Then and Now—A Thomistic Account of History

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Abstract: Thomists do not have a standard account of history as a discipline or of historical knowledge in general. Since Thomism is a tradition of thought derived in part from historical figures and their works, it is necessary for Thomists to be able to say how we know what we know about those figures and their works. In this paper, I analyze the notion of history both in its contemporary senses and in how it was used by Aristotle and Aquinas. I show briefly how intellectual knowledge of the past is possible. Then, I argue that the Thomistic tradition implies a far wider notion of history than is generally recognized, history as study of the past in general, not a science in itself, but an aspect of other sciences. Finally, I indicate how this wider notion of history relates to the ordinary sense of history as an inquiry into the specifically human past and then how such an account fits within contemporary Thomism.

I

History and related disciplines have no clearly established place within the Thomistic framework.[[1]](#endnote-1) There is evidence of this in the conflicting things Thomists say about history, particularly on the question of whether history is a science in the Aristotelian sense. Some Thomists (for example, Jacques Maritain, Charles De Koninck, and Glen Coughlin) argue that history is not a science because it treats of singulars which are unknowable.[[2]](#endnote-2) Others (principally Benedict Ashley) claim that it is not a science but also that it can provide intellectual knowledge and a degree of certainty, although they offer no systematic account of how.[[3]](#endnote-3) Still others (Charles De Koninck again—he changed his mind, seemingly—William Wallace, and Michael Buckley) argue that for various reasons history is a science, for example, because of the rational connections among acts (De Koninck), because of the necessity of the past (Wallace), or because of the influences of human beings on each other (Buckley).[[4]](#endnote-4) Others (here we find most contemporary Thomists) refrain from addressing the question of whether or not history is a science in the Aristotelian sense but still treat history as a discipline producing intellectual knowledge and limited certainty.[[5]](#endnote-5) The only one of these views with wide acceptance today is the last one, that of most contemporary Thomists who draw on history but do not offer an account of it.

This state of Thomistic thinking on history is problematic for at least two reasons. First, since Thomism is based on the system of thought articulated in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas, it is necessary that Thomists make coherent claims about how we can be said to know the past, about what it is that we can know about the past, and about why we might need inquiry into the past in the first place.[[6]](#endnote-6) Second, if Thomism is to integrate the disciplines, as is often called for, it will be necessary for Thomists to have an account of those contemporary disciplines that are related to the study of the past. And, in order to carry out the integration of the disciplines more generally, Thomists must show how Thomism does a better job of explaining the disciplines and their subjects than the current theoretical underpinnings of the disciplines themselves do, which, as MacIntyre has argued, requires Thomists to give accounts of the past of the disciplines.[[7]](#endnote-7) But to tell a history in the best way one must know what history and historical knowledge *are* and how they relate to other activities and kinds of knowledge. Unification of knowledge, however, also always implies a unification of the social groups that know, and so a further problem must be addressed within Thomism itself: the problem of the separation between Thomists who focus on Aquinas’s work mainly as a part of intellectual history and those who study his work primarily for the problems it can solve in our time, that is, what he can teach us about the world. Can we in fact do one without the other, history divorced from addressing contemporary problems or addressing contemporary problems divorced from history? What is the relationship for Thomists between studying the history of a discipline and studying in the discipline itself? The daily practice of working Thomists requires an answer to these questions, one only an account of history can give.

My goal in this paper is to outline an account of history within the Thomistic tradition that will solve the first two problems, showing the possibility of historical knowledge and history’s place in the Thomistic framework of disciplines, and through that to suggest an avenue of approach for solving the problem of the separation among those Thomists emphasizing history and those aiming to solve problems. Since most Thomists do seem to draw on history without claiming either that it is or is not a science, I will not primarily work through the various views on that question. Instead, I aim to provide an account of history that fits best with contemporary Thomistic practice, in the course of which I will show that history is not a science. To do that, I begin with an analysis of the notion of history.

II

The term “history” in English has at least three key senses: first, it refers to the past itself; second, to an account of the past; and, third, to a discipline of learning.[[8]](#endnote-8) Let me take each in turn, considering first the sense in English and then the senses of the related terms used by Aristotle and Aquinas.

By “the past” I mean anything that has *been* in any sense before the present time, anything that has had being before now. So, anything that has ever been actual in any sense is part of the past. When Aristotle refers to the past, he does not use the Greek term ἱστορία; instead, he uses phrases like τόδε γέγονε (*Posterior Analytics* II.12). Aquinas sometimes refers to the past with the Latin term *historia*, for example, when he uses *ordo historiae* to mean the order of past events (e.g. at *Exposition of the Psalms*, Prologue); but he prefers the standard Latin word *praeteritum*.

In the second sense, history, as an account of the past, can be either the written or oral account of something in the past, or it can be the *understanding* that an inquirer has of something in the past and its causes. Since any written account of the past is derived from the inquirer’s understanding of that past, history as the understanding of something in the past is prior to and more universal than history as a written account of that thing in the past. Aristotle refers to written accounts of the human past with the word ἱστορία when in *Poetics* (9) he discusses history as the genre of written or oral accounts of what has happened in the past. This is where he points out that poetry is more philosophical than history as a genre of writing, since a history treats of what *has* happened and a poem treats of what *may* happen, poetry therefore expressing what is more universal.[[9]](#endnote-9) Aquinas too uses *historia* to refer to histories as written accounts of the human past (for example, at *Summa theologiae* II-II 2.7). Neither Aristotle nor Aquinas have occasion to refer specifically to the understanding of something in the past as opposed to the written account of it.

In the third sense, history is a discipline of learning. By “discipline”, I mean anything that is learned as a habit and that involves truth in some way, like an art, science, practice, or skill; a discipline of learning seems to be one ordered to understanding. Now, when we talk about history as a discipline, we must mean something at least related to what is carried on in academic history departments by professional historians and also to what historians of philosophy and theology do. What historians do is inquire into the past in order to understand it. Within history departments particularly, history seems to be carried out as a discipline in two ways. First, history is carried out as an activity whereby one understands the past. This is the principal and defining activity of those who study the past. But, second, history is also carried out as the explanation and development of the methodology of understanding the past; this is what we usually call “historiography” or sometimes “historics”.[[10]](#endnote-10) Significantly, neither Aristotle nor Aquinas has *any* term for history either as a discipline of learning or as the study of the methodology of knowing the past.

We can now see an order among these different senses of the term “history”. Since the activity of understanding the past is what produces accounts of the past, and since historiography is the explanation and justification of the activity of understanding the past, all of which lead to the description of the past itself as “history”, every sense of the term “history” seems to derive from the activity of understanding the past.

So far, however, we have implicitly limited ourselves to considering history as restricted to the *human* past.[[11]](#endnote-11) Do we ever refer to the non-human past or to an account of the non-human past or to a discipline that studies the non-human past as “history”? It is clear in each case that we do: we refer to the past of everything in the universe as “history” (called “big history” nowadays); we can study the geological history of our planet; we can produce accounts of the non-human past when we write a history of life; and we also do have certain sub-disciplines like paleontology that specifically study something non-human in the past, and these are certainly aimed at understanding that past, although we do not commonly call them “history”. So, the term “history” is not properly restricted to the human past; instead, history seems to be inquiry into the past in general, of which inquiry into the human past is merely a special case. History in this general sense seems deeply related to the nature of inquiry itself.

And it is inquiry in general, *not* inquiry restricted to the past, that Aristotle and Aquinas know as ἱστορία in Greek and *historia* in Latin in their most general sense. It will be useful to look briefly at how Aristotle and Aquinas use these words in this sense. For Aristotle, ἱστορία means inquiry or research in general and has an important role to play in his understanding of science. In the *Prior Analytics* (I.30 46a18-27), Aristotle says that experience gives the principles of any science, and if we have apprehended all the attributes of the thing under consideration, then we can make the demonstrations relevant to the science; then, he goes on (46a24-27), “For if nothing that truly belongs to the subjects has been left out of our collection of facts [κατὰ τὴν ἱστορίαν], then concerning every fact, if a demonstration for it exists, we will be able to find that demonstration and demonstrate it, while if it does not naturally have a demonstration, we will be able to make that evident.”[[12]](#endnote-12) He confirms this view in his scientific works too, for example, at *Historia Animalium* I.6. We see, then, that ἱστορία for Aristotle is something like general inquiry into the matters under study, the beginning of a science. It seems related to but higher than experience, since experience tends to be inchoate, unsystematic, and unreflected upon, and Aristotle indicates that a general understanding resulting from an inquiry should, in the ideal case, not omit any of the true attributes of the thing. For Aristotle, ἱστορία is a general inquiry that is in some sense part of and subordinate to a science.

Drawing on the Aristotelian tradition, Aquinas has nearly the same sense for the Latin word *historia*.[[13]](#endnote-13) For example, in his commentary on the *De coelo* (III.1.547), Aquinas uses the term *historia naturalis* to refer in a general way to inquiry into natural things, coming quite close to the older English term “natural history”; here, Aquinas indicates that *historia* *naturalis* is a kind of *narratio*, i.e. account, of natural things. He elaborates a little more on what *historia* is when, in his commentary on the *De anima* (I.1.6), Aquinas says that Aristotle uses the term *historia* in the *De anima* to describe what he is doing in the work “because he is going to discuss the soul in a general way, without attempting in this treatise a thorough examination [*finalem inquisitionem*] of all its properties.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Aquinas also picks up on the more precise way Aristotle uses ἱστορία, namely as a stage in the movement toward scientific knowledge. In his commentary on the *Sentences* *of Peter Lombard* (II 11.2.3), Aquinas says that just as through *locutio* we do not acquire full knowledge of the subject being discussed, so too through *historia* we come to know something not known beforehand, but our intellect is not fully enlightened. *Historia*, then, in the key sense for Aquinas, is much like Aristotle’s notion: an inquiry that results in knowledge of the subject in some sense but not knowledge of the highest kind.[[15]](#endnote-15)

This reveals, it seems to me, a certain compatibility between history as inquiry into the past and Aristotelian ἱστορία as inquiry in general—respecting, of course, all the difference between what inquiry was for Aristotle and Aquinas and what it is for us. History as inquiry into the past can simply be taken as a special case of inquiry in the wide sense. Because this point has not, as far as I can tell, otherwise been noted, my discussion here is more general than earlier treatments of the nature of history, since those earlier treatments focused on history as the study of the *human* past.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Having briefly surveyed the senses of the term, I propose a definition of history in the most general sense: history is inquiry that aims to understand things in the past and their causes. This definition raises at least two problems, as mentioned above: the possibility of historical knowledge and the place of history within a Thomistic system of the sciences. Let me start with the first.

III

Both of the problems related to history that I began with raise a corresponding question. The most general question that the possibility of the knowledge of the past raises is whether we can have intellectual knowledge of the past at all. There seems to be no reason to doubt that we can know the past in some sense. All human beings by nature desire to know themselves and others; a sign of this is the delight we have in conversation and in learning about remarkable acts and strange customs; indeed, friendship seems to be predicated on knowledge of others. In general, both self-knowledge and the knowledge of others imply knowledge of acts in the past; so, knowledge of the past seems to be possible for us—consider, for example, that tragedies like *Oedipus Rex* and novels like *Bleak House* depend for their very drama on coming to know about the past. Further, although Aristotle and Aquinas are nowhere concerned to address intellectual knowledge about the past directly, they both imply that it is possible when they discuss instances from the human past and treat them as if they can be known; at *Posterior Analytics* II.11, Aristotle and Aquinas both even treat of what they identify as a *propter quid* demonstration of the cause of a historical event, namely why Athens became involved in the Persian Wars.[[17]](#endnote-17) Both also imply that we can have knowledge of the past when they treat extensively of the history of the philosophical sciences. It is sometimes said that the history of a science is merely dialectical for Aristotle, but in fact it is not the history that is dialectical—Aristotle is not in any doubt that Socrates existed—it is the *opinions* that one considers that are dialectical with respect to the science. John of St. Thomas, Aquinas’s great commentator, in his *Ars Logica* does explicitly address knowledge of things in the past and he concludes that we can know them, but only because something that we sense in the present represents past things to us in some intelligible way.[[18]](#endnote-18) The wider Catholic tradition, of which Thomism is a part, also treats the past as knowable in some sense. To take the clearest recent example, in *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II explicitly includes the discipline of history among those productive of knowledge and he confirms this in many places when he says or implies that we can know something from the study of history.[[19]](#endnote-19) All this applies equally well, indeed more so, to the non-human past, since it seems clear that we can know some things about the past of living things or the past of stars and planets and so on. So, taking into account the usage of Aristotle and Aquinas as well as that of the wider tradition, it is clear that knowledge of both the human and non-human past is possible in some sense within the Thomistic tradition. But the key question for Thomists is this: since for Aristotle and Aquinas intellectual knowledge is of the universal and necessary and things in the past seem to be material singulars, precisely *how* can we have intellectual knowledge about the past?

First, it should be noted that material singulars are *not* the only things or even the principal things that we seek to know about in the past. Focusing on the human past, consider the example of the office of the Pharaonic king of Egypt or feudalism in the Middle Ages or the genre of the novel in the nineteenth century. None of these are material singulars since all are attributable to more than one thing in whatever way historians do attribute them, but it is clear that things like these are what historians seek to understand; in fact, contemporary historians are more concerned with universal things like cultures and movements and genres than with particular details of which king did what, and, when they are concerned with details, it is almost exclusively for the sake of the more universal—as Aristotle was in his work on the Athenian constitution, a proto-institutional history. Likewise, those who study the non-human past do so mainly in order to know about things like stellar evolution or how salt and fresh water came to be differentiated, and such things are not singulars. Nor is the fact that such universals are in the past a bar to their being known. This is because things in the past possess their intelligibility from their forms, not from the fact that they are in the past, since that is accidental, as Aquinas says (*De veritate*, 10.3).[[20]](#endnote-20)

But do not historians (and those who claim to know the non-human past) claim to know *some* material singulars, and is this not impossible for Aristotle and Aquinas? They do claim to know some material singulars, but this is not impossible. It is true that the intellect cannot know the singular *as such*, since that is the manner of knowing proper to the senses, but the intellect can know the singular indirectly, that is, in so far as it is intelligible, as Aquinas says when he asks explicitly whether the intellect knows the singular (*Summa theologiae* I 86.1).[[21]](#endnote-21) To see why he says this, consider the two ways science treats of its subjects, which Aquinas outlines in his commentary on Boethius’s *De trinitate* (5.2 ad 4). Principally and primarily, he says, intellectual knowledge is the knowledge of universal natures and their causes. Secondarily and by a kind of reflection, however, science includes knowledge of singulars because the intellect, using the sense powers, relates universal natures to the singulars that possess them. Of course, material singulars, being material, are not known scientifically in the strict sense, since they do not admit of the kind of certainty one has in science properly speaking; but singulars can be known scientifically in a lesser sense, as in natural or moral philosophy, although even here we would know the universal natures of material things better and more clearly than we could know a given singular.[[22]](#endnote-22) Aristotle and Aquinas both insist that there is no science of the singular, not because we can know nothing about actually existing material things, which would be an odd thing for them to say, but because they are arguing against those who claim that intellectual knowledge comes directly through the senses.

We have seen, then, that both universal aspects of the past and material singulars in the past can be known by the intellect and we have also seen the sense in which we are said to have intellectual knowledge of them.[[23]](#endnote-23) And on *how* things in the past can be known, John of St. Thomas makes the key point: we can only know the past by means of representations we have of it in the present. Given such a limitation, then, by what methods can we come to know about things in the past? Because the methods for knowing any subject are tied to the sciences that know that subject, before we can outline the methods of knowing the past by means of the present, we first need to lay out where knowledge of the past fits within the Thomistic framework of disciplines. This is to ask the question corresponding to the second problem I began with.

IV

History as defined above is the investigation both of something in the past and of things related causally to it. Since things in the past possess their intelligibility from their forms, as pointed out above, any given thing in the past is *already the proper subject of some science*, namely the science that knows that kind of thing in that respect. So, each thing in the past is studied by the science that knows that kind of thing; for example, the history of living things is part of biology, the history of the sun is part of astronomy, etc.—which is usually how such things are divided up among contemporary researchers. This implies that we know the past through the present, *not* by a general method, but by means of the methods specific to a given science. History in the wide sense, then, is not a science of its own; it is an aspect of other sciences, and, in so far as it treats of material singulars, it seems to be the aspect of a science that knows secondarily and by way of reflection, as outlined above.[[24]](#endnote-24)

In addition to investigations into the subjects of a science in the past, there are also investigations into the past related to the science itself, for example, how that science was discovered and articulated and how it has developed down to the present.[[25]](#endnote-25) Since all intellectual teaching and learning begin from pre-existing knowledge and since our knowledge is almost never perfect or complete, it is clear that the more perfectly we come to know something in a given respect, the more we also come to know why our pre-existing knowledge was imperfect in the first place; if we did not come to know this in some way, then we could never know why we moved from our previous understanding to a more perfect one and we could therefore not even know whether our newly acquired knowledge was in fact more perfect than our pre-existing knowledge.[[26]](#endnote-26) What we come to know here is the past of the given science, as it is *in*, and *related to*, us. In general, since much of our knowledge comes from what we have learned from those who have taught us, we must also come to understand the imperfections of such knowledge in order to come to a more perfect understanding of the subjects of the science; this implies moving beyond the limitations not just of particular teachers but also of the errors of those who taught our teachers, which includes things like the limitations due to cultural presuppositions.[[27]](#endnote-27) In short, then, knowing the past of a science in *at least some way* is required in order to perfect our knowledge of the subjects of that science. And when we study the past of a science, we can only do so through our own understanding of the subjects of that science, since what determines the past of the science is that it is aimed at understanding those subjects. Thus, we cannot undertake to study the history of a science or its subjects without at the same time presupposing some scientific knowledge of those subjects.

So, we arrive at three key conclusions revealing the place of history in the wide sense within the Thomistic framework. First, inquiry into things in the past relevant to a given subject is part of the science that knows that subject in general. Second, the study of the past of a given science is part of that science too. Third, the study of the past of a science, far from being irrelevant, is in fact necessary for us because our very development toward perfected science implies knowing the past of the science in some way.

But what about history as the study of the human past? Is that not its own independent discipline? Since what historians study is human action and its circumstances in the past, the above considerations make clear that the study of the human past is part of the science that studies human action, namely moral philosophy.[[28]](#endnote-28) To see that this is so, one need only consult any attempt to justify why students should learn human history. Such attempts invariably rely on claims about human action and the good life and usually end up by saying how knowing the past enables students to live for the best in the present. The same justification is used for all of what are called "the humanities", and this is a sign that all of the humanities, in so far as they are concerned with the study of the past, are in fact parts of moral philosophy; this is likewise true for those of the social sciences that study human action in the past (as opposed to those that focus on human nature more generally).[[29]](#endnote-29) Of course, most universities today have these discipline as their own departments, and the story of how that came to be so is a long one. Suffice it to say here that history as the study of the human past was developed into a discipline in part for ethical and political reasons (even when it was claimed that historical facts could be discovered *outside* any theory)—one need only think of the ethical and political aims of Ranke and other early professionalizers of history.[[30]](#endnote-30) In a similar way, the social sciences were developed to ground theories of human nature and action, as is clear from their history, beginning with Auguste Comte.[[31]](#endnote-31) None of this should be taken to imply that the study of the human past is somehow illegitimate; indeed, my arguments above show why it is necessary. Nevertheless, we must be very aware of history's place as part of moral philosophy in order to inquire into the human past in the best way.[[32]](#endnote-32) And this is a point that Aristotle and Aquinas both make, although they are not as concerned to elaborate it as we are. Both Aristotle and Aquinas point out (in *Rhetoric* I.4 and *De regno* 98 respectively) that one must know the details of how one’s community came to be the way it is in order to direct that community well, and so the knowledge of the past of a political community “belongs to politics”, as Aristotle says there.[[33]](#endnote-33) Likewise, customs and habits acquired from childhood determine in key part the choices that human beings make, as Aquinas says in *Summa contra gentiles* III.85, and so knowledge of customs and habits and their causes in the past are parts of moral philosophy. More generally, in the study of the human past, we aim to understand how aspects of the past of a given community or tradition relate causally to individual acts or to customs and habits or to conceptions of good or to other communities or traditions.[[34]](#endnote-34) So, history as the study of the human past extends to all aspects of everything human beings have done in the past. Now, a Thomistic account of everything that human beings have done should begin with the central truth of Thomistic moral philosophy: human beings pursue happiness and perfection in political community in *everything* they do, and so in their communities they likewise pursue what they understand happiness to be. In so far as a community has a common life, its members will order that common life, not arbitrarily, but according to the conception of happiness that its members have (more or less); and so every community has a manner of realizing its members’ idea of human happiness through an ordering of customs and habits. This is a Thomistic way of defining what *culture* is: a community’s manner of realizing happiness through an ordering of customs and habits.[[35]](#endnote-35) Cultures in this sense seem to be the highest subjects of the knowledge of the human past. This is for two reasons: first, cultures are the most intelligible and determinative aspects of the human past, being the most general; second, it is through a knowledge of specific cultures that such investigations contribute most to moral philosophy, since we need knowledge of our own culture in order to direct our community well—contemporary historians, then, are right to seek to understand cultures.[[36]](#endnote-36) What has emerged from this account of inquiry into the human past are chiefly two points: first, that moral philosophy cannot be carried out without the knowledge of the human past; and, second, that the specialized study of that human past can only be carried out as part of and informed by moral philosophy.[[37]](#endnote-37)

We have seen, then, at least an outline of history and where it fits among the disciplines. But what is the overall shape of this account, and how does it fit in with contemporary Thomistic projects? I turn to these in conclusion.[[38]](#endnote-38)

V

One might first wish to know how this account relates to earlier Thomistic accounts of history. Let me just give a sketch, which is aimed more to show how I understand this account than to do justice to each view, for which I do not have the space here. Maritain and Coughlin are right, in my view, to insist that there is no knowledge of singulars as such, but my account develops theirs by making clear how *indirect* knowledge of singulars is possible. Benedict Ashley emphasizes that we can know things from history, and also that history is not a science, but he does not say much more than that; my account simply shows why what he says is right. Charles De Koninck’s point that there are rational connections among individual acts captures well why the human past is knowable. Likewise, Wallace is right, in my view, to emphasize that such connections have necessity because they are in the past, which reveals *why* they possess the stability and determination to be known. Buckley builds his account around the claim that human influences on one another do and can have generality, and, on my view, he is simply articulating part of the foundation for the role that the study of the human past has in moral philosophy; my work generalizes Buckley’s. So, each of these Thomists was right in the main on what he wished to clarify and defend, and each of their points contributes to the whole of this account.

In general, my account shows that the various sciences, in so far as they treat of things in the past, are also the sciences that know those things in the past, and so history as inquiry into the past is always subordinate to the larger inquiries into the subjects, as is knowledge of the past of each science as a discipline. This reveals too that history poses no special problem for Thomists. Aristotle and Aquinas were always careful (within the limits of knowledge in their time) both to draw on the past as need be and also to build up their accounts with reference to the histories of the sciences—indeed, Aristotle seems to have been the first thinker to include systematic reflection on the past of a science within the science itself. And, precisely because what I have given here is an account of *history*, it can suggest an answer to the question of what the relationship is for Thomists between studying the history of a discipline and studying in the discipline itself. On this account of history, studying the past is always part of and subordinate to a larger inquiry, and inquiry makes progress in part by reflecting on its own past; so, Thomists who seek to solve contemporary problems need Thomists who study the history of philosophy and theology; but Thomists who study intellectual history cannot do so without an implicit theoretical account of the subjects of the science whose past they study, and so they need theorists focused on solving problems. In making that clear, I hope my work here can contribute to the Thomistic *resourcement*, not only by solving philosophical problems related to history, but also by proposing an account of history that can help to address this social problem within Thomism as a movement.

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2. 2. Jacques Maritain, *On the Philosophy of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957); Charles De Koninck, “A Note on History” (unpublished manuscript; accessed on September 23rd, 2015 at http://www.charlesdekoninck.com/art-and-morality-with-a-note-on-history/); R. Glen Coughlin, “History and Liberal Education”, *The Aquinas Review* 5.1 (1998), 1-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 3. Benedict Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom: An Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Approach to Metaphysics* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 315-321. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 4. Charles De Koninck, “The Nature of Man and His Historical Being”, *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 5.2 (1949), 271-277: narration of past events “may also reveal more or less rational connections that exist among [those events], and … the term ‘history’ also serves to designate the kind of knowledge ordained to the discovery of such connections. … History tends towards a certain universality and thus towards the estate of a ‘science’” (271); Michael Buckley, “A Thomistic Philosophy of History”, *New Scholasticism* 35.3 (1961), 342-362; William Wallace OP, *The Elements of Philosophy: A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1977), 183-185, 268. The most recent Thomistic account of history is probably that of Thomas Joseph White in his *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), in his concluding chapter on why Christology is not a historical science (467-510). White’s view seems to be closest to that of De Koninck and Wallace. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 5. The most obvious example here is that of Alasdair MacIntyre, in particular in *After Virtue*, Third Edition (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 6. This is actually a general problem for contemporary theologians and philosophers who draw on historical work: most such historical work does not have a clear theoretical foundation for its results—and some of this work, of course, is used to argue against the claims of Thomists. In a similar way, contemporary Thomists are often seen as anachronizing by historians of thought, but those historians do not offer an account of history either or, if they do, it is only in the way of modern historiography, which is highly compartmentalized from the rest of philosophical inquiry. Both groups do, however, raise important problems for Thomists, and a strong account of history would allow Thomists to address those problems and respond to critics with clarity and depth. If my account here is successful, then Thomists will have both a robust metaphysical framework and also a robust historical framework, something no other contemporary school of thought has. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 7. See in particular MacIntyre’s *First Principle, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1990). One thing a reader of MacIntyre might be struck by is how seemingly un-Thomistic his work is at first glance. Part of my goal in this paper is to reveal in what ways historical work like his fits well within the Thomistic tradition on that tradition’s own terms—although I make no claims about the details of MacIntyre’s various theses that are controversial among Thomists. I have eschewed making points in broader sociological terms and have instead aimed to make related points within the Thomistic framework, from Thomistic authorities, and for the sake of what are recognizably Thomistic goals; although this will have less appeal to a wide audience, it will also ideally have more coherence and intelligibility and will be less liable to hidden errors introduced by a sociological language foreign to Aristotelian philosophy. This exposes me to criticism both from within the Thomistic tradition (have I read Aquinas rightly?) and from outside it (have I truly understood the historical situated-ness of human life in the relevant ways?). Both kinds of questions would raise important challenges to what I say here and are important directions in which this work should be developed. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 8. This is a more general version of the set of distinctions Jorge Gracia makes in his *Philosophy and Its History: Issues in Philosophical Historiography* (Buffalo, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 39-107. Wallace also begins with something like this distinction (*Elements of Philosophy*, 268). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 9. But as an activity aimed at understanding the past (rather than at producing a genre of text), history is more philosophical than poetry, since history aims to discover truth and poetry does not. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 10. Historiography is too ambiguous: it can mean the art of history writing, or historical methodology in general, or what was written at a given period, or even what has been written on a particular historical question. “Historics”, although less common, seems a better term for the theory and method of the investigation and understanding of the human past. “Historiography” would seem to be best used to mean the writing about the past, the historiography of Ancient Greece would be, then, the historical writing of or about the Ancient Greeks, although some ambiguity is of course perfectly acceptable. History in general I define below. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 11. It was a question of Michael Tkacz that helped me to see this important point. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 12. Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, translated with introduction, notes, and commentary by Robin Smith (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 13. For a detailed account of this term in medieval philosophy in general, see Arno Seifert, “*Historia* im Mittelalter”, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 21.2 (1977), 226-284. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. 14. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s* De anima, translated by K. Foster and S. Humphries, introduction by Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1994), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 15. Aquinas also has another general Latin word for inquiry, namely *inquisitio*; it seems that he prefers *historia* in those cases in which he is drawing directly on the translation of Aristotle, which tend to use *historia*. For example, the word *historia* in this more Greek sense does not appear in the *Summa theologiae*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. 16. Consider the two main online encyclopedias of philosophy and their articles under “philosophy of history”, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (at http://www.iep.utm.edu/history/) and Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history). Both say that history is the study of the past, but both fail to see that this claim is far wider than the human past: “History is the study of the past in all its forms” (Internet Encyclopedia); and “historians are interested in providing conceptualizations and factual descriptions of events and circumstances in the past” (Stanford Encyclopedia). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. 17. To take only two other examples like this one—Aquinas deploys history to support his case throughout the *Contra impugnantes* and, in his commentary on the *Nichomachean Ethics* (I.7 *lectio* 11), he refers to the fact that history teaches us that sciences can be completely forgotten. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 18. John of St. Thomas addresses this in most detail in his *Ars Logica* (Second Part, Question 23, Article 2, “Utrum possit dari cognitio intuitiva de re physice absente sive in intellectu sive in sensu exteriori” in *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus* (Lyons, 1678), 289-293. John Deely translates one key passage this way (Jean Poinsot, *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotics of Jean Poinsot*, edited and translated by John Deely (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 315: “For we say of a past thing that there can be a proper representation of the thing in itself, because it has already shown itself and so is able to terminate the representation of itself; but it cannot terminate through itself in the way required for an intuitive awareness, but in something produced by itself . . .” John of St. Thomas is drawing on Aquinas’s point that we can understand things outside of perception by means of their causes or effects that we can perceive (*Commentary on the* Sentences of Peter Lombard III.23, 1, 2, sol.). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. 19. John Paul II includes history among the disciplines that produce knowledge (5), and he confirms this when he says that we can know something from the study of history (4), that history reveals some truth (39, 48, 75, 77) or shows it (49, 96, 101), and in general when he implies that history gives knowledge (46, 56) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. 20. In various places, Aquinas makes the point that the memory is what knows the past (e.g. *Summa theologiae* II-II 48.1; *Commentary on Aristotle’s* De interpretatione, *lectio* 14.19). Aquinas distinguishes taking memory in two ways, either as the power of retaining species or as a power including in some way its objects considered as past (*Summa theologiae* I 79.6). If we take memory as including a consideration of the past as past, then that means memory includes the past as here and now and thus is part of the senses. The question is complex and will involve a complete account of the memory and the cogitative power (as well as how both relate to the contemporary neuroscience), but it is clear that those seeking to know the past do not seek to know the past *as past,* which would be to know it through the sense powers. Historians, for example, are not seeking to re-experience the past, but to understand it; reenactors and historical fiction writers seem to be the ones concerned to re-experience the past. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. 21. For the full range of texts in Aquinas’s corpus treating the issue, see George Klubertanz, “St. Thomas and the Knowledge of the Singular”, *New Scholasticism* 26.2 (1952), 135-166. I would distinguish the indirect intellectual knowledge of singulars as in I 86.1 from “accidental knowledge”, i.e. sophistical knowledge, which is how some commentators have understood Aquinas’s account of how we know singulars and contingents. Accidental knowledge is the kind of “knowledge” we have when we can be said to “know” a singular just because we know the universal, in the way that I can be said to know Cardinal Richelieu’s cats (he allegedly had fourteen!) for the simple reason that I know about cats. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. 22. Aquinas points out that we have a lesser degree of knowledge in natural and moral philosophy in many places; see especially, his *Commentary on Aristotle’s* Posterior Analytics I.2 *lectio* 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. 23. Jean Rioux drew my attention to Pope Benedict XVI’s claim that our knowledge of the past is hypothetical (in *Jesus von Nazareth: Erster Teil. Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2008). He says: “Sicher, es gibt Hypothesen vom hohem Gewissheitsgrad, aber insgesamt solten wir uns der Grenze unsere Gewissheiten bewusst bleiben” (xvi). And, for Thomists, this is certainly right: *both* that we can be said to have intellectual knowledge of the past *and* that such knowledge can only technically have a hypothetical degree of certainty, as much else in natural and moral philosophy. While it is doubtful that Benedict intended his point to be taken precisely as meaning that knowledge of the past can only have Aristotelian hypothetical certainty, what he says does seem to fit rather well with the position I outline in this paper. (As an aside, I should note that Jean Rioux referred me to Benedict as a way of objecting to my account of history.) [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. 24. This might seem a bold claim. What about the experience of a material singular in the present? But our experience of singulars is only in the present analogously. All our knowledge of singulars must by definition, because dependent on the senses in some sense, be knowledge of singulars in the past. Light and sound take time to reach us; smell clearly does too, since the particles must move from the emitter to our nose; similarly, even touch and taste we are not instantaneously aware of. So, what we know about material singulars (etc.) is always knowledge of such things as they were in the past, near or remote. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. 25. The past of a science may be studied from any number of perspectives (ethics, politics, philosophical psychology, etc.), but what is most determinative about those human acts in the past related to the science is that they are aimed in some way at understanding the subjects of the science; such acts are most properly studied, then, as part of the science itself. The fact that one can study a science’s past from many perspectives has led to things like feminist readings of modern science. On my account, such things are clearly not proper to the science itself as such; in so far they treat of either the politics or ethics involved in the past of the science, such studies are properly ethical or political and not part of the given science; in so far as such studies treat of ways in which the past of a science has been hindered by, for example, prejudices about femininity, such studies are (or at least can be) related to our own progress toward perfected science (science as it is in us). In this way, then, even things as seemingly un-Thomistic as gender studies can be integrated into a Thomistic framework. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. 26. The notion of perfected science I draw from Alasdair MacIntyre’s Aquinas Lecture, *First Principle, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (cited above, note 5) and from his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. 27. Benedict Ashley observes (*Way toward Wisdom*, 318), “The best way to attain a degree of objectivity and freedom to think critically is to become aware of the limitations that our own personal and social histories (‘narratives’) impose on our thinking and that of others.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. 28. Two objections: 1. One commenter raised the objection here that the human past should be more generally studied by and as part of philosophical anthropology within the philosophy of nature. I respond: understanding human acts is proper to natural philosophy only in so far as moral philosophy is itself part of natural philosophy. But understanding human acts requires that we understand what properly human action is, which is the province of moral philosophy. Of course, many historians think that it is obvious that we can come to know about this or that act without knowing what properly human action is, but this is false. Any account of this or that act implies a general picture of what human action is. And that is the province of moral philosophy. 2. Another commenter objected that if history were a part of moral philosophy, it would imply that history is part of the same discipline as meta-ethics; it seems strange to say that one inquires about the American Revolution in the same discipline as one inquires about theories like non-cognitivism. My response is that much of contemporary meta-ethics is not part of moral philosophy. For a Thomist, meta-ethics seems to be those parts of other disciplines that relate to and undergird moral philosophy, e.g. natural philosophy, psychology, etc. More generally, though, we do not seem able to come to know what courage is without having considered some acts (complete and therefore in the past) which we know to be courageous. And, even after theoretical reflection, our consideration of courageous acts in the past is one part of how we develop our understanding of courage. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. 29. To see this, consider one of the humanities, literature, for example: one can read literature to be formed (which is the end of the art); one can study literature to know how to make it (studying it as an art, i.e. what Aristotle and Aquinas call “poetics”); or one can study literature in order to understand key aspects of the society that produced that literature (studying it as part of moral science, which is what we usually mean when we include literature among the humanities). To elaborate on this last point, the genres of literature, for example, will be related to the social conditions of the given society; likewise, literature presents an account of something good, and that account is always related to the notion of the good life as lived in that community, even if it is a negative response to that community’s account of the good life; etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. 30. A good recent account of the social and intellectual history of history as a discipline, leading up to and including the German historicists, is F. Beiser’s *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. 31. See *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 7: The Modern Social Sciences*, edited by Theodore Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The Catholic historian and intellectual Christopher Dawson argued that history is becoming the science of “the whole human cultural-process in so far as it can be studied by documentary evidence” (“Sociology as a Science”, *Dynamics of World History* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 21); as such, in his view, it is indispensable for sociology and sociology for it. But, right as this is in one way, it is wrong in another: Dawson’s view implies that the knowledge of the human past is divorced from and intelligible apart from moral philosophy; a proper understanding of the past and of inquiry into the past reveals that this is not so. In Dawson’s defense, he seems to have understood moral philosophy in the modern sense (as focused on right and wrong, rules, duties, obligations, etc.) and he is certainly right that knowledge of the human past is more than and not only subject to morality thus understood; but in so far as we understand moral philosophy in a broadly Aristotelian way (as ordering everything human toward the *telos* of human life), we can see that there can in principle be nothing related to human action outside the domain of moral philosophy understood in this way; Dawson himself intimates something like this in at least a limited way when he observes that social life itself is by nature *artistic* (“Art and Society”, *Dynamics of World History*, 71-73). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. 32. The fact that the study of the human past is part of moral science can also be confirmed from the contemporary discipline of history itself. In the first place, history began with a clear focus on politics in authors like Herodotus and Thucydides and progressed slowly to widen out its purview to such an extent that among contemporary historians anything in the human past can be the subject of historical inquiry; its scope, then, slowly expanded from what is narrowly politics to what is broadly moral science; for the full story, the most comprehensive book in English is E. Breisach’s *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, Third Edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Likewise, since history is part of moral science, one would expect to find in the study of the human past the kinds of disagreements that are common in ethics and politics; and this is just what we do find, as arguments over how to interpret the past reveal; for examples of this related to the study of antiquity, see Neville Morley, *Theories, Models, and Concepts in Ancient History* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Again as part of moral science, history should only be able to attain a limited and imperfect degree of certainty in its acts of understanding, and this too is what we find, since history does not admit of mathematical certainty and historians know this very well. Even in discussions, not of specific parts of the past, but of the historiographical method itself, the various approaches to the relevant questions divide along largely political and ethical lines; the book that brings this out most clearly is Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. 33. Drawing on Avicenna, Aquinas outlines a distinction between those parts of a practical science that are close to practice and those that are remote from practice (*Commentary on Boethius’s* De trinitate 5.1 ad 4). Intellectual knowledge of the past relevant to the founding of a community or the origins of habits and customs is in the more theoretical part of these practical sciences, rather than in the more practical part, since such knowledge is both necessary and also remote from practice. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. 34. It seems to be precisely this that the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* seeks to call to the attention of the interpreter of revelation when it talks of literary forms and characteristic modes of thinking and feeling at the time of the sacred writer (12). By seeing that such things are subjects of moral philosophy, one can perhaps have a clear philosophical foundation for revealing the meaning that the scriptures had for their authors and successive audiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. 35. Tracey Rowland, in *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican* II (New York: Routledge, 2003), takes a different view of culture, one that is articulated in less recognizably Thomistic terms, but has much to offer. I would only suggest that the definition I give here includes hers and shows clearly how accounts of culture like hers relate to Thomistic moral philosophy. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. 36. I would suggest that it is precisely in a shift of culture in this sense after Vatican II that we will find explanations for the marginalization of Thomism, both a shift in what the shared conception of happiness among Catholic philosophers and theologians *was* and a shift among such Catholics in the manner of realizing their shared conception of happiness, i.e. in Catholic intellectual culture. In so far as Thomists see the current intellectual culture among Catholics as problematic, we must aim to change it in part through being aware that we are aiming to change *both* the shared conception of happiness among Catholic intellectuals *and* the manner of realizing a shared conception of happiness—not that such things are simple in any sense. One has only to state this to realize that philosophy articles like mine are not enough. Thomists must become intellectual missionaries, with all that that implies about our shared social life, virtues, goods we pursue, etc., as well as our need for the interior conversion of self that is the heart of every mission: we are first missionaries to ourselves. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. 37. Nietzsche makes something like this point in his early *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (originally published 1874; I use the translation of Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1980)). His main claim is that history is necessary for living well, but among the weak history tends toward an excess of history which is destructive of life. He says: “. . . that knowledge of the past is at all times only desired in the service of the future and the present, not to weaken the present, not to uproot a future strong with life: all of this is simple, as truth is simple, and immediately convinces even him who has not first been given a historical proof” (23). In Thomistic terms, we can agree that history is not for its own sake, and that excessive dwelling on history and an obsessive search to know the past (which one can see illustrated in the methods of some schools of psychology and psychiatry as well as among some contemporary historians) themselves are not conducive to happiness and human perfection. At the same time, a Thomistic account of history reveals why history is nevertheless necessary. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. 38. What I turn to in conclusion here is not mainly what a working historian would likely be interested in. Indeed, as David Appleby pointed out, what I present throughout the paper would seem to professional historians (perhaps Catholic ones especially) to be minimal as an account of history, with perhaps little of usefulness for examining sources, determining interpretive criteria, etc. I accept this point and agree that it is largely right. But providing yet more principles and criteria for historians is not my goal. What I hope this account has done is show where the study of the past, in particular the human past, fits within the Thomistic system and thus provides a theoretical grounding for historical methodologies. From a historian’s perspective, the way to read my paper is as an attempt, first, to provide an answer, in Thomistic terms, to the problems raised by postmodernism, as outlined in, e.g., Howell and Prevenier’s *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); and, second, as an attempt to show why the insights and results of historical work are important for Thomists, which in turn reveals that Thomists need to respect the relative autonomy of those who study the human past; history may be subordinate to theology, but it cannot be and is not subservient to it. Even though my goal here is quite general, having done some historical work myself, I am convinced that the Thomistic account of humankind, of our pursuit of goods we perceive, and of what culture is will prove to be useful for understanding the past. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)