

HISTORY AND THE MANIFEST IMAGE: HAYDEN WHITE AS A PHILOSOPHER OF HISTORY¹

THE FICTION OF NARRATIVE: ESSAYS ON HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THEORY 1957–2007. By Hayden White. Edited with an introduction by Robert Doran. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. 382.

“Normal historiography is based on the dream of a theory-less knowledge.”
—Hayden White, “Ideology and Counterideology in
Anatomy of Criticism” (249)²

“It is therefore, the ‘eye on the whole’ which distinguishes the philosophical enterprise. Otherwise, there is little to distinguish the philosopher from the persistently reflective specialist; the philosopher of history from the persistently reflective historian. To the extent that a specialist is more concerned to reflect on how his work as a specialist joins up with other intellectual pursuits, than in asking and answering questions within his speciality, he is said, properly, to be philosophically-minded.”
—Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”³

ABSTRACT

To claim that Hayden White has yet to be read seriously as a philosopher of history might seem false on the face of it. But do tropes and the rest provide any *epistemic* rationale for differing representations of historical events found in histories? As an explanation of White’s influence on philosophy of history, such a proffered emphasis only generates a puzzle with regard to taking White seriously, and not an answer to the question of why his efforts should be worthy of any philosophical attention at all. For what makes his emphasis on narrative structure and its associated tropes of *philosophical* relevance? What, it may well be asked, did (or could) any theory that draws its categories from a stock provided by literary criticism contribute to explicating problems with regard to the warranting of claims about knowledge, explanation, or causation that represent those concerns that philosophy typically brings to this field? Robert Doran’s anthologizing of previously uncollected pieces, ranging as they do over a literal half-century of White’s published work, offers an opportunity to identify explicitly those philosophical themes and arguments that regularly and prominently feature there. Moreover, White’s essays in this volume demonstrate a credible knowledge of and interest in mainstream analytic philosophers of his era and also reveal White as deeply influenced by or well acquainted with other important philosophers of history. White thus invites a reading of his work as philosophy, and this volume presents the opportunity for accepting it as such.

Keywords: metahistory, historical narratives, Hayden White, Kant, philosophy of history

1. My thanks to Herman Paul and Eugen Zelenak for providing helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. Body notes refer to the volume under review.

3. In Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 3.

To claim that Hayden White has yet to be read seriously as a philosopher of history (whether he wants that reading or not) might seem false on the face of it. Many philosophers of history, however few in number they may be, regularly register their awareness of White in print. Whom else do they have to write about in any case? David Carr, for example, unhesitatingly states, "As everyone knows, Hayden White's *Metahistory* changed the philosophy of history for good. Anyone who has wanted to do serious work in the philosophy of history since its appearance in 1973 has had to come to terms with this now-classic work."⁴ Likewise, Frank Ankersmit opines, "Hayden White has dominated debate in philosophy of history in the last three decades."⁵ But both Carr and Ankersmit write as if what supports the lofty philosophical position attributed to White's work rests on his application of analyses of narrative structure. But do tropes and the rest provide any *epistemic* rationale for differing representations of historical events found in histories? As an explanation of White's influence on philosophy of history, such a proffered emphasis only generates a puzzle with regard to taking White seriously, and is not an answer to the question of why his efforts should be worthy of any philosophical attention at all. For what makes his emphasis on narrative structure and its associated tropes of *philosophical* relevance? What, it may well be asked, did (or could) any theory that draws its categories from a stock provided by literary criticism contribute to explicating problems with regard to the warranting of claims about knowledge, explanation, or causation that represent those concerns that philosophy typically brings to this field? Had, for example, something of philosophical moment ever hung on the claim that categories used to analyze narrative structure *could not*, in principle, be applied to histories? So, without disputing the general assessment that philosophers of the stature of Carr and Ankersmit offer, discussions of tropes and the rest represent no reason for attributing to White a relevance to the *philosophy* of history.⁶

As Herman Paul rightly insists, the attention lavished on White's analyses of narrative as a literary form simply "falls short in explaining what is at stake in White's historical theory."⁷ Paul offers a gloss of this point as being one of a failure to account for the "*reasons* he insists on the legitimacy of different modes of representation."⁸ Indeed, it would seem in retrospect that White's most discussed contribution consists primarily in having given literary theorists and critics special license to behave as sociologists *manqué*, pronouncing on the "content of the form" without having to bother with all the messy empirical or archival work.

Paul, in his own scholarly and insightful review of the collection under consideration here, points away from the literary theory to which White's

4. David Carr, "On the Metaphilosophy of History," in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 15.

5. Frank Ankersmit, "White's 'New Neo-Kantianism,'" in *ibid.*, 34.

6. I am not alone in noting this ironic discrepancy between how philosophers characterize White's *influence* on the philosophy of history and the general absence of any explicit treatment of White as a philosopher of history. See, in particular, Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White," *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 143-161. Work by Noël Carroll represents an exception to my characterization that philosophers do not take White seriously as a philosopher, although my philosophical perspective on White differs in key ways from the one that Carroll offers.

7. Herman Paul, "Hayden White and the Crisis of Historicism," in Ankersmit et al., eds., *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, 56.

8. *Ibid.*

association with the philosophy of history has been so completely attached. He suggests instead a quite different orientation. “If White’s philosophy of history, as developed over the course of more than half a century, has a single center of gravity, it is the practical question—practical in the sense of Kant’s *praktische Vernunft*—how one should live a morally responsible life.”⁹ This represents both a suggestive and, I believe, ultimately an insightful characterization of where the intellectual (and so, in the end, the philosophical) center of White’s account resides. However, Paul leaves undeveloped just how emphasizing the epistemological and moral (and not the aestheticizing) aspects of the Kantian parallel plays out as a reading of White’s philosophical significance.

Doran’s anthologizing of previously uncollected pieces, ranging as they do over a literal half-century of White’s published work, offers an opportunity to identify explicitly those philosophical themes and arguments that regularly and prominently feature there. At both a personal and a professional level, White repeatedly engages a great many of those who address topics in the philosophy of history in and out of the philosophical community.¹⁰ Moreover, these essays function to make plain that White’s engagement with philosophical thought extends well beyond the usual suspects who have been appropriated for their own purposes by literary theorists, for example, Hegel or Foucault. For one, White’s essays in this volume demonstrate a credible knowledge of and interest in mainstream analytic philosophers of his era, including Danto, Hempel, Popper, and Wittgenstein. For another, the essays also reveal White as deeply influenced by or well acquainted with other important philosophers of history, ranging from Immanuel Kant to Louis Mink and Paul Ricoeur. Indeed, White in the brief “Preface” that he provides to this volume remarks, “Although the mode of history’s presentation of the past is dramatic—laying out a spectacle of the great events and conflicts of times past—it has always sought to contribute to the question that Kant defined as the soul of ethics: What should I (we) do?” (xi). White thus invites a reading of his work as philosophy, and this volume presents the opportunity for accepting it as such.¹¹

9. Herman Paul, “Review Article: Hayden White: The Making of a Philosopher of History,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 5 (2011), 142. Oddly, but in keeping with the aestheticizing emphasis on White’s work, Ankersmit rushes past considerations that he notes in passing that connect White’s work to Kant’s epistemology and his ethics in order to discuss it in the context of Kant’s aesthetics. See, for example, Ankersmit, “White’s ‘New Neo-Kantianism,’” esp. 40-46. In this, he follows the unfortunate example of Hans Kellner, who stands as the primary champion of reading Kant’s aesthetics into White at the expense of exploiting parallels with Kantian themes in epistemology and moral philosophy. See, in particular, Hans Kellner, “Does the Sublime Price Explanation out of the Historical Marketplace?,” in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, 216-230, and his “Hayden White and the Kantian Discourse: Topology, Narrative, and Freedom,” in *The Philosophy of Discourse: The Rhetorical Turn in Twentieth-Century Thought*, volume I, ed. Chip Sills and George H. Jensen (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992), 246-267. I have discussed internal tensions in White’s views on the “aestheticizing” reading in “Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography,” *History of the Human Sciences* 5 (1992), 17-35.

10. Indeed, starting with his undergraduate education and a professor who deeply influenced both White and Arthur Danto, White’s academic career fascinatingly overlaps and intertwines with a number of philosophers of history.

11. Herman Paul pointed out to me that my account slights the influence of thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche on White’s work. I grant this point, and do not claim to provide an exhaustive analysis of how White might be read as a philosopher, or to have pointed to all the relevant influences. But

In his “Editor’s Introduction” to this volume, Doran makes particular note of White’s affinities to and for Vico, remarking in this context that the “basis of Vico’s thought” resides in the principle “that the human mind can truly know only what it itself has made” (xvii). As Doran unpacks this principle for purposes of exposing White, he following a reading encouraged by Kellner and Ankersmit (among many others) that instantaneously switches focus from the epistemological implications carried by the view of history as a “making” by the human mind to the “categories used in making.” “Emplotment means not only that there is no primordial story but also that there is no such thing as a story-in-general . . . ; there are only the particular kinds—those story-types that form the cultural patrimony of every civilization and community” (xxiv). Yet leapfrogging the question of why, in the first place, one would consider history as mind-made unfortunately bypasses all the substantive philosophical issues on which the thesis of the primacy of narrative form in fact depends. Thus while discussion that builds on tropes *qua* “cultural patrimony” provides the platform that elevates a reading of White as narrative theorist over that of White as philosopher, it only obscures the reasons that served to transform narrative structure into a philosophical problem.

Ironically, from this *forced* reliance on tropes as organizing categories for historical experience, Doran hypothesizes that White’s ethical views supposedly emerge in the guise of a type of choice one makes. “This revelation of contingency is not a capitulation to nihilism but rather an affirmation of freedom, a freedom born of the necessity of tropes” (xxi). Doran parses “freedom” here as the (historian’s) realization of “his or her creative role in the self-understanding of his or her community” (xxi). Freedom so understood carries with it a complete responsibility for the telling of the history.

This suggests a parallel to existentialist thought, at least in the following regard. The historian’s “freedom” of emplotment implies, like the Sartrean notion of *mauvaise foi*, “that the claims of freedom and of ethical obligation are boundless and may never be curtailed by an appeal to how we—or others—are determined by the past.”¹² But a forced choice among contingently provided rhetorical modes does not clearly make a case for a historian’s (or anyone’s) freedom. Also, as stated, the existentialist appeal would be incoherent, inasmuch as phrased it appears to acknowledge that it makes sense to think of ourselves as possibly determined by circumstance—given past influences, one could not have chosen otherwise. Additionally, and of greater philosophical concern, on what basis does one apply the label “ethical” to *any* choice, and especially forced ones? Lack of a clear answer here inflates the sphere of responsibility beyond any intelligible bounds, and so makes hash of the thought that there even exist distinctively *moral* choices, that is, options for action that bear on how individuals *ought* to treat others.¹³

White’s close personal or intellectual relationship with key figures discussed below suffices for offering the reading that I do.

12. Ankersmit, “White’s ‘New Neo-Kantianism,’” 51.

13. Doran himself exhibits some awareness of this problem. “The tension between the interpretative freedom of the individual historian and the tropological influence of the community is not easy to reconcile” (345, n. 35).

The question of how to identify the special sphere of the moral and to hive it off from other modes of understanding experience certainly constitutes a central Kantian preoccupation in the three critiques. One way of addressing this concern would be to try to interpret a common characterization of Kant that humans are “phenomenally determined, but noumenally free.” The determination of phenomena concerns, of course, Kant’s Copernican turn, the view that mind provides the order attributed to the natural world. Regarding such forms of understanding, Kant has the skeptical challenges of Hume and achievements of Newton in view, that is, the task of accounting for the very possibility of actual empirical, and especially systematic, scientific knowledge. But because on Kant’s view the structure of knowledge reflects the human mind’s imposition of categories on experience, the mere having of empirical knowledge does *not* represent any choice made by us. This includes our understanding of ourselves as objects in space and time. As such objects, even humans come to be understood as empirically determined.

However, the Kantian limits on epistemology, on how humans can know what they know about the world, also serve to make freedom and morality possible. On Kant’s account, the structure of understanding of the world as revealed phenomenally constitutes one that the human mind imposes on experience. This understanding of the world, including ourselves, as objects causally configured in space and time Kant juxtaposes with the human ability to comport with another self-imposed form of law, namely, the moral law knowable through reason in the form of a categorical imperative. The categorical imperative delimits simultaneously the realm of human freedom and that of morality. The notion of a moral law so cognized provides a substantive guide for identifying the realm of the moral as well as signaling those choices that are truly ours to make. Human freedom consists solely in whether or not to choose to follow the moral law so construed. This accounts famously for Kant’s eloquent characterization of the human will; the capacity for choice alone allows humans an option of moving according to a law other than that dictated by taking a view of ourselves as mere objects. By positioning the mind as the source of all law, and conceiving of freedom as consisting in the ability to recognize the moral law and act on it, Kant’s Copernican turn attempts to provide an account of how people can have both. In short, humans can only understand themselves phenomenally as objects in the world, but since humans know that their mind stands as the source of this form of reasoning, they can think themselves *qua* source as also free.¹⁴

14. For example, “‘Man . . . puts himself in a different order of things and in a relationship to determining grounds of an altogether different kind when he thinks of himself as intelligence with a will and thus as endowed with causality, compared with that other order of things and that other set of determining grounds which becomes relevant when he perceives himself as a phenomenon in the world of sense (as he really also is) and submits his causality to external determination according to natural laws. Now he soon realizes that both can subsist together—indeed that they must.’” Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 76. “But if our Critique is not in error in teaching that the object is to be taken *in a twofold sense*, namely as appearance and as thing in itself . . . then there is no contradiction in supposing that one and the same will is, in the appearance, that is, in its visible acts, necessarily subject to the law of nature, and so far *not free*, while yet, as belonging to a thing in itself, is not subject to that law, and is therefore *free*.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1970), Bxxviii.

Now, a parallel between the theory of tropes and the Copernican aspect of Kant's epistemology has been recognized.¹⁵ But this rough analogy generates at least two key philosophical questions, neither of which receives either an answer or even a helpful elucidation by reversion to this or that literary explication of narrative structure. The first concerns how to interpret from the perspective of contemporary philosophy of science the epistemological import of Kant's Copernican hypothesis. Kant's theory of the categories has become of little more than historical interest as the sciences they were fashioned to explain have changed and evolved. Thus, it seems a perversely procrustean exercise to force discussions of works of history into a particular categorial structure without first canvassing the epistemological motives for assigning primacy to any particular contingent form of representation.

The first question presupposes, in other words, that the primary epistemological interest in narrative as a form of representation results from its seeming necessity as mode of systematic understanding. The second asks what stands as the analog in White to the process of delineating between, on the one hand, the activity of understanding that makes systematic representation possible but, on the other hand, still allows for human freedom and so makes moral choice possible? For, as emphasized in the broad-brush characterization of Kant offered above, the epistemological frame that explains the possibility of systematic knowledge in any area also supposedly makes possible a substantive account—one worth having—of freedom and morality. Relegating the moral to a realm that consists of forced choices of contingently received narrative forms does nothing by way of salvaging a substantive notion of freedom or morality.

An answer to the first question just posed would be to emphasize, as a contemporary consequence of the Kantian epistemological heritage, the type of conceptual/semantic holism advocated by two of the thinkers supposedly missing from the list of influences on Hayden White, namely Quine and Sellars.¹⁶ The holism of interest here can be characterized as the view—with apologies to Frege—that only in the context of a theory does a sentence have a meaning. As a critique of traditional empiricism, holism undercuts two forms of the “myth of the given,” that is, the view that knowledge represents an edifice built on an incorrigible foundation. Holism denies, as Sellars emphasizes, the intelligibility of experi-

15. For example, Ankersmit writes that “Hans Kellner already argued that one could hardly fail to recognize the similarities between White's four tropes and the four sets of Kant's categories of the understanding. Indeed, it makes sense to say that the Kantian categories of the understanding make knowledge possible and that White's tropology, in its turn, explains how historical knowledge is possible” (Ankersmit, “White's ‘New Neo-Kantianism’,” 36; see also 38). Oddly, Ankersmit complains that White seems to take no note of contemporary philosophers of language or science. See, in particular, his list of those unnamed on p. 35 of his essay. But he does not acknowledge the fact that White shows firsthand acquaintance with every philosopher in the analytic tradition who wrote on the philosophy of history or bore on critiques of absencing history from (analytic) philosophy, including Collingwood, Danto, Hempel, Kuhn, Mandelbaum, Mink, Popper, W. H. Walsh, Morton White, and Wittgenstein. Moreover, as Ankersmit knows, Hayden White had academic and personal connections with at least Danto (both were students of and were influenced by Bossenbrook at Wayne State University), Mandelbaum (at Michigan), and Mink.

16. An excellent intellectual history of this transition can be found in John Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

ence imagined as “immediate,” “unmediated,” or otherwise unconnected to other beliefs a person might have. But, in addition, following Quine, holism represents a denial of a noncontextual way to sort individual statements into those made true by experience and those made true by virtue of “meanings” of the concepts involved. If a notion of meaning cannot be isolated and attached to individual statements by virtue of confirming experiences or just the terms contained, then any attribution of meaningfulness already relies on a context. In short, a judgment regarding the truth or falsity of any statement becomes possible only within a larger matrix of beliefs.

As now has been widely recognized and acknowledged, this sort of holism was taken over from Kant by Carnap and other positivists in the form of discussions of theories as formal structures. Pre-Quine, the interdependency of meaning of statements in a theory receives its clearest and most compelling articulation in Carl Hempel’s classic essay, “Empiricist Criteria of Cognitive Significance: Problems and Changes.”¹⁷ Without trying to guess all of what White read or did not read (although he certainly cites essays by Hempel), he had a familiarity with and an appreciation of Thomas Kuhn’s wildly influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (see especially chapter 5 of the book under review). Kuhn makes clear in that work his debt to Quine’s critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction in particular and his holism in general.¹⁸ Moreover, White, as the volume under review demonstrates, had a working familiarity with (and even, at least at one point, a favorable view of) Popper’s philosophy of science. (Indeed, one even finds favorable remarks about the Hempelian covering-law model, in its place, of course.) So, in his reading of Kuhn, it does not represent a stretch to understand that reading as well informed with regard to the significance of Kuhn’s critique for traditional (that is, positivist and Popperian) philosophy of science. It should also be kept in mind that Kuhn retains from positivism the importance of the practice of “normal science” to the maintenance of a sense of a discipline’s intellectual integrity *qua* academic practice. (Recall Kuhn’s infamous parallels between scientific education and brainwashing.)¹⁹ In any case, White explicitly takes from Kuhn and Popper both the difficulties of mounting critiques of received methodologies that have disciplinary imprimatur as well as the importance of such criticism to genuine advances in or changes of understanding (see especially chapters 5 and 6).²⁰

17. Reprinted in Carl G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 101-119. See especially §4 of that essay.

18. White’s close association with Louis Mink would also be relevant here, for Mink certainly had a deep and thorough familiarity with and appreciation of the type of critique of logical positivism represented by Quine’s work and by Kuhn’s.

19. Within philosophy, the focus falls almost exclusively on Kuhn’s account of theory change. For by denying it a basis in purely methodological/rational considerations, Kuhn upended the philosophical apple cart. So it helps to be reminded that Kuhn can be and has been read very much against the philosophical grain, namely as someone who provides an account of how the sciences maintain and enforce disciplinary boundaries. See, for example, Barry Barnes, *T. S. Kuhn and Social Science* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

20. I make no claim to exhaust all one finds in White that proves relevant to reading him as a philosopher of history. One theme I neglect involves his relationship to Popper’s thought. See in particular “The Culture of Criticism” (chapter 6 in the volume under review here).

How then does White turn to his own purposes the type of history of science he finds in Kuhn and the critique of historicism garnered from Popper? Writing of the sea change in approaches to the understanding of art and of science occasioned by the works of Gombrich and Kuhn, White argues in an essay published in 1969 for a type of interdisciplinary, sociologically informed account of scientific change. This anticipates by several years the type of sociological analyses pioneered by, for example, the Strong Programme in the sociology of science. As White then writes: "By focusing study on the relationship between theory and practical application of thought-styles, Gombrich and Kuhn direct research away from the construction of genealogies of ideas alone and toward the development of sophisticated sociologies, psychologies, and anthropologies of consciousness in its concrete manifestations and dynamic historical dimensions" (91). In a turn of phrase that echoes Robert Merton's call for "theories of the middle range" in sociology (and with Popper's critique in mind), White goes on to speculate as to whether or not such "mesoscopic generalizations" represent the full reach possible for historical inquiry (91-92). Indeed, although he sometimes vacillates on this point, White avoids endorsing the use of history as a rationale for political policy.²¹

In some of these earlier essays, an appreciation of a Kuhnian, holistic, "mesoscopic" historiography finds its development alongside a much less optimistic view of a general historiography on the lines of Marxist theory. This will turn out to correspond to the limits of understanding and the space of morality and freedom. If historians (among others) attempt to "reach beyond" mesoscopic generalization for insight on how to warrant or justify actions, they will invariably exceed their cognitive grasp. If such uses of history will be doomed to failure, then it would be a moral mistake, an error with regard to action-guiding advice, to claim that the "course of history" justifies or warrants acting in a certain way. Hope of some good tomorrow cannot warrant an atrocity today.

For White, it can be argued that his use of the term "narrative" has less to do with the forms that preoccupy literary theorists (though White's focus may shift in later writings as this aspect of the reception of his work comes to predominate) and function, at least in his earlier writings, on the model of a Kuhnian paradigm. Recall that, in praising Kuhn, White applauds what he takes to be Kuhn's emphasis on "the relationship between theory and practical applications of thought styles" (91). Gombrich and Kuhn, he declares, have "given us models of how to write the histories of genres, styles, and disciplines" (97). Disciplines organize around paradigms. Paradigms, whatever else that troubled term connotes, anchor in the notion of a problem-solving model.

When teleology goes, only mesoscopic generalizations remain. But while White's hope for a more robust social theory may wax and wane at different

21. For instance, he at some phases in his work cautiously praises the more ambitious aspirations for social theory as expressed, for example, in the work of someone like Lucien Goldmann. "But if intellectual historiography is to deliver what it has promised for so long, it will do so only by following out the twofold path marked for it by scholars like Gombrich and Kuhn, on the one side, and engaged social theorists like Goldmann, on the other. Their work avoids the pitfalls of metaphysics as well as the arid deserts of simple chronicle and genealogy" (97).

points in his writings, a rejection of extant conceptions of teleology and a commitment to holism remain constants. But holism with respect to works in history does not have a form identical with that exhibited by scientific theorizing. For one, the “semantic atoms” for a historian consist primarily of events as opposed to the various sensory candidates for “incorrigibility” of traditional empiricist accounts of perception. In the context of history, an unproblematized notion of events too often functions as the atomic units that serve as the foundation of historical knowledge. Events involve a unity of actions over time. They can be relatively discrete, for example, having breakfast, or quite extended, for example, World War II. But whether discrete or extended, events within a realist conception of history constitute the stuff of true chronicles, so they form an analog to an empiricist’s foundational data on which to build historical knowledge/representation. But as goes the notion of singular statements or simple descriptions that have their own determinate truth conditions, so goes the conception of events as an untheorized given that supports realist representation.

White appreciates and emphasizes precisely this point. “But also it is because, as a theory of history, Marxism shares a weakness that is common to all other theories of history: a tendency to take as given the ‘chronicle’ of historical events that is the purpose of ‘historiography’ to analyze, interpret, and represent in a true account of what ‘actually happened’” (139). Rather than the “found” data on which true history can be based, White insists that the “chronicle is a fiction that permits the historian to act *as if* he has a *found* world of data that his theories can then fashion into a cognitively secured body of knowledge” (139). In the context of contemporary philosophy, G. E. M. Anscombe’s phrase “under a description” has been widely appropriated to account for the varying ways the same bit of behavior can be presented as instantiating different intentional actions. Ian Hacking has made radical use of this view, claiming that one can ascribe intentional actions to agents under descriptions that that person could not have known.²² In fact, White takes up this plastic notion of how behaviors may be transformed into many different events in his discussions of Collingwood. For as White understands Collingwood, “it is only self-conscious or purposive thought that qualifies as the creator of historical events. . . . Only events that grow out of mind exercising its peculiar functions—reason and will—are historical events and are to be studied by historical method” (8). Again, “[b]ut while nature might be viewed as developmental, it did not follow that it was historical, for historical events are only those events that grow out of purposive activity” (12). For White, Collingwoodian re-enactment involves rethinking behavior as purposive under the description that the historical actor in view presumably had in mind.²³ But

22. Chapter 17 of Ian Hacking’s *Rewriting the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) constitutes the *locus classicus* of this view. I develop implications of Hacking’s approach in “Ways of Pastmaking,” *History of the Human Sciences* 15 (2002), 125-143.

23. In lectures, I offer a characterization of historical realism as the “woolly mammoth” view of the past. This stems from an article concerning how explorers in some arctic region found an entire woolly mammoth frozen, embedded in the ice. Realists, on this view, see the past in just this way. As past, events become forever locked into some fixed configuration, awaiting a historian to come along and chip away the excrescences of time so that “the past” can stand revealed in all of its original glory. White invokes similar imagery at 136. See also Richard T. Vann, “Louis Mink’s Linguistic Turn,”

White's own views have a closer affinity to that which Hacking suggests (and accords with Danto's notion of a "narrative sentence"), that is, historians must expect characterizations of what happens in the past to be dynamic, not static, with true new descriptions emerging that were true of the past but not knowable in the past.²⁴

For another, the dependence of historical structures reflects a dependence peculiar to narrative structure, and not (or not just) the type of nested accounted of theoretical terms that, for example, Hempel comes to conclude makes it necessary to accept or reject theories as whole structures. However, and this point is key, the dependence of histories on narrative structure does *not* concern the tropes or the literary devices peculiar to narrative. Rather, as White forcefully acknowledges, it depends, following a point he takes from Mink, on the nondetachability of the conclusion of narratives from the narrative to which it belongs. "In short, literally speaking, the term 'narrative' qualifies the term 'history' in an epistemological not an aesthetic sense" (119). White amplifies this gloss so as to highlight the organizational function of the author/narrator, that is, the historian who does the writing. "The important point is that, by taking the literal meaning of the term 'narrative' and stressing it, we highlight the relationship between the narrator's voice and its purpose in directing our attention to evidence organized in a particular way" (120). Indeed, as White adds in a footnote he appends to the publication of this paper but written afterwards, "much of what I say is an amplification of the points raised by Mink," including the point about nondetachability (see 359, fn. 5, and White's remarks on 125).

Indeed, this specific piece of White's was one on which Mink served as a commentator when the paper was first presented in 1970 at a conference at the University of California–Davis.²⁵ In taking from Mink the point about nondetachability of conclusions offered in narratives, White takes up a form of holism indicative of and perhaps unique to history as a form of inquiry. In an early formulation of this point, Mink puts it as follows: "*Where scientists can note each other's results, historians must read each other's books. This is the fact which I want to inscribe in flaming letters, because it is a fact which any theory of historical knowledge must account for.*"²⁶ White echoes this.

History and Theory 26 (1987), 1-14, esp. 12-13. This lends a somewhat different, more philosophical twist to what Nancy Partner terms White's "best joke," that is, his account of the *Annals of St. Gall*. Nancy Partner, "Hayden White: The Form of the Content," *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 162-172, esp. 164-166.

24. "Nolte was justified in raising the question of comparability and, indeed, it seems, was only performing one of the functions of the historian in studying individual proceedings that have consoled the public by seeming to have wrapped them up and archived them, never to have to be examined again. In such a situation, it is the duty of the historian to suggest in what ways certain crucial events . . . can never be fully and finally dealt with, because their shadows are cast down the ages for the communities that have them in their pasts" (326); "[O]ne has only to look for a moment at past events—such as battles and revolutions or famines or the fall of empires—to realize that they are similarly complex and insubstantial and that their seeming substantiality and openness to perception were primarily functions of the paucity of the documents we have for them and the crudity with which they were recorded by witnesses. With the multiplications of images of 'historical' reality, we now appear to be further from rather than closer to the past itself" (307).

25. See Vann, "Louis Mink's Linguistic Turn," esp. 6-8.

26. *Ibid.*, 2.

Mink suggested . . . that the conclusions of historical narratives were not “detachable” from their demonstrations in the same way that the conclusions of scientific arguments were detachable from their proofs or as logical conclusions were detachable from their demonstrations. And he suggested that if, on having read a particular historian’s work, one still did not see how his conclusions followed from his dispositions of evidence, one would have no other recourse than to re-read the work in its entirety, since the conclusions were little more than a synopsis of the story told in the body of the narrative. (125; see also 137)

So historical knowledge, however one chooses to understand that notion, imbibes its own special type of holism. In addition to rejecting “givenness” as manifest in traditional empiricism, what accounts for the place in the structure held by any particular proposition in the context of a history cannot readily be separated from its narrative context.

An additional and significant epistemic feature that separates historical inquiry from at least a standard conception of natural-scientific investigation involves the nonaggregativity of the former. That is, one expects results in the natural sciences to be consistent with the world as the other sciences portray it. Issues of reductionism aside, the expectation here would be that all properly scientific results would aggregate as part of a general causal account of the world as science studies it.²⁷ This feature turns out to be, for White, decisive in ultimately separating historiography from any plausible connection to realism. If White had given more note than he does (at least in print) to Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability, he might have rested with this distinction as an epistemic one. That is, Kuhn notoriously denies progress in science, and precisely for the reason that incommensurable schemes seemingly make impossible the task of linking changes in scientific theories to a clear and nontendentious notion of increases in problems solved. The parallel point about history, stemming from the parallel point about dependence on the context of theoretical understanding and the absence of transtheoretical evidential givens (for example, nuclear events) to serve as a theory-neutral epistemic foundation, would be the incommensurability of different historical narratives. Factors such as these provide the underpinnings for understanding narrative as a topic of philosophical interest.

This brings into focus the second issue, that is, how do the epistemic limits of historical representation connect to identifying philosophically substantive notions of freedom and morality? Precisely at this juncture White reveals himself to be torn in different directions at different times in his writings. For the incommensurability of history (as revealed by the nonaggregativity of histories) places historians, whether they want that role or not, as among the keepers of what Wilfrid Sellars termed our “manifest image.” Instead of asserting, in a Kantian voice, the noumenal freedom of human beings, White positions our role as writers of our history as maintaining the viability of a notion of human freedom against the claims of science. As the themes explored in the first two essays make

27. The nonaggregativity point White probably takes from Louis Mink, who had emphasized it in a number of writings with which White was quite familiar (and, of course, White and Mink were at one time colleagues and remained intellectually and personally close). Louis Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument,” in *The Writing of History*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 129-149. For a discussion of this point, see Vann, “Louis Mink’s Linguistic Turn,” 10-11.

clear, White from early on has a preoccupation with the implications of the scientific picture of humans on their moral understanding. This leads him to focus on these themes as he finds them discussed in Collingwood and in Christopher Dawson. He finds in Collingwood a Kant-like (and Sellarsian) separation of mind understood as a physical entity as opposed to it being conceived of as the seat of purposiveness.

The study of mind's manifestations in the physical organism is the proper competence of psychology and psychology only errs when it asserts that the physiochemical manifestations of mind are mind *en toto*. Thus, purposive thought, the function of self-conscious mind, forms the criterion of differentiation between history and nature as well as the criterion for the distinction between historical knowledge, on the one hand, and scientific knowledge on the other. (6)

White picks up this theme—attempts to use history to mark out a space where freedom remains in the scientific image of our place in the world—again in his discussion of Christopher Dawson's work. As White puts the issue in that essay, "Civilization might well be defined as the product of the intrusion of the technical order into an area formerly controlled and interpreted by the moral order. It was at this time that in man's vision the cosmic order was broken in two. From this moment, we watch the progressive retreat of the moral order, the progressive diminution of the moral order" (46). Scientists replace priests as keepers and purveyors of the order that shapes and determines our world. But, of course, nothing answers in the scientific vision to moral codes thus displaced.

The lesson White typically draws here echoes an existentialist credo—humans can now take full responsibility for their actions; no other choice remains open to them. "For good or for evil, modern science has broken through these older compulsives and offered to man responsibility for everything he does. It is a terrifying gift but one eminently worthy of its recipient. To ask man to deny that gift in the interests of 'peace of mind' is an insult" (49). The same themes pervade, as well, the essay on Croce that follows those on Collingwood and Dawson (see, for example, 54-57).

Threats to freedom and responsibility arise not only from within the natural sciences, but also from those social sciences, for example, Marxism, that claim to have divined the laws governing historical development and to rationalize political actions in light of those laws. As previously noted, White sometimes displays a yearning for a more general social theory. But his remarks on and treatment of Popper, for example, "The Culture of Criticism: *Gombrich, Auerbach, Popper*" (chapter 6), leans in just the opposite direction. And indeed, however his personal political preferences may alter, there remains a discernible moral impulse and conception that form an enduring core of White's thought. For White takes the *epistemic* limits on history to underwrite a type of surrogate to Kant's noumenal self. That self only emerges as the object of our historical self-understanding.

Although this theme figures in many of his essays (and particularly in his remarks on Croce and Vico), it receives particularly clear and compelling expression in "What Is a Historical System?" (chapter 8). There White declares that "I am suggesting that historical systems differ from biological systems by their capacity to act *as if they could choose their own ancestors*. The historical past is

plastic in a way that the genetic past is not. Men range over it and select from it models of comportment for structuring their movement into their future” (132). History provides a type of “as if” account that can be utilized for moral purposes.

Men seem to require an ordered past as much as they require an ordered present. They want to believe that what they have in fact created could not have been otherwise. . . . [O]ut of the chaos of individual choices, the historians finds the order that even the choosers could not have seen. . . . Our anxiety in the face of the unknown drives us to embrace the fiction that what we have chosen was necessary, given our past. But the historical, unlike the biological past, is not given, it has to be constructed in the same way and in the same extent that we have to construct our sociocultural present.

In choosing our past, we choose a present, and vice versa. We use the one to justify the other. By constructing our present, we assert our freedom; by seeking retroactive justification for it in our past, we silently strip ourselves of the freedom that has allowed us to become what we are. (135)²⁸

The remarks here anticipate by several years the closing ruminations on first- and third-person perspectives on actions that Thomas Nagel famously develops in the concluding portion of his critique of Kantian ethics in “Moral Luck.”²⁹ Taking a third-person perspective on ourselves or others can result in perceiving actions as fated.

We are unable to view ourselves simply as portions of the world, and from inside we have a rough idea of the boundary between what is us and what is not, what we do and what happens to us, what is our personality and what is an accidental handicap. We apply the same essentially internal conception of the self to others. . . . We cannot simply take an external evaluative view of ourselves—of what we most essentially are and what we do. And this remains true even when we have seen that we are not responsible for our own existence, or our nature, or the choices we have to make, or the circumstances that give our acts the consequences they have. Those acts remain ours and we remain ourselves, despite the persuasiveness of the reasons that seem to argue us out of existence.

. . . But it is not enough to say merely that our basic moral attitudes toward ourselves and others are determined by what is actual; for they are also threatened by the sources of that actuality, and by the external view of action which forces itself on us when we see how everything we do belongs to a world that we have not created.³⁰

Given the circumstances surrounding the individual, it could not be expected that that person would act otherwise. But, from a first-person perspective, it often seems as if one had a choice. Although it is a view he attributes to Croce, I take White to be speaking of his own understanding of matters when he writes,

True historical insight demands . . . [being] able to recognize the degree to which man is a slave to passion and animal necessity, but his ultimate interest will always be individual persons or events insofar as they manifest the capacity for morally responsible decisions. The task of the true historian is to describe the encounter between man’s various projected ideals of life and the social-physical world operative around and within himself that that ideal is meant to explain, contain, and order. . . . Here history and philosophy become one. (60)

Thus what marks the sphere of the moral does not depend for White, as it did for Kant, on postulating humans as belonging to a kingdom of ends. In place of

28. Interestingly, White here speaks in his own voice a view he attributes in an earlier essay to Sartre. See “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 2 (1966), 123.

29. Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck,” *Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volume* 50 (1976), 137-152.

30. *Ibid.*, 149.

the Kantian ideal, he offers only a more homely motley of “various projected ideals of life.” Relative to these, individually and collectively, people “manifest a capacity for morally responsible decisions,” that is, for decisions that reflect the degree or extent of respect and care shown to the ends important to others.³¹

This concern can be seen as exhibited even when White occasionally turns to defend teleological historical speculation. He denounces as ideological any attempt by philosophers or others to preclude such speculation on epistemic or other principled grounds. His reasoning makes recourse to teleologically informed historiography (in any of its guises) as a near-Feyerbachian expression of alienation or longing, and so to be respected as such and hence not to be curtailed. As he complains, striking a Feyerabendian tone (though I can find no evidence that White read Feyerabend), “this distinction between ‘straight’ history’ and metahistory’ is itself ideologically loaded. It is a valid distinction, but not because ‘straight’ history is a legitimate and ‘metahistory’ an illegitimate form of intellectual activity, but because, as currently employed at least, it functions to discredit culturally innovative forms of reflection on history” (143). Blind obedience to a methodology sanctioned by current science becomes an intolerable tyranny if it shackles the expression of innovative thought. “Culturally innovative forms” represent newly imagined ends people set for themselves and others. This historicized and de-transcendentalized Kant-like ideal remains White’s moral center. In this regard, one might well say of White what White, in the essay of most recent (2007) vintage contained in this anthology, says in his homage to Paul Ricoeur:

He knows that history is all we are left with after the death of God and the end of metaphysics, that we are ineluctably “in” history, and that our principal obligation as human beings burdened by existential “care” is to live our lives “historically.” (328)

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31. Sellars puts the point this way. “To think of a featherless biped as a person is to think of it as a being with which one is bound up in a network of rights and duties. From this point of view, the irreducibility of the personal is the irreducibility of the ‘ought’ to the ‘is’. But even more basic than this (though ultimately, as we shall see, the two points coincide), is the fact that to think of a featherless biped as a person is to construe its behaviour in terms of actual or potential membership in an embracing group each member of which thinks of itself as a member of the group. Let us call such a group a ‘community’. Once the primitive tribe, it is currently (almost) the ‘brotherhood’ of man, and is potentially the ‘republic’ of rational beings (cf. Kant’s ‘Kingdom of Ends’). . . . The most embracing community to which he belongs consists of those with whom he can enter into meaningful discourse. . . . Thus, to recognize a featherless biped or dolphin or Martian as a person is to think of oneself and it as belonging to a community.

Now, the fundamental principles of a community, which define what is ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘done’ or ‘not done’, are the most general common intentions of that community with respect to the behaviour of members of the group. It follows that to recognize a featherless biped or dolphin or Martian as a person requires that one think thoughts of the form, ‘We (one) shall do (or abstain from doing) actions of kind A in circumstances of kind C’. To think thoughts of this kind is not to classify or explain, but to rehearse an intention.

Thus the conceptual framework of persons is the framework in which we think of one another as sharing the community intentions which provide the ambience of principles and standards (above all, those which make meaningful discourse and rationality itself possible) within which we live our own individual lives. A person can almost be defined as a being that has intentions.” Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality*, 39–40.