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Pre-Narrativist Philosophy of History

Abstract

Prior to the narrativist turn in the 1970s, philosophy of history focused on action and agency. Seminal pre-narrativist philosophers of history – from Collingwood and Oakeshott to Dilthey and Gadamer – argued that agent-centred action explanation constitutes an irreducible element of historical research. This paper re-examines the agent-centred perspective as one of the key insights of pre-narrativist philosophy of history. This insight has not only been neglected in philosophy of history after the narrativist turn but also fundamentally misunderstood. The paper advances two connected arguments: (i) that the agent-centred perspective is internal to the very idea of historical knowledge, and (ii) that the agent-centred perspective is epistemically prior to retrospective (re)description, which has been the focus of narrativist philosophy of history. In conclusion, the paper contends that the agent-centred and the retrospective perspective constitute two integral and irreducible modes of thought that belong to history.

Introduction

Pre-narrativist philosophers of history,[1] such as Collingwood, Gadamer, Dilthey and Oakeshott, argued that agent-centred action explanation constitutes an irreducible element of historical research. The reason was that they considered investigating action from the perspective of historical agents as a necessary condition for one of the key epistemic interests of history. This epistemic interest is to *know why* in relation to what came before the events, as opposed to retrospective narratives in which events are understood in connection with what came after. They did not believe that the two perspectives were incompatible: Historians can and often do use both perspectives. Rather, they argued that there is an important conceptual distinction to be made between the two perspectives, and that the retrospective view must necessarily presuppose the agent-centred view. Otherwise, there will be no historical events for which to ascribe new significance considering later events. Importantly, to know in relation to what came before is not possible, or at least extremely impoverished, without the agent-centred perspective – for the perspective of the agents *is* one of the significant antecedent conditions in relation to which historians explain the actions and events under investigation. In connection, pre-narrativist philosophers of history, and especially Collingwood, argued that it was the category of action (viewed from

[1] Obviously, the label 'pre-narrativist philosophers of history' does not denote a homogenous group. However, this paper uses that label only to refer to a general focus on agency and action that was common to seminal authors in philosophy of history prior to the turn towards narration in the 1970s. Of course, this is not to say that pre-narrativist philosophers agreed on everything nor that they never wrote about narration and retrospectivity. The important point is only that that there was a change in focus from agency and action towards narration and retrospectivity, and I consider the fact of such a change of focus to be beyond dispute.

the perspective of historical agents) rather than retrospective representation that distinguished history from other kinds of knowledge.

Since the advent of narrativism in the 1970s, influential philosophers of history, such as Danto, Mink, White and Ankersmit, have argued that the key characteristic of history is not agency and action, but rather the historian's retrospective, synthesising and literary mode of representation. As a result, the agent-centred perspective that dominated philosophy of history prior to the narrativist turn is notably absent from contemporary discussions in philosophy of history. The following essay is dedicated to elucidating the agent-centred perspective of pre-narrativist philosophy of history. Firstly, the paper argues that the fundamental role of agent-centred perspective is seriously misunderstood within contemporary narrativist philosophy of history. Secondly, the paper argues that the agent-centred perspective is epistemically prior to the retrospective redescription, which has been the focus in narrativist philosophy of history. In conclusion, the paper contends that the agent-centred and the retrospective view constitute two integral and irreducible modes of thought that belong to history.

Before and after narrativism

All philosophy of history before the 1970s was not, of course, about action and agency. Rather, conceptual investigations of action and agency became the hallmark of the critical tradition of philosophy of history during the mid-twentieth century. Speaking of this tradition, one must understand that the term 'critical' in 'critical philosophy of history' is not used to designate a school of thought, as for instance when one speaks of 'critical theory'. Instead, 'critical' is used in the Kantian sense of delineating a certain philosophical subject matter. This means that 'critical' is not to be contrasted with styles of doing philosophy, such as 'continental' or 'analytic', but with philosophy about a different subject matter, namely substantive philosophy of history.[2] In substantive philosophy of history, the subject matter is the entire course of past events, and the aim is to divine the supposed purpose or meaning in historical events by viewing them as part of some general plan or pattern. Substantive philosophy of history has a famous lineage of practitioners from Augustine and Spengler to contemporary authors such as Francis Fukuyama and Yuval Noah Harari.

Critical philosophy of history is not concerned with plotting the course of history, but with elucidating the concepts and logic of historical inquiry. The subject matter is distinctly Kantian: one is interested in the conditions of possibility of history as a form of knowledge and thought. Consequently, critical philosophy of history does not make claims about the meaning or purpose of historical events in the grand scheme of the world's development. Instead, critical philosophy of history has primarily been occupied with questions such as: How does history relate to other forms of knowledge? What sort of objectivity, if any, is

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[2] My use of the term 'critical philosophy of history' derives from William H. Dray's *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 1–3. Dray uses the contrast 'critical' and 'speculative' while Arthur Danto in *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 1, uses 'analytic' and 'substantive' when talking about the same contrast. I have chosen the terms 'critical' and 'substantive' because 'speculative' carries negative connotations and 'analytic' is too easily mistaken for the school of thought with the same name. I have argued elsewhere that the very distinction between critical and substantive may also be problematic in philosophy of history. See my paper "The Idea of a Philosophy of History," *Rethinking History* 22:1 (2018): 86–104.

possible for historians? How do historians explain or understand? Are there any laws that historians formulate or use in their explanations?[3]

These questions were at the heart of the Hempel-inspired[4] debates about historical explanation during the 1950–70s heyday of critical philosophy of history. Hempel's work inspired debates primarily about the difference between intentional explanation of human action, which was equated with the domain of 'history', and causal explanation of events in the natural sciences. On the one hand, equating history with action may seem narrow, on the other hand it reflects that the debate was closely attuned to questions about the ways in which historical knowledge is distinct from other kinds of knowledge. The basic idea was that the concept of action was the best candidate for distinguishing history from other forms of knowledge about the past.

The rise of narrativism in the 1970s popularised a very different conception about the distinguishing features of history, and, thereby, the proper subject matter of a philosophy of history. Narrativists claimed that it is the idea of *retrospective (re)description*

[3] This list of paradigmatic questions is also used by Rex Martin in *Historical Explanation: Re-enactment and Practical Inference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 14. Cf. William H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1958).

[4] It is now generally agreed that the main catalyst for critical philosophy of history was the publication of Carl G. Hempel's classic paper, "The Function of General Laws in History." *The Journal of Philosophy* 39:2 (1942): 35–48. In this paper, Hempel forcefully challenged the idea that historical explanation, and historical thinking as such, would be in any way conceptually or logically distinctive from the law-based explanation model of science. Consequently, Hempel's article inspired an extensive debate about the epistemological and methodological status of historical explanation. For a brief exposition of the different positions in this debate, see Chris Lorenz, "History and Theory," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Historical Writing Since 1945*, eds. Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf,. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22–3.

that serves as the distinguishing feature of history, not action.[5] The main supposition behind this idea is, roughly, that the specificity of historical knowledge and understanding is rooted in the use of 'narrative sentences' – a classic example of such a sentence is: "The Thirty Years War began in 1618."[6] Centrally, narrative sentences reveal truths about the significance of an earlier event in light of later events. Thus, historical knowledge contains elements that were not (logically) available to the agents themselves since truths about the significance of an event continue to accrue after it has happened. A 'historical event' is something that exists only under a certain description, and the availability of descriptions alters with our position in time. This entails that, with the passage of time, historians can use narrative sentences to create new events and novel descriptions in order to explain the past reality that is unfolding itself.

Narrativism centres on the concepts of temporality and retrospectivity. This paradigmatic change of focus is best understood as an imperative about the subject matter of philosophy of history: the interest *should* be on how historians retrospectively integrate a great number of historical facts into one synthetical whole.[7] This feature is important to understand since narrativists tended sometimes to confuse the idea of retrospectivity as a key point of interest for philosophy of history, which is an unproblematic claim, with a much stronger (and false) claim, namely, that retrospectivity is that which conceptually

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[5] Arguably, narrativists and postnarrativists alike share this paradigmatic idea. Cf. Paul Roth, "The Philosophy of History," in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Social Science*, eds. Alex Rosenberg and Lee McIntyre (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[6] Danto introduced this concept in his *Analytic Philosophy of History.*

[7] Cf. Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 15.

distinguishes history from other forms of knowledge. For instance, Louis Mink writes that narrative sentences "belong to stories which historians alone can tell."[8] Yet, every past phenomenon, natural or human made, is the possible object of a description that assigns significance to earlier events in light of later ones. A natural scientist may say: 'The retreat of the glaciers since 1850 was the beginning of global warming' or 'The mosquito bite of John Doe in 1923 was the start of a pandemic.' Hence, one must be careful to not confuse imperatives about points of interest with conceptual questions about history as a form of knowledge and thought.

In contrast, seminal pre-narrativist philosophers of history – prime examples would be Collingwood, Oakeshott and Dray – had argued that history is not distinguished by the temporal location of its subject matter – the past – but by the kinds of questions that historians ask about the past. Furthermore, they argued that questions about the past are historical to the extent that they invoke variant (social, political, moral, epistemic) perspectives of meaning of historical agents for answering questions about *why* certain actions and events took place. Importantly, this implies that method, not temporal position, sets history apart. For instance, a historian may explain why people in the nineteenth century practiced bloodletting to cure diseases by invoking their responsiveness to the prevalent epistemic norms of the time. However, it is also by the same method that the historian would explain a contemporary case of bloodletting in alternative medicine, that is, by invoking the agent's responsiveness to epistemic norms of medical knowledge within the relevant community. Consequently, there is no necessary connection between the

[8] Louis Mink, *Historical Understanding*, eds. Bryan Fay et al. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 138.

historian's temporal position and historical explanation. The historian is interested in 'the view from elsewhere' – how reality appeared from the perspective of historical agents.

History vs 'knowledge of the past'

Pre-narrativist philosophy of history refused to equate history with mere 'knowledge of the past'. History is not simply 'knowledge of the past' because 'the past' is not the exclusive temporal domain of historians – and this holds true regardless of whether the past is viewed retrospectively or not. For example, epidemiologists may trace the causal origins of a virus to animal breeding 50 years ago, and palaeontologists may infer the birth of a species from changes in bone findings that are millions of years old. Consequently, both do indeed produce 'knowledge of the past'. Still, it does not follow from this fact that epidemiologists and palaeontologists should be categorised as historians. What does follow is that the past in itself, so to speak, is neither historical nor non-historical, and it is therefore possible successfully to study the past by many different methods. This in turn implies that the predicate 'historical' denotes a particular way of understanding (past) reality, and not our knowledge of the past as such.

For Collingwood, this was *the* crucial point about understanding the distinction between general facts of the past, say that it rained on this day two years ago, and historically understood facts. He argued that historical facts cannot be established without rethinking the thoughts embodied in past action or events. The historian's facts are a function of the category of agency. However, the identification of *what* agents in the past are doing is not separable from *why* they are doing it, which implies that historical understanding presupposes a critical reconstruction of past reasoning in light of the conditions of its meaningfulness. This fundamental point is expressed in one of Collingwood's famous examples of the nature of historical facts as the inside and not merely the outside of past events.[9] His point entails the following kind of distinctions:

(i) A past fact: One person cut another person and 0.5 litres of blood poured out.

(ii) A historical fact: The agents were trying to cure disease by bloodletting.

(i) A past fact: In early January 49 BC, Caesar crossed the Rubicon with a group of men.

(ii) A historical fact: In early January 49 BC, Caesar defied Roman law by crossing the Rubicon.

As these brief examples show, there is a dimension of meaning or explanation in terms of purpose, significance, intentions, desires, goals, beliefs, et cetera already built into the very idea of a historical fact. Such facts are certainly not arbitrary nor merely in 'the head of the agents', as for example the Roman Constitution is not merely in the head of Caesar when his crossing of the Rubicon is explained as an act of infringement upon that constitution. Nor is the practice of bloodletting merely the figment of any one person's imagination.

Importantly, the pre-narrativist notion of a historical fact derives from a specific view about the subject matter of history. Pre-narrativist philosophers argued, Collingwood especially, that the past of history is *conceptually distinct* from the natural past of biological processes and fossilisation. The historical past is the past understood as a space of reasons

[9] Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. with Lecture 1926–1928, ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 213.

that constitutes the social life of the agents – a space that allows the historian to understand agents as either agreeing with or disputing norms.[10] However, contrasting with the natural scientist, it is crucial for historians that their subject matter is not uniform – unlike laws of nature, human norms change with time. Unless historians are able to understand the significance of such changes, they will find the actions of historical agents either utterly unintelligible, or simply dismiss them as stupid or mistaken since they are not in agreement with their own norms. For Collingwood, it was therefore important to distinguish between truth and meaning in historical understanding, and by that distinction show that the concept of historical fact is tied to the social and normative dimension of human existence. Collingwood writes:

> [I]f the reason why it is hard for a man to cross the mountains is because he is frightened of the devils in them, it is folly for the historian, preaching at him across a gulf of centuries, to say "this is sheer superstition. There are no devils at all. Face facts, and realize that there are no dangers in the mountains except rocks and water and snow, wolves perhaps, and bad men perhaps, but no devils". The historian says that these are the facts because that is the way in which he has been taught to think. But the devil-fearer says that the presence of devils is a fact, because that is the way in which he has been taught to think. The historian thinks it a wrong way; but wrong ways of thinking are just as much historical facts as right ones, and, no less than they, determine the situation (always a thought situation) in which the man who

[10] Cf. Wilfrid Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," in *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Robert Colodny (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 35–78.

> shares them is placed. The hardness of the fact consists in the man's inability to think of his situation otherwise. The compulsion which the devil-haunted mountains exercise on the man who would cross them consists in the fact that he cannot help believing in the devils. Sheer superstition, no doubt: but this superstition is a fact, and the crucial fact in the situation we are considering.[11]

To explain the actions of the devil-fearers historically, according to Collingwood, would be to show the ways in which their actions follow from their responsiveness to norms for understanding the natural world at the time. Such norms are usually not the objects of deliberation, but rather, constitutive frameworks for what counts as reasonable behaviour. What makes an explanation of facts historical is the invocation of historically specific norms and reasons, not the mere temporal location of the explanandum in question, that is, that the behaviour of the devil-fearers happened a long time ago.

This pre-narrativist idea about the subject matter or history connects with *one* key epistemic interest of history: to know *why* in relation to what came before the events under explanation. This epistemic interest is obviously expressed in paradigmatic text-book examples of historical questions. For example: Why did the Weimar Republic collapse? What were the causes of the Russian Revolution? It is difficult to imagine that one could answer such questions 'historically', or even intelligently at all, without viewing *as fact* the way the world appeared from the perspective of the relevant historical agents. For such

[11] Collingwood, *The Idea of History,* 317. Compare with the so-called Thomas Theorem formulated in 1928 by William I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas in sociology: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences".

historical facts constitute an important aspect of the significant antecedent conditions in relation to which historians explain the actions and events under investigation. What the historian is interested in is how the *explanandum* – the collapse of the Weimar Republic or the Russian Revolution – connects with preceding historical facts about the situation of the relevant historical agents. For example, they would look at the conflict between socialists and communists in Weimar Germany, or responses to food shortages and state repression in Tsarist Russia, to render intelligible the events that followed.

The perspective of meaning of the agents is not an ontological but a methodological commitment in historical research. This means that a subject matter of research is historical only to the extent that one views it from a perspective of meaning, not because of ontological properties belonging to the subject matter itself.[12] A good illustration of this is Edward Carr's well-known discussion of the concept of a historical event.[13] One may explicate the philosophical bearings of Carr's discussion by the following example: the mere fact of an extra ton of snow coming down in Greenland does not mean that this natural

[12] Giuseppina D'Oro has recently pointed out the importance of this point in relation to philosophy of history about the Anthropocene. The misleading assumption in much of that literature is that classical philosophers of history would have *denied* that human beings are a part of nature. That is not the case: defending the irreducibility of historical explanation to natural science is not tantamount to assuming an ontological separation between humans and the rest of nature. To say that history is methodologically distinct is not to say that human beings, as a species, need a science of their own but that there is a logical distinction to be made between explanations that invoke norms and conceptual relations and those that invoke laws and causal relations. See Giuseppina D'Oro, "In defence of a humanistically oriented historiography: the nature/culture distinction at the time of the Anthropocene," in J-M. Kuukkanen, ed., *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

[13] Edward H. Carr, *What Is History?,* 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

event in the past is also a historical fact. Still, this natural event can become a historical event, or part of one, if it interacts with and/or changes the ways in which people understand their lives. For instance, during the late Middle Ages the climate of the earth became colder, with the result that the Scandinavian settlements in Greenland and North America were abandoned. Historical understanding of this large-scale process must involve investigations of the complex interaction between natural processes and human decisions.

Still, human migration and snowfall are not connected in the same way as a drop in temperature and water freezing to ice. Consequently, understanding migration will be crucially dependent on viewing the agents from a perspective of meaning in which their actions are set within a normative framework constituted by the agent’s own beliefs, desires and knowledge of natural processes. In other words, historians investigate the ways in which the change of living patterns was caused by climate change by showing how that change occurred in and through the understanding and reasoning of historical agents. This kind of investigation would be ‘history’ and not a branch of climatology because the subject matter is determined by the characteristic method of history; namely, it is an investigation that invokes norms and human reasoning for understanding actions and events.

The two-sided mediation of history

Based on the paradigmatic idea of agent-centred history, pre-narrativist philosophers of history argued for a two-sided mediation of the historical past:

(i) The historical past as always-already mediated by the perspective of historical agents.

(ii) The historical past as mediated by the retrospective perspective of historians.

Collingwood and many of his followers gave pride of place to the first side of this relation, while philosophy of history after the narrativist turn tends entirely to neglect the first and privilege the second. In addition, many pre-narrativist philosophers of history thought that retrospectivity is secondary, and that agent-centred action explanation has epistemic priority over narrative (re)description. The reason being that if narrations ascribe significance by linking together two temporally separated events, then this operation must already presuppose historical understanding of the identity of the separate events in themselves – without that, retrospective narration will be mere projection.

These two levels of meaning are often neglected by narrativists, who typically speak more about a distinction between individual facts and synthetisation. For example, the influential works of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit emphasise the idea of history as narrative synthetisation by utilising a two-level hierarchy of historiography. On the one hand, there is a basic level of raw (individual) statements about events in the past and, on the other hand, there is a higher level at which raw data are integrated into a synthetic whole (narrative). The basic level is often exemplified by chronicles or individual statements of facts, and their epistemic status is typically not considered problematic or even a relevant object of philosophical analysis at all. As Ankersmit writes:

> [A]ll that is essential and interesting in the writing of history . . . is not to be found at the level of the individual statements, but at that of the politics adopted by historians when they select the statements that individuate their 'picture of the

past'. . . . Saying *true* things about the past is easy [on the level of individual statements] – anybody can do that.[14]

This dichotomy between simple (individual) statements of facts vs meaning as synthetisation is misleading. As pre-narrativist philosophers argued, no simple, individual facts exist in history – there is inference, interpretation, and invocation of perspectives of meaning already at the most basic level of historical facts. Consequently, the historian's ability to say true things about the past in an individual statement involves questions about meaning and significance as much as the process of retrospective synthetisation does. For instance, consider Hayden White's example of a simple (narrated) chronicle: "The Emperor Henry died; and his son Henry succeeded to the rule."[15] At face value, this may seem as an easy statement of fact – but merely repeating sentences from a chronicle does not count as historical knowledge. As Collingwood argued, historical knowledge is not simply statements about facts of the past but an understanding of the meaning of those facts from within the conceptual framework of historical agents. Importantly, it is unclear what the individual chronicle in question means *unless* one puts to use the historical method of invoking the norms and reasons of the historical agents that created the document in question. To state the obvious, what does the chronicler mean by the terms of succession and rule? Is it safe to assume that these terms denote something analogous in meaning to when Rishi Sunak succeeded the rule of Liz Truss?

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[14] Frank Ankersmit, "[Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations]: Reply to Professor Zagorin," *History and Theory* 29:3 (1990): 278.

[15] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7:1 (1980): 18.

Similar questions of meaning also pertain to individual statements of facts in narrative sentences. Speaking with Danto, the fact that the Thirty Years' War started in 1618 was certainly not available to the historical agents. Nevertheless, historians will be dependent on the perspective of meaning of the historical agents who lived during those times as soon as they aspire to say anything truthful about *what kind of war* started in 1618. If one does not consider projecting one's own concepts and terms on past agents as a species of 'stating simple facts', then one must acknowledge that the truthfulness of individual statements of (historical) facts depends on the historical method – for meaning is prior to truth.[16] In other words, if one aims to understand the past historically, then there are no easy facts to cut and paste from chronicles into synthesised historical narratives.

One important task for philosophy of history in the future is to re-examine the dynamics and relations of dependence between (i) and (ii) above for understanding the possibilities of redescribing historical facts. Not as a distinction between 'facts' and 'meaning as synthetisation' (as in narrativism), but rather as a question about interdependent levels of meaning/explanation in historical research. Therefore, I believe one needs to go further in a task that has been neglected in philosophy of history and ask: In which way is the historian's redescription by narration and colligation dependent upon agent-centred history? The problem is not that this question has not been posed – it relates to central points of disagreement in narrativist philosophy of history. Rather, the problem is that one answer has become very dominant since the 1970s: That there is no such

[16] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus: Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2003), § 4.064.

dependence.[17] In the following, I will argue that this position depends on a fundamental misunderstanding of one of the key insights from pre-narrativist philosophy of history, namely the idea of history as agent-centred action explanation. A proper appreciation of that concept will shed light on relations of dependence between agent-centred and retrospective history as two irreducible elements of historical thought.

Agent-centred history beyond subjectivism

The fundamental claim of pre-narrativist philosophy of history – that historical facts depend on invoking the perspective of meaning of historical agents – may be understood in two distinctly different ways. The first alternative is to understand the claim as *subjectivism*: historical understanding is essentially to give an account of the agent's subjective process of reasoning that led to the actions and events under investigation. A typical rendering of this process would be to try to duplicate the agent's apparent practical inference of beliefs and desires, citing them as necessary and sufficient means and ends for the performance of the action. On this subjectivist interpretation, there is no meaningful distinction between *performing an action* and *the understanding or explanation of action*. Consequently, historical understanding depends on the possibility of 'peeking into the head' of the agent to reveal the (mental) states of believing and desiring that produced the action in

[17] I have argued for this interpretation of narrativism in Jonas Ahlskog's *The Primacy of Method in Historical Research: Philosophy of History and the Perspective of Meaning* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 46–50.

question.[18] This subjectivist interpretation of the agent-centred view implies internalism about reasons for action: All sufficient *explanans* are limited to the subject's 'inner life', that is, her mental states of believing and desiring.[19]

The main alternative to subjectivism is to interpret reasons not as mental states but as facts about the agent's situation. This view, sometimes labelled 'objectivism', holds that to understand or explain action is *not* the same as performing the action, and, therefore, not dependent on duplicating the agent's subjective process of reasoning. To explain action is to connect (in the researcher's understanding) the action with the reasons for its performance. Reasons on this account are not mental states, but facts about the historical agent's situation: not the believing and desiring but what is believed and desired, along with external reasons such as challenges, rules, institutions, norms, et cetera . These factors all make up the motivational background in the setting of which the historian renders the behaviour intelligible as action performed for certain reasons. Accordingly, to call an interpretation 'true' or 'correct' does not depend on accessing the agent's brain or mind. Rather, interpretations are labelled 'true' or 'correct' when they provide the most coherent picture of the relation between the antecedent reasons as facts (from the agent's perspective) and the subsequent action as fact.

[18] Cf. the paper by Adam Bricker in this volume of JPH.

[19] Cf. Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in Ross Harrison, ed., *Rational Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 101–113. For a comparison of Donald Davidson's subjectivism and recent objectivist accounts of reasons for action, see Hans-Johann Glock, "Reasons for Action: Wittgensteinian and Davidsonian perspectives in historical, meta-philosophical and philosophical context," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 3:1(2014): 7–46.

This 'objectivist' conception of the agent-centred view does not limit the potential reasons to the agent's awareness, but only to factors that could possibly figure in the logical space of reasons of the agent. All potential reasons must, of course, be antecedents of the action. Still, historians are not limited to the self-understanding of the agent but may, by researching past records, show that other antecedent facts about the situation, which may conflict with the agent's self-avowed reasons, provide a more coherent connection between reasons and action. For example, a historian may argue, by citing facts about the historical agent's past and subsequent behaviour, that 'saving the republic' was not the effective reason why Brutus stabbed Caesar but rather, more plausibly, Brutus' own career ambitions. And it is the perspective of the historian which determines what will count as coherency and, thereby, ascribes 'correct' reasons for the action (among candidates within the logical space of reasons).

The 'objectivist' view of reasons as facts is a prominent alternative to subjectivism in contemporary philosophy of action.[20] However, one of its early exponents was the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, who in the late 1970s abandoned the subjectivist view he had earlier held in *Explanation and Understanding*[21]. In his later work, von Wright contends that philosophy of action has "suffered under a tendency to look for the 'forces'

[20] It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full account of the current debate about reasons for action. For some interesting accounts relevant for the present paper, see Maria Alvarez, "Reasons for action, acting for reasons, and rationality," *Synthese* 195 (2018): 3293–3310; Giuseppina D'Oro, "Collingwood, psychologism and internalism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 12:2 (2004): 163–177; Frederick Stoutland, "The Real Reasons," in Jan Bransen and Stefaan E. Cuypers, eds., *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 43–66.

[21] Georg H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).

which move us to action exclusively in the 'inner life' of agents."[22] Reasons are 'in' the agent not in the sense of inner mental states, or neural processes, but rather *in* the logical space of reasons of the agent. The very conceptualisation of behaviour as (intentional) action "presupposes a community of institutions and practices in which agents are reared to participate."[23] In relation to his discussion of understanding knocks as reasons for opening doors, von Wright writes:

> [R]easons for action are [normally] things which an agent gets, which 'happen' or 'occur' to him. Usually they enter his 'stream of life' from 'the outer world' in the form of perceptions the meaning or significance of which as reasons for action he has already learnt. The stage, so to speak, has been set for them as potential reasons.[24]

In the same spirit, von Wright writes: "it is, so to speak, a 'global' fact of indefinite temporal duration that a reason for action exists."[25] This entails that whatever one attributes in the understanding as an efficacious reason must already have been part of a set of reasons that

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[22] Georg H. von Wright, "An Essay on Door-Knocking," in *In The Shadow of Descartes: Essays in the Philosophy of Mind* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 83–96, at 95.

[23] Georg H. von Wright, "Intellectual Autobiography of Georg Henrik von Wright," in Paul A. Schilpp, and Lewis E. Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of Georg Henrik von Wright* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 3–55, at 41.

[24] von Wright, *An Essay on Door-Knocking,* 95.

[25] Georg H. von Wright, "Explanation and Understanding of Actions," in Ghita Holmström-Hintikka and Raimo Tuomela ,eds., *Contemporary Action Theory*, Vol 1 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), 1–21, at 9.

were somehow present in the situation of the agent.[26] And if reasons are facts, then there can be no first-person authority in action explanation. As von Wright writes, the truth of action explanation by way of reasons is assessed in terms of coherence, which means that an ascription of reasons for action is to be called "better, more correct or more true" if it "matches a more comprehensive assortment of facts concerning [the agent's] life and character."[27]

Unfortunately, at least since Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History*, narrativist philosophy of history has been committed to a subjectivist interpretation of the agent-centred view. As Danto writes: "the whole point of history is *not* to know about actions as witnesses might, but as historians do, in connection with later events and as parts of temporal wholes."[28] This misleading contrast – between history 'as available to witnesses' vs 'retrospective history' – is rehearsed in many narrativist works. Recently, Chiel van den Akker declared in the same spirit that the central distinction of his book is "between events under the description of witnesses and their contemporaries and events under the description of historians which were *unavailable* to witnesses and their contemporaries."[29] This distinction is misleading since it equates the agent-centred perspective with a subjectivist interpretation of action explanation in terms of reasons. Importantly, on an 'objectivist' interpretation, the concept of agent-centred history depends *not* on what was available to the description of witnesses, but on facts about the agent's situations that can

[26] von Wright, "Explanation and Understanding of Actions," 10–11.

[27] von Wright, "Explanation and Understanding of Actions," 17.

[28] Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, 183.

[29] Chiel van den Akker, *The Exemplifying Past* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 15.

logically be used – since they are antecedents of the event – for rendering the actions and events intelligible in relation to the motivational background of the agent.

The decisive distinction for the agent-centred perspective is *not* the one between descriptions available to contemporary witnesses vs descriptions by historians, but the distinction between rendering events intelligible in relation to antecedent conditions vs ascribing significance to events considering later events. In sum, the agent-centred perspective and the retrospective view are two distinct and irreducible modes of thought *from within the perspective of the historian*, and not, as Danto and other narrativists believe, a contrast between viewing the past only through the eyes of the agents vs viewing the past retrospectively. Confusion about these distinctions may explain why narrativists typically speak as if the retrospective view of history was all there is to history. This tradition goes, again, back to Danto, and van den Akker also writes: "This is in a nutshell the work of a historian: to narrate earlier events in terms of the later events with which they are connected, thereby exposing their historical significance."[30] The mistake here is that one construes retrospective (re)description, which is indeed a central *aspect* of the historian's work, as if it was the only way historical research relates to the past.

The irreducible status of the agent-centred perspective

The supposed primacy of retrospectivity in history has led some narrativists to embrace Ian Hacking's mind-boggling thesis that retrospective redescriptions change what someone in

[30] van den Akker, *The Exemplifying Past*, 102.

the past did.[31] As such, Hacking's incredible idea is the result of pushing to the furthest conclusion the common-sense claim that "What is curious about human action is that by and large what I am deliberately doing depends on the possibilities of description."[32] The philosophical basis for this claim is the contention that action is just behaviour described by community-approved descriptions, and when community practices change this will literally also change the actions attributable to an individual. This supposition is very convenient for those who want to emphasise the definite nature of the turn towards narrativism in philosophy of history: If retrospective redescriptions *change* past action, then there will be no meaningful contrast between agent-centred and retrospective history. Every perspective is a retrospective one *if* past action as such changes when we apply our linguistic resources to it. Consequently, pre-narrativist, agent-centred philosophy of history will seem hopelessly outdated. That conclusion is, as I will show, false.

Hacking's well-known example is about retroactively describing someone's experiences in the past as child abuse, and central to Hacking's discussion are cases in which the modern concept of child abuse was not available to the agents at the time of the events themselves and the agents, including the victim, apparently did not consider the events as maltreatment or harassment even in their own terms. For Hacking, however, a retroactive description of child abuse does not simply mean that consciousness has been raised for the victim but that the past action itself has changed by the retroactive application of a novel

[31] Cf., van den Akker, *The Exemplifying Past*, 14 and Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 35–37, passim.

[32] Ian Hacking, "Making up People," Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery, eds., *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 231.

description. This will, of course, have palpable relevance for the lives of the agents involved: "Child abuse is a new kind that has changed the past of many people, and so changed their very sense of who they are and how they have come to be."[33] Hacking's claims are interpreted as knock-down arguments for the complete primacy of the retrospective gaze in historical research. Roth writes:

> But surely what has been done cannot be undone. That will turn out to depend on what one takes a 'doing' to be. If what happens in the world is at least in part a function of human actions, and if what actions are are Goodmanian kinds, that is, exemplifications of ways a given community descriptively collates behaviors in particular ways, then when new descriptions, new ways of collating physical doings, become available, this changes what actions happened, whenever they happened. Only descriptions create a past in which human actions have meaning.[34]

This claim is only intelligible if one neglects that a central epistemic interest of history *is* to explain action by invoking the perspective of meaning of historical agents. Thus, one essential task for historical research is to investigate and uncover the ways a given community descriptively collates behaviours in particular ways. For example, to understand an edict of the Theodosian code historically as a response to the problem of heresy is possible only to the extent that the historian is sensitive to what kinds of behaviour count as, say, 'heresy' for the historical agents involved. This epistemic interest entails that it is

[33] Hacking quoted in Paul Roth, "The Pasts," *History and Theory* 51:3 (2012): at 332.

[34] Roth, "The Pasts," 333; Cf. Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 42.

crucial for the historian to uphold the distinction between (i) how the historical agents collated behaviour and (ii) how people in the present collate behaviour. The possibility of making this distinction is a presupposition for there even being such a thing as understanding actions and events by invoking the specific epistemic and moral norms of the historical agents.

Paradoxically, the argument for indeterminacy presupposes that an agent-centred history has already been written. Otherwise, it would not be possible to understand differences between how given communities collate behaviour by applying descriptions. For what would be the sense of saying that our descriptions 'change' past action, or even that a particular description is 'new', if we do not have access to an account of the difference between how behaviour is collated in the present in comparison with how it was collated by the historical agents? If that distinction cannot be upheld, we are only allowed legitimately to say that we describe behaviour in the past based on present categories, nothing more. We are not allowed to say that present descriptions are 'new' or that they 'change' past action, for this already presupposes that we do have access to the way in which historical agents collated behaviour in ways different from our own.

However, if we do acknowledge distinctions between our ways of collating behaviour and the ways of the historical agents – which we must if we call our descriptions 'change' – and if we also believe that the identity of action simply *is* the way in which communities collate behaviour, then what on earth could it mean to say that redescriptions *change* past action? Given the premises of the argument, such change would entail that our descriptions can change the descriptions that the community of the historical agents applied. One ends up at this nonsensical claim because past action for the historian is never merely ‘physical doings’ or ‘behaviour’, as Roth and van den Akker assume,[35] but always-already collated behaviour under descriptions that derive their meaning from the perspectives of historical agents. Those who claim that new descriptions can change past action thus owe us an account of how one will be able to convince the historical agents themselves to revise the ways in which *they* collated behaviour in the past.[36]

Furthermore, as Martin Gustafsson has convincingly argued, Hacking fails properly to distinguish what it means for something to fall under a description from what it means for something to be intentional under that description.[37] According to Gustafsson, Hacking ends up at his mind-boggling claim from a failure to appreciate that a new description may be true of an action even if that description cannot capture the intention with which the action was performed. Contrary to what Hacking and his narrativist followers in philosophy of history think, it is possible to argue that retroactive descriptions may state truths about the past for the first time without being committed to the idea that stating such truths changes the past by filling it with new intentional action. For instance, having examined the evidence of Hacking’s example, one may want to say that a historical agent’s behaviour constitutes child abuse by our lights even if that concept was not available at the time – if this is the conclusion that we reach from considering the details of the case. One is then stating a truth about the past that was not known to the agents themselves. The truth in question is that

[35] Cf. Roth, “The Pasts,” 333; van den Akker, *The Exemplifying Past,* 106–107.

[36] For further inconsistencies of the application of Hacking’s argument for indeterminacy to history, see my book *The Primacy of Method,* 69–74.

[37] Martin Gustafsson, “Seeing the Facts and Saying What You Like: Retroactive Redescription and Indeterminacy in the Past,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4:3 (2010): 296–327.

the agent's behaviour would indeed fall under 'child abuse' within our community practices of using such descriptions.

However, it does not follow from the fact that if past behaviour now falls under a new description, then that behaviour must also have been intentional under that description in the past. That past behaviour may fall under new descriptions, but it does not change the fact that what is properly labelled 'intentional' depends logically on the conceptual resources of *the agent's* community. Consequently, a particular behaviour may, for us, constitute child abuse even if it would be absurd to claim that child abuse was intentionally committed in the past. The non sequitur of Hacking's strange claim is revealed: Acknowledging that new linguistic resources may allow us to say truths about the past that were unknown to the historical agents themselves does not require changing the past.[38]

As I have argued, one key epistemic interest of historical research is to understand why past action and events unfolded as they did by invoking the perspective of meaning of the agent which, necessarily, preceded the events. Importantly, historians are interested in the agent's perspective of meaning only insofar as it renders past action and events intelligible – historians do not typically study past action in order to decide whether the historical agents were morally corrupt by our contemporary standards. Furthermore, the question of whether past action falls under novel descriptions can only be of secondary

[38] This seems also to have been acknowledged by Hacking in response to his critics. There Hacking makes a clearer distinction between (i) that later events may make a fact determinate and (ii) that later events can change past action. See Ian Hacking, "Indeterminacy in the Past: on the Recent Discussion of Chapter 17 of *Rewriting the Soul*," *History of the Human Sciences* 2003 16(2): 117–124. Hacking seems also to acknowledge his earlier position as untenable in Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 28–29.

interest in historical research. The issue here is one of *epistemic priority*: Considering whether past action falls under novel descriptions presupposes that the action in question has already been described by invoking the perspective of meaning of historical agents. So, the question of whether something falls under *our* descriptions assumes that historians have already done their job. They may either fail or succeed in that job, but at no point will the descriptions they use for rendering events intelligible to their readers change past action – unless historians can travel back in time and change the thoughts and practices of historical agents.

The epistemic priority of the agent-centred perspective

We have seen that (i) the agent-centred perspective is not tantamount to subjectivism, and (ii) retrospective redescriptions by historians do not, of course, change past action. With those misconceptions out of the way, it is time to reassess the question that was posed previously: In which way is the historian's redescription by narration and colligation dependent upon the agent-centred perspective? I will briefly illustrate the levels of dependence that I believe deserve more philosophical work by citing two examples from contemporary work in the (post)narrativist tradition of philosophy of history.

Based on considerations about colligating the relaxation of state control in the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev Era under the concept of the Thaw,[39] Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen

[39] I owe this example to Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's discussion in Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 97–130.

concluded that "on the level of colligatory concepts, antirealism rules."[40] He came to this conclusion by arguing that colligatory concepts cannot refer directly to the past-as-actuality because they lack corresponding counterparts in the historical world. For instance, the colligatory concept of Thaw exemplifies a conceptual framework invented post-factum for organising large-scale processes and events. Such colligatory concepts do not denote equivalent entities in the past as actuality, somehow independent of the organising work of the historian, and this entails that colligations cannot be true in the correspondence sense.[41] Kuukkanen is perfectly right *if* one remembers that correspondence is not the only way in which one description may be dependent on another description. For instance, the application of 'Thaw' is surely dependent on the fact that historians can understand the significance of certain actions and events for the historical agents involved. The idea of a Thaw is closely associated with the relaxation of state control, and one can meaningfully apply the concept only to the extent that one can identify such a process in the lives of the agents themselves – whether they were aware of it or not.

In fact, the literal meaning of 'Thaw' denotes a process of softening of what was once frozen stiff, and this very meaning makes it an appropriate metaphor for describing the softening of state control. However, understanding events in the past as expressions of 'relaxation' or 'softening' presupposes that historians can identify that actions were later being performed that were earlier considered to be prohibited by the state and, equally, that acts of reprisal did not follow from state officials. Crucially, what counts as 'reprisal' is determined by the standards for applying that term among the historical agents, not the

[40] Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography,* 114.

[41] Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography,* 105.

standards of historians some 70 years later. The colligatory term of ‘Thaw’ redescribes and synthesises a change in conduct, but that very change is discernible only through the identification of action by invoking the perspective of meaning of the historical agents – which means that colligation presupposes that historians have already established an agent-centred history of the actions in question. From this one may conclude that the agent-centred perspective has *epistemic priority* over retrospective (re)descriptions in the form of colligation. For without relying on descriptions of action available by way of the agent-centred perspective, our retrospective (re)descriptions can never be more than arbitrary projections on the blank screen of an unknown past.

This relation of epistemic priority is typically neglected by narrativist philosophers of history. For a recent example, consider the following illustration of retrospective narratives as exemplification by van den Akker. He writes:

> We may agree with Danto that witnesses and contemporaries cannot view their actions from the perspective of the historian. The soldiers obviously witnessed the battle cries but they could not see their historical significance. Wedgwood [a historian] retroactively attributed this significance to their shouts. We may also agree with Danto that the behaviour and attitude of individuals are the proper objects of observation for the historian and that social changes cannot be observed as such in their behaviour and attitudes, nor in the remains they left behind. Wedgwood observed the battle cries of the soldiers, but the social change those shouts illustrate cannot be observed. She *sees in* those cries the change from a primarily religious conflict into a primarily political conflict: ‘insensibly and rapidly, the Cross gave way to the flag.’ This change is not empirically found in their

> behaviour, even though their behaviour illustrates that change. Historians single out behaviour and attitudes because of the significance they see in them with regard to the social change they are interested in. . . . Past attitudes and behaviour receive a historical meaning by illustrating a social change that, as such, cannot be found in the past itself, nor can it be inferred from its remains because it only comes into view in retrospect.[42]

What does it mean in this example to 'single out' behaviour? Certainly, historians do 'single out' one thing as more important than another for their historical thesis, but they (must) do so based on their ability to distinguish between different kinds of action – which is only possible by invoking the perspective of the agents – and not by observing mere behaviour, whatever that might mean. For if historians have not already grasped the actions, then they will have no identifiable items of comparison for singling out one piece of 'behaviour' as having a better fit with their thesis than another. Clearly, what it means to 'single out' something already presupposes that the items among which one 'singles out' have separate identities. Otherwise, the very practice of 'singling out' becomes nonsensical: I am not 'singling out' items if the identity of the items themselves are determined by my own use of them. That is not to 'single out' but simply to ascribe meaning. And unless the narrativist philosopher of history has access to a universal schema for interpreting behaviour, then separating between different kinds of behaviour will depend on identifying the behaviour in question as action in response to the historical agent's logical space of reasons. Contrary to what van den Akker seems to suggest, the historian's subject matter is, as action, already an expression of meaning, which implies that past action does not receive its historical

[42] van den Akker, *The Exemplifying Past*, 106–107.

meaning in total from historians, but only a particular dimension of historical meaning pertaining to retrospective redescription.

However, the relation of dependence just discussed is not merely one of epistemic priority, which will become clear from scrutinising Kuukkanen's example in relation to colligatory choice. One may articulate the additional layers of dependence by the following question: Why should the relaxation of state control in the Soviet Union be colligated as 'the Thaw' rather than as 'the Degeneration'? This question shows that facts in colligation depend on ethical and political perspectives. These relations of dependence stem from the fact that in colligating historical facts, rather than natural facts, the historian faces questions about *doing justice* to the perspective of the agents.[43] For example, historians cannot get away from the fact that their redescriptions require sensitivity to the ways in which the relaxation of state control was understood from the perspective of the Soviet citizens that suffered under state repression – regardless of whether those citizens possessed the concept of Thaw or had any kind of synoptic overview of the historical process. For the concept of historical facts – as articulated in pre-narrativist philosophy of history – forces a choice between different 'views from elsewhere'.

Colligating the relaxation of state control as 'Degeneration' is not false in and of itself – for this synthetisation of the facts would gain support among historical agents committed to orthodox Bolshevism – but it is ethically problematic because it entails that the historian colligates facts from the perspective of those that wanted the Soviet system of oppression to continue. Now, this doesn't mean that the historical past is a mere tool of political or ethical projects in the present, nor that the choice of perspective is arbitrary (as it certainly

[43] Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans.Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Vol 3. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 152.

isn't in the present case). *What* the agent's perspective involves depends on a critical study of the evidence, but *which* perspective to choose does not – even if historians may face questions about demographic representativeness. For the 'views from elsewhere' among which the historian chooses when reconstructing the relation between actions and antecedent conditions, including how that explanation is incorporated in narration and colligation, are *not* somehow neutrally given by the facts of the past itself, but depend on ethically and politically pregnant decisions that individual historians must make for themselves.[44] This question about, so to speak, what doing justice to the past is supposed to mean, again leads us, back to a central insight of pre-narrativist philosophy of history: Retrospectivity is not, as Danto and his followers believe, the whole point of history.

However, it is equally wrong to claim that there is such a thing as a purely horizontal, and thereby completely non-retrospective, understanding of actions and events in history. With clear-sighted recognition of this fact, perhaps the most influential pre-narrativist philosopher of history (Collingwood) argued that retrospectivity constitutes an essential element in his formative idea of history as the re-enactment of thought. Contrary to common misinterpretations, the argument for re-enactment as a condition for the possibility of historical understanding does *not* imply that history is limited to the intentions or views of the historical agents.[45] Collingwood was no subjectivist about action explanation but rather a proponent of what was earlier labelled objectivism: To engage in re-enactment

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[44] In fact, this very ethical and political feature of the historian's responsibility is an important but often misunderstood part of Hayden White's theory of history, see my article "The Idea of a Philosophy of History".

[45] For a misinterpretation of this important part of Collingwood's philosophy of history, see Frank Ankersmit, "Why is there no "Progress" in Philosophy of History?" in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 19/07/2022, https://gtw.hypotheses.org/7111 (Access Date 16/11/2022).

is to rethink the thought that past actions embody from the historian's own position in time.[46]

Pre-narrativist philosophers of history did not assume that historical research is reducible to merely looking at past actions and events from the local perspective of historical agents. As Collingwood often emphasises, rethinking is a critical process, and historians can know the past only if they are "firmly rooted in the present."[47] Historical knowledge, for Collingwood, is knowledge of the past in the present, not telepathic time travel.[48] The integral element in this form of knowledge, re-enactment, is a process in which *historians* rethink thoughts and purposes embodied in past actions and events and thereby give them a new quality as one element "within a whole of thought that goes beyond it."[49] In other words, Collingwood's notion of re-enactment offers an account of historical mediation that acknowledges the irreducibly two-sided character of historical thought: (i) the past as always-already mediated by the conceptual frameworks of historical agents, and (ii) the mediation of the historical past by the concepts of the historian. The general character of the first side, and the dynamics between the two sides in historical research, became to be both neglected and misunderstood with the arrival of narrativist philosophy of history.

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[46] For the close connection between Collingwood's idea of re-enactment and von Wright's 'objectivist' position, see Rex Martin, "Von Wright and Collingwood on Causation and the Explanation of Human Action," in Ghita Holmström-Hintikka, and Raimo Tuomela, eds., *Contemporary Action Theory, Volume 1: Individual Action*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), 21–45. Cf. D'Oro, "Collingwood, psychologism and internalism."

[47] Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 60.

[48] Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 175.

[49] Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 448.

Conclusion

This paper argued that narrativist philosophers of history neglect relations of dependence between agent-centred history and retrospective representation. The reason is that they tend to (i) equate history with retrospective representation, and (ii) equate agent-centred action explanation with subjectivism. At the heart of this misconception is the popular and misleading narrativist division between descriptions available to witnesses vs retrospective (re)descriptions by historians. In opposition, the paper argued that the decisive distinction is, instead, between explanations invoking the perspective of meaning of the agents antecedent to the events vs explanations ascribing significance in relation to later events. These two perspectives are both irreducible modes of historical thought. The importance of the agent-centred perspective for historical thought has been neglected in narrativist philosophy of history, and consequently the relation of epistemic priority over retrospective redescriptions.

Why does the agent-centred perspective matter for history? This issue concerns the very meaning of historical research itself: What is it for? Answering that question is not possible without examining whether history is, as some pre-narrativist philosophers of history argued, an autonomous mode of thought centrally premised on the (in principle) possibility of doing justice to the alterity of the historical past, which means that historical research can surprise and challenge our own conceptions, and thereby serve as a form of critical and self-reflexive cultural self-knowledge. Nor is it possible to answer without examining whether the historical past is merely a function of our own retrospective redescriptions of it in the present, always created and never discovered, which entails that history as such is reducible to a form of cultural memory dressed up with scientific pretensions.

In conclusion, philosophers of history should reassess what it means for the very idea of history to be able to make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate redescriptions of significance or meaning. Faced with these questions, there seems to be a deep and largely unexplored continuity between the concerns of pre-narrativist philosophers of history, who championed the agent-centred view of history, and some of the most pressing issues about the politics of history and memory today. For example, popular retroactive redescriptions of the past – in relation to colonialism, racism, and nationalism – will become pressing issues for philosophers of history interested in examining the role of the agent-centred perspective in our relations to the past. Consequently, future philosophy of history may benefit from exploring conceptions of history before narrativism.