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“The Grammar of Historiography”¹

Jonathan Gorman

In this paper I propose to present briefly an outline of the arguments in my book *Historical Judgement*, which has as a subtitle *The Limits of Historiographical Choice*,² and then, still more briefly, to take the subject matter forward a bit into the future. First, then, the simplest point: the subtitle explains the title. In other words, the being and essence of historical judgement lies in historians’ *choices*. That is what it takes to understand historiography, and, indeed, also what it takes to understand history. Conversationally implicated³ by the subtitle is a question to which the subtitle is an answer: surely historians cannot choose what they like? And the answer is “no”: historiographical choices have limits, and recognising that is crucial.

The book is philosophical in the analytical tradition, and organised in terms of a single line of argument. It seeks to synthesise the solutions to a number of problems in the philosophy of history, but while many if not all of those problems are traditional – and historians know better than most people that many philosophical issues are not new – it remains the case that what counts as a philosophical problem is itself a philosophical issue, and the book seeks to show just how the problems of philosophy of history arise. I say here “the” problems of philosophy of history, but, again, what count as such problems depends on the philosophical approach taken. It is the philosophical approach taken which enables us to sort puzzlement about history into clear questions. As that approach is developed in the book there is continuing reflection on which problems turn out to arise and hence which need to be dealt with. And the approach I take is based on American pragmatism, using in particular Quine’s philosophy. Quine has been tremendously influential in

¹ This paper was first delivered to the Research Seminar in Philosophy of History at the Institute of Historical Research of the University of London, Senate House, Malet St., London WC1, on 22nd January 2009. I am very grateful to the Chair of the Seminar, Dr Robert Burns, for the invitation, and to him and other members of the Seminar for a very fruitful discussion.

² Jonathan Gorman, *Historical Judgement: The Limits of Historiographical Choice*, Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, December 2007, Montreal & Kingston/Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, January 2008; xi + 258pp. Cloth edition ISBN 978-1-84465-109-2 (UK) and 978-0-7735-3409-4 (USA/Canada), paper edition ISBN 978-1-84465-110-8 (UK) and 978-0-7735-3410-0 (USA/Canada). While most of the book’s arguments in the present paper are in summary form or a re-expression of them, some short passages are reproduced without further reference.

³ The idea of “conversational implicature” comes from H.P. Grice, “Logic and conversation”, in P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, *Speech Acts*, pp. 41-58, New York: Academic Press, 1975. See also Jonathan Gorman, *The Expression of Historical Knowledge*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982, pp. 24ff.

analytical philosophy, sometimes lauded by such as Donald Davidson, or rejected by such as Richard Rorty, but the agenda he set lives on in the work of both and of many others also. Working out this agenda for philosophical issues about history is an important part of what *Historical Judgement* tries to do.

The book's first main argument draws on the old complaint, going back to Jack Hexter versus Carl Hempel, Morton White and Arthur Danto, that philosophers, in their philosophies of historical explanation, *prescribe* what historians ought to do rather than *describe* what they actually do. This descriptive/normative contrast is simplistic and involves misunderstanding the nature of philosophical method. However, just what philosophical method is is controversial, and the book initially analyses the metaphilosophical and historiographical moves made in the analytical philosophy of other disciplines, in particular those made with respect to epistemological issues of justification in science and law. It is noticeable that debates in philosophy of science and philosophy of law alike appeal, on both sides, to what appear to be historical facts about the practice of those disciplines. This part of the book's overall argument concludes by holding that the philosophy of a discipline requires the historiographical recovery of those rules which the practitioners of the discipline conceive as characterising their discipline and under which they conceive themselves to be operating. The book argues that it is appropriate to think of the offices, roles and practices and the rules or principles which specify or express them as a model which specifies and sets a "standard" which characterises the discipline. Even a philosophical model can be recognised and adopted by a discipline as constitutive of the self-understanding of the practitioners of that discipline. The philosophical model of a discipline is typically offered as being both descriptive and prescriptive, these being necessarily linked. They are linked just because – and this is a typical point from Quine – we *decide* what *count* as the facts in question. How much freedom we, in practice, have in such decisions then becomes a crucial issue. Justification typically – by which I mean, as a matter of fact about relevant philosophical arguments – requires an appeal to historical facts, in particular the facts about the model which the practitioners of the discipline conceive as characterising their discipline.

Given this, the historiographical recovery of such a model is central to the philosophy of a discipline, and hence this is the appropriate way to engage in the philosophical modelling of historiography. Thus historiography, to be modelled in a philosophical way, requires a historiography-friendly philosophical response to historians' theoretical concerns. Philosophers cannot prescribe for historians. Just as in general the philosophy of a discipline requires drawing on its historiography, so the philosophy of historiography should draw on the historiography of historiography. The philosophical issues concerning a discipline should arise from that discipline itself, as shown in its historiography. We then need a historiography of historiography to show the model or models used, where they are used (for we may believe that historiography, even if it can be traced back before Herodotus, was not "disciplinised" until, say, the nineteenth century). However, the unavoidability of writing our own historiography of historiography

is then argued for, first because, as already said, what count as philosophical problems depends on the philosophical approach taken, and second because it is evident that historians themselves rarely engage in the history of their own subject and rarely explain what they are about in terms of it; nor, when writing the historiography of historiography, do they often show the theoretical sophistication which historians are very able to do when writing about other matters. There is an interplay between philosophy and historiography in writing the historiography of historiography, and the point of writing our own is to recover, or make explicit, the presuppositions of that writing, in due course generalising our findings as appropriate to cover all historical writing.

Essential to a fully written historiography of historiography, given the pragmatic philosophy adopted, is an appreciation of the choices past historians have made and, for that matter, those choices they were not in a position to make. As to the latter, the book analyses the recovery of both choices and non-choices, non-choices in terms of Collingwood's notion of "absolute presuppositions".⁴ These are shown to mark the contingent limits of choice in the historical judgements made by past historians. A central feature which is analysed here is the historian's historically situated yet privileged position of *hindsight*. It is argued that the recovery of an absolute presupposition, of a "non-choice", is characteristically historiographic just in so far as it is capable of being understood in terms of characteristically historiographic ways of ascribing choices and thoughts to past individuals.

Already I am using the word "historiography" a lot. In my experience, few people, even historians, use this word, and those that do use it in many different ways. In the book a wide range of ambiguities are dealt with. But why not just say, for example, "history of history" instead of "historiography of historiography"? Briefly, I initially use the word "historiography" to refer to the *discipline* "history", and reserve the word "history" for the subject matter of that discipline: in effect, this is to stipulate that the word "history" is to be used, by historians and non-historians alike, to refer to (or purport to refer to) that reality which the writing produced by the discipline "historiography" is supposed to be about. If I use "history" both for that reality which historians write about *and* for what they write about it then I seem to be speaking ambiguously. Hence the simple distinction just presented. However, the distinction is there only to keep the argument safe from confusion in its early stages. In fact, because the book makes the broadly Quinean assumption that history – that reality through which we all live and have lived – just is that which we count it to be, and, most importantly here, also that which our historiography counts it to be, so the distinction ultimately disappears. History is, at least in part, what our historiography says it is. There is an anti-realist understanding involved here, which I will come to shortly. Importantly, it is an anti-realist understanding which I think historians, knowingly or not, share, an understanding which justifies their characteristic refusal to make much of the supposed history/historiography distinction, and which justifies their usual preference for using the word "history" rather than the word "historiography" in relevant contexts. As I continue I shall use the distinction

⁴ See R.G. Collingwood, *Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940.

less slavishly; it is an important point about historians' self-understanding that the distinction comes to be seen as less and less natural.

So the argument of the book continues by seeking to write an outline of the required historiography of historiography, centring as it must on historians' choices. Historians are themselves used as primary sources, and their self-understanding is recovered using their own views, both as directly expressed and as expressed in such historiographies of historiography as exist. The search for a suitable historiography of historiography, in disclosing its own presuppositions of writing historiography, discloses also the philosophical issues which arise for historians, which have to do with their factual and moral judgements made in a context of a multiplicity of choices. Selecting some historians who are paradigmatic of the discipline, the book examines in an order determined by the logic of the argument Butterfield, Ranke, Herodotus, Momigliano, Carr, Elton, Bloch, Langlois and Seignobos, and a number of others. Striking is the fact, already hinted at, that the *history* of historiography is characteristically not a part of historians' self-understanding. Historians, in seeking to explain their own discipline, do not characteristically use historiography to do it. Briefly, historiography presents historians as thinking many different things about the nature of historiography. Yet they can only disagree with each other if in some broad sense they share the issues about which they are disagreeing. What is characteristic of the discipline is that historians disagree most centrally about the following four interrelated issues: the role and nature of truth and truth-telling, the synthesis of facts, the acceptability and grounds of moral judgement, and their role or function in society.

I will say little about the last two of these here, because they are not part of what I want to develop in this paper. Briefly, then, the acceptability and grounds of moral judgement by historians, and historians' role or function in society, are dealt with in the final sections of the book, where Ranke's wish to avoid judging the past is analysed. Much in the book shows how many of the philosophical problems which historiography raises are matters not for *a priori* philosophical reasoning but for contingent or localised solutions. Thus it is argued to be a contingency how moral or political our historical judgements are or ought to be, and this varies with our audience or readership. Ranke may then be seen as "objective" for his own time but not for ours, because the moral and political agenda varies over time. Ranke required of himself that he consciously avoid projecting his subjectivity into the topic of enquiry, and it is plain that he felt himself able, in his own time, and in his desire to report the facts dispassionately, to *take for granted* that, for example, his readership would not find morally or politically controversial or contentious his view that the Latin and the Germanic nations form a unit for the purpose of his history. Whether or not he was right about that, certainly writing history on that assumption in the twentieth century would be a very different matter. In general, it is a moral rather than epistemological question whether historians should engage in moral judgement, and contingencies determine both the moral question and its answer. Historians' role or function in society is also historically contingent, and not a matter for any particular philosophical input.

I want to concentrate here on the middle of the book, which deals with the nature of truth and truth-telling and the synthesis of facts, and I will next summarise the arguments here. For many contemporary historians who reflect on the philosophical issues concerning historiography there is a worry about the postmodern destabilisation of historical reality. The suggestion that there is no historical truth and that historians can say pretty much what they like is, for many, completely contrary to the evidence-based ethos of the discipline. Richard J. Evans has expressed just such a complaint.⁵ He argues against what many see as the postmodern view that historians' language does not correspond to historical reality, a view which makes historiography essentially indeterminate and unjustifiable. But Evans' own solution which involves, briefly, reference to evidence and agreement, is far too thin to address postmodernism sufficiently, for that approach has powerful philosophical foundations. As an analytical philosopher I do not think these foundations are best expressed by those so-called "Continental" philosophers who are often supposed to be their source. This is partly because their arguments sometimes amount to claiming that no true or exact statements can be justifiably made by anybody. Applying this to themselves, it seems that they are then justified in taking less care than would normally be philosophically appropriate over how this postmodern view is to be expressed, believing as they do that exactness is unachievable even about their own approach. But applying a criterion to oneself involves the assumption that criteria are always appropriately universalisable so as to include oneself. Indeed, it has always seemed to me surprising that pluralistically minded philosophers should seek to express *universal* views at all. To be fair, it is often their opponents who convict them of inconsistency by presupposing the universalisability of what they say. However, if one thinks of the applicability of universalisability, rather, as a contingent matter, then one can conclude that sometimes it may be appropriate to universalise a criterion and sometimes not. There is, for example, nothing on the face of it which precludes our using exact language to express the view that historians' views are inherently inexact. What is needed is an understanding of how exactness, truth, objectivity and the like can be found, contingent though they may be, and it is the grounding for such exactness which I find in Quine's epistemology.

Using this approach, I argue that analytically expressed postmodernism is best seen as antirealist, with a sophisticated view of reality as being what we *count* it to be. That being so, language "fails to correspond to reality" because there is no *independent* reality for it to correspond to. It is not then a *failure*, and we need to make sense of words such as "knowledge", "truth" and related terms in ways that make sense, not in ways that do not. Given antirealism, it is a mistake to suppose that only a language-independent reality could ensure determinacy, truth, objectivity and so on. The postmodern position suggests *unlimited* freedom of choice in the context of what to believe about reality, and hence it is a chaotic contingency what people understand reality to be. This part of the book argues for what is for pragmatist philosophers a familiar point, that there are sufficient resources within the antirealist approach, pragmatically understood, to give us the

⁵ R.J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, London: Granta, 1997.

certainty and objectivity we need, without any requirement to adopt realism.

It is the view that reality is essentially known through experience which is often taken to mark the sound commonsense of the historian. The Quinean approach which I use is indeed best conceived as broadly empiricist, but it differs very much from the empiricism of David Hume. Humean empiricism is *atomistic*: it holds that experience comes in small bits which are associated and re-associated with each other, both in reality and in our understanding or knowledge of it. Much – arguably all – positivist philosophies of science were built on similar assumptions, as were their philosophies of history. Yet the best philosophical efforts of the positivists have failed to show that this atomism is correct. As F.H. Bradley, one of the British idealists influenced by Hegel, argued at the end of the nineteenth century, present experience presents itself all at once, and not bit by bit, and our understanding involves the active focussing of attention, which is something we can *choose* to do, or not.⁶ A Kantian solution in terms of fixed mental categories will not suit, not merely because empiricists don't like rationalism but because in fact we can and do, on occasion, have *choices* how to count reality. There is a simple example which has been used in philosophy of science since long before the atomist empiricist John Stuart Mill's 1843 book *A System of Logic*. Imagine an ignorant eighteenth century ornithologist, firmly convinced *a priori* that all swans are white, who travels to Australia and discovers a black one. There is for him a clear conflict between his background knowledge claim and what he takes his experience to be. But must he discard as false his belief that all swans are white? Not necessarily. Two inconsistent beliefs are in the forefront of his mind at the relevant point: "all swans are white" and "this is a black swan". These beliefs are inconsistent with each other. Logic says that one of them has to go.⁷ But neither logic nor experience tells us which it should be. The ornithologist can keep the belief that he has before him a black swan, and discard the belief that all swans are white. Equally, he can keep the belief that all swans are white, and discard the belief that this is a black swan, by supposing it to be some other kind of bird. There is therefore freedom of choice with respect to what we count as reality here. There is no fixed "real" answer. What we count as facts depend in part upon the rest of what we believe. These decisions are commonly socially, rather than individually, made. The "truth" of these many beliefs is mutually supporting, and based on practical grounds. Against Hume, this is a *holistic* rather than an *atomistic* conception of knowledge, reality and truth.

Thus we come to the broadly Quinean view that our beliefs form a "web" which expresses reality as a whole. Quine recognises that there is room for decision as to which sentences we wish to hold true and which false. We can amend our knowledge claims as convenient, and there are in principle many

⁶ See F.H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928, and other works.

⁷ Or perhaps, "Logic takes you by the throat and...." See C.L. Dodgson's (Lewis Carroll's) "What the Tortoise said to Achilles", *Mind* n.s. 4, 1895, pp. 278-280; see also Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, p. 43 and *passim*.

ways of doing this. In a famous expression, Quine said “Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system”.⁸ Isaiah Berlin said much the same: “Any one proposition or set of propositions can be shaken in terms of those that remain fixed; and then these latter in their turn; but not all simultaneously”.⁹ Moreover, Quine said, “no statement is immune to revision”, so *unlimited* adjustment is available. This pragmatist holistic empiricism gives us a kind of postmodern freedom to count reality as we wish, *except* for a crucial point: that any consequential cost of our decisions must be met by sufficient adjustment elsewhere in our system of beliefs. Changing our beliefs has *costs*, which contingently arise in situations of choice, where we desire to revise or are obliged to revise our beliefs, and decision is also called for when we observe the *conflict* between beliefs.

For Quine, the costs of revising beliefs particularly arise when what he calls “recalcitrant experiences” place other beliefs at risk. Such experiences are theory-dependent, they are not “raw”, and it has to be the *expression* of them which raises the risk of inconsistency with other beliefs. We might think of newly found historical evidence which places at risk an existing historical judgement, something up to now accepted as historical fact. As with the white swan example, we have to revise our beliefs to avoid inconsistency, and this means that revising a belief requires accepting a belief system in which we do not face recalcitrant experiences relative to it. I argue in the book that, as a matter of contingent fact, the proper claim to make is that, for many beliefs which we might think of as “established”, it is in practice *impossible* to revise them, for alternative beliefs which actually meet the required costs are not in practice available. Quine is then wrong to say in his early work that *any* belief can be revised and that we can *always* meet the costs of adjusting it. Free postmodern revisability of beliefs is just not available. Reality, while in principle a function of human choice, is nevertheless in practice largely “fixed”. Berlin continued my earlier quotation from him by saying: “It is this network of our most general assumptions, called commonsense knowledge, that historians to a greater degree than scientists are bound, at least initially, to take for granted”.¹⁰

Hence, on this holistic empiricist pragmatist approach, our conclusion at this point ought to be this: that reality is what we count it to be, and that we choose, and have chosen, to count it as we do, but we live with the outcome of our inherited choices, most of which we are not able to revisit simply because we do not see them as the outcome of choices, while many more, even if we wished to revisit them, are not revisable because an alternative belief system consistently permitting it is not available to us. Stage philosophers, and Descartes, try to persuade us that, for example, *that* is not

⁸ W.V.O. Quine, “Two dogmas of empiricism”, in his *From a Logical Point of View* [1951], 2nd edn., New York: Harper and Row, 1961, pp. 20-46 at p. 43.

⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “The concept of scientific history”, in his *Concepts and Categories*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 103-142 at p. 115.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “The concept of scientific history”, in his *Concepts and Categories*, pp. 103-142 at p. 115.

a really existing chair. J.L. Austin would have responded, “if *that* is not a chair, then I don’t know what is”. We can choose whether to count it as a chair or not, but we, in our shared language, have *already made the decision*. Our language, a successfully shared social institution, embodies our decisions how to sort the world. Incidentally, that language is a successfully shared social institution is only contingently so. It depends in large part on trust, just like our other social institutions. I hesitate to mention banks in this context. It is not easily imaginable that our language could collapse, just like our banks. But it could: some postmoderns are in effect imagining just that.

One duty for an analytical philosopher is to preserve trust in language. Is it *true* that that is a chair? Is it *really* a chair? Of course, because it meets the criterion which *we* have chosen. But neither you nor I are in a position to revise that judgement. Notice that, on the one hand, it is a *fact* that it is a chair, just as we say the chair is real or that it is true that it is a chair. But, on the other hand, that it is a chair, that these things are so, is a matter of meeting a criterion or standard that we have set, a standard that is normative as to what ought to be the case if something is to be counted as a chair, that is, if the word “chair” is to be correctly used of it. To specify this is to specify the *grammar* of the word “chair”, and this is the word which is deliberately used in the title of this paper.¹¹ We recognise here that we are following a rule, which exists in virtue of our recognition of a standard which is there to be met, even though we might sometimes fail to meet it. I mention at this point the “existence” of a rule in deliberate and respectful reference to the late Oxford Professor of Jurisprudence Herbert Hart, who explained such things.¹² It is in the philosophy of law that much of the work in this area has been done, and this is why much of *Historical Judgement* refers to arguments in philosophy of law. But the work has also been done in philosophy of science. One of the reasons for the current strength of American pragmatism in analytical philosophy is that it is able to allow for what has long been recognised as the *revisable* truth of scientific theories.

So far I have summarised arguments that might have been used by Richard J. Evans to support his reference to evidence and agreement in his defence of history. But the arguments are still not good enough for two reasons: first, the place of logic, which I will explain a little later, and second, that, with regard to historiography, neither “evidence” nor “agreement” are so easily available. It is tempting to suppose that, if the argument can be developed for the grammar of the word “chair” and hence for the reality of that which it refers to when used in a sentence we hold true, then we can run the argument for any linguistic expression. But this is where philosophers of law and philosophers of science typically run out of material, and where philosophy of history has particular importance. As *Historical Judgement* points out, a

¹¹ The concept and approach here derives from Wittgenstein, but I was stimulated to use the word “grammar” in this context by George Pavlakos’s use of it in his *Our Knowledge of the Law*, Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2007, p. 37: “In this book I shall use *grammar* in order to refer to the conceptual scheme that guarantees the intelligibility of thought, through a network of rules which determine what linguistic move is allowed in making sense and which is not”.

¹² See, for example, H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

crucial feature of historical writing, going back to Herodotus, is that historiographical writing is characteristically a lengthy affair. Herodotus did not think that he was offering merely a list of discontinuous facts, but that he was in some sense *unifying* them. It then seems that historical accounts should be seen as some kind of *synthesis*, and the question then arises of what it is that is being synthesised. Are there “discontinuous facts”? Only if we *count* the world that way. But we don’t; not, at least, at this stage of the argument. We have already lost “atomic facts” as we have moved to a holistic approach. But we have not lost them entirely, for while it is no longer appropriate to see them as philosophically foundational it remains the case that we can distinguish one word from another, one sentence from another, one paragraph from another, and one historical account from another. But what is very obvious is that it is an atomistic prejudice to suppose that it is only short sentences, such as “that is a chair”, which have the reality-counting function. They do, of course, have such a function, but so do single words, paragraphs, and – importantly for us – historical accounts as a whole. Indeed, since reality is what we count it to be, language is at the centre of our understanding of reality. This “linguistic turn” means that all the resources of our language are available for this purpose and this includes “tropes”, or literary devices.

In so far as historical accounts contain words, sentences and paragraphs then those words, sentences and paragraphs all have their place in counting reality. There is at this point for many analytical philosophers an assumption sometimes called “compositionality”, which is, put simply, the view that the whole is nothing more than the sum of its parts. For example, the view might be expressed as holding that if we can make sense of words, then we need do nothing more to make sense of sentences, and if we can make sense of sentences, then we need do nothing more to make sense of paragraphs, and if we can make sense of paragraphs, then we need do nothing more to make sense of whole historical accounts. You may well recognise that this amounts to insisting upon that very atomistic approach which was found in Hume and denied in Quine. F.H. Bradley knew it: his point that experience comes “as a whole” involved his view that breaking it up into simpler parts led to a range of contradictions.¹³

Here *Historical Judgement* uses examples formulated in my Cambridge Ph.D. dissertation, awarded in 1973 just as, unbeknown to me, Hayden White’s *Metahistory* was being published. I had worried in earlier years about similar things, but despite one of my supervisors being Bryce Gallie I could see no way forward using literary theory which seemed to me to fail the epistemological tasks required, and I inclined to the Quinean interests of my other supervisor, philosopher of science Mary Hesse, but here I could see no obvious way of making the Quinean web of belief operate for a historical account; the “holism” of each seemed too different. The “holism” of the Quinean web and the “holism” of the historical account seemed not to mesh with each other. But I was able to set up the philosophical problem which I thought mattered: using examples of historical writing with highly tendentious

¹³ F.H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928, p. 95.

selection of accepted truths, it was possible to demonstrate the difference between truth at the sentence level and at the whole account level, and also display the difference between inconsistency between two whole historical accounts as distinct from inconsistency between their constituent sentences. It is these examples that I used in *Historical Judgement*. A contingent fact about our ordinary recognition of the *meaning* of what was said in historical accounts made it clear that sentence-truth and sentence-inconsistency could not make sufficient sense of account-truth and account-inconsistency. Notice that “meaning” here includes the so-called “meaning of history”. In other words, compositionality failed for whole historical accounts. To use a term of art in analytical philosophy, what might be called “whole account” truth is not “truth-functional”.

Since historiographical whole accounts are the characteristic way for historians to count and express historical reality, they each can characteristically be taken to express a truth claim – *the* truth, rather than just a collection of truths – about their subject matter, and the previous Quinean arguments then apply to them at this whole account level. Notice that historical reality is *our* reality. Despite what one might think of as their size, historical accounts do not claim to express *all* our reality. Just as the word “chair” sorts and expresses what we think of as one part of reality, so a historical account may be taken to sort and express what we characteristically think of as a much larger part of reality. The postmodern claim is then that historiographical accounts can configure historical reality in as many different ways as we wish, analogous to the claim that we can believe what we like about smaller things. We may then proceed to use the Quinean argument, that any reconfiguration of historical reality requires adjustments elsewhere in our system. However, we now understand that system to be one not only of beliefs understood in an atomistic way but one including whole historiographical accounts, including our evidence for them, for the latter are also part of the web. Adjustments are then required when we have to decide between some historiographical accounts and others when they conflict at the whole account level. As a matter of contingent fact, historiographical accounts may then be considered as *established* when holistically understood conflicting alternatives are not pragmatically available. Established accounts will organise the historical reality in question, they will express the truth about it, they will embody the *criterion* for what counts as that reality, and in that way, just as for the word “chair”, they illustrate the *grammar* of historiography. Here, some history is objective, just because and in so far as it is in fact established without rival as counting the reality in question.

The argument is not yet good enough. I have used Quine’s arguments so far, and I have presupposed with him the availability of standards of logic which require us to choose between conflicting beliefs. It is logic which purports to force on us the need to adjust our beliefs where there is recalcitrance or inconsistency. *Historical Judgement* points out that a postmodernist such as Foucault would deny us reliance on logic. I have already doubted the pragmatic merit of universalisability, and the insistence on universal consistency has been seen by some as a totalitarian desire to impose a logical order on things. But this objection conceives the so-called laws of

logic as an independent set of standards which might be imposed by some power structure. It would then seem that the laws of logic are what they are only contingently, and a different power structure might as successfully enforce different laws. Quine is somewhat confused by their status, for he asserts that the laws of logic are merely further beliefs of the web which are as revisable as any other, but then he needs the laws to set up the web's operation. That seems to involve paradoxes of self-reference, but then the very expression of those paradoxes may well beg the questions involved; indeed, it may well be begging the question to use notions like "begging the question". We need not here get into that morass of unintelligibility, but we can observe this: that it seems to be a matter of contingent fact that we are rational, and so it seems that we might if we chose be irrational, we might not believe the laws of logic, so that we might in some appropriate sense *disobey* them, and that some power structure that valued those laws as we did not might try to force us to obey, so infringing our claimed freedom to choose. Down this route nothing whatever becomes "established" within the web. We then might, while for example believing "all swans are white", also believe "this is a black swan" at the same time, and simply refuse to take any notice of the alleged inconsistency. More generally, we might believe p and not- p , where p represents any sentence.

Well, we might, but on the whole we don't. It is indeed a mere contingency what we hold to conflict and what we do not, but this alone gives us enough "logic" to drive our recognition that some beliefs may conflict, and that, where that is so, we have to choose between them. Here, however, it is crucial to recognise that the argument works differently from the first-person singular point of view as compared with the first-person plural point of view. "I" is different from "we", and "we" is also ambiguous in a way in which "I" is not. First, I shall run the argument for "I". If I cannot believe two incompatible things, is it really political force – choice of logical laws, material interests or otherwise – which prevents me? Rather, it seems *impossible* for me to believe two things which I judge incompatible, for example, both that that is a chair and that it is not. This incompatibility is for me *categorical* rather than *hypothetical*. I cannot believe two things which I judge incompatible, and I take "incompatible" to involve "cannot both be believed by me". "Believed", *from the first-person singular point of view*, means "believed to be true". So, when I judge that two things "cannot both be believed", that means that I judge that those two things "cannot both be believed to be true by me". The only sense to be made *by me* of my believing two inconsistent things is that I separate the two by difference of time, so that I take myself to have changed my mind or I take the world to have changed in the meantime. My inability to believe two things which I judge to be incompatible is a personally perceived "psychological" constraint in the light of my own self-understanding, not an externally judged political one. It is nevertheless a contingency that I can perceive that constraint. I don't *have* to have the psychology I do, but if I don't perceive such constraints then I will have practical problems communicating with other people, as I will next explain.

Can "we", then, believe incompatible things? Despite what I have just said, *of course we can*. I cannot believe what I recognise as p and not- p , and neither

can you; but certainly I can believe p , and you can believe not- p . I have here deliberately moved from the first-person singular “I” to the first-person plural “we”, and in doing that I assume among other things that my p and not- p is the same as yours. However, as I have said, the “we” here is ambiguous. The first-person plural “we” can here be conceived as a mere list of first-person singulars, or it can be conceived as a group, understood as sharing some relevant consensus. In the “consensus” sense of the word “we”, then, imagining ourselves to be United States citizens, we might *truly* say that “we” voted for Barack Obama as President, and *even a person who voted for John McCain instead could truthfully say that “we” voted for Obama*. But, in the “mere list of singulars” sense of “we”, a person who voted for John McCain could *not* truthfully say that “we” voted for Obama.

When we ask if “we” can believe incompatible things, we have the same ambiguity in the interpretation of “we”. If we think of “we” in terms of a mere list, then, in the imagined public space between us, there are no constraints on what we believe, for there is no objective independent “reality” which will select for us which of us is believing truly. Here the postmodernist is effectively right: if reality is no more or less than what “we” (conceived as a collection of first-person singulars) count it to be, then, in so far as I count the world as p and you count it as not- p , reality is such that p and not- p (continuing with the assumption that my p and not- p is the same as yours).

But, *Historical Judgement* argues, so imagined, you and I do not *share* our reality. Do we care? In fact, “we” contingently do, at least up to a point, and here we are asserting something about ourselves at the level of what might be called group consensus or community. On the whole, we *value* others, and we *value* sharing reality with them. Our *shared* language amounts to a *shared* way of organising reality. It is indeed this which permits the contingently true assumption, to which I unjustifiably helped myself a moment ago, that my p and not- p is the same as yours. Truth as personally judged is not our goal, but rather truth as agreed. Initially this may be helpfully understood if we imagine a partial consensus, from which those who judge differently are excluded, but who, if they wish to avail of the opportunity for communication, will have to join the consensus on what reality is to be counted to be. From the perspective of the self-excluding individual, “truth”, “reality” and indeed “consistency” itself are then not wholly determinable by personal choice but are rather decided by the group which they have not yet joined. To share in “truth”, the group needs to be joined. From the point of view of the individual, terms such as “truth” function as external and objective as a consequence of a shared consensus about communication. The objectivity is grounded in a social pressure which only the most coherent of power structures can seek to modify. Such “objectivity” is to be antirealistically understood, and this enables us to recognise that truth, reality and consistency function as values for us, values which express our desire and need to share the same world. You and I need to *decide*, in constructing our shared language, whether to count the world as p or as not- p , for neither one of us is capable of believing both, and we will not share the world without some agreement here. Nevertheless, it is a contingency how much agreement we need, or how much we value sharing. We live today with the

outcome of the contingent decisions we have already made about how to count reality. Epistemologically, it is then not our beliefs which need justification, but proposed revisions to our beliefs.

Our existing language displays our current agreements, and also displays its contingent limits. We contingently share much of the world, and have little difficulty agreeing on our expressions of what we count reality to be when we use simple and short sentences such as “that is a chair”. Many beliefs are, again contingently (for the web is in fact a changing process), accepted as part of a system which is largely unchallengeable. Yet even our disagreements typically demonstrate the same point. From my point of view, p is true. From your point of view, $\text{not-}p$ is true. Reality, from my point of view, is expressed by what I say, but not by what you say. I recognise the conflict, and hold false what you say. You do the same. Importantly, you and I recognise the situation as a *conflict*. Each of us judges the other’s assertion to be inconsistent with his or her own, and we do so partly in virtue of a shared *commitment* to a *consistent* reality, which does not permit a pluralist approach to truth. Characteristically, we do not accept “true for you” and “true for me” in factual contexts. Disagreement is a worry, there to be overcome rather than left to continue. How it is to be overcome depends on the disagreement. In historiography, it is by historiographical methods, which will not always be sufficient for the purpose.

Our shared language, the grammar of how we count our reality, operates successfully at the level of the atomic sentence. But it does not completely do so at the level of the whole historical account. To make it work, we need to count reality in such a way that we can share some part of it as our subject matter, we need to share with others a desire to share the reality in question, we need to recognise where we have, if we do have, conflicting ways of counting that shared reality, and we need to recognise that any such conflict needs to be resolved, just because and in so far as we wish to share the reality in question. It is *contingent* whether we recognise these things. We do indeed characteristically do so at the level of the atomic sentence, while equally historians often share with each other the view that they are each seeking, in their different ways, to describe or count the same reality at the whole account level. They recognise that they may conflict in doing this, and they frequently seek for resolution of such a conflict. However, historians, like the rest of us, are sometimes unwilling to share. Not all historians think that every factual disagreement is a worry to be overcome. Many historians have accepted a roughly postmodern view, and think that history can be justifiably narrated in conflicting ways, but without thinking that the conflict is either resolvable or needs to be resolved. Reflecting on his play about David Frost’s interviews with Richard Nixon, now made into a film, Peter Morgan asked:¹⁴ “Could such a notion as ‘history’ ever exist when all the participants united by time and place in the mid-1970s would, 30 years later, have such conflicting views about what happened? Never, it seemed, had historical record seemed more like a series of other people’s fictions”. The need to share historical reality is not always felt.

¹⁴ “Change of perspective”, *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, 17th January 2009, p. 27.

Such contingencies about sharedness are historically located: remarks Martin Bunzl, “The drive for historians to speak of the past with one voice was a powerful tool in the nineteenth-century movement of professionalization”.¹⁵ Historiography is only one contingent contributor to our society’s self-understanding. It might stop one day. Law is another such contributor, and (although with a different argument in mind) Richard A. Posner finds for us, from Louis L. Jaffe, a helpful expression of what is plausibly the position both in law and for historiography: “In a society so complex, so pragmatic as ours, unity is never realized, nor is it necessary that it should be. Indeed, there is no possibility of agreement on criteria for absolute unity; what is contradiction to one man is higher synthesis to another. But within a determined context there may be a sense of contradiction sufficient to create social distress; and it is one of the grand roles of our constitutional courts to detect such contradictions and to affirm the capacity of our society to integrate its purposes”.¹⁶ The historical profession has no such constitutional court. But it might. On the other hand, there is no assurance of peaceful integration. Law might stop too. We might instead seek to overcome conflict, including conflict about how to conceive our own history, by war, as we strive to remove those who hold what are to us alien conceptions. However, such methods for overcoming conflict are again contingencies. Anti-postmodern historians will need to find ways of overcoming factual inconsistency at the whole account level and of making historical writing more determinate at that level. Historical judgement requires an understanding of the synthesising factual choices available at the whole account level, and an understanding of what their pragmatic limits are. *Historical Judgement* provides material for this.

I propose now to move on a little from this summary of and reflection on the book’s arguments. The metaphor – for that is what it is – of the “web of belief” is in some ways not a helpful one. Quine himself falls foul of it, commenting that it touches experience or reality at its “edges”, which makes about as much sense as supposing that a historical account touches history at its “edges”. However, analogical argument always has such limits. A more important point is this: those who speak of the web of beliefs often present it as if it were a kind of timeless equilibrium of resolved conflicts, an ideal to which the real world of beliefs only approximates. But it is not intended to be that. It is intended to *be* that real world of beliefs. Better, as I have argued, we should not think of it as the real world of beliefs narrowly understood but rather as the world of *reality-counting expressions*, including historical accounts. This is to be understood diachronically, such that it is at any one time packed with inconsistencies, some ignored and others heading for resolution. The “web of beliefs” is best seen as an ongoing and changing holistic process, involving only contingently the resolution of conflict by an

¹⁵ Martin Bunzl, *Real History: Reflections on Historical Practice*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 4, drawing on Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

¹⁶ Richard A. Posner, *Overcoming Law*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 76, reference given as Louis L. Jaffe, *Judicial Control of Administrative Action*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965, pp. 589-590.

evolving search for consistency in the face of recalcitrance. The image you should have of it is of a *rolling web of reality-counting expressions*. There are metaphysical commitments in imagining this web: the laws of logic apart, the image assumes that many human beings exist, each one a choosing and experiencing entity which uses reality-counting expressions. The details of the metaphysics here I won't go into, not least because I am not sure what they are, but I think there is no difficulty in assuming that such metaphysical commitments can be held true at least in so far as they are for us an unrevisable part of the web. So it is not that we need hold that people exist logically *prior* to the web, it is just that believing in the existence of ourselves and of other people with whom we can share our reality-constructing communicative practices is among the beliefs which we share and for which there are no practical alternatives.

It is time to return to the history/historiography distinction. In so far as historical reality is what we count it to be, and in so far as historiography is one of the ways of doing that, then the distinction dissolves, and we can, in a quasi-Hegelian way, speak of the "march of history" meaning by that the "march" of the rolling web itself, the march of what historical reality is counted to be. Those of us who studied analytical philosophy of history decades ago were taught to distinguish what we were doing from so-called "speculative" philosophy of history, the kind of thing which sought large-scale patterns such that we can predict the historical future. Whether it is the inevitable victory of the proletariat or Heaven on earth, Karl Popper persuaded many of us how scientifically wrong we would be in trying to engage in such thinking. W.H. Walsh, shortly after the Second World War, claimed that such thinking was against the British temperament.¹⁷ About a year ago I was selecting papers for the philosophy of history section of the World Congress of Philosophy which took place in Seoul in summer 2008. The majority of the submitted papers came from Russian academics. What I found most striking was that many of these submitted papers sought a replacement for Marx in our social self-understanding. The merits of Marxianism is not the issue here, rather the issue is that a number of the papers sought a solution to questions about the meaning of history and the fundamental causes of historical change, questions to which Marx, Hegel and others offered solutions. There was a rejection of the chaotic diversity of approaches in historiography, and it was apparent that there is a widening feeling that, now the certainties of soviet communism have come to an end only to be replaced by uncertainties, some larger sense of the "meaning" of history is required. With the worldwide economic downturn and the uncertainties which that engenders now apparent, it may well be that the search for large-scale historical meaning will not be restricted to the former Soviet Union.

I am not going to suggest that we ought to try to answer the big question about the meaning of history. But I would like to say a very little about the way in which the rolling web of reality-counting expressions can count as real not just the past but the future too. I realised that my own approach provides room for this when I heard a paper from Mark Day preparatory to his 2008

¹⁷ W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, London: Hutchinson, 1951, p. 12.

book *The Philosophy of History*¹⁸. Day thinks that past-directed knowledge and future-directed practical attitudes are fused in what he suggests we call “open narrative sentences”. He says that “an open narrative sentence is about a past event, but which refers to it in terms of later events, *including events that have not taken place by the time of the speaker*. Such sentences are open to the utterer’s future”.¹⁹ Using the example “The Thirty Years War began in 1618”, Arthur Danto originally specified the criterion for narrative sentences in his 1965 book *Analytical Philosophy of History*.²⁰ They have the general characteristic “that they refer to at least two time-separated events though they only *describe* (are only *about*) the earliest event to which they refer”.²¹ Danto thinks that narrative sentences commonly take the past tense, but Day holds that the “openness” of a narrative sentence is in some sense *future-referring*. Day stresses that “what is required is an act of will: the will to make that sentence true by your future action”.²²

Perhaps we could be in a position to make future-referring narrative sentences true in so far as we have the power to bring their truth about. On Tuesday 12th August 2008, a newsflash appeared on my screen telling me that President Medvedev of Russia had ordered an end to Russian operations against Georgia. Russian tanks entered South Ossetia on Friday 8th August. On the face of it, it seemed on the 12th August to have been a five-day war. Maybe President Medvedev knew that it would be a five-day war. Maybe, given the depth of military expertise, there was a plan called “The Georgian five-day war”.

Thinking of “The Georgian five-day war is beginning” as a narrative sentence which is future-referring on 8th August 2008, it is plausible to hold that, given the strength of Russian forces, one thing it is not is “open”. On the contrary, Russia’s power sought to close down a number of future options. That is what power does, and typically why we seek it: we wish to close what we might believe to be the openness of the future, and, some desire, for a range of possible reasons, to make it as fixed as the past is often supposed to be. We try – at least, we do if we are not fatalists – to make the future a part of history, to make it as safe as that which is now past. I do not, then, think it right for Day to describe narrative sentences which are future-referring relative to us as “open”, for, in so far as they have any use, “open” is exactly what they are not.

What importantly makes a so-called open narrative sentence true is that the future event it refers to does in fact occur. But, on the pragmatist approach, reality is what we count it to be, so that we should understand the power to

¹⁸ Mark Day, *The Philosophy of History*, London and New York: Continuum, 2008.

¹⁹ Mark Day, *The Philosophy of History*, London and New York: Continuum, 2008, p. 227; Day’s stress.

²⁰ A.C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1965.

²¹ A.C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1965., p. 143.

²² Mark Day, *The Philosophy of History*, London and New York: Continuum, 2008, p. 227.

close down the future as thereby power to close down what *we will accept as* true descriptions of the future, at the time. We may now recognise that it is proper to have a conception of what is presupposed here as a past-future continuum which involves knowledge of the past and – in so far as we have the power to ensure that we count it as such – knowledge of the future also. This just is the rolling web of reality-counting expressions, which has both past and future.

What we count as our shared world is a diachronic matter, with revision sometimes preserving tradition, sometimes not.²³ The limits of our choices here have to explain the ways in which we see our ongoing world as “fixed” or “unrevisable”. The future can similarly be understood if we develop a grasp of the powers, and their limitations, which govern the choices we will have over what to believe is the case. A successful theory of the future might in principle be self-affirming if humanity thought it true and acted accordingly; for example, the future-referring model of God’s Providence operated in just such a way in pre-modern times. It is a historically variable contingent matter, not a philosophical necessity, what the constraints are on how far we may think of the historical future as predictable.

²³ See my “The commonplaces of ‘revision’ and their implications for historiographical understanding”, *History and Theory*, *Theme Issue 46* on “Revision in History”, December 2007, 20-44.