

In defence of a humanistically oriented historiography

The nature/culture distinction at the time of the Anthropocene

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Introduction

This chapter examines a recent challenge to the idea of a humanistically oriented historiography.¹ I refer to this recent challenge as ‘the new challenge’, in order to distinguish it from a better-known criticism of the autonomy of historical explanations that was articulated by Hempel in the 1940s and 1950s: a criticism which I will refer to as ‘the old challenge’. In speaking of a new challenge, I do not refer to a school of thought whose members explicitly identify with a set of tenets or share a common manifesto. I refer rather to a cluster of claims that share a certain family resemblance, one that is sufficiently robust to justify seeing them as emerging from a similar set of metaphilosophical assumptions. Proponents of the new challenge (Chakrabarty 2009; Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016; Latour 2017) argue that the advent of the Anthropocene, a geological period in which humankind has become a significant geological force capable of initiating environmental changes, spells the end of the distinction between the historical and the natural past. According to the new challenge, narratives of historical development should go well beyond the relatively recent human past (with which historical narratives have been traditionally concerned) and view human history in the context of a deeper, longer-term geological history. Advocates of the new challenge argue that the distinction between the historical and the natural past (a distinction that was pivotal to the defence of a humanistically oriented historiography against the old challenge) relies on questionable anthropocentric

assumptions that treat human beings as if they were not basically or essentially *natural* beings. They condemn the distinction between the historical and the natural past as an unacceptable dichotomy committed to a form of human exceptionalism which pits the human being against the rest of nature.

There is a soft and a hard version of the new challenge. The soft version claims that traditional histories, the history of the Egyptian and the Roman civilization, for example, and long-term geological histories, should criss-cross. For if these two histories are kept in complete isolation from one another, then it is very difficult to expose human activity as a crucial factor in climate change. It is only when these different histories are entangled that it is possible to see, for example, that 'James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784' coincides with the 'beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane' in the air trapped in polar ice (Crutzen 2002: 23), or that the cooling of the climate known as 'the little ice age' followed the drastic fall in the indigenous population after Columbus's 'discovery' of America (Lewis and Maslin 2015: 175–6). This kind of criss-crossing is not new. But whereas traditional histories tended to mention the way in which nature impinges upon civilization (they discussed, for example, the ways in which draughts impacted upon Pharaohs's abilities to rule effectively in ancient Egypt), Anthropocene narratives change the direction of fit: they expose the influence that civilization has on nature rather than nature on civilization. The soft version of the new challenge does not deny that longer term, 'deep' geological histories and the history of civilizations are different kinds of histories, with different methods, suited to answer different kinds of questions: an argument against the compartmentalization of knowledge is not the same as an argument against disciplinary boundaries. The hard version, however, is a different kettle of fish and considerably more radical than its soft counterpart. It argues not merely against the compartmentalization of knowledge which prevents the historian of ancient civilization from knowing anything about the findings of geologists but also against the very idea of disciplinary boundaries which was invoked to defend the possibility of a humanistically oriented historiography against the old Hempelian challenge. While the old challenge sought to reduce historical explanations to scientific ones, the new challenge, in its most radical form, undermines the disciplinary boundaries between science and history by denying that the concept of historical agency is *sui generis*. By replacing the *sui generis* category of 'historical agent' with an undifferentiated concept that includes microbes, characters in novels and military commanders alike, the most radical form of the new challenge does away with the distinction between rational and causal explanations that demarcated the domain of history

(traditionally understood) from that of science. I take Dipesh Chakrabarty, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz to be articulating, *for the most part*, a soft version of the challenge, calling for entanglement, and Bruno Latour as articulating the more radical version, calling for abolition. The dividing line between these two versions of the challenge, however, is not always clear cut, and the distinction between the two is more like one that ought, in principle, to be made than one that is actually drawn in practice. It is the abolitionist view that I am mostly concerned with in this chapter, a view from which those who call for entanglement do not always sufficiently distance themselves.²

This chapter has two goals. First it defends a humanistically oriented historiography against the charge that it is inextricable from an unacceptable form of human exceptionalism. *Humanistically oriented* historiography, I argue, is not the same as *human* history. The subject matter of a humanistically oriented historiography is not humans, understood as a biological species, and the time of humans on planet earth, but the norms which govern any beings whose conduct can be explained as responding to certain normative demands rather than as conforming to natural laws. The new challenge to the possibility of a humanistically oriented historiography conflates the idea of the historical past with that of the human past. The historical past is *not* the human past; it is the past understood in a way that is different from the way in which it is approached by, say, the palaeontologist or the geologist. And because what defines the historical past is how it is explained, the historical past is not an insignificantly brief temporal segment of the geological past (the time of the humans, or the time when written records began) because it is not a segment of time at all but a different way of approaching and understanding what happened in the past. It is the conflation of the historical with the human past that gives rise to the objection that traditional histories are premised upon a form of human exceptionalism. Second, this chapter resists the weakening of the notion of historical agency that inevitably follows from denying the distinction between the historical and the natural past. It argues that if there were no distinction between the historical and the natural past, no disciplinary boundaries between history and science and no distinction between historical and other kinds of agents, then the anticipation of the future would become a mere spectator's sport analogous to the activity of predicting the weather.

To be clear, the goal of this chapter is not to take issue with geologists who claim that in years to come the rocks will bear traces of a sudden acceleration in climate changes caused by human activity, changes comparable to those which occurred in the transition from the Cretaceous to the Tertiary, when it

is widely believed that the impact of a meteor led to the disappearance of the dinosaurs (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 13). This chapter takes issue not with climate scientists but with those philosophers of history and science who claim that the appropriate response to the findings of the science of climate change is to undo the nature-culture distinction. In defending the distinction between the natural and the historical past this chapter seeks to make room (philosophically speaking) for the possibility that the future climate of the planet may be shaped by responding to environmentally friendly norms, rather than merely forecast as the inevitable consequence of climate changes which humans have set in motion *qua forces of nature*. This chapter does not deny that by deforesting land and burning fossil fuels humans have initiated or causally contributed to global warming. What it argues is that it is only *qua historical agents* that they can look to the future as something that they can *shape* by changing the norms to which they responded in the past rather than as something that they merely *facilitate* by playing a role analogous to that of yeast in the chemical process of fermentation.

The old challenge

Before the so-called 'narrativist turn' much analytic philosophy of history was preoccupied with the task of specifying the nature of the methodologies at work in the sciences.³ The question which dominated the debate was whether historical explanations of past events are covert retrodictions which share the same logical structure as scientific predictions of future events or whether, on the other hand, they have a completely different logical form. Hempel (1942) argued that the nomological model of explanation, according to which to explain something is to subsume the explanandum under a general law, can be employed either to predict the future or to retrodict the past. The fact that historians are typically concerned with the past rather than the future does not entail that historical explanations are different in kind from scientific explanations if we accept that historical explanations of past events have the same logical form as scientific predictions of future ones. The historian's focus on the past and the scientist's focus on the future, for Hempel, merely obscures the fact that scientific and historical explanations share the same (nomological) form and that historical explanations at best differ from scientific ones only in degree, in so far as the generalizations used by historians invoke probabilistic laws which cannot be falsified by a single counter-instance.⁴

W. H. Dray (1957, 1963)⁵ responded to Hempel's argument for methodological unity in the sciences. He conceded that the distinction between the past and the present cannot be mobilized to defend the methodological autonomy of history but denied that the past, as understood, for example, by a cultural anthropologist or medieval historian, is the same past as that which is investigated by big bang physicists: historians do not retrodict Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon in the way in which astronomers retrodict the explosion of a star that occurred millions of years ago. While historians are concerned with the past, they are not concerned with the *natural* past. But what is this non-natural past with which historians are concerned? It is the study of the norms which govern the conduct of certain beings who are taken to be distinctive kinds of agents, that is, *historical* agents. These beings are taken to be *historical* agents neither because they live in the past rather than the present nor because they are human rather than non-human but because they are responsive to norms. The contrast that is relevant to a defence of the autonomy of history against the old challenge is not the distinction between the past and the present. It is the distinction between nature and culture. This distinction is not a distinction between humans and other 'lesser' beings because it is not an empirical taxonomy such as the one that, for example, is invoked to distinguish human mammals from other mammals as, for example, chimpanzees; it is a methodological distinction between the presuppositions informing forms of inquiry which serve different explanatory needs. For the sake of predicting the future and retrodicting the past physicists assume that nature is uniform, that the laws of nature are the same in the Victorian and Edwardian period and that water will freeze at 0°C under the reign of King Edward VII as well as that of Queen Victoria. For the sake of understanding historical agents, by contrast, historians assume that the norms by which historical agents lead their lives may differ from their own. From the point of view of the physicist 'nature has no history'. This is not because natural beings are unaffected by the passage of time (fruits first ripen and then rot) nor because nature never changes (the earth was a very different place millions of years ago than it is now) but because the scientific investigation of nature operates under the assumption of the uniformity of its underlying laws.⁶ By contrast, the historical investigation of the past operates on the assumption that agents are responsive to norms, and that these norms are not historically invariant. For example, historians explain why in plague-stricken Britain people rubbed live chickens on their wounds by invoking the epistemic norms prevalent at the time. What makes this explanation *historical* is not that it applies to human beings who lived in the past but that it explains human beings as responding to the state of medical knowledge at

that time, much as the behaviour of a driver who stops at a red traffic light is explained by invoking traffic regulations rather than by identifying natural laws. If the Slitheen, the Time Lords, the Daleks and the Silurians had not been alien fictional creatures in the TV series *Dr Who*, but ancient civilizations predating the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, they would be appropriate subject matter for history even if they did not belong to the biological species 'human'. The question that one should ask to establish whether certain life forms can be studied historically is not 'Are they mammals?' or 'Are they higher mammals?' or 'Are they human?' but 'Are they civilized?' And if they are, then they will need to be understood in different ways from the rocks and the waves, not because they have a supernatural 'inside' over and above a natural/observable 'outside' that the rocks and waves do not have but because to the extent that they live by self-given rules which they take to be binding, their behaviour cannot be explained as that of the sunflower which turns towards the sun, or the moon which orbits round its planet. Such is the nature of norms: unlike natural laws they can be disobeyed, but they will cast light on the behaviour of those who follow them in such a way as to show, for example, that the individual rubbing a live chicken on his wounds is not plain mad.

The distinction between nature and culture which was invoked to defend the methodological autonomy of history in the middle of the last century did not capture the divide between the human and the non-human. Nature and culture are distinct explicanda that are known through the presuppositions and methods of science and history respectively. Even if both history and science look at the past, they never really look at it in the same way. The big bang could never be explained historically, just as the significance of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon could not be grasped through the methods of science. But this is not because Caesar has an unobservable supernatural inside which eludes the third-person perspective of science but because the significance of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon can be understood only against the background of Republican Law, not by reference to the laws of nature. Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon was an act of disobedience that is understood historically when it is understood in the way in which one explains the action of the driver who disregards a traffic regulation, that is, as a failure to abide by the norms of conduct dictated by Republican Law, rather than as a counterexample to a natural law. The defence of a humanistically oriented historiography against the old challenge conceived of the historical past neither as a segment of time that lags behind the present and grows bigger as each day goes by (the metaphysical view that time is a growing block) nor as the all-too-human past of kings and queens, of Queen Elizabeth rather than

the queen bee (the view that what is meant by historical time is the time of the humans on planet earth). The defence of the autonomy of historical explanations against the claim for methodological unity was premised on the assumption that history and natural science have different investigative goals and are governed by different presuppositions, presuppositions that are reflected by the adoption of different forms of inference. Since the defence of a humanistically oriented historiography against the old challenge assumed that nature is the correlative of a particular form of (scientific/nomological) inference and culture is the correlative of a different form of (historical) inference, it entailed that a change in the form of inference also entails a change of subject matter. The reason why the (historical) significance of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon would elude an empirical scientist seeking to retrodict it through the application of inductive tools is that the application of the methods of natural science turns everything that it tries to explain into a natural event, just as King Midas turns everything he touches into gold.⁷ Scientists directing their methods to the study of biological humans do not write history; they change the subject matter because the past can be understood historically only when it is investigated by the methods of history. And the other way around too: if historians tried to explain the big bang in the way in which they seek to render intelligible the actions of past agents, they would not be writing science but rather mythological accounts of the past. The distinction between the historical and the natural past that was invoked to defend the possibility of a humanistically oriented historiography against the argument for methodological unity in the sciences, therefore, is not the same as the distinction between the human and the non-human past. Nor does the defining characteristic of the historical past lie in the fact that it is no longer present. Rather, what is no longer present constitutes the historical past in so far as it is looked at through the lens of beings who, as Heidegger would say, have an understanding of Being. Historians tracing the rise and fall of civilizations are not palaeontologists seeking to date the extinction of biological species through the study of their fossilized remains. While palaeontologists look at the fossilized remains of dinosaurs as providing evidence for the existence and evolution of a now-extinct animal species, the mummified remains of ancient Egyptians are of interest to humanistically oriented historians *not* in so far as they provide evidence to document the existence and evolution of a now-extinct ethnic group but insofar as they symbolize the belief that the preservation of the body is required for the soul to find an appropriate home in the afterlife. The defence of the idea of a historical past against the old challenge was therefore based not on an arbitrary divide between human and non-human animals but on the

assumption that to understand the past *historically* is to approach it as a *space of reasons*⁸ in which the action of historical agents are understood as abiding by (as well as contesting) norms.

There is much more that could be said about the defence of humanistic understanding against the old challenge. While in the early and mid-twentieth century the debate for and against methodological unity was conducted primarily on the terrain of philosophy of history and social science, these issues were also the object of extensive discussions in the philosophy of mind and action⁹ where it was perhaps much clearer that the defence of the irreducibility of action explanation to event explanations did not hinge upon defending a dichotomy between humans and other beings but on the nature of the inferences that are adopted in different contexts of inquiry. Davidson, for example, argued that the mental has a normative dimension that finds no echo in scientific explanations (Davidson 1963); many others have argued that the explanation of action is *sui generis* because it has an irreducibly teleological dimension (Malcom 1968; von Wright 1971; Tanney 1995; Schon 2005). The current debate concerning the role of history at the time of the Anthropocene about whether historical narratives should shift their focus from the relatively recent human past to a deeper past of the human species in order to expose the interdependence of human life on other species (and nature at large) seems to forget that the old defence of the irreducibility of humanistic explanations to naturalistic ones in its various forms was an argument against scientism that did not hinge upon a commitment to an ontological divide between the human and the non-human. It is arguably a new form of naturalism which is making a comeback, in a different and subtler form, in the new challenge.

The new challenge

The distinction between nature and culture which informed the defence of a humanistically oriented historiography against the old challenge has come under attack on the basis of reflections about what it means to live in the Anthropocene: a new geological epoch characterized by cataclysmic human-induced climate changes which could potentially lead to the extinction of human life on earth. Stratigraphic proof for the end of the Holocene and the beginning of the Anthropocene is still outstanding, and there is no consensus among geologists as to the identifiable beginning of this new epoch, some dating its onset to the

time of the first nuclear explosion in 1945 (Zalasiewicz et al. 2015), some to the year 1784, the date of the invention of the steam engine as a symbol of the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Crutzen 2002: 23), and others dating its onset further back to 1610, when a drastic fall in the indigenous population following Columbus's 'discovery' of America led to a decline in atmospheric CO₂ and the cooling of the climate known as the 'little ice age' (Lewis and Maslin 2015). While there is no clear consensus as to whether the Anthropocene has succeeded the Holocene and if so, what its precise start date is, the Anthropocene has increasingly been described as that slice of geological time in which humans have become causal forces so powerful as to be able not only to selectively intervene in nature but also to radically alter its course. Whether or not the Anthropocene will be given scientific recognition as a separate geological era is ultimately a matter for geologists to determine. What we are concerned here is not the scientific claim that the Anthropocene is a new slice of geological time, in which traces of human activities are being carved into the earth's strata, but rather the philosophical claim that we should cast aside the distinction between the historical and the natural past either as philosophically dubious or as an obsolete categorial distinction that no longer serves our present needs. Since we stand on the threshold of an environmental catastrophe, so the argument goes, humans should see themselves in the context of a longer term, geological history of planet earth, one in which the history of kings and queens unfolds in the batting of a geological eyelid. During what, from a geological perspective, is an infinitesimally short period of time, human beings fought revolutions, waged wars and plotted against each other. During this period of time those same human beings enslaved members of their own species with a different skin colour, devised class systems which exploited large sections of humanity for the benefit of a selected few and created myths to provide ideological support for racial segregation and class exploitation. This is the focus of traditional histories: the domain of human affairs or the time of the human species on earth and their internal quarrels and conflicts. Historical narratives at this momentous time, where humanity is on the cusp of self-destruction, should focus on a different kind of time, a time long before any of the written records that professional historians study, to uncover the 'deep history' of humankind (Chakrabarty 2009: 212). Anthropocene-inspired criticisms of the idea of a distinctively historical past therefore tend to highlight the brevity and comparative insignificance of human time – a time during which humans became the predominant species: a species whose skills in mastering the natural environment eventually led them to fancying themselves as being other-than-nature.

As well as urging historians to shift their attention away from historical to geological time, proponents of the new challenge seek to undermine what they see as the unacceptable dichotomy between the subjects of traditional history (human agents) and the object (nature), a dichotomy that they see as integral to the distinction between the natural and the historical past. The realization that human activity is responsible for global warming and the ensuing 'natural' catastrophes undermines the distinction between the traditional agents of history (humans) and the immutable backdrop against which their deeds take place (nature). As Chakrabarty puts it, climate scientists, in positing 'that the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent than he or she has always been ...', are 'unwittingly destroying the artificial but time-honoured distinction between natural and human history' (Chakrabarty 2009: 206). In traditional histories nature is portrayed as an unchanging 'silent and passive backdrop' (Chakrabarty 2009: 203), against which human history unfolds; it only makes sporadic appearances in historical narratives when it either facilitates or somehow hinders human endeavours. The weather, for example, is mentioned in Second World War histories because on 7 December 1941 the clear skies made the Japanese attack on the American base in Pearl Harbour easier or, in histories of the Great War, because persistent rain weakened the structural integrity of the trenches on the western front. But in traditional histories nature is generally portrayed as a constant backdrop against which human affairs unfold. It is seen as the 'other' of history: whereas civilizations change, the seasons alternate in an eternal recurrence of the same natural cycle, indifferent to human turmoil and unaffected by it. This view of nature as the other of history, an external and static backdrop indifferent and impregnable to human action, is shattered by the discovery that human activity is the catalyst for global warming, that deforestation and the industrialization of farming play a role in the process of climate change that is not different in kind from the one that, for example, microbes play in the development of diseases. The science of climate change shows that just as the balance of nature would remain inexplicable without taking into account the 'actions' of living organisms, so the disruptions to the natural cycles that have for so long been taken for granted could not be explained without the agency of humans. The Anthropocene brings the realization that human agency is the catalyst of climate change, that humans are geological forces of nature (Latour 2017: 92 ff.) just as Pasteur demonstrated that sugar could not be transformed into alcohol without the presence of yeast. The dividing line between a dead or de-animated nature that can be explained by appealing to physics and chemistry alone and history, to be understood, on

the other hand, teleologically, as the achievement of the goals of human agents, is shattered by the twin realization that just as the balance of nature could not be accounted for without taking into consideration the actions of living organisms, so the disruption to this balance cannot be accounted for without taking into account the actions of humans. The onset of the Anthropocene therefore challenges not only the distinction between human agents as the subject of history and a dead/deanimated nature to be understood mechanistically rather than teleologically; it also challenges the distinction between the agents that feature in traditional histories and other kinds of agents: microbes, yeast and so on.

As the distinctions between history and nature, between historical and other kind of agents comes under attack, so does the view that there are different modes of understanding that correspond to the (allegedly) distinctive explananda of the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Bruno Latour claims that the way one understands the working of General Kutuzof's mind in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is not significantly different from the way one understands how the Corticotropin releasing factor works. The reason why one might find it easier to grasp the psychology of the general in Tolstoy's novel than a scientific text describing the function of the factor releasing Corticotropin is simply due to lack of familiarity with the scientific context (Latour 2017: 49 ff).¹⁰

The distinction between nature and culture also becomes the target of gentle mockery as the question 'Don't the historical beings who feature as main characters in traditional histories have a natural environment as well as a culture?' is teasingly posed. Sloterdijk, for example, asks whether Dasein does not have a habitat as well as a 'world' in the Heideggerian sense (a language, a culture a history). 'When you say that the Dasein is thrown into the world, into what it is actually thrown? What is the composition of the air it breathes there? How is the temperature controlled?'¹¹ The nature-culture distinction presupposed by the notion of a distinctively historical past leads not only to an unacceptable dichotomy between humans and the rest of nature; it also treats historical agents as if they were ethereal creatures who do not need to eat, breathe and perform any physiological functions, or so the argument goes. These objections are closely interlinked: if there are no distinctive *historical* agents, then there is no significant difference between culture and habitats and no distinctive methods for studying them are required as a result.

The new challenge questions the methodological distinction between different modes of understanding as based on an unacceptable ontological distinction between humans and the rest of nature. Once the ontological

distinction between subject and object in its various manifestations (historical time vs geological time, historical subjects vs the object [nature]; historical agents vs other non-historical agents, humans vs other lesser beings) is rejected, so too are the methodological distinctions that underpin the study of nature and culture, the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. From the perspective of the new challenge, the nature-culture distinction which emerged in the twentieth century and which was invoked to defend the idea of a distinctively *historical* past¹² is at best humanity's ultimate delusion of grandeur and at worst a self-destructive ideology invoked by the human species to justify the exploitation of nature, just as the idea of the free market functioned as the ideology through which the emerging bourgeoisie sanctioned the exploitation of the working classes. Bonneuil and Fressoz, for example, advocate going 'beyond the great separation' of nature and culture, of 'the natural sciences with their non-human objects' and the 'a-natural' humanities and social sciences, the former postulating 'physical continuity between human and other entities', the latter 'defined by a metaphysical discontinuity between humans and everything else' (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 32). The Anthropocene, they argue, once it is recognized 'as the reunion of human (historical) time and Earth (geological) time, between human agency and non-human agency, gives the lie to this – temporal, ontological, epistemological and institutional – great divide between nature and society' (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 32). The *temporal* divide between human and geological time, the *ontological* divide between humans and the rest of nature, the epistemological/*methodological* divide between the humanities and science all stand or fall together, the result of the same unacceptable dualist metaphilosophical standpoint.¹³

The same boring old conceptual distinctions?

Does the nature-culture distinction that is presupposed by the defence of a humanistically oriented historiography either rest on or entail an ontological distinction between humans and the rest of nature? To see why the considerations raised by the new challenge fundamentally misconstrue the assumptions on which the idea of a distinctively historical past rests one needs to understand what kind of distinction the nature-culture distinction is. As intimated earlier, nature and culture are the explicanda of two different modes of inquiry with distinctive methods and investigative goals.¹⁴ The nature-culture distinction

captures a joint or juncture in the way reality is conceptualized in different areas of inquiry; it does not 'cut reality at the joints'. It is not a Cartesian¹⁵ (real or metaphysical) distinction entailing that historical subjects/agents could exist without a physical body, that there could be culture without nature, a 'World' (in the Heideggerian sense)¹⁶ without a habitat, in the way in which Descartes argued that the concept of mind, being really distinct from that of the body, could exist apart from the body. Defending the nature-culture distinction does not, for example, entail denying that the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians ate and breathed, or that their bodies aged and eventually decayed. What it entails, rather, is that it is not with their physiological functions that the Egyptologist (*qua* humanistically oriented historiographer) is concerned. Collingwood ([1946] 1993), whose philosophy of history loomed large behind Dray's defence of the autonomy of historical explanation against Hempel's claim for methodological unity in the sciences, put the point as follows:

A great many things which deeply concern human beings are not, and never have been, traditionally included in the subject-matter of history. People are born, eat and breathe and sleep, and beget children and become ill and recover again, and die; and these things interest them, most of them at any rate, far more than art and science, industry and politics and war. Yet none of these things have been traditionally regarded as possessing historical interest. Most of them have given rise to institutions like dining and marrying and the various rituals that surround birth and death, sickness and recovery; and of these rituals and institutions people write histories; but the history of dining is not the history of eating, and the history of death-rituals is not the history of death. (Collingwood 1999: 46)

Collingwood's point is not that it is not possible to write natural histories. Nor is he advocating a linguistic reform and arguing that the term 'history' should be reserved to denote histories of a certain kind, those which have been concerned with rituals rather than physiological facts. But while we may continue to speak as we wish, we should be wary of the bewitchment that words can exercise on our intelligence¹⁷ and assume that because we use one and the same word, 'history', there is no difference between the subject matter of the Egyptologist, or of the historian of ancient Rome, and that of the palaeontologist. Nor does it follow from the fact that the humanistically oriented historiographer and the natural scientist have different interests that there exist different kinds of beings, material and immaterial beings, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, that correspond to their different subject matters.

At times it is philosophers, more than ordinary people, who tend to be under the spell of words. The Gladstone Pottery museum in Stoke-on-Trent¹⁸ traces the history of the toilet from the humble chamber pot to the modern flushing toilet. Museum visitors are not normally surprised to find that the chamber pots and toilets on display contain no human excrement. If they are not surprised, this is because, echoing Collingwood, they tacitly acknowledge that the *history* of toilet rituals is not the same as the *history* of a physiological function. They do not infer from the fact that no human excrement is contained in the chamber pots and toilets on display, that the beings who used them were angel-like creatures who never needed to relieve themselves. Yet it is precisely this sort of inference that gives rise to the glib question 'Does Dasein not have a habitat? Does it not breathe? What kind of temperatures can it withstand?' Defending the irreducibility of the *Geisteswissenschaften* to the *Naturwissenschaften* is not tantamount to assuming an ontological separation between humans and the rest of nature; it is rather to make the point that the concept 'historical agent' is sui generis and irreducible to that of 'natural agent' and to advance an argument for the existence of disciplinary boundaries that reflect the different concerns and investigative goals of science and the humanities. The new challenge gets the direction of fit between ontology and epistemology upside down: the argument against methodological unity in the sciences was premised on the metaphysical assumption that there is a reciprocal relation between method and subject matter, that nature is the *explanandum* of science, just as culture is the *explanandum* of history; it was *not* premised on the assumption that the methods of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften* are different because mind and nature are metaphysical entities which can be known 'as they are' independently of the investigative goals of history and natural science. Defending the nature-culture distinction and the possibility of a humanistically oriented historiography does not mean providing an argument for metaphysical dualism,¹⁹ or being committed to it by default. It is to argue, rather, for the disunity of science, for the claim that science and history ask different kinds of questions and therefore that, just as the questions asked by scientists are not answered by the methods of history, so the questions asked by historians are not answered by adopting the methods of science.

Yet, quite often, when one mentions the old debate for and against methodological unity in the sciences one is met with a yawn: *how boring, how old hat, you are stuck in the 1950s! Since then much work has been done to show that there are different models of causal explanation that do not invoke generalizations, such as, for example, counterfactual accounts of causation. Since the argument for the unity of science as articulated by Hempel was based on a nomological account*

of causal explanation, defending the inapplicability of this nomological model to a humanistically oriented historiography is tantamount to fighting a strawman. The nomological model of explanation, so the objection goes, has long been superseded, and the debate between those who defended it and those who attacked it is stale. But whatever one might think about the nomological model of causal explanation (it is not my intention to take sides on whether causation should be understood in terms of regularities or counterfactuals), adopting a counterfactual rather than a nomological account of causal explanation does *not* undermine the distinction between the space of reasons and that of causes, the very distinction which was at stake in the old debate for and against methodological unity. Those who argued against methodological unity in the sciences did so on the grounds that the actions of historical agents must be understood in an intensional context, if they are to be understood *historically* at all. To illustrate, suppose that a tourist from a distant galaxy with no knowledge of the Catholic faith arrived on earth when the cardinals are gathered in Conclave. One day the tourist notices crowds in St Peter's square cheering and wonders why, since she noticed no such cries of jubilation the previous day. Yet the weather was the same, the air temperature similar and the merchants selling silk scarves were positioned in exactly the same spots. She consults video footage of the previous days and notices one difference: the colour of the smoke. On the day in which the crowds cheered, unlike the previous days, the smoke was white, not black. Having spotted this difference the tourist concludes that the crowds cheered *because* the smoke was white and that, had the smoke been black, they would not have cheered. She has provided a counterfactual causal explanation for the cheering of the crowds. Now, even if one were to concede that the intergalactic tourist could isolate the white smoke as the relevant counterfactual (why not the fact that, on the day the crowd cheered, the silk scarves on the merchants' stands were a different colour, or the bored kids screaming their heads off were positioned in a sunny rather than a shady spot of St Peter's square?), this counterfactual does not explain, in a particular sense of 'explain', why the crowds cheered. For the crowds did not cheer on account of the white smoke. They cheered because the cardinals gathered in Conclave elected a new leader of the Catholic Church.²⁰ Even if the tourist succeeded in providing an explanation for the crowds' cheering that would enable to predict similar behaviour in the future,²¹ this kind of explanation still singularly fails to capture the symbolic significance of the white smoke; it does not explain the cheering of the crowds in the way in which the tourist would like the event to be explained if she were a historian.²² If the intergalactic tourist were a historian she would

ask what the white smoke meant to the crowd, what is its symbolic significance, just as the Roman historian is interested not merely in the fact that in 49 BC some men with shields and horses waded across a stream (which later historical narratives glorified by calling it a river) but in what the crossing of that stream by a provincial governor meant to a Roman senator. The historical context of explanation is an intensional context in which the reaction of the crowds to the white smoke is understood against the background of the Catholic faith, just as Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon is understood in the context of Roman Law. A counterfactual explanation that limits itself to an extensional context, to the occurrence of white smoke emanating from a chimney, for example, but ignores the intensional context (the significance of the white smoke for the Catholic faith) may at best be able to predict or retrodict the behaviour of the crowds, but it would fail to explain it in the way that would satisfy the curiosity of the intergalactic tourist if the tourist were after a particular kind of *historical* explanation. Understanding the past historically, as Winch puts it, is a reflective or conceptual task:

Historical explanation is not the application of generalizations and theories to particular instances: it is the tracing of internal relations. It is like applying one's knowledge of a language in order to understand a conversation rather than like applying one's knowledge of the laws of mechanics to understand the workings of a watch. (Winch [1958] (1990): 133)

Winch contrasts historical explanations to generalizing/nomological ones; but his claim that we understand an event *historically* in the way in which we understand a language stands, whether or not one believes the (nomological) model of explanation to be an outdated model. Winch's point is that just as someone who has mastered the English language knows (by entailment) that if something is a washing machine then it is an electrical appliance, so if you are a Roman (or a Roman historian) and you know Roman Law then you know (by entailment) that crossing the Rubicon with an army signifies challenging Republican Law. Just as the concept of washing machine analytically entails that of electrical appliance, so Roman Law entails that certain acts are punishable transgressions. To understand Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon as a challenge to Roman Law is to subsume human agency under a certain kind of explanation, one that is rather different from that used to explain human agents qua catalysts for climate change, that is, as beings that play a role in global warming analogous to that which yeast plays in the process of fermentation. For while scientists have discovered empirically that a certain kind of human action (deforestation

and the burning of fossil fuels) causes global warming, historians understand the magnitude of Caesar's wading across of small stream because they know the 'grammar' of Roman Law.

The defence of a humanistically oriented historiography against the old challenge rests on the consideration that in order to understand an event historically one must go beyond a purely extensional context of explanation. This consideration is not rendered obsolete by the claim that since counterfactual causal explanations need not invoke covering laws, the argument against methodological unity articulated by Dray, Winch and others was directed at a straw man. Counterfactual causal explanations, just like nomological ones, miss the significance of the white smoke and of the crossing of the Rubicon because they do not consider how things appear or look like for that being who (as Heidegger says) has 'an understanding of Being'. A history of how humankind sleepwalked into global warming along the lines of Christopher Clarks *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Clarks 2012), cannot simply be a history of the consequences that deforestation, the industrialization of farming and the burning of fossil fuels have on the earth's climate because only agents who can rethink who they are and reconceptualize their relationship to their habitat could possibly be awoken from their environmental slumber. The facts of climate science can be understood as wake-up call to alter the way one lives only if one presupposes precisely what advocates of the new challenge at times appear to be denying, that is, that there is a distinctive kind of (historical) agent that is the correlative of a distinctive kind of (historical) explanation, one, to say it with Heidegger again, who has an understanding of Being.

The argument for the possibility of a humanistically oriented historiography was not an argument in support of some sort of ontological or metaphysical dualism but an argument in support of the existence of disciplinary boundaries between science and history, one motivated by the consideration that historians and scientists have different concerns. Since interdisciplinarity is the buzz word of the day, and an argument for the existence of disciplinary boundaries could easily be misconstrued as an attack on the very idea of interdisciplinarity, it is important to take some time to explain that defending the idea of disciplinary boundaries does not mean belittling the importance of cooperation among disciplines. Consider, for example, the relationship between crime detection and forensic science. Detectives enlist the help of forensic scientists to establish the location and time of a crime scene. By learning that the grit under the victim's fingernails originates from a remote area of the country that was inaccessible to the prime suspect at the time of the crime, a detective will then be able to rule

out the suspect from their investigation. The detective's goal is not to know the chemical composition of the grit; it is to solve the murder mystery, but she would not be able to infer that the prime suspect could not have been present at the crime scene without the assistance of the forensic scientist. Architects choose cladding materials with fire-retardant properties or glass panels which prevent homes from losing heat. But it is not their job to know what chemical composition the cladding panels must have in order to be fire-retardant or what scientific properties the glass must have to prevent the heat from escaping. Cooperation of this kind, between say, the detective and the forensic archaeologist (or the architect and the chemist), does not require denying that mutually supportive spheres have different goals. So understood, interdisciplinarity requires acknowledging the distinctive goals of, say, the detective and the forensic archaeologist, the architect and the chemist; in fact, interdisciplinarity makes no sense except against the background of disciplinary boundaries. The goals of those who argue that, in response to the Anthropocene, we should develop new 'environmental humanities' (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 288) can be achieved by putting the knowledge that is generated in biology, chemistry and physics at the service of architects, town planners, garbage disposal firms, just as the police can avail itself of the assistance of forensic science. Chakrabarty is absolutely right in saying that 'the crisis of climate change calls on academics to rise above their disciplinary boundaries because it is a crisis of many dimensions' (Chakrabarty 2009: 215). But rising above disciplinary boundaries is not the same as undoing them. There is no need to dissolve the historical past into the geological past or to undo the nature-culture distinction in order to change human habitats and foster environmentally friendly ways of living. What is required is joining the dots between, for example, chemistry and architecture so that the knowledge gained in one sphere can be mobilized to achieve the goals of another, just as forensic science has become a tool in crime detection. To acknowledge the existence of disciplinary boundaries and to understand interdisciplinarity as the interlocking of different spheres with distinctive methods is not synonymous with being an enemy of interdisciplinarity. Nor does understanding interdisciplinarity as the interlocking of distinctive spheres with their own distinctive goals and methods entail a commitment to the view that science can fix it all, that there is a purely technological solution to the problems of climate change.²³ The defence of the possibility of a humanistically oriented historiography, one must remember, is premised precisely on the assumption that scientism, understood as the view that science has the answer to all questions, precludes the possibility that the past could be understood as a response to self-given norms and thus that the

future could be shaped through political agency just as the historical past was. Undoing the nature-culture distinction is not the key to solving the climate crisis²⁴ because it is only in so far as one acknowledges the idea of historical agency that one can also make room for the possibility that the future may be shaped by the adoption of environmentally friendly norms rather than simply anticipated, in the way in which one expects rain after consulting the weather forecast.

Before drawing to a close I should make clear (again) that defending a humanistically oriented historiography is not the same as defending an anthropocentric historiography that excludes in principle the possibility of ascribing historical agency to non-human animals. The concept of 'human' and that of 'historical agent' are as distant as the concept of 'human' and that of 'Dasein'. Lizards or aliens from a distant galaxy can be historical agents if they have what Heidegger calls 'an understanding of Being'. Some animals – dolphins, elephants, higher primates – may have historical agency. This chapter is not concerned with determining who does or does not have historical agency, but with the more general point that the history of those beings (human or not) who do have a culture cannot be the same as the history of those beings (human or not) who do not have it: if there are beings who have a culture, then they have to be understood in a different way from beings who do not have it, as distinctive kinds of agents, and this is what distinguishes a humanistically oriented (which is not the same as *human*) history from other kinds of history. It is clearly possible to write animal histories,²⁵ but the question still remains as to what kind of history one should write about animals. The objection that the nature-culture distinction rests on a form of human exceptionalism conflates the distinction between different types of inferences or explanations with the distinction between two kinds of beings: human and non-human. A defence of a humanistically oriented historiography is therefore not an argument for speciesism; it is rather an argument against a new and subtler form of naturalism that seeks to deny the existence of methodological differences between forms of inquiry by undoing the distinction between nature and culture.

Conclusion

There is something politically progressive about the literature on the Anthropocene and resulting reflections on what entering this new geological

epoch may entail for the writing of historical narratives. It may be no coincidence that the analogy of ‘the house on fire’ recently used by Greta Thunberg²⁶ to describe the need for urgent action against climate change is to be found, and perhaps originates, in Latour’s *Facing Gaia*.²⁷ Those who contrast human time with geological time philosophize in response to the challenges of our times. These reflections on the nature of time, whether it should be subdivided into the Holocene and the Anthropocene, rather than, say, the Elizabethan, Victorian and Edwardian eras, are not the musings of philosophers living in an ivory tower. In comparison to these reflections the debates concerning the nature of time which rage in contemporary analytic metaphysics between endurantists and perdurantists,²⁸ on whether or not time is a fourth dimension such that – if only we had the right means of transport – we could travel through it like Dr Who, may seem like indulgent scholastic disputes whose participants are no better than Nero, playing the lyre as the world is burning. But while there is no denying that we should be shocked by the Anthropocene, undoing the nature-culture distinction is not the right response to its onset since humans, *understood not as a biological species of featherless bipeds but precisely as interpreting as self-interpreting beings*, are the only ones who may be able to respond to the climate crisis. As Jeff Malpass said in a conversation at a recent conference on the role of the philosophy of history, ‘The birds and the bees are not going to save us.’²⁹ There is no contradiction in describing humans (qua biological beings) as the cause of climate change and humans (qua historical agents) as the potential solution to it. It is just that, when human actions are explained causally, their behaviour is explained as if it were like that of the sunflower which turns towards the sun, rather than like that of Roman legionaries obeying the commands of their centurion. We often switch seamlessly from one explanation to the other. When, for example, I reprimand my daughter for not picking the wet towels off the bathroom floor, I treat her as capable of responding to the norms of common living. When, on the other hand, I tell my partner ‘Don’t bother to reprimand our (lovely) teenager for banging the door: it is not her; it is her hormones’, I treat my daughter as a force of nature. No parent of a teenage daughter needed to wait for the onset of the Anthropocene to learn that humans are forces of nature. What the Anthropocene has taught us is the extent to which these causal powers extend, *not* the fact that we have them.

The recent challenge to a humanistically oriented historiography hypostatizes the methodological distinction between different forms of explanation and, as a result, erroneously identifies their respective explicanda with the ontological distinction between biological humans and the rest of nature. In seeking to

combat human exceptionalism by rejecting the disciplinary boundaries between the human and the natural sciences it undermines the possibility of historical agency. In so doing, it inadvertently threatens to make the historical future as inevitable as the natural past. What appears to be a politically progressive argument motivated by the noble intention of curbing disrespect for the rest of nature (a clearly laudable goal) comes dangerously close to endorsing a fatalistic outlook that forecloses the possibility of taking affirmative action against climate change. This is what is ultimately at stake in defending the nature-culture distinction and why protecting it is important. It is not *qua* natural but *qua* historical beings that we can act to halt or to reverse what we started, to avoid the environmental catastrophe that climate science warns us about. The role of the philosophy of history is not to encourage a form of fatalism born out of the abolition of the nature-culture distinction rather than, say, out of belief in divine providence, or a commitment to old fashioned reductive naturalism, but rather to appeal to our historical nature to bring about those changes which it is still possible to bring about.

