment) ethical beliefs, and those expressed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Further, it requires holding open the possibility that Aristotle might be right, and that our own position might be wrong. To take a second example: Robert Darnton made famous the report of an eighteenth century French print worker, Nicolas Contat, of a massacre of cats (Darnton 1984). To interpret Contat's report about killing cats dialogically requires not closing off the possibility that there might be comedy in killing cats, thus putting into question a previously strongly held belief that there is no comedy in killing cats.

The historian stands in a *material* relation to the past. The historian is a product of the past, including that portion of the past which they choose to study. So much is philosophically innocuous. A more intriguing suggestion is that the past makes its presence felt in the historian's present more directly. Consider the status of artefacts: they are past and they are present, and from that duality they acquire their power. In *So Many Ways to Begin*, Jon McGregor describes his protagonist's response to why he enjoyed museums:

> It seemed perfectly natural to him, to be amazed by the physical presence of history, to be able to stand in front of an ancient object and be awed by its reach across time. A thumbprint in a piece of prehistoric pottery. The chipped edge of a Viking battle-axe, and the shattered remains of a human skull. The scribbled designs for the world's first steam engine, spotted with candlewax and stained with jam. (2006: 37)

In what may become a founding paper for the future of the philosophy of history, Eelco Runia (2006) explored this material relation with the past by invoking the notion of Presence. The Presence of the past is to be understood in terms of metonymy, that linguistic trope that substitutes an attribute of x for x itself. Crucially, that substitution creates a discontinuity, such that the description becomes 'out of place'. Runia's central example is 'the gall bladder in room 615 doesn't want to eat', which places in jarring proximity the language of reductionist medicine of the body, and holistic care of the person. Metonymy can, suggests Runia, be applied to objects as well as words. In this way the historical artefact is best regarded not as evidence but as an object out of context, out of place, bringing us into jarring proximity with the past. And Runia applies this account not only to artefacts, but to monuments:

> It should be remarked that while a modern monument *presents* a past event in the here and now, it can hardly be said to *re*present it. A monument like the Berlin Holocaust Memorial is a repository of what haunts the place of the present, a refuge for what has always (or at least since the event in question

> took place) been there. It is closer to a relic than to a painted, written, or sculpted pictorial account of what happened—though, of course, it differs from a relic in the sense that presence is transferred to a new, and willfully made, object. So, whereas pre-modern, metaphorical monuments are primarily engaged in a transfer of *meaning*, modern metonymical monuments concentrate on a transfer of *presence*. (Runia 2006: 17)

Practical Relations with the Past

In the remainder of this paper, I explore in more detail a family of present–past relations that, in one way or another, can be regarded as *practical*. By 'practical relations with the past' I mean those relations which privilege the historian as *actor*, instead of or—more interestingly—in tandem with the historian's position as *knower*.

It is a commonplace that historical knowledge can, and often should, have practical consequences for the historian and the historian's audience. One purpose of a professional historian is to secure the continuation of their career by publishing defensible and original work in the form of a paper in a journal whose audience is primarily their professional peers, or a monologue whose audience might further encompass certain university students and even a wider public. A second use of past knowledge is in the application of that knowledge to the guidance of future action. We can use knowledge of the past to understand the present by comparison with the relevant past. The traditional insistence that people—but especially politicians—'learn from the past' can be taken as the demand to locate past events that are either the same in relevant respects to, or are analogous to, present events of particular practical interest. In both of these cases, the relation between knowledge and action is straightforwardly from the former to the latter: past knowledge is an instrument for the achievement of future practical ends.

Our practical relations with the past go well beyond those recognised by that instrumentalist picture. We can first observe that successful action is related to past not only in a contingently instrumental manner, past lessons sometimes proving useful for future action, but also in a more fundamental way. Past practice (including, though by no means limited to, the artistic, philosophical, historical) provides the standards for what it is to act well. What it is to paint well depends on the work of past masters; what it is to reason dialectically depends on the achievements of Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel. Alasdair MacIntyre develops this point as part of insistence that virtues be situated in practices with a history:

> A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules… To enter a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them… The standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far. (2003: 190)

We can extend investigation of practical relations with the past by regarding practical action as a sort of knowledge—knowledge how to do something, as contrasted to propositional knowledge that something is the case. The overarching

motivation in privileging action over propositional knowledge derives from Heidegger's suggestion that our epistemic and linguistic relation to the world is built upon a practical relation. Knowing-that only makes explicit what we already have in know-how:

> In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is something which gets laid out by the interpretation. (Heidegger 1962, 32: 190-1; as quoted in Mulhall 1996)

This insistence has been used to suggest that the Cartesian method of doubt wrongly presupposes that mind and world are in separate realms, and wrongly attempts to find the resolution to this 'problem' by searching for some belief which can provide a bridgehead into the world. The Heideggarian response is that no such bridgehead is required, for we are embodied minds, and practically experience the world before we can doubt it. The Heideggarian insistence can be equally deployed against the Kantian division between noumena and phenomena, and against the linguistic Idealism derived from that Kantian metaphysics that fuelled so much of the philosophy of history dominant in the final quarter of the twentieth century. The 'noumenal world' is not hidden from us by conceptual schemes, but is first directly experienced.

How might this idea be applied with regard to the historian's world, the past? At first glance, perhaps not especially well. The standard examples used to illustrate Heidegger's point relate to objects 'present-at-hand'. Heidegger's hammer is perhaps the most well known of those examples: the hammer is known first practically, in use, and only secondarily conceptually and theoretically. But using and knowing about a hammer is not a case of historical knowledge. One suggestion that has been enthusiastically adopted in certain humanities and social sciences is to pay renewed attention to the pre-linguistic experience of evidence. The pre-linguistic sensory encounter with the evidence—the smell of an old book, the feel of an artefact—might be taken to be related to historiography as know-how is related to knowledge-that in the case of Heidegger's hammer. I do not pursue this suggestion further here, not least because it is less a relation to the past, than to the present evidence (comments at the end of the previous section concerning Presence notwithstanding).

The most promising application of the thesis that know-how is prior to knowledge-that brings to light the role of action in sustaining a vision of the past. One creates and shapes a vision of the past in, for example, attending a remembrance day service, in behaving in a respectful manner in proximity to war memorials, or in refusing to react with awe when confronted with overblown fascist architecture. The power of such practical activity is most apparent in societies holding divergent visions of the past. In Franco's Spain, the officially sanctioned pattern of action was to honour the war graves of Nationalists by ceremonial commemoration, and to ignore or even deface those of the Republicans. Such actions embody a powerful vision of the past. One would expect it to be part of the historian's business to make that vision explicit, and to criticise it as necessary, both ethically and epistemically.

My argument is not that this is impossible, but that the historian's explicit knowledge builds on the implicit, practically embodied knowledge.

The model presented at the start of this section (instrumentalism) focused on the application of historiographical knowledge to practice. By applying the Heideggarian insight of know-how prior to knowledge-that to historical activity, we have seen how practice can underlie historiographical knowledge. In the final section I examine a class of cases in which practice and historiography are fused.

Open Narrative Sentences

The notion of a narrative sentence was introduced by Arthur Danto to exemplify the essential feature of historical knowledge: that it as about events in the historian's past. He was concerned to reject the sceptical complaint that the justification of historical claims is inherently suspect because the historian was not a witness of the events they purport to describe. Danto regarded that complaint as perverse: temporal distance is not a problem for historical knowledge, but the condition that makes it possible. That condition is made most manifest in narrative sentences, which

> refer to at least two time-separated events though they only *describe* (are only *about*) the earliest event to which they refer… The fact that these sentences may constitute in some measure a differentiating stylistic feature of narrative writing is of less interest to me than the fact that use of them suggests a differentiating feature of historical knowledge. (Danto 1968: 143)

Danto's narrative sentences include 'The author of *Principia* was born at Woolethorpe [sic] on Christmas Day, 1642' and 'The Thirty Years War began in 1618' (1968: 158). These statements could not have been justifiably uttered by observers to the event being described. Narrative sentences, and therefore historical knowledge, require of the historian that they occupy a position of temporal hindsight relative to the event of interest, since that event should be embedded in a narrative that continues into the event's future.

I want to focus on a sub-class of narrative sentences, that I call open narrative sentences, in order to make a different point to Danto's. An open narrative sentence is a sentence which is about a past event, but which refers to that event in terms of later events, *including events that have not taken place by the time of the speaker*. Such sentences are open to the utterer's future. When one wakes up the day after an unsuccessful job interview for a post that was strongly desired, it is yet possible to look back on the previous day with the thought that *the job interview was a learning experience*. The foregoing sentence in italics is an open narrative sentence. It is a description of an event in the utterer's past. Yet it refers to the utterer's present, since it depends on their present attitude. (In this way open narrative sentences bear similarity to performative utterances, such as 'I now pronounce you husband and wife', since the performance of the sentence is intimately connected to its truth.) Still further, the sentence refers to the utterer's future: for it to be true, one must learn from the failed interview, and modify future action accordingly.

Jeanne Peijnenburg (2006) has also drawn attention to what I (though she does not) call open narrative sentences. Peijnenburg's argument is that such phenomena

are cases of backwards causation[3]. Peijnenburg does not talk of narratives: her point is rather that the character of an act A is underdetermined by A alone, and is only determined by the sequence of actions to which A belongs. Yet Peijnenburg's examples are clearly narrative, and well exemplify the claims made in the previous paragraph. Yesterday's liaison might be described as the 'beginning of a long and secret affair' (2006: 249). That open narrative sentence is narrative in the strong sense that it implies a structure that is recognisably *a story*. The truth of the sentence, and of the alternative open narrative sentences that might be used to describe the same event, is clearly dependent both upon the utterer's present attitude and on their future romantic and erotic behaviour.

With regard to my central concern—relations with the past—what is most salient about open narrative sentences is their fusion of the epistemic and the practical. What has already happened serves to restrict those open narrative sentences that can justifiably be told, though permits a range of alternative narratives: the open narrative sentence is therefore partially determined by the past. (Yesterday's failed job interview may be described as a learning or a chastening experience depending on what happens later; it simply can not, one supposes, be described as the beginning of a long and secret affair.) It is one's practical attitude and behaviour that supplies the remaining determination. The extent to which what *has* happened determines the open narrative sentences that may subsequently be justifiably uttered is inversely related to one's strength of will; the Nietzschean 'plastic force' that enables us to bend previous episodes into a variety of different narratives.

Open narrative sentences need not be restricted to the autobiographical reports of personal action. In collective open narrative sentences, we rejoin mainstream historiography in its focus on classes, nations, and other groups of people in society. The form and determination of collective open narrative sentences is no different to the autobiographical. The important difference between personal and collective lies in the political significance of collective action. For if the truth of open narrative sentences depends in large part on will, then in collective cases the question to be asked is '*whose* will is hereby expressed'? Nationalist histories of the nineteenth century contained open narrative sentences that had clear political import ('on __AD was fought the battle that marked the birth of our great nation!'). Broader still, metanarratives (of scientific progress, of God's will working in the world, of the development of Spirit, or of liberal democracy) are collective open narratives, for unless the *telos* has already been reached, the narrative extends into the utterer's future.

It is important to recognise that collective open narrative sentences need not be politically dubious or dramatic, and can be benign or mundane. A local example is that 'Sheffield's regeneration began in 2002'; a thoroughly unremarkable statement, which yet tacitly refers to the process of regeneration that it is hoped will continue into the future. Once one is attuned to the phenomena of open narrative sentences, they are hard to avoid. Such ubiquity is to be expected so long as we agree that fundamental to our life is the practice of telling stories that connect our past to a future that we hope to achieve, or otherwise hope will come to pass. And that

[3] I do not agree with that argument, though given that it is incidental to my current topic I do not here substantiate that criticism.

ubiquity undermines Danto's criticism of collective open narratives (again: my term, not his) that they are a danger to be avoided. Danto's concern is that claims of this kind are historically illegitimate in that they close off a future which should be kept open. Lydia Goehr, in her recent commentary on Danto, writes that

> What is always at stake for Danto is the presence of openness. To leave the future open is to make no substantive claim upon it; to leave the future open is to leave the present open, as also the past, for only if a past is open does the historian's task make sense when generating historical narratives. (2007: 17)

Yet the future can never be entirely open so long as we have plans, wishes, and desires. And since collective action is manifestly required in this connected world of ours, it is naïve to suppose that each should have exclusive control of their own future. Collective open narrative sentences cannot, therefore, be wholly avoided. What is important to do—and this is a task that philosophy is well suited for—is to make explicit the open narrative (and associated wish, plan, or desire) that is coiled within the sentence. In making the open narrative explicit, alternative narratives are naturally suggested given our appreciation that the received version is not determined by what has taken place, but remains one possibility amongst many. The result of such explication is to make the future more open, not less.

I have suggested that these multiple relations with the past are philosophically relevant, not least because they shape our knowledge and descriptions of the past. I have stressed the interaction between the multiple relations, a stress which marks a sharp departure from a programme which might otherwise seem similar: Oakeshott's examination of different modes of experience (1991/1933). The argument of this section, in particular, has been made with the intention of rebutting the insistence that different relations to the past be kept quite separate.

> To carry a practical attitude into the world of science or history, or to carry a scientific or an historical attitude into the world of practice must, in every case, turn what is significant into nonsense, turn what is valuable into something worthless by dragging it into the wrong market: and this, I take it, is the essential character of *ignoratio elenchi* (Oakeshott 1991: 311)

On the contrary, the philosopher of history should attend to our multiple relations with the past—relations of epistemology, materiality, ethics and politics—with the aim of doing justice to the integration of those relations in a rich historical practice.

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