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Paul A. Roth

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# Hayden White in Philosophical Perspective: Review Essay of Herman Paul's *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*

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**Paul A. Roth<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

For almost half a century, the person most responsible for fomenting brouhahas regarding degrees of plasticity in the writing of histories has been Hayden White. Yet, despite the voluminous responses provoked by White's work, almost no effort has been made to treat White's writings in a systematic yet sympathetic way as a philosophy of history. Herman Paul's book begins to remedy that lack and does so in a carefully considered and extremely scholarly fashion. In his relatively brief six chapters (plus an introduction), Paul packs a wealth of information. He convincingly demonstrates that a guiding theme of White's work from earliest times has been that historians have no choice but to impose a structure on historical data and thus bear responsibility for structures so imposed. As such, a key philosophical question concerns on what bases White contends that a freedom of choice exists regarding forms given to recorded histories. This essay focuses on how Paul argues for a unified vision that answers this question, as well as how he offers an original and comprehensive conception of White's writings.

## **Keywords**

Hayden White, philosophy of history, historiography, Louis Mink, Thomas Kuhn, metahistory

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<sup>1</sup>University of California, Santa Cruz, California

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## **Corresponding Author:**

Paul A. Roth, Department of Philosophy, University of California–Santa Cruz,  
Santa Cruz CA 95064.

Email: [paroth@ucsc.edu](mailto:paroth@ucsc.edu)

Herman Paul

*Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 204 pp.

Aristotle's comment that every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end is not merely a truism. It commands universal assent while failing to tell us anything new, simply because it makes explicit part of the conceptual framework underlying the capacity to tell and hear stories of any sort. And in making a presupposition explicit it has implications that are far from banal; it makes clear that our experience of life does not itself necessarily have the form of narrative except as we give it that form by making it the subject of stories. That this implication is surprising should not be surprising. It merely reflects the difference between the deliverances of common sense and its presuppositions. The former are the comfortable certainties that we know; the latter, though *sine qua non*s, yield themselves up only to reflection, which finds them wonderful as their implications come to light.

Louis O. Mink

It can hardly be denied that the demise of positivism had as an ironic consequence a type of professional marginalization of philosophy of social science. Once debates about the unity of method ceased to have any compelling philosophical rationale, a primary philosophical motive to take interest in social science qua science disappeared. To the extent that philosophers of science had much cared about what social scientists did or did not do, a prominent reason for caring went away. The current fashion for experimental philosophy and applications of game theory to biology (both of which utilize methods closely associated with social sciences) notwithstanding, I suspect that most philosophers of science view the social sciences as intellectual gulags, places to quarantine those intellectually suspect but not convicted of some actual crime against genuine science.

In this bleak landscape, where philosophers of economics have come to play the role of prison orderlies, receiving favored treatment and privileges from established powers, some interesting ideas grow wild, unfettered by pressures to conform. Included here should be philosophy of history, a sparsely inhabited subfield so marginalized as to essentially escape notice by guardians of academic propriety. Indeed, aware of the success of this low-profile strategy within philosophy, some stoutly resist being labeled philosophers at all. Yet, as often as not, some of most interesting innovations actually occur at the margins of "accepted" practices, whether in science, business, or philosophy. From this perspective, I suggest, one should approach the work and legacy of Hayden White. And the case for the place of White within the

context of philosophy of history and some hints respecting the importance of the area itself can now be found in Herman Paul's interesting and timely study.

To claim White as a philosopher of history (or a philosopher of any sort) might seem, at first blush, wholly implausible. For that label attaches by neither virtue of disciplinary accreditation nor academic affiliation. Indeed, White has never, to the best of my knowledge, characterized himself this way. But these facts notwithstanding, reclaiming a place for Hayden White as someone to be taken seriously as a philosopher of history proves to be an important undertaking. This involves nothing less than coming to terms with philosophy's own lack (or avoidance) of historical consciousness, of how philosophy's methods and problems regularly fail to acknowledge anything problematic about received readings of any history one takes them to have.<sup>1</sup>

Wherein resides a case for taking a renewed interest in philosophy of history generally and so White's role in that regard? It would come as no surprise to be told that a particular topic "has a history." Trouble begins, more often than not, with claims that a term such as "the history of \_\_\_\_\_" does not function as a type of definite description, as naming or referring to exactly one account of whatever topic fills in the blank. Indeed, suggesting that no history exists per se or no Single Universal World Story brews fierce tempests in various academic teapots. As the epigram suggests, no better venue exists for both displaying and so challenging entrenched prejudices masquerading as wisdom than does the study of what histories reveal as "taken for granted."<sup>2</sup>

For almost half a century, at least since the 1966 publication of "The Burden of History," the person most responsible for fomenting brouhahas regarding degrees of plasticity in the writing of histories has been Hayden White. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, despite the voluminous responses provoked by White's work, almost no effort has been made to treat White's writings in a systematic yet sympathetic way as philosophy. In particular, very little has been done to explore White's relation to philosophers and

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<sup>1</sup>For essays that do explore this theme, see the special issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* (2011).

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, despite its massive influence, a still un- or underappreciated aspect of Kuhn's work involves not just arguing for the relevance of history to an understanding of contemporary scientific views but also calling into question how histories themselves come to be constructed. Kuhn's account of the structure (or lack thereof) of scientific revolutions can and has been told about historiography as well. See, for example, Peter Novick's classic study *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988). See also Mink's (1987, 188-89) remarks about unarticulated assumptions regarding universal history.

philosophy of history. Herman Paul's book begins to remedy that lack and does so in a carefully considered and extremely scholarly fashion. If only for those reasons, his work should be welcomed by all those with an interest in philosophy of history.

In his relatively brief six chapters (plus an introduction), Herman Paul packs a wealth of biographical information, including insights into the numerous personal connections that shaped White's outlook. In addition, the bibliography provides an outstanding guide to White's oeuvre as well as to the best of the massive secondary literature inspired by his writings. Rather than recapitulate Paul's own nicely done introductory account of what he does and in what order, this essay focuses on how Paul argues for a unified vision that claims to offer a comprehensive and encompassing conception of White's extended scholarly output. Specifically, Paul claims that

at the heart of White's philosophy of history lies an existentialist-inspired understanding of human flourishing, which reveals itself . . . in White's unshakable confidence in the abilities of human beings to endow the "meaningless" realities of past and present with self-won meanings; in his imperative that human individuals must develop such meanings in order to free themselves from traditions, conventions, and other tyrannical powers, in his insistence that every historical interpretation entails a moral judgment, for which the author bears responsibility; and in what [historian Peter] Novick calls White's "quasi obsession with the historian's liberty of choice." White's philosophy of history is a series of reflections inspired by what one might call the first commandment in his moral universe: "thou shalt be responsible for thine own life." (11)

What Paul throughout his book terms White's "existentialism" has roots in his view that no person's past has intrinsic meaning. Yet White remains an "optimistic existentialist," at least insofar as he believes that by being brought to self-consciousness of this fact, both laypersons and professional academics can better understand the realm of possibilities for configuring their life and for making choices that will make a difference going forward. White seeks, that is, to undo the hold of the view of one's past as that which cannot be altered and so of history as fated to weigh like a nightmare on the minds of the living.

Paul convincingly demonstrates that a guiding theme of White's work from earliest times has been that historians have no choice but to impose a structure on historical data and so bear responsibility for structures so imposed. Yet many subscribe to what I have elsewhere characterized as a "woolly mammoth" metaphysics of history. According to an account I once read in a newspaper, explorers in the Arctic discovered a woolly mammoth fully preserved in a block of ice. Likewise, a certain commonsense view

takes history to be like a frozen (because past) tableau from which some enterprising historian simply chips off the excrescences of time. Woolly mammoth metaphysics presumes that this suffices to make evident past reality in all its pristine glory. So a key philosophical question concerns on what bases White contends that a freedom of choice exists regarding forms given to recorded histories.

However, unlike Kuhn or even Foucault, White explicitly harnesses his views to serve a moral agenda. He argues, Paul shows, that an explicitly conservative political agenda—one in the service of maintaining the status quo—primarily constrains acknowledgment and recognition of the freedom historians have in providing shape to the past.

Socially innovative historiography is threatening not to historical studies as such, but to the conservative political agenda underlying the scholarship of Ranke and his followers. . . . White's aim, then, was to identify the "politics" of those who complained about a politicization of history in the hands of metahistorians. And what mattered most, to him, . . . was that every historian and every philosopher of history expresses political views in defining what "proper" history is. (54)

Just as labeling a view as "relativist" serves as an intellectual bugaboo by which to scare the timid from particular positions, so too with the terms "moral" or "political." In this regard, Paul quotes Iris Murdoch's apothegm regarding Gilbert Ryle, to the effect that "the world of Ryle was 'the world in which people play cricket, cook cakes, make simple decisions, remember their childhood and go to the circus, not the world in which they commit sins, fall in love, say prayers or join the Communist Party'" (55). The explicitness of the moral element in White's writings, Paul intimates, has served as an obstacle to having White's positions accorded the philosophical seriousness they deserve.

Any effort to have these views given a philosophical hearing, moreover, will be further critically complicated by White's mode of writing. For although knowledgeable of philosophy and well acquainted with leading philosophers in this area who were his contemporaries, White eschews presenting his work as philosophy, including writing in a way that addresses that audience. Indeed, White's target audience has most often appeared to be literary critics and not historians, since his favored and best-known mode of characterizing historical writing utilizes formal characteristics, for example, a theory of tropes, employed in the analysis of fiction and other literary works.

Paul acknowledges this yet in an underplayed way. Rather, in a decisive and highly original move in his own exposition and development of White's

thought, he declares, “I argue that *Metahistory* was not a book about narrativity, as is often said, but a study of metahistories or ‘prefigurations’ of historical realism. Only against this background . . . is it possible to understand why White . . . adopted a structuralist linguistic vocabulary for describing the ways in which the human imagination thinks and dreams about what counts as ‘real’ in history” (59). Paul might well have added, given White’s acquaintance with the works of Kuhn and of Foucault (see, e.g., 61), that the works that White terms “metahistories” function as paradigms for those seeking to exercise their historical imagination. Put another way, Paul (rightly, in my view) places emphasis on White’s critiques of a type of naïve realism that implicitly informs and shapes most historical writing. The dead hand of woolly mammoth metaphysics lies heavy on the profession.

A great irony emerges, in this regard, from Paul’s analysis of the core intellectual motivations and insights to be gleaned from White’s great masterwork *Metahistory*. For while White’s work has often been taken to rationalize the appropriation of studies of historical works as de facto literary productions and so as much the provenance of literary critics as of academic historians, Paul’s analysis suggests why this appropriation turns out to be problematic. For what proves revealing about historical works does not turn on how or whether they employ devices also found in novels. Rather, one should ask why these devices, as elements for constructing narratives, prove *unavoidable* for historians. As Paul puts it, “White’s categories sought to classify the forms of realism that historians develop in the realm of ‘precritical’ historical imagination. Therefore, trivial as it may sound, *Metahistory* was a book about metahistory. Tropes, plots, arguments, and ideologies were shorthand labels for the metahistorical prefigurations of the ‘real’ that underlies the ‘narrative prose discourses’ that White would examine in his later publications” (73-74). And making that point rests on an appreciation of the philosophical arguments, of reasons for believing that a past does not come metaphysically prefigured.<sup>3</sup>

A Kantian key to reading White’s views on the role of narrative in history resides, in short, in understanding White (influenced by his friend and one-time Wesleyan colleague Louis Mink) as urging a “Copernican turn” in historiography. The structure found in history, like that in other realms where experience has been subject to the rule of systematic coherence, can only be a structure provided by a cognizing mind. Experience per se would otherwise offer nothing more than a Jamesian “blooming, buzzing confusion.” “Only when historians begin to organize this chronicle thematically by ‘patterning events in motif-clusters,’ do stories emerge. Stories, then, are thematically

<sup>3</sup>See the discussion in Vann (1998, 149f).

ordered accounts of historical events. They organize a historical account by grouping events into thematic unities” (85). Paul, well aware as he is of White’s own reading of Kant and Kantian readings of White, further remarks that “White took figurative language to be a means for transforming ‘raw data’ into ‘facts’ that stand in some relation to each other,” a view that, in this context, undermines “the old, empiricist distinction between description and interpretation” (89; see also, 112-13). So much the worse, White concludes, for any conception of historical events as found rather than made. This view, while certainly not uncontroversial, nonetheless has been a philosophical commonplace since Kant. It also has clear affinities to views that have been at the center of many philosophical debates following lines laid down in, for example, “Two Dogmas” or *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But why then all the fuss when applied to historiography?

Reflections on parallel sorts of debates between philosophers and sociologists stemming (if only unwittingly) from Kuhn’s influential work suggest a reason why. At least one aspect of that academic turf war concerns the following key question: what factors explain scientific change? Do rational considerations predominate, or do social/cultural/psychological variables loom large? The shadow of Popper lies long here, for difficulties that attend falsifying historical narratives have special significance. And, of course, Kuhn also enraged Popperians by emphasizing how education and funding favor “normal science,” anomalies notwithstanding. This, somewhat unwittingly, provided a key opening for reconfiguring challenges from within a rejuvenated science studies to then accepted philosophical accounts. That battle continues more or less unabated to this day.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In the foregoing remarks, my emphasis falls not only on how Kuhn problematized standard account of confirmation and falsification but also on the ways in which he made plain the significance of social factors in the functioning of science. The fact that Kuhn’s remarks on history failed to spark any interest by philosophers in how histories themselves come to be constructed remains something of an intellectual mystery, a revolution still waiting to happen. That said, others find in my remarks Popperian overtones that also call for development and further consideration in this regard. To wit, “Yet I would see Popper’s relevance not in that debate but in the historiographical remarks he makes in *The Open Society*. Where White uses literary terms Popper uses interpretation and says that overall, or grand interpretations, while rationally arguable, are not matters of truth and falsity, but rather, fruitfulness. He fully admits that his sweeping sketch of the historical emergence of the movement towards the open society is highly contentious. His defence is the light it throws on such matters as intellectual authoritarianism. Popper too wanted a moralized history, famously declaring at one point that standard political histories were largely stories of mass murder and other crimes against humanity that did not say so” (Ian Jarvie, personal correspondence).



White's emphasis on historiography as a type of cultural poetics raised parallel threats to claims to historical knowledge, that is, to history as a type of science. "White's own vocabulary—words like myth and fiction in particular—reveals his readiness to take issue with those 'naïve' nineteenth-century historians, especially in so far as they were still regarded as fathers of the historical discipline. . . . In short, in deliberate contrast to any scientific conception of historical studies, White developed a 'poetics of history'" (94; see also, 106). To take minor issue with Paul's choice of terminology here, the point of contention does not concern history as a type of science (which I take to be a methodological issue) so much as history as a form of knowledge. For what realists want, more often than not, concerns a notion of truth independent of human judgment, a notion of truth rooted in a *ding-an-sich*. Historical realism imagines just one past, existing as a time-frozen tableau. So true histories must converge; there can be only one past. To illustrate the implications here, ask the likely reception of Kuhn had he talked of a "poetics" of science and not paradigms. His core points could have remained unchanged, but arguably altering terminology would have rationalized ignoring any philosophical implications his work might be thought to have. Philosophers who take White seriously, in short, typically read past White's (deliberately) provocative language and so read through to its underlying philosophical base. The philosophical rationale proves fully consonant with much of what has been most interesting and provocative in the evolution of analytic philosophy under pressure from Wittgenstein, Quine, and Sellars.

At its most philosophically interesting, Paul's book helps make plain why White had clear sympathies for and affinities to the sort of antirealist arguments regarding history that can be found in works by Louis Mink and Frank Ankersmit. Yet, as Paul details, White offers nonetheless a distinctively moral rationale for his own approach. "For his refusal to see real life as narratively structured stemmed from nothing other than White's moral conviction that life is lived better without 'given' or 'prefabricated' meanings. . . . In other words, the anti-realism ascribed to White stemmed from moral beliefs" (115). Ironically, this Kant-like emphasis on a historian's practical reason, her ability to choose how to recount what has happened, invites not just the tired charge of relativism but also the more damning charge that history has only a political use. This appears to obviate any distinction between those who put histories in the service of progressive values and those who use histories to license terror and oppression.

Such accusations have dogged White throughout his long career and, as Paul recounts, famously came to a head in a conference on Holocaust historiography captured in the volume *Probing the Limits of Representation*:

*Nazism and the "Final Solution."*<sup>5</sup> Evidence of the profound distaste that White's view elicited can be found in the parallel drawn at that conference by the noted historian Carlo Ginzburg between White's views and the sort of intolerance associated with taking "a blackjack as a moral force" (121). As Paul's even-handed assessment of the heated debate that follows from this charge indicates, this arouses concerns with regard to "how easily White's defense of freedom to interpret the past for moral or political purposes could be misused for goals diametrically opposed to White's own" (121-22). This challenge, Paul notes, "went to the heart of his [White's] philosophy of history" (122). But White's "moral" dilemma here attends to anyone who advocates or maintains a belief in free will. For misuse of the ability to will remains a possibility. "Freedom of the kind that White consistently advocated can always be used for various purposes. . . . In a sense, therefore, White was willing to take the risks that Ginzburg and Moses pointed out" (122, 123).

But rather than rest with just a platitudinous defense of White's notion of people as free, Paul illuminatingly pulls together White's philosophical and moral concerns and White's focus on linguistic and structural features of narrative into what Paul terms White's conception of a "practical past." As opposed to those who advocate a "disinterested" study of the past, a "practical" approach in White's sense of the terms emphasizes using histories to address contemporary problems and values historical studies only "insofar as they [historical studies] illuminate such problems—be they social, cultural, political or religious" (145). In this respect, Paul observes, "The practical past, then, is practical in the sense of Kant's *praktische Vernunft*: it wonders 'what should I (or we) do?'" (146). Certainly, Paul has put his finger not only on the pulse of White's thought but also on a primary reason why White has remained marginalized in philosophical discussions. "If there is one continuing thread in White's philosophy of history, it is a fierce rejection of a scientification of history, in the name of what White held to be a higher cause: moral orientation and political commitment" (149). Yet while correct as it stands, this statement threatens to mislead. It should not imply some Luddite-like resistance to science but rather reflects the fact that White never thought of a "scientific" history as an alternative to the position for which he ceaselessly advocates. For the philosophical point here resides in the insight that claims to "objectivity" at the level of historical narrative have no possible basis in anything other than ideology masked as metaphysics. It requires a

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<sup>5</sup>Interesting parallels exist between White's treatment in this volume and Kuhn's fate at the hands of irate Popperians as memorialized in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

type of “bad faith” to imagine historians as mere scribes recording events that unfolded apart from their will and imagination to see them as leading or cohering in a certain way.

Herman Paul’s book should be applauded for bringing to bear a much-needed philosophical perspective on Hayden White’s influential and extensive oeuvre, one that offers a corrective to the received reading of White as a mere tropologist of historiography. And while the book represents more of an initial effort than the final word in offering a full philosophical assessment of White’s efforts to map the boundaries of the historical imagination, it does constitute an important and impressive beginning.

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### **Author Biography**

**Paul A. Roth** is a professor in the philosophy department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has published extensively in the areas of philosophy of social science, philosophy of history, and naturalized epistemology.