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Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography

PAUL A. ROTH

... one cannot appeal to any specific 'sense of history' as a basis for excluding any given critical practice from the list of proper critical approaches. . . . In short, one cannot check the fall into 'radical relativism' to which pluralism in general is prone by appeal to 'a sense of history', as if this were an unproblematic concept not threatened by the same 'relativism' which critical pluralism wishes to avoid. (White, 1986, 'Historical Pluralism')

Ironies pervade debates concerning the nature of historical knowledge. Traditional debates between, e.g., historians and positivists, center on whether or not there are differences in kind between the sort of knowledge produced by the human as opposed to the natural sciences. However, what fuels and perpetuates this ostensible disagreement, I maintain, are problematic assumptions about the nature of knowledge which erstwhile opponents *share*. Without these shared assumptions, the familiar debate would not be possible.

The philosophical challenge regarding the nature of historical knowledge has become one of how to reconfigure the alternatives from those currently envisioned.¹ To achieve this reconfiguration, assumptions which structure the present debate on historical knowledge must be rejected. These include at least three assumptions: (1) that knowledge implies certainty; (2) that there exists a determinate or fixed past; and (3) that one acquires knowledge by application of an appropriate method. Each of these presuppositions – the epistemological, the ontological and the methodological – is, I argue, unacceptable.²

In what follows, I argue first for the need to reorient debate concerning historical knowledge by examining the problematic assumptions within one traditional theory of historical knowledge – historicism. Second, and in order to indicate how radical this change must be, I show how unwanted tenets regarding

historical knowledge return even in theories designed to repress them. In pursuing both of these goals, I focus on the work of Hayden White. For White has, perhaps more than any other contemporary historiographer, criticized conventional views of historical knowledge and offered alternatives to them.

Indeed, my task is made both easier and more difficult by White's work. Easier inasmuch as the conceptual therapy advocated in this paper owes many insights to, and shares many conclusions with, theses he has long advocated. But difficulties arise inasmuch as I interpret the philosophical consequences of our shared views quite differently than does White. For, I contend, historians gain no more in methodological or epistemological insight from study of a theory of tropes (or other rhetorical devices) than they did from positivist studies in the logic of explanation, and for closely related reasons. Most importantly, I contend, his epistemology requires him, against his intention, to reassert untenable assumptions about knowledge he otherwise rejects. White, in his efforts to reform the criteria for evaluating historical knowledge, promotes in the end a position which makes rational evaluation impossible.

Part I investigates historicism as a theory of historical knowledge, considering, in particular, Hayden White's critique of historicism and one of his alternatives to it. Part II traces the evolution of White's position regarding the nature of historical knowledge. In particular, White's eventual embrace of a form of skepticism about the possibility of historical knowledge – aesthetic historicism – is documented. I argue there that White endorses this skeptical view only because he misconstrues the import of his own best insights.

I

Historicism, at least in one of its chief forms, is the view that certain phenomena – specifically human beings and their social doings – are knowable only by virtue of their particular historical development: 'knowledge of socio-historical things coincides with a knowledge of their history' (Ankersmit, 1983: 122). For the sense of historicism which concerns me, all historical knowledge is temporally local knowledge.³

Historists, no less than those they oppose, assume that there is a 'real' meaning to events which perspicacious investigators may discover. It does not matter, in this respect, if one holds that each moment is immediate unto God, or that general laws function in history to explain events, or some intermediate position.⁴ What counts is that these rival conceptions assume that the object of historical knowledge is not transcendent; an historical event is not a *Ding-an-sich*. It is a belief in a determinate object of knowledge, and in an investigator's possession of the tools to ascertain what this object is, that unites thinkers as otherwise diverse as Dilthey and Comte, and traditions – hermeneutics and positivism – otherwise thought antithetical (Connolly and Keutner, 1988: 14).

Each believed that it was possible to launch history on the sure and certain path of a science.

The term 'knowledge' is central here, for what separates historians from their epistemological Others is *not* any dispute about whether there is historical knowledge. All parties to the traditional dispute believe that there is. What distinguishes historicism as an epistemological doctrine, rather, is the special character – usually, the non-generalizability – of such knowledge, and the methods proper for acquiring it.⁵

Taken as a thesis about the nature of historical knowledge, historicism is conceptually tied to hermeneutic philosophy, for the historical problem is to recapture the thought of another time. Historicism connects, via this link with hermeneutic philosophy, to a series of standard dichotomies – idiographic v. nomothetic, *Geisteswissenschaften* v. *Naturwissenschaften*, understanding v. explanation – which have long divided the field concerning the nature and possibility of historical knowledge.⁶

Iggers provides magisterial surveys of the fate of the concept of historicism.⁷ His accounts register a tension within the notion of historicism he catalogs. The tension is this: on the one hand, historicism implied a relativity of values, for historical study made it appear as if each era were unique (Iggers, 1965: 304–5). On the other hand, this very result – the 'discovery' of what other ages believed – was the product of history *qua* scientific discipline, a discipline which produces, by its distinctive methods, knowledge of different epochs (see also Ankersmit, 1983: 120–4).

Here the hermeneutic emphasis of historicism reveals itself as the twin of the positivist conception of knowledge.

In a sense, Dilthey stood much closer to Auguste Comte and the positivists. . . . For Dilthey thought that once it was accepted that the answers for all metaphysical questions reflected the philosophy of life (*Weltanschauung*) of the speculative thinker rather than the demands of logic, the methods of the individual human social sciences could be formulated and these fields raised to a scientific level. (Iggers, 1965: 307)

In other words, implicit in the historicist conception of history is a reflexive paradox, only partially grasped by its exponents. When considering history as a field of study – as the object of inquiry – historians worried about relativism. But, at least for some, the failure to uncover universal historical truths did not engender questions regarding the very methods used to ascertain these results. The relativism, in other words, is one underwritten by objective methods inquiry.⁸

There is, in addition to the reasons just given, a further epistemological argument for the conclusion that a historian cannot know what a historian claims to know, viz. the uniqueness of the event or individual being studied. The argument draws on Donald Davidson's justly famous paper, 'On the Very Idea

of a Conceptual Scheme'.⁹ Davidson, in that paper, examines the claim that some 'conceptual schemes' are incommensurable, i.e. that it might be impossible to translate or interpret what others mean.¹⁰ Davidson asks, in this regard, how one might in fact verify a claim to radical incommensurability. Either we can translate or interpret what another says or we cannot. If we can, then the claim that the schemes are incommensurable is false, for we have just translated one into the other. But if translation proves impossible, then what evidence exists that there is a language to be translated?

The debate here is between impositionists – those who argue that we impose our logical, ontological or ethical presuppositions on others – and a priorists – those who believe that we regularly discover that others are really 'just like us'.¹¹ This debate is rationally irresolvable. We have no basis by which to distinguish an imposed order from one that is 'really there'. For a resolution turns on how one tells the history, and there is no single way that the history can be told.

The problem is *not* the alleged incommensurability of opposed historical accounts, but their underdetermination relative to the chronicles from which they are constructed.¹² That is, even if the data are more or less agreed upon, it is still possible to construct, as W. V. Quine puts it, explanations which are empirically equivalent but logically incompatible.¹³

Underdetermination subverts the promise of the methodological assumption that investigators employing a suitably scientific approach are bound to achieve consensus.¹⁴ In addition, what I term the epistemological assumption of historicists, i.e. the view that there is a distinctive form of historical knowledge, separate from the sort of knowledge produced by the natural science, is also subverted by the ironic technique of showing the historians' methods to be historical products. There exists no reason to believe in the certainty of knowledge claims, or in the timeless legitimacy of our methods.¹⁵

Historicism, taken as a philosophy of history, is caught in a paradox of self-reference.¹⁶ For if the historicist view is correct, there is no reason to exempt a historian's methods from historical analysis. But this engenders the conclusion that we could not know – given the equation of knowledge with certainty – even that a historian's methods are correct, for they are as much a historical product as other normative beliefs. One cannot, without begging the question at issue, appeal to historically contingent methods to arrive at historically non-contingent conclusions (including, of course, conclusions concerning the epistemic status of some particular set of historically received values).

A historicist who was aware of this irony is Droysen, at least in an interpretation for which Hayden White argues. On White's self-consciously anachronistic reading of Droysen, Droysen's primary concern is with the historian's order of things, with what 'we might call the aim or purpose of the discourse, not to be confused with its subject matter, or referent' (White, 1987: 90). Against, for example, interpretations such as Iggers' (1968: 112ff.),

which emphasize Droysen's commitment to a notion of objective knowledge of history, White's focus is on 'Droysen's presentism', i.e.

. . . his insistence that the subject matter of historical investigation, the interpretative framework used to disclose some meaning for it, and the representational mode chosen to insert it into current theoretic and practical activities are not given by the data themselves but are chosen by the historian – in response to imperatives . . . immanent always in the current praxis that defines the historian's social horizon. . . . Thus envisaged, every putative investigation of the past is and can only be a meditation on that part of the present that is really either a trace or a sublimation of some part of the past. (White, 1987: 9)

White's emphasis on Droysen's presentism contains, however, a telling slip. White claims: 'Historical theory thus envisaged is nothing but a sublimation, a raising to consciousness of the practice of society itself' (White, 1987: 97). What is striking, of course, is the juxtaposition here of 'sublimation' and a 'raising to consciousness'. On the one hand, both White and Igers agree that Droysen's writings may be interpreted as a sublimation of his own political/social outlook. But, on the other hand, it is Hayden White, not Droysen, who argues for the raising to consciousness of historical practice.¹⁷ The issue is not whether Droysen had a way out of historicism, but if the strategy White imputes to Droysen effectively evades the problems perceived with traditional debates on historical representation.

I agree with White generally, even if not convinced by his reading of Droysen, that one cannot pretend to a science of history and a historicist philosophy. There is no more reason to credit the idea that there is a determinate past, knowable in its unique specificity, than there is to accept the idealist/natural-law view that differences are only apparent, a mere overlay on traditions, values or principles constant across time.¹⁸ The issue, I suggest, is whether problems of self-reference are unique to a historicist position.

Does emphasis on discourse avoid the realist assumptions which White finds so objectionable? White sometimes writes as if self-referential questions of method can be stepped around or avoided.¹⁹

The more interesting question would be to ask: not *what* do Freud, Foucault, etc., assert, allege, argue, and so on, but *how* do they establish, through the articulation of their texts, the plausibility of their discourse by referring the 'meaning' of these texts . . . to a complex sign system that is treated as 'natural' rather than as a code specific to the praxis of a given social group . . . ? To ask this question is to shift hermeneutic interest from the *content* of the texts being investigated to their *formal* properties, considered . . . as a dynamic process of overt and covert code-shifting by which a specific subjectivity is called up and established in the reader, who is supposed to entertain this representation of the world as a 'realistic' one

in virtue of its congeniality to the *imaginary* relationship that the subject bears to his own social and cultural situation. (White, 1982: 289)

But speaking here of process as supposedly distinct from meaning cannot disguise the fact that White's talk of semiological codes is just another way of talking of real meanings again, dressed up to appear as if this were now a formal object of study. Problems with the world–word relation are not obviated by shifting to talk of codes. For the epistemological problems here are, as stressed above, problems concerning the theory–evidence relation. Referring to a code as a metalanguage does not change matters, for the logical distinction between an object language and a metalanguage is purely relative. It does not mark one language as possessing some special epistemological status. Underdetermination applies as readily to codes, however imagined, as to theory in physics.

White attempts to problematize the notion of ordinary reference but privilege the notion of semiological code. As becomes apparent, however, such codes function in ways which presuppose the problematic notion of reference which, White maintains, they are to replace.

The crucial question for any historical investigation is the evidential status of any given artifact, . . . its *referential status*. Of what is the artifact evidence? . . . As long as the object to which an artifact gives access is conceived to exist *outside* the artifact, these questions are irresolvable, at least when it is a matter of historical perception. And this because . . . a datum is *past* only in the extent to which it is *no longer* something to which I can be referred as *a possible object of living perception*. . . . The indexical, iconic, and symbolic notions of language, and therefore of texts, obscure the nature of this indirect referentiality and hold out the possibility of (feign) direct referentiality, create the illusion that there is a *past out there* which is directly reflected *in* the texts.

But even if we grant this, it is the reflection that we perceive, not the thing reflected. By directing our attention to the reflection of things that appear in the text, a semiological approach to intellectual history fixes us directly before the process of meaning production that is the special subject of intellectual history. . . . (White, 1982: 305)

If we are thrown back on the bare text as the only 'reality' with which to deal, semiology is no more a 'fix' on meaning than are such paragons of referential language as proper names or indexicals. For if, as White maintains above, the 'indexical, iconic, and symbolic notions of language' only 'feign' reference, how does linguistic analysis escape the stigma of ersatz referentiality? We have no special knowledge by acquaintance of what codes encode; our epistemic liabilities apply as readily to codes considered as arrays of syntactic and semantic devices as they do to those languages which White deems guilty of feigning their connections to objects. If historians err by imagining they can exempt their

methods of study from their object of study, White too is guilty of a misplaced confidence in his method's ability to discern what is constant amidst the flux.²⁰

II

Philosophy of history is thought to matter, by historians otherwise as different as Novick and White, on the one hand, and Rüsen and Koselleck, on the other, for purposes of deciding what ought to be taught. Rüsen, for example, calls for the formation of a special discipline of 'historical didactics'; Koselleck bemoans history's lost status as the teacher of life (see Rüsen, 1987: 276, 285–6; Koselleck, 'Historia magistra Vitae', in Koselleck, 1985). White, for his part, worries aloud in many of his publications (and Novick shows how well placed these worries are) that what passes as historical consensus in most texts is most often the undigested ideological leavings of particular authors (see White, 1982: 286–8).

The issue is whether to acknowledge the legitimacy of White's critique entails worship of the devil relativism.²¹ I deny that the sort of relativism and skepticism which troubles Rüsen, Gossman, et al. is worth troubling about.

Rorty has quipped that, 'Except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good'. He goes on immediately to add, 'The philosophers who get called "relativists" are those who say that the grounds for choosing between such opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought' (Rorty, 1982: 166).²² It is in this Rortian spirit that the evolution of Hayden White's thought needs to be examined. For if historians do not know the truth when they see it, what does convince them to accept or reject the works that they do? In other words, since relativism is the *de facto* state of the discipline, why the denial and fear?

What appears worrisome, to revert to an earlier noted typology of historicisms, is 'aesthetic historicism'. The suggestion that, in the end, aesthetic judgments are all there is is what excites fear and loathing of historicism (or any number of views associated with the notion of postmodernism).²³

Writing in 1959, White clearly anticipates the aesthetic turn and, most significantly, strongly resists it. Aesthetic historicism, White declares in a work from this date, overvalues the imaginative and underrates the weight of evidence. It

. . . went too far and ended by asserting that the traditional objects of historical reflection, past human thought and action, were less important than the original, imaginative creation of the individual historian. Fact must give way to the creative imagination which confronted it. . . . The *effect* of the narrative was considered more important than its truth or falsity. (White, 1959: xxi)

White then goes on to castigate this view, identified with Michelet, Burckhardt and, of course, Nietzsche, for denying 'that reason is anything but the tool of an

animal will, having no regulative function whatsoever. . . . [It was] destructive of a balanced view of humanity which does justice to its creative and regulative elements at one and the same time' (White, 1959: xxii).

Yet this early inclination to resistance has, in the last few years, collapsed into a type of Nietzschean celebration of aestheticizing influences. By the 1970s, White's views reveal a significant shift. The regulative element for historians is not reason, but the figurative and story-telling language which belongs to the historian's cultural repertoire. White, by this point in time, emphasizes the 'explanatory effects' which familiar stories have for their audiences. The work of the history – what convinces – is not found in an argument, under some familiar construal of that term, but in the skill of the historian *qua* writer, i.e. in the conviction generated by the historical text as a literary work.²⁴

Presumably as a result of his developing conviction that historians move 'to the imperatives of narrative discourse' (White, 1975: 49). White too finds the distinction between historicism and its imagined conceptual antitheses 'virtually worthless' (White, 1975: 49, 53). For while historicists and their opponents debate the method proper to historical inquiry, both camps are more or less unwitting dupes of their own rhetoric.

A rhetorical analysis of historical discourse would recognize that every history worthy of the name contains not only a certain amount of information and an explanation (or interpretation) of what this information 'means', but also a more or less overt message about the attitude the reader should assume before *both* the data reported *and* their formal interpretation. This message is contained in the figurative elements appearing in the discourse which serve as subliminally projected clues to the reader about the *quality* of the subject under study. . . . As thus envisaged, those historians who pride themselves on avoiding the use of all jargon and technical terminology . . . should not be regarded as having avoided falling into 'historicism' as a result, but rather as being historicists of a particular kind. I would call them 'figurative historicists' inasmuch as they remain unaware of the extent to which *what* they say about their subject is inextricably bound up, if not identical, with *how* they say it. (White, 1975: 53)

If anything, this rhetorical element is even more important than the logical one for comprehending what goes on in the composition of an historical discourse. For it is by figuration that the historian virtually *constitutes* the subject of the discourse; his explanation is little more than a formalized projection of qualities assigned to the subject in his original figuration of it. (White, 1975: 54)²⁵

Characterizations of histories and the activity of writing history such as these have led White's views regarding the poetics of history to be deemed the 'New

Rhetorical Relativism'. White, thus, comes to embrace the aesthetic historicism he previously criticized and rejected.

White's poetics, as many have observed, both emphasize and limit relativism. Hans Kellner captures this aspect of White's tropism when he refers to it as a 'bedrock of order' (Kellner, 1989: 193–227). Kellner writes tellingly, as well, of the 'anxiety' and 'terror' this rhetorical relativism inspires in most guild historians. However, the attention which Kellner and others pay to White's theory of tropes results in a neglect of White's lingering discomfort with 'aesthetic historicism'.

This discomfort manifests itself, in the essay just discussed, in White's remarkable suggestion – one not repeated to my knowledge in any of his work from this period – that not just denies the incommensurability of histories, but articulates a program for their reconciliation. Kellner has it only partly right, that is, when he identifies the theory of tropes as a bedrock of order. For the order imposed on historians' discourse by the tropes yields, or so White suggests, to a deeper order provided by the intertranslatability of the tropes.

At the same time, however, if this theory of linguistic determinism is correct, it offers a way out of an absolute relativism and a way of conceptualizing a notion of progress in historical understanding. Because it is a theory of *linguistic* determinism, we can envision a means of translating from one mode of discourse to another, in the same way that we translate from one language to another. This way of conceptualizing the problem of relativism is superior to that which grounds points of view . . . because we can imagine no way of translating between these, while we can imagine ways of translating between different language codes. It makes no sense to say that we can translate the perceptions of *a* Frenchman into those of *a* German, those of a Renaissance man into those of a Medieval man, or those of a radical into those of a liberal. But it does make sense to say that we can translate the perceptions of an historian who has cast his discourse in the mode of metaphor into those of one who has cast his in the mode of synecdoche, or those of one who sees the world ironically into those of one who views in the mode of metonymy. *And if the tropes of language are limited, if the types of figuration are finite, then it is possible to imagine how our representations of the historical world aggregate into a comprehensive total vision of that world, and how progress in our understanding of it is possible.* Each new representative of the past represents a further testing and refinement of our capacities to figure the world in language, so that each new generation is heir, not only of more information about the past, but also of more adequate knowledge of our capacities to comprehend it. (White, 1975: 66, emphasis added)

The tension between what White says here, and his remarks cited previously is manifest. If figurative discourse is constitutive of the account one offers, as White

most frequently claims, then there is simply no basis for the type of translation he imagines. One cannot 'translate' between the rules of, e.g., chess and soccer, since the rules of each game are constitutive of those games, i.e. define what it is to be engaged in that particular activity. There is no neutral material to be mapped from one realm to the other; the two games are not aspects of some shared thing. More generally, for discourses that are constitutive of their objects, their objects are, for that very reason, incommensurable.

By the 1980s, White has renounced any qualms regarding aesthetic historicism. Now declaring himself to be a 'genuine pluralist and one who is even prepared to bear the label of radical relativist' (White, 1986: 486), he castigates those, such as Wayne Booth and M. H. Abrams, who imagine that relativism is defeated by the summing of perspectives or stories.²⁶

In opting, as I suggest he has, for an aesthetic historicism, White joins other figures on the intellectual scene, e.g. Richard Rorty, who are 'gentle Nietzscheans'.²⁷ By this phrase, two aspects of White's form of historicism are emphasized. One is the element of free choice, which is for that very reason a moral choice, on the part of the historian regarding how history is written. Kellner characterizes this aspect of White's outlook as follows: 'For White, the major problem behind historical writing is the question of *will* expressed in the choice of principles of representation; allegory is precisely the existential projection of our will upon the given field of historical artifacts' (Kellner, 1989: 291). The emphasis on writing history as a willing of its form is the Nietzschean element.

The other aspect of White's thought to which the phrase alludes is political/moral. Gentle Nietzscheans, however, are those who 'forget' that Nietzsche's thought has been put to very different political uses (as the conflicted biographies of De Man and Heidegger testify). The point is this. White emphasizes the degree to which, as I would prefer to put it, explanations are underdetermined by the available data, and this in order to make room for human agency. White's Kantianism informs not only his theory of the tropes *qua* categories of understanding, but also his moral theory. For both Kant and White, however conditioned are the stories we tell by the categories of understanding, this determinism is the mind's own work. To paraphrase Kant, historical knowledge [for White] is tropically determined but noumenally free. We are, thus, doubly responsible for the histories we write: epistemologically, inasmuch as the plots are created and not found, and morally, since we are responsible for the choices we make.

In the end, White develops a philosophy of authorial moral responsibility but not one of historical criticism.²⁸ But the two doctrines cannot readily coexist. His aestheticism provides grounds, that is, for holding people responsible for what they write; but he nowhere provides grounds for criticizing the product as opposed to the writer. Put another way, aesthetic historicism, as White develops it, counsels that there are no more grounds for accepting or rejecting histories

than moral/aesthetic ones. So if one does not blink at the moral consequences of one's views, debate is at an end. *De historibus non est disputandum*.

This way of putting matters is clearly contentious, making White more into one of Rorty's 'cooperative freshmen' than, surely, he is. What this formulation emphasizes, however, is the difficulty of articulating a pluralism that retains critical or normative bite. Pluralism becomes toothless, for purposes of critique, once it is totally aestheticized. Ironically, given White's understandable opposition to attempts by positivists to formulate accounts of historical explanation, White's own aestheticism reduces criticism to the status which logical positivists assigned both ethics and aesthetics, viz. to a type of emotivism, the equivalent of saying no more than 'Hooray' or 'Boo' when confronted with views to be endorsed or denied (Ayer, 1946: 102–13).

In order to offer a pluralism which does not slip into aesthetic historicism one needs to attend more to local rather than global claims. White is led to undercut his own concern with ideological critique because of a tendency to conflate levels of proof. That is, even if it is the case that histories may be differently emplotted, it does not follow from this that they are well emplotted, even on their own terms. This is a mundane point, but one which is too often neglected in the current theoretical shuffle.²⁹

Those caught up with histories as rhetorical constructions, such as White and Kellner, constantly point to how certain forms of narrative organization are closely associated with, if not dictated by, certain forms of explanation. The first chapter of *Metahistory* or, even better perhaps, Kellner's essay, 'The Inflatable Trope as Narrative Theory: Structure or Allegory?' (Kellner, 1989: Ch. 9), illustrates how inclusive this sort of analysis can be made to seem.³⁰ However, nowhere in White's work, despite his fascination with histories he deems classics, or in Kellner's, for that matter, do I find any account of normative criteria. Belief that accounts are theory-driven in no way precludes or excludes the question: 'Is the argument given good/plausible/acceptable?' Lack of some definition of rationality *überhaupt* does not preclude demanding some warrant for an assertion made now.³¹

To invoke a Kuhnian distinction, we must distinguish between normal history and revolutionary history (see, e.g., Kuhn, 1970: 35–42). Normal history is concerned with problem-solving within a chosen model. But normal history need not be uncritical. What makes it 'normal' is just that it is pursued within an accepted model of inquiry, one which defines what the problems are and offers a model of inquiry. As such, it is open to evaluation as a better or worse case of employing that technique of problem-solving. 'If you set out to determine what happened in 1649, you will look to the materials that recommend themselves to you as the likely repositories of historical knowledge and go from there. In short you and those who dispute your finding . . . will be engaged in empirical work, and . . . arguments about history "are not finally epistemological but empirical, involving disputes about the contents of knowledge, about evidence and its

significance”’ (Fish, 1989: 313). Criticism need not be the sole province of professional communities, nor perhaps should it be. Relativism is only a threat if one imagines that relativism *qua* critical pluralism entails aesthetic historicism. No such entailment, however, holds.

Attempts to hold disciplinary practices to some special canon of epistemological accountability induce paralysis, not insight. This is not, by any means, to urge acquiescence to disciplines as we find them. It is, however, to insist that critical canons are to be applied to judge models of inquiry by considerations derived primarily from the nature of how that model works, or fails to work, given other accepted views.

In the context of the philosophy of science, Arthur Fine urges a similar view. Theories must pay their way, but not in the coin demanded by traditional philosophical conceptions of knowledge.

It [Fine’s view] does not begin with some entrenched scientific structure and recommend that we water down our beliefs . . . to bring them in line with certain belief-warranting principles. That is bad belief management, requiring us to trade in scientific beliefs to pay for epistemological ones, regardless of context or content. Rather I have emphasized what all makers of causal models for data . . . are well aware of; namely, that causal conclusions depend on a decision to employ models with particular causal arrangements, and that other models might equally well have been employed so far as the data go. . . . Indeed, I recognize that there may be good reasons to impose models with certain causal connections and excellent reasons to accept such models, perhaps because of their fertility and the way they fit with other models or considerations that emerge from related investigations. . . . The situation in causal modeling presents us with the necessity to make judgments about how to proceed which are not forced on us by the data in the field. Such judgments, I would urge, are always to be found at the center of scientific life if we care to look with an open mind. (Fine, 1990: 109)

White reaches his extreme – aestheticizing – conclusions regarding historiography because he cannot relinquish the mirror conception of historical truth: that historical truth is reporting the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. The problem with this conception of truth and knowledge is not that historians cannot attain it; the difficulty, I have urged, is that it is the wrong conception. We cannot but interpret and choose; the moral here is to underline the importance of continuing efforts at criticism of our procedures. As Fine aptly remarks, ‘We interpret and we choose. But not in a vacuum. . . . It is a reasoned activity that engages social and educational policy, affecting what kind of creatures we take ourselves to be and, hence, what kind of people we become’ (Fine, 1990: 110). Disabusing ourselves of the pretensions of science is surely no reason to cease inquiry on the best models we happen to have.

A chief motivation for preserving at least one of the conceptions of knowledge is in order to provide a 'bedrock of order' to historical inquiry, and so a rational basis for debate about the products of such inquiries. However, each notion of knowledge has *not* provided the bases for rational evaluation as promised and this, as noted in section I, for reasons which cut deep. The lesson I am urging is that evaluative criteria useful to the practice of historical inquiry will more likely be forthcoming from the study of the best of what historians do. We may never be free of epistemological assumptions, but we are free sometimes, anyway, of the need to do epistemology. For purposes of criticism, normal history is history enough.

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NOTES

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- 1 I suspect that what motivates the continued search for a system of historical knowledge is a fear of historical relativism – aesthetic historicism. If the past is *not* a story waiting to be told, knowable by a particular method, then it might appear as if historical inquiry cannot be rationally evaluated. But, I suggest, skeptical worries too are parasitic on the notion of knowledge skeptics claim to question.
- 2 I have reduced to a list of three the assumptions challenged by Charles Beard (Beard, 1956: 317). Essentially these assumptions are noted by Connolly and Keutner (1988) and Habermas (1988). For a summary criticism of Dilthey endorsing both the linkages and the assumptions I suggest, see Ricoeur (1981: 48–54).
- 3 Pietro Rossi provides a helpful summary of key elements of German historicism: 'Historicism appears as an (a) *individualizing*, (b) *dynamic-evolutionary*, and (c) *relativizing* conception of history and, in the extreme, of all reality. The first two of these elements . . . lie at the basis of Meinecke's definition of historicism' (Rossi, 1975: 16). This list is in basic agreement with the summary judgments of D. Lee and R. Beck in their much cited article (Lee and Beck, 1954: 577). Historists reject positivism because it is scientific and ahistorical in its approach to understanding, but they reject as well a *prioristic* approaches to historical knowledge.

Hayden White offers an interesting typology of historicisms which distinguishes between a naturalistic historicism which 'sees man as the tool of hypostatized physiochemical process', a metaphysical historicism which 'sees man as the tool of an abstract idea governed . . . by the "cunning of reason"', and an aesthetic historicism which 'assumed that . . . a true vision of history must begin not with the object, the past, but with the subject, the historian living in the present' (White, 1959: xx–xxi).

- The notion of aesthetic historicism is the one which proves crucial, as discussion in Part III shows.
- 4 As Leonard Krieger argues for the case of Ranke, the drive to reconcile a quest for universal historical connections and a concern for the particularities and individuality of events is central to certain forms of historicism (see Krieger, 1975). If I understand Krieger, his point is that, for Ranke, history had its own course, despite, as it were, the uniqueness of individuals and events.
 - 5 For a sampling of anti-historist views which, nonetheless, are not themselves consonant on the nature of historical knowledge, see: Jörn Rüsen (Rüsen, 1987) and Reinhart Koselleck, 'Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process' (Koselleck, 1985). Rüsen and Koselleck incline more to *Verstehen* than *Erklären*. For an anti-historist view with the latter emphasis, explicitly incorporating statistical and other social science methods into historical explanation, see the work of Jürgen Kocka (e.g. Kocka, 1984: Chs 1 and 5).
 - 6 See Iggers (1965: esp. 298–9, 307). K.-O. Apel suggests that these distinctions are rooted in the writings of Droysen and Dilthey (see Apel, 1984: esp. 1–46). What Apel's suggestion emphasizes, and the point I develop below, is that there is a deep link between the forms of historicism/historicism I address and hermeneutic modes of understanding. This link is largely taken for granted by writers in the Continental tradition (see, for example, Habermas, 1988: 153–4; Connolly and Keutner, 1988: 1–16).
 - 7 See Iggers (1968, also 1965).
 - 8 This ironic stance of insisting on a relativity of results as underwritten by objectivity of methods is one which Iggers, for one, does not appear to appreciate. Evidence for this is his brief discussion of Kuhn in Iggers (1984: 6–8). His emphasis falls on paradigms as changes of theory, without seeming to recognize that paradigm shifts involve changes in research methods as well. Koselleck attributes this ironic consequence, if I understand him aright, to an ambiguity in the term '*Geschichte*', which can be used to refer to an event or to a way of representing events.
 - 9 Reprinted in Davidson (1984).
 - 10 The incommensurability imagined here is global, i.e. there is alleged to be no 'way in' to the other system of beliefs.
 - 11 See Roth (1987: Ch. 9) for a more detailed discussion of this issue. See also Roth (1989).
 - 12 As emerges below, I believe that those who assert the incommensurability of histories, and see this as a problem, focus on the wrong problem. See, e.g., Lionel Gossman's 'The Rationality of History' in Gossman (1990: 293ff.). The incommensurability is more commonly alleged than demonstrated. What is demonstrably the case is the underdetermination of histories, as discussed below.
 - 13 Examples of histories fitting this description are relatively easy to find (unlike the task of finding theories in the natural sciences which are genuinely underdetermined). Interesting sets of examples are discussed *passim* in Novick (1988), but especially Ch. 14, 'Every Group Its Own Historian', and the wrongly neglected Wise (1980).
 - 14 I have directed most of my criticisms towards the epistemological and the methodological assumptions which inform the notion of knowledge I reject. For criticism of what I here term the ontological assumption, see Roth (1989).

- 15 The now classic overview of how philosophy comes to reject the assumptions I discuss is, of course, Rorty (1979).
- 16 A similar point is noted in passing by Ankersmit, but not developed in the way I do below (see Ankersmit, 1988: 82).
- 17 Indeed, White, in an oddly backhanded way, acknowledges that Droysen 'explicitly defends a notion of historical objectivity' (White, 1987: 99). But any notion of objectivity cannot obviously or readily be squared with the radically presentist view of Droysen that White urges through most of his essay.
- 18 Examples of anti-historist histories include A. O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* or, indeed, any history of philosophy which represents the 'great philosophers' as talking about fundamentally the same issues. Historists include Fleck, Kuhn and Feyerabend – those who emphasize discontinuities. I explore this interplay of history and philosophy in Roth (1989).
- 19 The qualifier is due to the fact that writings of a later date than what I discuss above, e.g. White (1986, 1989a,b) suggest that White would no longer adhere to the form – content distinction in the way I criticize. In general, as I discuss below, there is a marked trend in White's work to a more and more Nietzschean view of the historian's activities, by which I mean he takes all distinctions as made rather than found.
- 20 In an excellent recent article (Carroll, 1990), Noël Carroll offers a somewhat different, though related, diagnosis of where White goes wrong. Both Carroll and I charge White with being more of a verificationist than he cares to admit. The essence of my complaint, outlined above, is that White retains as a criterion of meaningfulness one type of language – analyses of semiotic codes – despite the fact that there is no reason to assume such codes to be free from the shortcomings of languages he rejects. Carroll, however, locates the problem differently. On his reading of White, White rejects the appropriateness of a correspondence theory of truth for evaluating historical narratives, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, appeals to just this conception of truth to justify his classification of historical narratives as essentially fictional.

Confronted by the inapplicability of the copy ideal of an empiricist view of correspondence truth, it seems to me that the line one should take is to search for some other grounds for accommodating the truth of historical narratives construed as nonfictional. That is, we should hold onto the intuition that historical narratives can be truthful in the way that nonfictional discourse is true, drop the expectation that this is explicable in terms of a naive view of correspondence to the past as a whole, and explore alternative models. White, in effect, maintains the criteria of empiricist correspondence, which leads him to reassigning historical narration to the realm of fiction. In this respect, oddly enough, he turns out to be a closet empiricist – presupposing that anything that falls short of the correspondence standard is fictional. (Carroll, 1990: 148)

White cannot have it both ways. He cannot use arguments to show the failure of referentiality, the inapplicability of positivist models, etc., to establish the inadequacy of traditional accounts of historical explanation and yet appeal to the very notions just discredited in order to establish that analyses of historical texts can only be mounted by the tools – structuralist, rhetorical or otherwise – used to examine fictional texts. White cannot both reject demarcations between history and fiction and yet privilege modes of analysis that presume the intelligibility of that very distinction.

- 21 Lionel Gossman worries that the assimilation of history to literature entails the concomitant loss of any hope for objectivity. Gossman's faith that professionalization preserves credibility (Gossman, 1990: 315–16) need only be contrasted with Novick's account to show how little professionalization justifies the faith Gossman invests in it.
- In his fascinating study of how 'that noble dream' of objective history is subverted by historical practice, Peter Novick underlines the irony of the supposed 'crisis of historicism'. For the American Historical Association, whose particular history Novick recounts, is founded on the presumed need to throw the amateurs out of the historical profession. By professionalizing history, in the manner championed by German academics, American historians *circa* 1880 imagined that their discipline could be put on the sure and certain path of a science. However, in its century-long existence, the AHA has provided eloquent evidence, if such were still needed, that professionalization does not insure objectivity or consensus. The history of the AHA is a history of the fragmentation of the historical profession, a history which shows consensus about methods, conclusions and topics as, if anything, diminishing over time.
- 22 For Rorty's thoughts on the consequences of 'professionalizing' philosophy, see 'Keeping Philosophy Pure: An Essay on Wittgenstein', in the same volume.
- 23 For the notion of aesthetic historicism, see White (1959: xxi ff.). Richard Shusterman, writing of the 'postmodern turn' in contemporary thought, puts matters in a way particularly apposite to the issues under discussion. 'Postmodernism . . . privileges the aesthetic over the logical and algorithmic, and stories convince, compel, and are assessed as much, if not more, by their aesthetic appeal and the expressive power of their different vocabularies as by their logical form or even factual accuracy' (Shusterman, 1989: 607). For a helpful article also stressing the aestheticizing aspect of postmodern thought, see Megill (1989).
- 24 A particularly clear and relatively unpolemical view is that of White (1971).
- 25 It is worth noting here that White characteristically moves between conditional statements of what, e.g., Jakobson's linguistics *would* show if correct, and assertions which presuppose that the empirical work is complete, i.e. which presume that research has established what he claims. While I believe that many of White's observations regarding specific texts are acute and insightful, and that *Metahistory* is a genuine masterwork, the fact remains that his many claims about semiology remain unproven or unsubstantiated. Indeed, although I cannot prove it here, the theory of language and codes on which White consistently presumes is closely linked, with respect to its assumptions about structure, to the postivism which White otherwise mocks and rejects. Semiotics owes much to Peirce, who was more a logician and philosophical idealist than a pragmatist.
- 26 In writings of recent vintage (e.g. White 1989a: 330–2), White takes a more relaxed view of cultural codes as well.

Although I have attempted to characterize what I take to be the predominant line in White's thought, I cannot be entirely confident about this. In a recent essay (White, 1989b), one finds evidence enough for imputing a variety of different positions to White. For example, he continues to insist here on a distinction between 'facts' – which are constituted by linguistic descriptions – and 'events' – happenings in the world (see, e.g., p. 35). This, of course, sets him up for Carroll's charge of naive empiricism. But matters are actually worse than Carroll suggests. For, it appears, the distinction is idle; 'events', for White, has the dubious status which Kant accords unsynthesized

intuitions: 'If there is no such thing as "raw facts," but only events under different descriptions, then factuality becomes a matter of the descriptive protocols used to transform events into facts' (p. 35). An event thus becomes a something about which nothing can be said. In this regard, it is difficult to credit White's claim, a page later, that plots 'are tested against the information and knowledge that specific forms of human life *have had* in the past' (p. 36). What can 'information' possibly come to here, inasmuch as factuality is, on White's account, a product of theoretical/discursive protocols? Earlier suggestions by White (p. 26) that events are a type of 'given' only make problems worse, as anyone familiar with the fate of this notion in empiricism in this century appreciates. Again, White maintains at one point that 'there is no necessity, logical or natural, governing the decision to emplot a given sequence of events as a tragedy rather than as a comedy or romance' (p. 27), and yet, a few pages later, insists that 'the choice of a farcical style for the representation of some kinds of historical events would constitute, not only a lapse in taste, but also a distortion of the truth about them' (p. 30). These conflicting statements indicate, I argue, the deep tension in White's work: the more he stresses that histories are created, the more the writing of history becomes a moral issue. But the very lack of standards for objectively evaluating histories which fuel his arguments undercut, at the same time, the moral standard to which White would like to hold historians accountable. For he has no better standards by which to certify moral truth than he does historical truth.

27 The term is C. C. O'Brien's. I discuss this view of Rorty in Roth (1989).

28 For an anticipation of this point, see Gossman (1990: 392–3, fn. 28).

29 It is most certainly not neglected by Carroll, who relentlessly criticizes White for this oversight. Again, my analysis, like Carroll's, emphasizes the irony that White slips (needlessly, in my view, anyway) philosophically because his notion of knowledge remains too traditional; his more extreme statements on the literariness of histories only measure how close he holds a traditional empiricist conception of truth. As Carroll aptly remarks, 'White's deepest problem seems to be that he believes that truth is the only relevant grounds for the epistemic assessment of historical narratives' (Carroll, 1990: 161).

30 Carroll understandably suspects that White has made the theory unfalsifiable.

31 Considerations similar to those I'm raising here are voiced by Stanley Fish (Fish, 1989: 307–8).

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