Chapter 11
Philosophy of History: Metaphysics *and* Epistemology

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Abstract Some of the most important questions historians have to answer are "What happened in the past?" and "Why did it happen?" and the epistemological question "How do we know?" or, more modestly, "How are our historical hypotheses epistemically justified?" It is important to note that answers to these questions require not only epistemological but also metaphysical, especially ontological, investigations. Due to the failures of speculative metaphysics of history (in the style of Augustine, Hegel, and Marx), metaphysical questions were frowned upon by recent philosophy of history. Thus, the focus has been on questions of logical form, conceptual analysis, and methodology (analytical philosophy of history) on the one hand and on questions of the literary and rhetorical forms of historical representations on the other hand (narrativism). In both research programs, the reality of history is in danger of disappearing. By discussing recent attempts to reduce the philosophy of history to the epistemology of historiography, I will argue that philosophy of history and scientific historiography are in need of metaphysical, especially ontological, investigations without falling back into the fallacies of a speculative metaphysics of history. Finally, the fertility of such enquiries shall be illustrated by raising an important question, namely, "How close can the contact with the historical past be?" and by attempting an answer.

Keywords Philosophy of history • Metaphysics • Ontology

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11.1 Philosophy of History

Nowadays, old-style philosophy of history (in the manner of, say, Augustine, Vico, Herder, Hegel, Marx, or Spengler) is not of high repute. The fanciful vision of history inevitably approaching a final destination and the pretension of knowing this necessary historical progression a priori are rightly considered as discredited. This form of philosophy of history rested both on bad metaphysics and on the neglect of epistemological investigations.

Currently, a different mistake is about to impend: partly because of the failure of speculative philosophy of history, partly due to prejudices against metaphysics in general, metaphysical questions are dismissed altogether in contemporary philosophy of history.[1] Thus, philosophers confine themselves either to epistemological and methodological questions (analytical philosophy of history) or to questions about the literary and rhetorical forms of historical representations (so-called narrativism). Put another way, a reduction of philosophy of history impends, either to epistemology or methodology of historical science (analytical philosophy of history) or to rhetorical or literary studies on the form of historical representations (narrativism), with a neglect of all metaphysical issues.

Since the narrativists frequently exaggerate the importance of the "reshaping" of data or even consider it to amount to a fictionalization, they typically end up in endorsing extremely anti-realist theories of history. Ontological anti-realism about history is usually combined with a radical relativism, preferably in the form of social constructivism stating that every society constructs its own past in accordance with its prevailing (non-epistemic) needs and interests. Anti-realism concerning the historical past is not only poorly justified,[2] it is also cynical toward the victims of history. All the atrocities and all the suffering history is filled with did not originate from intellectual constructs but rather from concrete persons, actions, and events.

Analytical philosophers of history are inclined to confine philosophy of history to the epistemology and methodology of historiography, that is, to the philosophy of scientific historiography. Thus, in his important book *Our Knowledge of the Past*, Aviezer Tucker decisively does not develop a philosophy of history but only a philosophy of historiography.[3] In a similar vein, Peter Kosso has emphasized that "[t]he philosophical issues in the analysis of historiography are almost entirely epistemological."[4]

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[1] Similar problems can be found in natural philosophy. Here, too, speculative flights of fancy were followed by a total renunciation of metaphysics.

[2] For pertinent arguments against various forms of relativism, anti-realism, and constructivism, see Boghossian (2006).

[3] Tucker (2004).

[4] Kosso (2009), p. 9. Nota bene, I am only complaining about the neglect of ontology of history. To be sure, with regard to the epistemology and methodology of the historical sciences, Kosso (2001, 2009) and Tucker (see especially Chap. 3 of Tucker 2004) have made very important contributions.

In both of these research programs, historical reality is in the danger of being moved to the background or even to disappear. Within narrativism, it mutates into an aesthetic artifact, an artwork produced by a historiographer kissed by the muse Clio. In some trends of analytical philosophy of history, it wastes away into an aggregate of past events cut off from us by an unbridgeable chasm, a past which can at most be reached via hazardous causal inferences. Whereas early analytical philosophy of history was at least worrying about the explanation of historical *events*, more recent authors, such as Tucker, restrict their investigations to the question "How is the historical *evidence* explained?"

In the following, it will be shown at which points philosophy of history as well as scientific historiography relies on answers to metaphysical, in particular ontological, questions, without relapsing into the errors of speculative metaphysics of history. The brand of metaphysics I am suggesting is not fanciful, but disenchanted and analytical. It stands in the tradition of Aristotelian metaphysics and its renaissances.[5] Especially the project of a category theory or categorial ontology shall be made fertile for an ontology of history.

The principal thesis of this chapter is that *ontological* inquiries belong to the philosophy of history no less than *epistemological* investigations. This becomes plain when you (a) consider the historical sciences in their whole extent, (b) take seriously the most important questions historians should answer, and (c) keep in view the sources of knowledge that are available to them. In the following, I advocate a comprehensive ontology of history and begin to sketch some of its questions. Finally, the fertility of such enquiries shall be illustrated by raising an important question, namely, "How close can the contact with the historical past be?" and by attempting to answer this question.

11.2 The Spectrum of the Historical Sciences

Let us start with the concept "historical sciences." By "historical sciences" (in a broad sense), I mean all sciences whose inquiries are directed at the past (including, of course, its effects on the present). These sciences include, inter alia, cosmology, geology, and evolutionary biology. When talking about history and historical sciences within the context of philosophy of history, people typically think of history in a narrow sense: roughly, as all the sciences asking questions about that part of space-time that has been influenced by individual and collective actions of human beings (or that could at least have been influenced thus). These comprise, inter alia, political history, economic history, church history, and military history, as well as comparative linguistics, literary history, art history, history of science, and history of philosophy.

[5] See, for instance, Loux (2006) and Schaffer (2009).

11.3 Questions for the Historical Sciences

Scientific disciplines are often characterized by their respective objects and the methods to be applied. I prefer to focus on the pivotal questions that characterize the respective discipline. Which questions do historians wish to answer and which questions should they answer? Which questions are requested to be answered by the consumers of historiography? First of all, there are two main questions:

1. What happened in the past?
2. Why did it happen?

With each of these questions, we face the epistemological question:

3. How do we know? Or, more modestly, how are the respective hypotheses epistemically justified?

From an ontological point of view, an improvement of question (1) becomes already apparent, since (1) was tailored one-sidedly to happenings or events. The more comprehensive questions read as follows:

(1.1*) What was the world (or a certain part of it) like at time t_i? Which properties did the world (or a certain part of it) possess at time t_i?

(1.2*) How did the world (or a certain part of it) change between t_i and some later time t_{i+n}?

(2.1*) Why was the world (or a certain part of it) at t_i the way it was? How did it come about that the world (or a certain part of it) at t_i possessed those properties?

(2.2*) Why did the world (or a certain part of it) change between t_i and the later time t_{i+n}?

11.4 From Epistemology to Metaphysics: Objects and Sources of Historical Knowledge

That a metaphysics of history is needed already ensues from epistemological considerations. To see this, let us consider (a) the objects of historical knowledge, and (b) the sources of knowledge that are at our disposal.

(a.1) The historical sciences investigate the past and the development from the past to the present. Therefore, a metaphysics of time and change is required. (a.2) The historical sciences deal with human beings and their deeds and omissions. Human beings are persons and agents; thus, we further need a metaphysics of personhood and personal identity as well as a metaphysics of actions and omissions. (a.3) Human beings are cultural beings; they develop and pass on their culture. In addition to an ontology of the natural world, we therefore need an ontology of the cultural world. (a.4) Human beings are social beings; they build communities, societies, and institutions. Correspondingly, we are also in need of a social ontology.

(b) Let us now consider the sources of knowledge that are available to the historian. Epistemologists and historians classify the sources from which we may obtain justified beliefs about the past in different ways. Epistemologists normally list perception (or observation), introspection, memory, testimony, and reason as types of sources. Three of these sources[6] are available for answering the historical questions mentioned above:

(i) Memory
(ii) Testimony
(iii) Inferences from the present to the past (in which reason and experience work together)[7]

Historians mention:

(A) Memory
(B) The oral, written, and pictorial tradition
(C) Remains, including (C.1) unintended remnants and (C.2) intentional monuments[8]

[6]As we will see below, on closer examination, perception or observation (as supported by proper background information) is to be added.

[7]For example, inferences from properties of preserved testimonies and material remains to properties of objects, actions, and events of the past.

[8]Cf. Droysen (1882), §§20sqq.; Bernheim (1908), pp. 255sq.; for more elaborate classifications, see Feder (1924), pp. 84–105 and Howell and Prevenier (2001), Chap. I.

11.5 Metaphysics of History: Tasks and Projects

If historians and philosophers of history make self-conscious use of ontological categories at all, they mostly talk of *events*.[9] At times, there is also talk of historical *facts*. However, historians and philosophers of history hardly ever dwell on clarifying those categories.[10] In any case, the confinement to or fixation on very few ontological categories is unfortunate and misleading. In a categorial ontology of history, at least the following categories should be taken into account:

- Individuals (Aristotelian substances)
- Persons
- Individual actions and omissions
- Artifacts
- Properties (universals) and individualized properties (so-called tropes)
- Relations, in particular causal relations
- Events
- States of affairs and facts
- Groups/communities
- Collective actions and omissions
- Institutions, organizations, or the like

Among the tasks of a categorial ontology of history are the following: an analysis of the constitution of historical reality, an analysis of each particular category of historical reality, and an analysis of the relations holding between these categories. With regard to fundamental postulates, it is important to emphasize the following:

(OH 1) The ontology of history has to include all categories of physical reality.
(OH 2) The ontology of history has to include all categories of mental reality.

In addition:

(OH 3) The ontology of history has to include categories of cultural reality.
(OH 4) The ontology of history has to include categories of social reality.

[9] According to an influential current, historians are instead concerned with structures. Sometimes, it is absurdly suggested to students of the historical sciences that they have to choose between an investigation of events and an investigation of structures.

[10] To be sure, there are some exceptions: for example, Gruner (1969), Walsh (1969), and Pachter (1974) put some effort in clarifying the concept of an historical event.

Justification of these postulates is straightforward: The physical, mental, cultural, and social realities do not constitute separate worlds or separate strata of being. On the contrary, they constitute a unity. This holds in particular for the possibility of causal interactions.

Whether an ontology of history also has to include categories sui generis, that is, categories of historical reality as such, still requires investigation. (Possible candidates might be the historical situation, epoch, crisis, social movement, an alternative course of the world, etc.).

11.6 Seeing, Hearing, and Feeling the Past: Perception as a Historical Source of Knowledge

According to many philosophers of history, the past is absolutely inaccessible. It is separated from us by an unbridgeable chasm. This chasm is supposed to be not merely temporal but also epistemic and ontological. The prevalent opinion is that the past is gone for good. The only thing we might be able to do about it is to make hazardous conjectures, or we are even bound to construct it all by ourselves in an act of free creation.

Of course, I cannot investigate this misleading picture in every respect here. But I at least want to question it. With the background of our reflections on ontology of history at hand, I invite you to consider the question: How close can the contact with history get? How close can we get to the historical past? The hypothesis I am going to defend is the following:

> (OP) In some cases, it is possible to perceive the past.

And this does not only hold for that part of the past that belongs to space-time regions that cannot be influenced by human beings. (As is well known, it is possible to see stars that do not exist any longer.) We can also observe some parts of history made by humans.

In this context, it is important to remember that not only reports and other oral or written testimonies are preserved but also concrete objects which exhibit many of their original properties: fossils, skeletons, bone fragments, food remains, etc.; pyramids, cathedrals, town walls, etc.; photographs and movies; and sound recordings. While some of the original properties have to be inferred, others can be observed directly.[11] Indeed, a whole spectrum of cases has to be taken into account:

[11] At this point, one must be careful to distinguish between causal and epistemic intermediaries. Of course, in any causal process many intermediate causal links can be distinguished. What I want to dispute is that our access to the past is mediated by epistemic intermediaries (in the form of

(a) Entities whose properties are preserved unchanged – which can therefore be observed and measured
(b) Entities whose properties have changed but which can nevertheless be inferred reliably
(c) Entities whose properties have changed and which can no longer be inferred reliably
(d) Entities that are completely past and gone, in the sense that there are no discernible traces left

The clearest examples of cases of type (a) are material remains. Napoleon is claimed to have said to his soldiers: "Be aware that forty centuries look down upon you." Less metaphorically speaking, it can be said that every single observer of the pyramids sees the past, or put more exactly certain properties of past reality.

To take a more controversial example, when we regard Nadar's photographs of Charles Baudelaire, we gain knowledge of some of the poet's properties. If we listen to audio recordings of Winston Churchill's speeches, we hear the statesman's voice and words.

To be sure, observation of the past is only possible if we possess the requisite concepts and background beliefs, and in order to have them, a lot has to be learned. This, however, holds for perception in general. Thus, it remains true that we directly perceive some aspects of the past instead of having to infer them in a rather roundabout way.

Certainly, only a small part of the past is accessible to us in this way. Nevertheless, being able to perceive past reality is very important for the phenomenology of historical experience and its institutionalization in museums, memorials, and other places of remembrance. Moreover, this access to the past provides a point of departure for the rejection of radically skeptical and anti-realist views of history and historical science.

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inferred beliefs) in every case. Some aspects of past reality can be perceived without such epistemic intermediaries, and in this sense directly.

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