

# THE USE OF HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

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The use or value of history today has been questioned by many. But it is not an issue that we should feel free to ignore. Our values, our perspectives, and our very identities are reflections of our cultures; we know that we are not merely biological beings. Yet neither are we just cultural beings – we are *historical* beings. Our value as human beings cannot be understood without also considering our histories.

It is this latter insight that is one of the guiding principles of the work of George McLean. Research on values, on metaphysics, on religion – and, arguably, in every sphere – needs to take account of individuals as beings with a distinctive history. Whether McLean is participating in a conference in Bangkok, leading a seminar in Washington, DC, or reading a paper in Nairobi, he recognises that the hermeneutical task requires looking at the human person as a being coming from a particular place at a particular time. If history has no use, then what can be said about the nature and value of the human person?

History is not just an academic interest; it is important to life – and it is particularly significant at a time when the conventions and norms of religion and science no longer hold firm. People want to know who they are and where they come from, and so they turn to history – to family or local history, to genealogies and chronicles, but also to stories and accounts of historical figures, of nations and civilisations, and even histories of the world. But here, too, little appears settled, for we have institutional histories, ‘people’s histories,’ academic histories – and we are told that all histories are ideological, each promising to tell things ‘as they were’ and yet frequently leaving out more than they include. So the underlying assumptions involved in the writing of history concern not only scholars, but anyone struck by the uncertainty that exists at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## I

If we look at history – academic history – as it is engaged in today, we see that many historians find themselves confronted with challenges concerning the presuppositions of history. So, while some may go no further than to admit that there is a distinction between history as ‘event’ or a series of events, and history as a discipline, historians and historiographers (and philosophers as well) raise the issue of what history is – whether it is a science, a social science, an art, a “corpus of ascertained facts” (Carr, 1961, p. 6), a social practice (that inevitably reflects ideologies and models of gender), or a ‘conceptual structure’ that makes no claim to be ‘about’ people or events. Some historians and philosophers go further, raising such questions as whether there are any *facts* or only *judgements* – whether one can ever *know* the past and, if so, how one could attain it. Others raise the points that, even if the past can be known, one cannot conclude anything from this knowledge – and that historical understanding or explanation is not even possible.

As historians (and philosophers) today consider and reconsider questions central to what history is and what it is about, the answers they give certainly divide them. But it seems that the source of this division does not lie in the interpretation of data, but in how one answers the more basic questions of the possibility and status of historical knowledge. In current debates, then, what one takes history to be, what it is to do history, and so on, are influenced by what is generally called ‘historicism.’

‘Historicism’ is an ambiguous – or at least vague – term. It appears in the movement called the ‘New Historicism’ that has been influential in literary and cultural studies (cf. Michaels, 1987; Greenblatt, 1988; Veese, 1989). The term has also been used in (what is for an Anglo-American audience) a somewhat idiosyncratic sense by Karl Popper, where it is equated with a kind of grand narrative determinism – that, “through studying the history of society, we can detect patterns and recurrences which will enable us to predict the future” (Popper, 1957) – which, to Popper, not only denies human freedom but suggests that there may be some way in which to engage in ‘social engineering’ to create the perfect society. And the term refers as well to a movement rooted in 19<sup>th</sup>-century German scholarship in religion, philosophy, and history,

concerned with the basic questions of how knowledge – and particularly judgements of value about what is ‘known’ – are possible when we recognise that the conditions under which we know are in flux, that human knowledge is limited, and that what we know has an essentially subjective character which seems to preclude absolute objectivity and the possibility of making definitive judgements (cf. Iggers, 1995; Megill, 1997; Hoover, 1992).

Historicism in its most widespread and popular sense today is close to this third description. It holds that “human phenomena cannot be understood in isolation from their historical development and from their significance to the particular historical period in which they existed” (Martin, 1991, p. 103) – that “the nature of any phenomenon can only be adequately comprehended by considering its place within a process of historical development” (Gardiner, 1995) – and it emphasises the particularity (and possibly incommensurability) of past events compared with present events. Because of this, it is often equated with a kind of historical relativism. Historicists reject the claim that there can be “a purely ahistorical perspective on human affairs” (Kemerling, 2003) and hold that there can be no understanding events or the actions of agents as events or actions of a certain type; events have meaning and significance only within a particular context. *Everything* is subject to “interpretation.” Historicists also suggest that, at best, the only legitimate judgements (i.e., value judgements) we can make about these events are those we could have made *at the time* (– so that, by extension, we have relativism).

Historicism, then, challenges not only the possibility of historical understanding, but the giving of ‘historical explanations,’ and it would also appear to challenge the possibility of history itself as being anything other than “something spun out of the human brain” (Carr, 1961, p. 30).

Historicism has become entrenched within our intellectual culture; at least, one finds a widespread acceptance of many of its underlying principles. Some scholars have become so convinced of the relativity of claims of knowledge and meaning, that they are reluctant to claim that we can say anything true about the past. Indeed, they question whether ‘truth’ is a proper historical concern. This has contributed to the development of a post-modern approach to history and to a philosophy of history which rejects any attempt to present the past “as it really was”

(Ranke in Carr, 1961, p. 5), any claim that there are any principles or rules or models of history, and any attempt to see history as a science – particularly an explanatory science. This approach is also resolutely anti-foundationalist.

The postmodern ‘solution’ or response, then, has been to focus on issues other than knowledge, objectivity, and meaning, and to see history as a construct – as a narrative that does not have a particular logic or character to it (Ricoeur, 1983-85) – and not to be concerned with seeking to explain events (cf. the essays in *A New Philosophy of History*, Ankersmit and Kelner, eds., 1995). Some have chosen to discuss the character of historical writing as literature, or in relation to gender or politics or ideology (Smith, 1998). Others, having similar views, have become more open to seeing even historical ‘fiction’ as a source of knowledge and understanding.

There are, of course, those who resist this. There seems to be something wrong in just giving up on history, or saying that it has no use. Some scholars have suggested that the post-modern turn, exemplified by its fundamental historicism, “is self destructive and can lead to solipsism” (Hoover, 1992, p. 355). Others have tried to argue that reality exercises a constraint on theory, and that the objections of the post-modern sceptic just are not borne out (cf. *Telling the Truth about History*, in Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 1994). Some argue that, no matter how persuasive – or how difficult to refute – it is, this post-modern approach to history is “methodologically irrelevant” to historians, so that “hardly anyone... *acts as if* he or she” believes it in practice (Martin, 1995, p. 327). Still others acknowledge the legitimacy of the issues raised by historicism about the “historical sensitivity” of knowledge claims or the relativity of knowledge, but seek to avoid post-modern or relativistic conclusions (whatever this might mean); this is a strategy suggested by Hilary Putnam’s 1981 *Reason, Truth, and History* and also acknowledged, at least in part, by E. H. Carr (1961). There are those who return to such philosophers as R.G. Collingwood, whose recognition of the contextual character of knowledge nevertheless claims to allow room for genuine historical understanding. And there are other responses besides.

Nevertheless, historicism presents us with a number of challenges. Is history *passé* – a ‘thing of the past’? Why should anyone seek to

understand history? Can we ever speak of objectivity in history? To see better the present debates in history, and to help in answering or responding to these three challenges, it may be useful to review briefly how matters got to where they are today. After all, the present debates about history and historicism, like all events, are ‘historical’; they are products of what has come before.

## II

History – by which I mean the activity or discipline of history – is old. The “Father of History” in the west is commonly held to be Herodotus (c 490-425 BCE), and it is perhaps no surprise that he is also sometimes referred to as the “Father of Lies.” It was his *History*, written at the time of the Peloponnesian War that sought to do more than chronicle or relate a series of events; its aim was to interpret events, explain them, and draw a lesson from them.

But a key moment in the discussion of history occurred more than 2,000 years later, in the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>- centuries. Following on 18<sup>th</sup>- century models of history reflected in the work of scholars like Edward Gibbon and William Robertson, the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>- century was still a period of detailed, comprehensive historical accounts, and included attempts to describe the course of events, not just in a nation or an empire, but in the world as a whole. In the Anglo-American world, for example, Robert Labberton (1812-1898), Edward Augustus Freeman (1823-1892), Thomas Keightley (1789-1872), and H. G. Wells (1866-1946; see Wells, 1920) continued to provide grand historical accounts. (On the continent, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) may be included as well [see Spengler, 1939].) Here we see instances of historians writing works that were not mere chronicles, and which explicitly sought to interpret events, to put them into a ‘meaningful’ order, and to suggest some kind of direction in them. A model of such endeavours – and perhaps the greatest project in history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – was that of Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975). In his magisterial twelve volume *A Study of History* (1934-61), Toynbee produced a comparative study of 26 civilizations, analyzing their development, and discerning not only a pattern, but a “lesson.” Focussing on civilisations rather than nations or

empires, Toynbee allowed that there can be a development in history – that history is not cyclical – but neither is it necessarily a straight line of progress from the past to the future.

Yet the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>- centuries were, in many respects, also a watershed in the writing of history. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, an increasing number of scholars – particularly philosophers – argued that undertaking large, narrative histories was highly problematic. The stirrings of this concern, first found in the historical and literary criticism of Biblical texts in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., in Friedrich Schleiermacher [1768-1834]), and inspired by the work of J.G. Herder and G.W.F. Hegel, came to have an influence in dealing not just with texts, but with any talk about events in a historical past.

These ‘stirrings’ did not influence just 19<sup>th</sup>-century German thought; it had an impact far beyond its borders. Critical reflection on history was undertaken by many of the leading Anglo-American philosophers and, while this interest may not have been pervasive, it was acute. F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) raised a number of fundamental questions in his *Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874). Influenced by the German Biblical scholarship and criticism, Bradley argued that (historical) testimony does not stand as a fact on its own, but must be evaluated from the perspective of the historian. History, then, must be “critical” – it cannot pretend just to be a “copy” of what happened in the past. The historian must select, and must also be aware of the presuppositions of the approach she or he brings to historical enquiry. For Bradley, the historian’s judgement is the basis of history; “The historian ... is the real criterion” (Bradley, 1968, p. 78). Bradley does not deny that there are facts; he simply rejects the view that these facts exist independently of the historian and are there for scholars just to collect. While Bradley’s position is not (narrowly) historicist, it recognises the inseparability of (value) judgement from event and the importance of understanding historical events within their contexts. Bradley’s view, R.G. Collingwood later wrote, was a “Copernican revolution in the theory of historical knowledge” (Collingwood, 1946, p. 240).

Bradley’s colleague, Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923) has seemed to many to take an even more cautious and sceptical view of history. When confronted with “mechanistic” accounts of history or

accounts that emphasized the fundamental role of “great individuals,” Bosanquet was struck by their “fragmentary” and dead quality. He was suspicious of any history *qua* narrative or *qua* chronicle of the contingent events of the past which proposed to give a “total explanation” – and of the historian who sought to provide an explanation of “the minds and natures of great men as if he was God’s spy” (Bosanquet, 1912, p. 79). Such history was a “fragmentary diorama of finite life processes unrolling themselves in time,” consisting of “mere conjectures,” and “incapable of any considerable degree of being or trueness” (Bosanquet, 1912, pp. 78-79). And thus Bosanquet wrote what some take to be a remark dismissive of the whole practice of history – that history was “the doubtful story of successive events” (Bosanquet, 1912, p. 79).

Bosanquet did not, however, mean to reject the value of history, or imply that history could not be done, or say that there is no point in studying history, or hold that history is merely “one damn thing after another.”<sup>3</sup> (He was, for example, the author of *A History of Aesthetic* (1892) and, like many ‘speculative philosophers’ of the period, had been schooled in the Greek and Roman classics and had a deep appreciation of history and tradition.) Bosanquet’s objection was, however, that history – when it is understood simply as a series of contingent events in a narrative – ignores the general; it is not a concrete universal. And so Bosanquet proposes that, rather than concern ourselves with this kind of history, we should turn to art and religion, both of which bring together the particular and the general. Thus, Bosanquet could write a history of aesthetic – of the development of aesthetic consciousness in and through particular works of art – but not be interested in a history of art.

We see this “critical” approach to history in R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943) as well. Influenced by Benedetto Croce (1866-1953) and by the idealism of his teachers in Oxford, Collingwood is best known for his *The Idea of History* (posthumously published in 1946). Here, Collingwood develops some of the insights of the idealist tradition by arguing that “All history is the history of thought ... and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind” (Collingwood, 1946, p. 215). An experienced archaeologist and a distinguished historian of Roman Britain (see Collingwood, 1926, 1923, 1930, 1936), but a philosopher by inclination, training, and profession,

Collingwood had the experience to reflect seriously on history. He argued for a closer relation between history and philosophy than was generally held, and insisted that philosophy must understand itself as a historical discipline – that philosophy’s task was to articulate the “absolute presuppositions” characteristic of an age or way of thinking, and that the truth and falsity of philosophical claims must be understood in their context. Yet Collingwood believed in the possibility of historical knowledge and historical explanation through the method of re-enactment. (i.e., a “re-thinking” of the historical actor’s thoughts). Collingwood focused on the historical figure as an agent – on what he or she thinks – rather than on just what the person does. Explanation, then, requires understanding – and hence the appropriateness of re-enactment.

Collingwood has been called a historicist (Strauss, 1952; Mink, 1987<sup>4</sup>). Perhaps rightly so – though if it is, it must be in a sense that is consistent with Collingwood’s rejection of relativism and subjectivism. Indeed, whether Bradley, Bosanquet, or Collingwood actually held strongly historicist views, in the sense in which the term is used today, is doubtful. For while they raise some problems in giving historical explanations, they do not deny that this is possible, nor do they claim that there can be no history or historical truth.

One of the key features of these three thinkers, then, was that they identified some central problems in the practice of history. And so, by the mid-20th century, the study of history was much more critical, and there were serious questions about the nature of that activity itself – and indeed, of what it was to do history.

### III

This ‘moment’ in the philosophical reflection on history described above – though I am speaking here of a ‘moment’ that lasted some 50 years - was a ‘watershed’. And it evoked two radically different responses in the understanding of history in the Anglo-American world.

The first was a move to formal or critical philosophy of history; this can be said to begin in the middle of the 20th century, about the time of the death of Collingwood in 1943. In a 1952 essay, “Some Neglected Philosophic Problems Regarding History,” Maurice Mandelbaum



presented what was becoming clear to many who engaged in, or thought about, history, and that was that how one ‘did’ history was rooted in an issue in the philosophy of history – that there was a distinction between “formal” and “material” approaches to the field.

“Formal” philosophy of history dealt with “a philosophical concern with the problem of historical knowledge” and attempted “to interpret the historical process itself” (Mandelbaum 1952, p. 317); “material” philosophy of history sought to provide “some ‘meaning’ within the whole of man’s historical experience” (Mandelbaum 1952, p. 318). Much the same distinction was made, at the same time, by W.H. Walsh – between critical and speculative philosophies of history – the former dealing with such questions as “the nature and validity of historical knowledge” and the latter being “attempts to give an over-all, ‘metaphysical,’ interpretation of the course of events” (see Oakeshott, 1952).

Speculative philosophy of history, then, was that which hailed back to Augustine, and through Bossuet to Vico, to Hegel and Marx, on to Spengler and Toynbee and up to Karl Löwith and Niebuhr<sup>5</sup>. Here, one found accounts that professed to discern a pattern within history, to find a principle that serves as an axiom of interpretation and explanation, and therefore to give a meaning to the historical process.

Formal or critical philosophy of history, however, did not have such ambitions. It focused on the assumptions underlying history – for example, about the nature and objectivity of historical knowledge. Other questions included whether we can establish causal relations among events and, if so, whether they have a general character. Broadly, formal philosophy of history was concerned with epistemological and logical problems. Because of this focus on the analysis of the fundamental concepts of historical practice, most philosophers of history in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-American tradition can be seen as formal philosophers of history. It is an approach that one sees reflected early, in Herbert Butterfield (1931), in E.H. Carr (1961), and in other historians. And there were attempts by philosophers to ensure that history could be a truth-bearing discipline: by Karl Popper and C.G. Hempel – who insisted that unless history provided causal explanations involving “covering laws,” it had no title to call itself a science (Hempel, 1966, 1963, and

1942; Popper, 1949) – and by those like William Dray who insisted that explanations with ‘law governing’ rules or general statements were possible in history, even if these rules did not have a necessary character (Dray, 1957). Formal philosophy of history was widely accepted, no doubt, because of the awareness of problems with the selection process used by historians in gathering data and the adequacy of any resulting knowledge – but also because of suspicion of speculative philosophies together with (or perhaps because of) the anti-metaphysical and anti-systematic tendencies of mid-20th century philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

Whether one can make a rigid distinction between speculative and formal philosophy – whether each does not implicitly lead the philosopher to questions characteristic of the other – is a fair concern. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s, Anglo-American historiography and philosophy of history was almost exclusively formal, and the dominant questions were the formal (epistemological) questions of explanation, of objectivity, and of whether history can be a science.

But there was a second response to the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussion of history, that went beyond many of the mid-twentieth century “epistemological” questions of explanation and objectivity. Some found many of the concerns of philosophers and historians simply question begging – for they presumed that there *can* be explanation and objectivity when such things are simply not possible. Such challenges were – and are – pressed by those who, explicitly or implicitly, adopt the ‘principles’ of postmodernism.

The term ‘postmodern’ is, like many terms to describe intellectual movements, vague (see Sweet, 1997) – but in general one can say that it is rooted in the conviction of the legitimacy of historicism and, by extension, of the inappropriateness or impossibility of claims of objectivity and truth.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Jean-François Lyotard, postmodern historians insist that both “upper case” history and “lower case” history have collapsed. (The former is “a way of looking at the past in terms which assigned to contingent events and situations an objective significance by identifying their place and function within a general progressive schema of historical development usually construed as appropriately progressive” [Jenkins, 1997, p. 5], the latter is “the study

of the past ‘for its own sake’” [Jenkins, 1997, p. 6]). Thus, speculative and formal philosophy of history are both rejected.<sup>8</sup>

Many see the postmoderns as taking the late 19th-century theory of ‘critical history’ to its logical conclusion – that, by recognizing the role of the historian in history, we must also challenge many of the pretensions to truth and objectivity of history itself. And so, inspired explicitly or implicitly by the historicism of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century German and Anglo-American philosophers, postmoderns asked: Is there room for the concept of truth in history? Is it proper to attempt to judge (morally) the motives and actions of agents in the distant past? Or is all this ruled out of court, given the questionable status of historical knowledge? Today, then, while some scholars may still hope that there is a ‘meaning’ to history, few would claim that reason, observation, or experience *shows* that there is and, like pluralistic postmodern philosophers, many have come to accept the possibility that there is no such meaning at all. Some have gone so far as to suggest that, because historical objectivity is impossible – there always being bias in the posing of questions and in the selection of data – history should become more focussed on advocacy (Zinn, 1970).

Of course, while postmodernism is influential – largely because of the persuasiveness of some features of historicism – it is not without its critics (e.g., Brunzl, 1997; Evans, 1997; cf Fox-Genovese, 1999). And so it would be presumptuous to hold that postmodernism expresses the consensus of historians or philosophers of history, and a mistake to think that contemporary philosophy of history has entirely left behind the debates and controversies of the preceding generation. Nevertheless, in the scholarly literature today, a large – perhaps an inordinately large – amount of time is spent discussing the various post-modern criticisms (and there are many) of history, historiography, and the philosophy of history. And thus the three challenges of historicism raised earlier need to be addressed. But I would suggest that the preceding ‘history’ of how we arrived at where we are may provide us with some responses to these challenges.

## IV

As we have seen, postmodern historicists press the points made by those like Bradley, Bosanquet, and Collingwood concerning the place of the historian in history, the pretensions of a value-free historical science, and the alleged independence of historical knowledge. But do these points in fact lead us to, or oblige us to hold, the conclusions of the postmodern historicist? Consider the first question raised earlier, in section I: Is history a thing of the past? When we ask such questions as ‘What is it to have knowledge of the past?’ or ‘What are the conditions for the possession of historical knowledge?’ it may seem that we cannot avoid ending up in some kind of subjectivity – for how (as Bradley noted) can history be done without reference to the standpoint or the context of the historian? But does this – as some postmodern critics maintain – eliminate the possibility of the study of history as a study of what has happened in the past? As students of R.G. Collingwood remind us that “the possession of a point of view by the historian should not be confused with bias”<sup>9</sup>, and we can acknowledge the inevitability of having a perspective without being committed to arbitrariness or relativism. After all, it is obvious that any historical account is given from a point of view, and that this point of view may not have been available to the historical agents. But this does not entail that there is incommensurability in the accounts or bias. Historians can or do know what their presuppositions are, are normally open to debating and criticizing them, and seek to avoid unreflective bias. Historians recognize that their histories are always written from a perspective representative of their time, and yet seek to organise or present them in a way that allows them to engage the past in a ‘critical’ and self-critical way. In other words, a “critical history” (to use Bradley’s term) recognises the inseparability of context from historical knowledge while, at the same time, avoids the potentially relativistic consequences of postmodern historicism.

Yet – a postmodern might claim – even if we can have historical knowledge, history is nevertheless *just* a “thing of the past”, that neither bears on contemporary discussion, nor can be subject to any kind of (contemporary) normative assessment. Substantive critical commentary on the actions or the motives of past historical agents is not possible; (as

Quentin Skinner<sup>10</sup> seems to hold) we are prohibited from making such (putatively anachronistic) attributions and limited to merely formal commentary.<sup>11</sup> Collingwood, however, would allow we *can* reasonably know what past historical agents held “on their own terms”; this is, in part, what is undertaken when we engage in re-enactment. And because we focus here on historical agents as agents – decision makers – we can hold them responsible for their views (as Collingwood does in *The New Leviathan*). Thus, we can appropriately make substantive critical comments (as distinct from simply formal remarks) about a past historical agent’s blindness or lack of blindness on an issue – at the very least, provided that there are reasons to believe that that person could have had his or her position challenged by others who lived at that time.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to ignore that Collingwood’s re-enactment theory is not without its difficulties, and later scholars, such as William Dray, have tried to develop Collingwood’s insights in a way that avoids these problems. Nevertheless, it is clear that Collingwood did not see the role of the historian in doing history as providing any reason to doubt that there is something called the past, or that we can have access to the past – and there is certainly no logical connexion between Collingwood’s claims and the postmodern ‘conclusions’ putatively drawn from them.

But even if history is not just a thing of the past, what – if anything – are we to do with history? Why seek to understand history? Even if we grant that we can know the past, are not past events also unique – the results of events that, strictly, can never take place again? And doesn’t it follow that history is, therefore, of little help to us?

I think that there are two responses to this, implicit in the accounts of Bradley, Bosanquet, and Collingwood. The first is that we seek to understand history because it is required in order to make sense of the present. The postmodern challenge to historical knowledge and understanding – based on the concern that our location in the present and in a ‘different’ place always impedes any genuine knowledge – is misplaced, for neither the present nor one’s aims for the future can be known unless they are already understood in the context of the past. Indeed, ignorance of the past severely inhibits action in the present.<sup>13</sup> For Collingwood, for example, we must know the past in our own lives in order to know our own ‘presuppositions’, and these serve as guides for

action and our own personal development.<sup>14</sup> Again, it is by a study of the past that we can have a “trained eye for the situation in which one acts”<sup>15</sup> – and thereby can bring about progress.

Second, not only do we need to have some understanding of the past to make *sense* of our own present (i.e., to ‘make ourselves’), but we need to know the past so that we can be aware of the present in a broader sense. Collingwood would point out that a re-enactment by the historian of the thinking of the historical actors allows us to understand it as a process that is historical and relative, and yet does not require explanation of the past in terms of principles or laws. Thus we do not need a casual theory to explain why an agent acted or chose as he or she did, or a law-like account of history. And so, even if we accept the putative uniqueness of historical events, there can still be an understanding of the past.

Still, some postmodern critics argue that such ‘knowledge’ of the past can never be genuine because it can never succeed in being objective; it is ‘just’ a perspective. (It is ironic that a principal argument for this, presupposes the correspondence theory of truth which postmoderns generally reject.) These postmodern critics would add that historical explanation involves historical understanding – and understanding is a process that is historically relative and value laden. But there can be no objectivity – not in history or in any social science or even science. And it is precisely its claim to objectivity that makes conventional or traditional history suspect. Many post-modern historians would consider that a “narrative” is sufficient to provide all we need (and all we can have) *qua* explanation.

Nevertheless, Bradley and Collingwood (who saw himself as completing Bradley’s ‘Copernican Revolution’<sup>16</sup>) – both figures whose work lies at the origin of this historicist critique – would insist that objectivity can still be achieved. Indeed, they would argue that objectivity can be achieved not in spite of, but because of, the fact that historians write from a point of view. By re-enacting the thought of agents, Collingwood says one is attempting an objective picture – by taking into account all the relevant details that one can, being ready to adjust or to correct error, and so on.<sup>17</sup> It is true, of course, with the writings of different historians we have before us a multiplicity of perspectives. But, first, historians would standardly allow that these perspectives and

presuppositions are open to discussion and critique – and that, to do so, they admit that there is enough that is shared to allow for the possibility of the engagement of, and a reconciliation between, differing views. And, second, to the extent that this diversity remains, there is no sufficient reason to believe that the result is less, rather than more knowledge. Consider a Marxist and a feminist account of an historical event. Each would draw attention to details the other might not. But by having both to hand, we may have a better understanding than only one – even a ‘best’ one on its own – might provide. While the multiplicity of different accounts does not cumulatively provide a general principle or law, i) what counts as good research is the same, ii) one recognises and overcomes certain problems in the selection of data and in the selection process, and the result is that iii) one may have a better *understanding* of the event even if not a better *explanation* of the event. If none of this were the case, why take feminist or Marxist criticism seriously? In short, there is no good reason to assume that objectivity entails that exactly or only one correct perspective does or can describe best how events took place. Such an “interspectivism” among historians, taking its inspiration from Collingwood, would thereby allow one to claim that one’s knowledge is objective. This does not mean that historical truth is absolute and unchanging, but that it meets a standard, appropriate to the object of study, where ‘the past’ and the historian’s self awareness of doing history and his or her judgement lead to understanding the event.

As a result, if we adopt a broadly Collingwoodian conception of re-enactment – which contains elements of narrative - we may have both a better understanding of the agency of historical actors, and a basis for objective knowledge of the past.<sup>18</sup>

In short, we can take some of the basic claims of postmodern historicism, and see that, if we look at their roots, this origin not only does not entail postmodernism, but may provide for a more robust account of history as objective. While taking seriously the three challenges of historicism enumerated at the beginning of this paper, we can allow that historical explanations are not value free, and yet objective; we can still claim that we can have knowledge and understanding of the past; and we can hold that understanding the past is an activity that is done not just for its own sake, but because it bears on our capacities to understand ourselves

and the world around us, and to respond thoughtfully to what may happen in the future.

## V

The preceding remarks present some reasons for holding that there is a use for history today.

‘Doing’ history today cannot ignore the arguments of postmodern critics and of all those who would argue that the ‘subjectivity’ of the discipline of history makes it impossible to carry out. It requires reassessing or rethinking what it means to have historical understanding, and what it is that historians do.

Nevertheless, in this paper I have suggested that, if we return to the work of some of the key figures in Anglo-American philosophy of history, we can see that a postmodern, historicist critique of the ‘use’ of history need not succeed. I have argued, first, that history is not just a thing of the past. This does not mean that history is just a series of events that the historian merely identifies and puts into some externally determined right order. It requires a critical effort on the part of the historian as well as an act of interpretation. But neither does this mean that there is nothing in ‘the past’ that we must respond to.

Second, I have argued that the issues of historicism and historical understanding have to be carefully and fully assessed. As paradoxical as the notion of knowledge of what does not exist – i.e., the past – may be, it is obviously necessary both for our social practices and for our ability to understand the present; this suggests that the subjectivist or post-modern may simply be posing a set of pseudo problems. This is not to deny that the questions have force, but perhaps the issue of the nature of the past is just like the issue of the nature of time – a puzzle about which Augustine remarked, “If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know” (Augustine, 1993, Bk. 11, ch. 14, sect. 17).

Third, I have argued that there is no sufficient reason to abandon the search for objectivity. Rather than rule out objectivity *tout court*, it seems plausible to hold that there are different ways in which we might understand objectivity – with some ways more likely to be fruitful than



others. Here, we need to explore the notion of standpoint or perspective, what it entails, and whether (and how) it is consistent with objectivity and the possibility of making judgements about the past.

And finally, I have suggested that, in returning to, and reassessing, the work of figures such as Bradley, Bosanquet, and Collingwood - who were central in the critical understanding of history - we may be able to resist the temptations of historicism. Despite the many difficulties that critics note, we may still have confidence that history is possible, that there can be some kind of historical understanding, and that we can learn lessons from – and make criticisms of – history.

There is a use for history.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Institut for Pædagogisk Filosofi - Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitet, Kobenhavn, Denmark, on March 25, 2004. As well, I draw on material that will appear in the Introduction to my book *The Philosophy of History: a re-examination* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2004).

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<sup>3</sup>Despite Bosanquet's view of history, he is not an ally of the post moderns, and would not hold that since we can't know the past itself, there is nothing to know and, in consequence, history is simply explained away.

<sup>4</sup>See, especially, the essays "Collingwood's Historicism: A Dialectic of Process," and "Collingwood's Dialectic of History," pp. 223-45 and 246-85.

<sup>5</sup>Löwith, 1949; see also Jaspers, 1953.

<sup>6</sup>Outside of the Anglo-American world are figures like Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Raymond Aron (1905-1983). Despite dealing in his later works (e.g., *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, 1883) with the question of whether there can be a "foundation of the human sciences" – a question which bears indirectly on the possibility of a philosophy of history – Dilthey also addressed the issue of historical understanding, and thus can properly be regarded as a critical philosopher (see Dilthey, 1962). Similarly, Aron (1961) provides a powerful critique of positivism, but also proposes the use, in history, of an imaginative reconstruction that is more than empathy.)

<sup>7</sup>Historicism was not, at first, particularly influential on historians or historiographers; neither was it immediately adopted in philosophical circles. Thus, Karl Marx provided a purely objectivist and materialist philosophy of history which was - notwithstanding later works by Benedetto Croce (*Storia come pensiero e come azione*, 1938; Engl. Tr. 1941), Reinhold Niebuhr (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1939), and Oswald Spengler (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918; Engl. Tr. 1939) - the last profoundly influential philosophy of history.

<sup>8</sup>Keith Jenkins and Hayden White (1973) have had a significant influence here.

<sup>9</sup>See James Connelly, 'Is History a Thing of the Past?', in Sweet (2004), pp. 27-42, at p. 39.

<sup>10</sup>See Skinner (1969).

<sup>11</sup>See Catherine Wilson, "Postformalist Criticism in the History of Philosophy", in Sweet (2004), 43-62.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>See Franz Schreiner and Mostafa Faghfoury, "Temporal Priority and a Better World", in Sweet (2004), 119-127. Here, they argue for a similar point, drawing on the work of Wilhelm Dilthey.

<sup>14</sup>Lionel Rubinoff, “History, Philosophy and Historiography: Philosophy and the Critique of Historical Thinking”, in Sweet (2004): 163–196, at p. 191; cf. Collingwood 1946, pp. 226; 230.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>18</sup>See for example, Karsten Steuber, “Agency and the Objectivity of Historical Narratives”, in Sweet (2004), 197-222.

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