

***The Modern Idea of History and its Value* by Chiel van den Akker (Professor of History, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V. 2020. ISBN 978 94 6372 833 1.**

The “modern” conceptions of history examined by Chiel van den Akker in *The Modern Idea of History and its Value* made their first appearance in the early nineteenth century, but of course there were foreshadowings even in antiquity and the usual acknowledgements of Herodotus and, especially, of Thucydides are made.

The opening chapter is devoted to a discussion of Nietzsche’s perspective on history as the “teacher of life” (exemplary history) and draws upon his 1874 essay, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*. Van den Akker states that “the answer to what history *is* provides an answer to what its *use* is and vice versa” (p. 12) and argues that Nietzsche’s threefold distinction between antiquarian, monumental, and critical history enables us to subdivide history into various categories and identify the pros and cons of each” (p. 17). Tied to Nietzsche’s monumental history is the idea that it captures the “genius” of historical figures whose work is not merely a product of its time but is “immortal, eternal, and therefore superhistorical” (p. 19). For Nietzsche this is antithetical to the usual workings of academic historians who lose the insight into the timelessness of works of genius by focusing on extraneous matters. Van den Akker provides a wonderful analogy: “Think of art historians who use modern techniques to look through the layers of paint in a painting and believe that what they find there is just as interesting as the painting itself. ... the research ignores the genius of the work, which can only be found in the way it changes our view of the world” (pp. 19–20). A related criticism of Nietzsche’s is that the question of how history serves life falls outside the scope of positivists and their ilk who merely want to do justice to the facts or transform history into a social science on the model of the natural sciences.

The next chapter’s main focus is on Thucydides as the first *model* historian. Key here is the idea that Thucydides departed from the exaggerated, embellished, and mythic tradition and instead narrated events as they actually happened, relying on what he himself was able to observe or ascertain and on the critical scrutiny of eyewitness reports. (Yet even Thucydides wasn’t past contriving someone’s public speeches for “what I thought his situation demanded”.)

With the third chapter, we finally encounter the first modern (in the relevant sense) historians, Niebuhr and Ranke, who were also progenitors of what came to be called historicism. Their view was that “history is a science which studies what is specific (*eigen*) to the development in time of individual communities – nations – and their ethos, and their contribution to the development of mankind as a whole” (p. 52). Drawing upon Thucydides, Ranke claimed that the task of historians is to say what the past was really like, i.e. *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (p. 28) and to “direct their attention to finding *coherence* in the progression (*Fortgang*) of history” (p. 60). (Some skepticism about whether Ranke and Thucydides themselves exemplify this ideal is registered in Moses Finley’s *Ancient History*).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, positivists would claim that history should, like the natural sciences, be based on laws. The philosopher Wilhelm Windelband introduced a methodological distinction between ideographic and nomothetic sciences, the former focusing “on specificity and individuality, on what is unique and singular, on forms (*Gestalten*) of life, while the second focusses on the general and what repeats itself, on what is abstract and general, on laws (*Gesetze*)” (p.71). He sided with the historicists, arguing that history, being a study of unique individuals and events, is an ideographic science. This chapter could have benefited from some confrontation with Karl Popper’s *The Poverty of Historicism*, whose widely read analysis and critique of historicism associates it with various

nomothetic doctrines and is closer to how the term “historicism” is now commonly understood.

The chapter on reasons and causes begins with a brief discussion of Carl Hempel’s claim that historical explanation consists in “revealing causes behind consequences and only a law can connect cause and consequence; therefore, when historians explain, they use laws” (p. 73). Or perhaps we should say more loosely, vague and broad lawlike generalizations, inasmuch as historians don’t actually cast their claims in anything like a hypothetico-deductive model. Even Windelband allowed that historians might rely on general knowledge of human behavior and laws, but the singularity of historical events is still the main concern over and above that.

Much is made of the difference between explanations in term of reasons and those in terms of causes or dispositions. To be sure, a reason is quite a different entity than a cause. However, there is no mention of the middle ground first brought to attention in writings of Donald Davidson, especially his seminal essay “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”. To simplify, Davidson’s idea was that although causation is a relation between events, and reasons per se aren’t events, a person’s *having* of a reason nevertheless *is* an event. So causal explanations and reasons explanations need not be antithetical. Van den Akker argues that rational explanations cannot be reduced to dispositional explanations; maybe so, but it is not obvious why rational explanations do not involve causal dispositions to act on the basis of having certain reasons. How else could someone be moved to act for a reason? To come at the point from another direction: there is no reason to assume, as van den Akker seems to, that dispositional explanations as such must be bound by the commitment to mindlessness of classical behaviorism. Moreover, dispositional explanations aren’t limited to human behavior; they also have a major role in explaining natural phenomena (cf. Choi & Fara, “Dispositions”), some of which may figure decisively in historical events.

Van den Akker’s discussion of historical insight raises questions of subjectivity, objectivity, and normativity, and the different points of view from which these may be understood. Here he presents the views of Frank Ankersmit, who explained (in his 1981 dissertation *Narrative Logic*) that what is of importance in the debates between historians is more often not about the course of events and the evidence for it but rather about the point of view from which the past is best understood. Historians have to position themselves in the history of the writing of history in their own work. And such history-writing has the purpose of enabling us to reflect on the society in which we live by providing perspectives on the present (p. 94). Concerns over the historicity of moral values arise in this context and the interrelationship of facts and values is briefly addressed. Ankersmit’s (and by proxy van den Akker’s) view is that historians don’t merely establish facts of the past but select them from a vantage point that gives them meaning and enables us both to realize what norms and values should be pursued and to orient ourselves to the present and the future (p. 100).

The French Revolution is discussed in order to further illuminate and bolster Ankersmit’s view. I won’t go into that discussion (which draws upon the introduction to Lynn Hunt’s 1984 book *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*) but as a footnote to it I’d like to backtrack and suggest that the same example should be used to mitigate Nietzsche’s criticism of academic historians. Grand monumental accounts that highlight genius in one way or another are well and good, but sometimes the aesthetics of creative historical writing can hide countervailing *Schönheitsfehler* and they may be legion. Anyone who has read Albert Goodwin’s account of the French Revolution, for example, will be struck by the relentless litany of events that unfolded in chaotic, haphazard fashion, often more smacking of petulance and blinkered intransigence on the part of actors than of anything resembling rational motivation or pursuit of ideals. One feels that, pace Nietzsche, academic nitpicking is sometimes needed to deliver the genuine goods after all.

There are subsequent chapters respectively on narration and on the historical sublime, for which I will also forgo commenting except to say that the former is au courant inasmuch as notions of narrative are nowadays ubiquitous in the humanities and social sciences, whereas the latter is not, since contemporary historians rarely concern themselves with notions of the sublime.

I close with some observations concerning whom this book may be intended for. It is accurately subtitled “An Introduction” so I surmise its intended readership is mainly second- or third-year history majors in order to give them a brief overview of the nature of their discipline. And indeed, it is admirably suited to that purpose. The presentation is not overly demanding and the Nietzschean trichotomy it opens with is especially useful for initially categorizing the approaches to history an undergraduate is likely to encounter, although it should perhaps have been explicitly noted that many works of history consist of elements of all three approaches. Moreover, with the title’s word “modern” and its cognates (pre-modern, early modern, late modern, modernity, modernism, postmodern, etc. etc.) being bandied about so much these days, and with no general agreement as to the time periods or ideological scope falling under such designations, a few words to the unwise right at the onset would have been in order. Finally, I would also have liked to see some indication of the interdisciplinary nature of much contemporary historical research. But despite my quibbles, I would have no qualms about including this book in the readings for an undergraduate course on historiography or philosophy of history and recommend it for that purpose.

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