

Introduction: The Philosophy of Historiography

This book studies our knowledge of history, its nature, historical development, epistemic limits, and scope. In ordinary language “history” is ambiguous. It may mean past events or the study of past events (Dray, 1993, p. 1). In its original Greek *historie* is etymologically related to the verb “to see” and consequently to inquiry and knowledge. In other languages, “history” means a story (Le Goff, 1992, pp. 101–3). Arthur Marwick (1993, p. 6) distinguished five different uses of “history.” In addition to past events and the activity of research into past events, Marwick added the interpretations that result from research, the accumulated knowledge of the past, based on those interpretations, and what is considered significant of the accumulated knowledge of the past.

Ordinary language aside, in this book I use a terminology designed to fit its epistemic focus: By history I mean past events. *Historiography* is composed of representations of past events, usually texts, but other media such as movies or sound recordings may also represent past events. *Historians* like Ranke or Mommsen wrote about history, they produced historiography. *Historiographers* like Momigliano and Iggers wrote about historiography, about the works of historians like Thucydides and Ranke. *Scientific historiography*, the main topic of this book, is historiography that generates probable knowledge of the past. *Historiographic interpretation* is the final historiographic product that is ready

for popular consumption in the form of textbooks and “the history of” popular books.

Historiographic interpretations include knowledge generated by scientific historiography, but also ethical, aesthetic, political and other value judgments. The artistic and rhetorical interpretations of the results of historiographic research, of scientific historiography, ought to be distinguished from the logical structure of historiographic research (Lloyd, 1993, p. 53). Interpretations decide which parts of scientific historiography are sufficiently significant to be included in textbooks, and what kinds of value judgments should be passed on them. Different historiographic interpretations may incorporate an identical core of scientific historiography but “spin” it in different directions. For example, different historiographic interpretations of the New Deal in the United States may agree on what happened, on its causes and effects, the scientific core of interpretation. But one interpretation may consider it a positive development, the creation of a more civilized and moral United States with greater economic security. Another interpretation may consider it a degeneration of American individualism and liberty and its replacement with state paternalism and individual irresponsibility. Accordingly these two interpretations would emphasize different parts of scientific historiography, the first would discuss improvements in the standard of living of unemployed workers and the second would stress the growth in the size of the federal government.

The distinction between history and historiography parallels that of nature and science. The philosophy of science studies science and its relations with the evidence. It cannot study exclusively nature directly, or it would be a science. Similarly, scientific historiography studies history through its evidential remains. Philosophy can study the epistemology of our knowledge of history, the relations between historiography and evidence. This subfield of epistemology is then the *philosophy of historiography*. The philosophy of historiography has nothing to say about history directly, or it would be historiography. As a philosophy of historiography it deals exclusively with philosophical questions that can be elucidated, analyzed, or answered by a rigorous examination of historiography. Problems for which historiography is irrelevant may be philosophical, but are beyond the scope of the philosophy of historiography.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

The philosophy of scientific historiography, like other philosophic meta-disciplines such as the philosophy of science or the philosophy of law may be divided into *phenomenological*, *descriptive*, and *prescriptive* modes of inquiry. *Phenomenological meta-disciplinary inquiry* is a rigorous examination of the consciousness of disciplinary practitioners such as scientists or historians. Meta-historiographic phenomenology asks questions such as: How do historians perceive their enterprise? Self-consciousness can be incomplete and even misleading. Scientists and historians like to present their enterprise to themselves and outsiders as fitting prevailing cognitive values and ideals, even if their actual practices do not reflect these values at all. Many scientific innovators have not been fully or correctly conscious of their own methodologies. The explicit values to which scientists pledge allegiance are not necessarily the actual implicit values that affect and guide their scientific work (Laudan, 1984, p. 55). For example, Newton presented his methodology in terms of the contemporary dominant inductive philosophy of science, though Newtonian physics is clearly not inductive. Historians and philosophers of science are more interested in understanding Newtonian science than in what exactly Newton thought of his enterprise (Cohen & Westfall, 1995, pp. 109–43).

Philosophic descriptions attempt to present what disciplines like historiography are actually like. Any philosophic description is theory laden. I found some of the theories and concepts of recent epistemology and philosophy of science particularly useful for describing historiography. The history of historiography is the foundation for the philosophical description of historiography, just as the history of science is the basis for the philosophic description of science. In including the part of historiography that is devoted to representing the history of writing about the past, the philosophy of historiography partly overlaps with historiography proper. *Philosophical meta-disciplinary prescription* considers normatively what are the proper practices for a discipline such as historiography. It posits some meta-historiographic normative principles or ideals that may be a description of the practices of a “successful” part of the discipline or another exemplary discipline, whether or not this description is accurate.

Though phenomenology, description, and prescription are equally legitimate foci of inquiry, description is more important for the purpose of this book, the analysis of historiographic knowledge. The nature of the historiographic enterprise is independent of the professional self-consciousness of historians. Indeed, I will demonstrate that this self-consciousness is often false. Understanding historiography or science requires understanding what historians or scientists are doing, not what they think they are doing (Goldstein, 1996, pp. 195–6). Textbooks and ex post facto accounts by participants present a distorted image of actual practice: “Historiography is what historians write as historians, not what they say they do” (Goldstein, 1996, p. 256). For example, in their 1898 book, Langlois & Seignobos (1926) codified what many of their contemporaries considered Ranke’s method. Langlois & Seignobos assumed an outdated philosophy of science that was inductive and empiricist: They divided the sciences between those that depend on direct observations, and those like historiography and geology that cannot observe the events they study, but have to infer them from written documents and other material traces of the past. They were wrong in their understanding of science, as physicists and chemists are not able to observe electrons any more than historians can observe historical events. Yet, these anachronisms should not obscure the fact that Langlois & Seignobos described correctly the similarities between how historians and textual critics obtain knowledge. As I demonstrate in this book, both attempt to prepare a complete genealogical table, a *stemma codicum*, that should connect the plural similar evidence with its common cause, may it be a historical event or a textual archetype that generated several exemplars (pp. 80–3, 95). A younger generation of historians, including the founders of the Annales school, were right to criticize their almost exclusive identification of evidence with written texts. But if we broaden Langlois & Seignobos’s concept of evidence to include nondocumentary and material evidence, their analysis of historiographic practice as distinct from their philosophic self-consciousness is still correct. Similarly, Murphey (1973, pp. 57–8) noted that despite Beard and Becker’s presentation of their historiography as distinct from Ranke’s paradigm, and their distinctive claim that all historiography is underdetermined by the biases and perspectives of historians, their actual historiographic procedures and practices were not significantly different from those of Ranke.

Cambridge University Press

0521834155 - Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography

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Excerpt

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As Kant put it, “Ought implies can.” Before philosophers can tell historians what they should do, they should get a good idea of the epistemic limits of all possible historiography. A sophisticated analysis of the epistemic scope of scientific historiography is the only method through which it may be possible to evaluate the epistemic limitations of all historiographic knowledge. A relevant prescription must also be founded on a thorough understanding of existing historiography to avoid reproaching historians for not practicing what at least some of them already do. It is rash to ask whether historiography fits certain standards before we know what are the intrinsic standards of historiography. A prescriptive discussion of historiography would be premature.

Before embarking on the project of describing and explaining historiography, it is important to caution against confusing description with phenomenology and prescription. These confusions led to mistakes when philosophers of historiography believed they had solved one problem, while in fact they discussed a different problem altogether. When philosophers of historiography confuse description with phenomenology, they think they describe historiography, while in fact they describe what historians think of their practice. This confusion may result from a meek acceptance of historiographic self-consciousness, the assumption that historians must know what they are doing. When philosophers accept at face value the self-consciousness of historians, historiography appears usually more rational and coherent than it actually is. When historians like Elton (1969) or Carr (1987) wrote historiographic manuals they rationalized what they perceived as their own practices and criticized as deviant what they took to be those of their competitors. Other historians adopted what they perceived as the prevailing epistemic paradigm as a model for their own professional self-consciousness. However, Ranke’s “inductive empiricism” just as the “relativism” of some contemporary historians do not reflect more than what historians have taken contemporary epistemologies to legitimize.

When philosophers of historiography confuse description with prescription, they prescribe while they think they describe. This confusion may arise out of insensitivity and lack of attention to historiography, assuming that historians must behave as a rule according to prescriptive standards set by the philosopher. The logical-positivist project in the philosophy of historiography was actually prescriptive. Hempel

(1965) endorsed on a priori grounds a logical model as the one and only correct form of explanation and then applied it to historiography as its description. Hempel did not bother to actually examine historiography because he thought it either followed his model or was bad historiography.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE

The description of scientific historiography, of the nature, types, and scope of historiographic knowledge, requires an investigation of the history of scientific historiography, of historiographic research. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, historians adopted new communal methodologies that are often referred to as scientific or critical historiography. By communal methods I mean:

Agreed means of obtaining evidence; accepted strategies for the marshalling and deployment of evidence; conventions adhered to in the criticism of claims and the conduct of controversy; shared assumptions about the division of labor and distribution of authority in inquiry; etc. (Jardine, 1991, p. 78)

With the aid of these and other theories and methodologies, historians have been able to produce historiographic knowledge. This knowledge, such as it is, is the subject matter of the philosophy of historiography.

Leon Goldstein (1976, pp. 140–1) introduced an important distinction between the superstructure and the infrastructure of historiography. The superstructure of historiography is the finished product of historiographic research, ready for consumption by nonhistorians, usually in narrative form. The historiographic infrastructure is historiographic research, interaction with evidence, the bulk of the professional activity of historians. Goldstein warned against basing a philosophy of historiography on the superstructure of historiography. Hanson (1958) may have been the first to criticize the philosophy of science for analyzing the finished systematic theoretical result of scientific research, rather than the process of scientific research. Kuhn (1996, pp. 136–8) warned against basing a philosophy of science on textbook science. Textbooks misrepresent the process of investigation and the historical evolution of research and theorization. They make

it appear more consistent, coherent, and progressive than it actually is. Likewise, in the philosophy of historiography:

... Philosophical writers have virtually ignored... problems concerning the emergence or constitution of the historical past in the course of historical inquiry... because the history books they tend to read, full blown accounts of much-studied periods, tend to obscure them. Such a book would tend to present what is essentially the generally accepted tradition of those historians who work on the period in question as if it were a description of the real past. The author of the work may disagree on this or that point with the established opinion, and where he does he may be inclined to deal more explicitly with the evidence he thinks supports his deviation; but, for the most part, his book will be a presentation of what he thinks happened with very little interruption of the account in order to deal with evidence. Of course, he will constantly be referring to evidence, either in published collections of material or in archival sources, but mostly these references will be understood only by his professional colleagues. ... Writers of philosophical essays on history... may note... that the historian's account must... be based upon evidence, but... have not the slightest idea of precisely how – unless it be that widely held but totally erroneous idea that he finds his facts in old texts and copies them out. For the most part we [philosophers] follow the account, attend to the descriptions it contains, note the evaluations historical critics sometimes make of the men and events they write about, and, above all, keep a wary eye out for how things get explained. It is very easy, indeed, on the basis of such reading, to take the historical past for granted in some realistic way and treat it as something there to be described and explained. (Goldstein, 1976, pp. 50–1)

Goldstein (1976, pp. 139–82; 1996, pp. 86, 183) and Marwick (1993, p. 195) argued against placing textbook narratives that compose the historiographic superstructure at the center of the philosophy of historiography. The superstructure does not reflect the historiographic process of inquiry, the relation between historiography and evidence; rather, it represents the stylized results of inquiry. It is impossible to reconstruct the epistemology of historiography from studying its superstructure, as it is impossible to evaluate a scientific article from reading its abstract or conclusion. Since this book pays little attention to the superstructure of historiography, it pays even less attention to the debate whether it has the structure of a narrative or not.

Limiting the purview of philosophic problems that we discuss to those that can be decided by an analysis of historiography permits us to dispose of debates that do not belong to the philosophy of

historiography. Perhaps the most essential distinction between the schools of philosophy that became known as “analytic” and “continental” concerns the theory of meaning: How do words or propositions receive their meanings? Analytic philosophers argue that words or sentences receive their meanings from their relations with the world. Continental philosophers tend to claim that words receive their meaning through their relations with other words. The original poststructuralist interest in history was a reaction against criticisms that it ignored historiography, which in some circles meant Marxism (Attridge et al., 1987). But the core of the debate about poststructuralism is about the nature of language and its relation, or lack thereof, with the world. The presence of poststructuralist or narrativist interpretations of the superstructure of historiography is hardly surprising since this set of literary theories and methods were constructed to interpret any text or textlike structure, from my tax returns (tragic) to my career (comic) to this sentence (ironic). However, the decisive battle in the war of theories of meaning will not be fought in the disputed margins, but in the sustaining cores. The relevant field for this battle is the philosophy of language and not the philosophy of historiography. In a sense this book calls for the liberation of the philosophy of historiography from imperialist ambitions of partisans of other philosophical debates (Tucker, 2001).

The chief inquiry of this book is into the relations between historiography and evidence. Rachel Laudan (1992, p. 57) opined that the philosophy of historiography lost its relevance for mainstream philosophy because it continued to focus on the *forms* of historiographic theories and explanation, while the research program of the philosophy of science shifted to focus on issues of *validation* whether scientific theories are well founded and justified and how they change (Laudan, 1992, p. 57). Peter Kosso (1992) suggested that the relation between evidence and historiography is not substantially different from the relation between evidence and theory in biology, geology, or physics. A misleading analogy between historiographic descriptions of past events and scientific descriptions of evidence led to the common mistake that since historians cannot observe historical events, knowledge of history can never be scientific. Yet, descriptions of historical events in historiography are as theoretical as descriptions of electrons are in physical theory. Historiographic evidence such as written documents

or material remains is just as observable as scientific evidence. Murphey likened George Washington to the electron, “an entity postulated for the purpose of giving coherence to our present experience . . . each is unobservable by us” (Murphey, 1973, p. 16).

Arguably, contemporary epistemology began with Quine’s (1985) naturalized epistemology. Quine suggested that how we arrive at our beliefs is relevant for answering the normative question of how we should arrive at them. Quine recommended that epistemology focus on descriptions of the links between observation and science. Description is better than rational reconstruction because it is better to discover how science in fact developed than to “fabricate a fictitious structure.” Epistemology should study the relation between input and output, evidence and theory (Quine, 1985). Such a research program in the philosophy of historiography should examine the relations between evidential input and historiographic output. There can be three approaches to such a philosophy of historiography: *Determinist* philosophy of historiography would claim that historians infer from evidence with historiographic theories and methods a single historiographic “output.” Historiographic determinists could recognize that different subfields of historiography have different “inputs,” different types of theories, methods and evidence. But they would claim that all historiographic outputs are consistent, creating together a jigsaw puzzle picture of the past. Historiographic *indeterminists* would claim that whatever consistency and regularity we find in historiographic judgments result from political, ideological, or socio historical factors that influence groups of historians. Otherwise, evidence does not affect historiography. Historiographic *underdeterminism* would claim that historians are constrained by the evidence and their theories to choose among a finite range of possible historiographies. One of the goals of the philosophy of historiography should be to discover whether historiography is determined, indeterminate, or underdetermined.

This distinction between determined, underdetermined, and indeterminate parts of historiography should not be confused with a distinction between chronicle facts and explanations of events. Some dry pieces of historiographic chronicle are underdetermined because of the paucity of evidence, for example, whether Czechoslovakia’s Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk was assassinated or committed suicide in 1948, or how popular the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia was

in February of that year. Some explanations of events are determined for example, that the rise of Nazism caused the Second World War, or that the global economic recession of the thirties was a contributing cause of the rise of Nazism. Any speculation about the religion of cavemen who left material remains in the shape of buxom women is indeterminate.

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION

The philosophy of historiography may be divided into the philosophy of scientific historiography, which is a branch of epistemology, and the philosophy of historiographic interpretation that is closely related to ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics. This book is exclusively about the philosophy of scientific historiography. Yet, it should be noted that there is much work to be done in the philosophy of historiographic interpretation, since the last thorough philosophical discussion of historiographic interpretation is almost a century old. The Neo-Kantian Rickert (1962) and Simmel (1977) differentiated two kinds of values in what I call historiographic interpretation: Ethical values judge whether historical events were beneficial or harmful, worthy of praise or blame. Other values decide whether historical events are significant or meaningful and therefore worthy of mention in historiography. The Neo-Kantians argued that ethical values are not distinctively historiographic. Historians borrow them from ethics.

Historians cannot mention everything they think they know about the past. Their selection of what is meaningful and significant is value laden. Rickert (1962, pp. 19, 86) thought that only human events can be meaningful in this sense, whereas the natural sciences deal with meaningless events. The Neo-Kantians did not consider that all branches of knowledge must be selective in their presentation of what they think they know of the world. All such selections must be value laden. The selection of which problems and evidence to study in the sciences, including historiography, is often associated with research programs or paradigms. While such research programs are present in historiography, some historiographic interpretations select what they consider to be meaningful knowledge of history according to external values that direct them to consider the history of a group they identify with or are otherwise interested in as meaningful. They write