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A Loosely Knit Network: Philosophy of History After Hayden White

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Abstract

Does the death of Hayden White mark the end of an era in philosophy of history? Although White's *personal* presence is sorely missed, White's *work* is unlikely soon to lose its prominent position in philosophy of history. This is because no other author occupies a position in the field that is remotely as central as White's. His oeuvre serves as a shared reference point for scholars working on issues ranging from explanation and representation to deconstruction and presence. From whatever school or persuasion they are, philosophers of history relate to White's work, either by building upon it or by dissociating themselves from it. In explaining this unique position of White's work, this essay reflects as much on the field called philosophy of history as on White's interventions in it. It argues that philosophy of history is not a *discipline* in a recognizable sense of the word, but a loosely knit *network* of scholars working on different "questions about history." Only when this network status of the field is taken into account, it becomes possible to see why White's work has such a central place in current philosophy of history.

Keywords

Hayden White, philosophy of history, historical theory, social network theory

Introduction

Does the death of Hayden White, in March 2018, mark the end of an era in philosophy of history?[1] When I raised this question over the course of the past year during coffee breaks, conference dinners, and other occasions for informal exchange with colleagues in philosophy of history, I noticed that many of them responded in the affirmative. Especially in the immediate months after White's passing, quite a few colleagues declared that philosophy of history will "never be the same" without White. Although most of them would tell their students that eras or epochs can only be identified in hindsight, from an epistemic position not available to historical actors enmeshed in the events themselves, they seemed convinced that philosophy of history is entering a "post-phase" – if not "post-narrativist," then at least post-Hayden White.

Although White's *personal* presence will be sorely missed – round tables and Q&A sessions will be different without his powerful personality and ironic, thought-provoking style of engagement – I will argue in this essay that White's *work* is unlikely soon to lose its prominent position in philosophy of history. This is because no other author occupies a position in the field that is remotely as central as White's. His oeuvre, spanning half a century of debate in philosophy of history, has come to serve as a shared reference point for scholars working on issues ranging from explanation and representation to deconstruction and presence. From whatever school or persuasion they are, philosophers of history relate to White's work, either by building upon it or by dissociating themselves from it. Given that this cannot be said of any other contemporary philosopher of history, it is hard to think of a successor to White. It seems plausible, therefore, that philosophers of history will continue to position themselves vis-à-vis White, at least if they maintain their habit of locating their work within the field at large.

In substantiating this claim, I will reflect as much on the field called philosophy of history as on White's interventions in it. I will argue that philosophy of history is not a

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[1] This is how the editor-in-chief of this journal, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, phrased my assignment when inviting me to write this essay. I would like to thank Jouni for his encouragement, Ewa Domańska for a long dinner conversation that helped me order my thoughts, and Robert Doran and Hans Kellner for helpful comments on a draft of the text. Funding was generously provided by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

discipline in a recognizable sense of the word, but a loosely knit *network* of scholars working on different "questions about history." Only when this network status of the field is taken into account, it becomes possible to see why White's work has such a central place in current philosophy of history.[2]

Questions about history

What does it mean to say that philosophy of history is not a discipline? Especially today, this may seem a counterintuitive, perhaps even implausible claim. Haven't recent years seen a boost in initiatives aimed a consolidating philosophy of history (or "historical theory," as some prefer to say) as a discipline of its own? Apart from the International Network of Historical Theory, with its much-attended network conferences in Ghent, Ouro Preto, and Stockholm, centers for philosophy of history have been established at places as diverse as Groningen, London, Bielefeld, and Oulu. Study groups or seminars devoted to philosophy of history convene in London, Amsterdam, and other places. There are established journals like *History and Theory*, *Rethinking History*, and the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* as well as a couple of smaller journals (*Historein*, *Práticas da História*). Doesn't this qualify as evidence for philosophy of history being a real discipline?

Arguably, however, an infrastructure of journals, seminars, and conferences is only part of what makes a field a discipline. According to historian of science Mary Jo Nye, five other criteria have to be met before one can attribute disciplinary identity to a field of study: (2) codified practices and rituals; (3) external recognition; (4) shared problems; (5) a core literature; and (6) a professional genealogy.[3] Although Nye develops this six-point definition for the purpose of understanding the history of chemistry, her definition of disciplines can

[2] Given the focus of this essay, I will not discuss the "whole" White – the medieval historian, the historian of consciousness, the political activist, the teacher, and so forth – but only the White who is read and discussed among philosophers of history. A broader treatment of White can be found in Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011). Much of what this essay says about White and his conversation partners is documented more extensively in the book.

[3] Mary Jo Nye, *From Chemical Philosophy to Theoretical Chemistry: Dynamics of Matter and Dynamics of Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 19.

be applied fruitfully to other fields. It helps to recognize that institutions alone do not make a discipline. The conversations conducted within their walls or pages must display some kind of coherence in terms of subject matter, approach, references, or background assumptions before one can speak of "disciplined" scholarly work. Journals, seminars, and conferences are necessary, but not sufficient for a field to qualify as a discipline.[4]

In order to understand the peculiar nature of philosophy of history, it is helpful to zoom in on the fourth and fifth of Nye's definitional elements: shared problems and a core literature. Seen from a *longue durée* perspective, philosophers of history in the past two centuries have returned again and again to a set of mostly conceptual questions: What is interpretation? What is explanation? What is objectivity? How does research (*Forschung*) relate to writing (*Darstellung*)? These four questions have been on the agenda from at least the early nineteenth century onwards. Arguably, they come close to what Nye identifies as shared problems, even if philosophers of history do not always agree on the meanings of the questions just mentioned, let alone on the form that satisfactory answers must take.

However, apart from these four themes, an inventory of questions on which philosophers of history in the past two centuries have worked would be remarkably diverse. Without any pretense at completeness, the inventory would at least include the following questions:

- What are the laws according to which history (the historical process) develops?
- What distinguishes history from other fields of study, including especially the natural sciences?
- What moral lessons, if any, can history teach?

[4] There are, of course, alternative definitions, which associate disciplinary status less with shared problems or a core literature than with institutionalization in a large number of degree-granting university departments. In the case of philosophy of history, however, such an institutional approach would make disciplinary status even less attainable. Stephen Turner, "What Are Disciplines? And How Is Interdisciplinarity Different?" in *Practicing Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Peter Weingart and Nico Stehr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 46-65; Jerry A. Jacobs, *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 27-53.

- Does historical thinking lead to moral relativism?
- What is the meaning of history (the historical process)?
- How can we understand the historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of human existence?
- What does it mean to live in stories or traditions?
- How can people be liberated from oppressive traditions (invented or otherwise)?
- What are the political subtexts of historical thinking and writing?
- What is historical "colligation" or "representation"?
- How is historical discourse structured by narrative form?
- How can historians grant agency to "people without history"?
- How do people relate to their pasts?
- How do people experience time or break it up in phases?

Although these questions cannot be arranged in chronological order, given that they are not confined to single generations, it is immediately obvious that some of them are nowadays more current than others. In the interwar period, versions of the question "Does historical awareness lead to moral relativism?" were on many people's lips.[5] But for reasons that are still in need of clarification, the question almost disappeared in the years following World War II. Likewise, the 1950s was a decade in which historians, philosophers, theologians, and political scientists alike spilled much ink on the question, "What is the meaning of history?" (As late as 1961, a Bavarian broadcast company devoted a series of radio talks to it, with contributors from across the academic and political-religious spectrum.)[6] But at around the same time, William H. Walsh and others popularized a distinction between "critical" and "speculative" philosophy of history that – probably against Walsh's own intentions – did much to challenge the legitimacy of the latter.[7] And so one could go on: philosophers of history disagree not only about how to answer the questions listed above, but also, more fundamentally, on what questions are worth asking in the first place. Only at a high level of generalization might one agree with Patrick Gardiner that philosophers of history resemble

[5] See, e.g., *Krise des Historismus, Krise der Wirklichkeit: Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur 1880-1932*, ed. Otto Gerhard Oexle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

[6] *Der Sinn der Geschichte: Sieben Essays*, ed. Leonhard Reinisch (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1961).

[7] W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), 9-28.

each other in raising "questions *about* history" rather than "questions *within* history" such as typically addressed by historians.[8]

What this implies is that philosophy of history should not be understood as an activity of scholars united in their commitment to solving one or more particularly urgent problems. Most characteristic of philosophy of history is the diversity and, in many cases, the rapid succession of questions singled out for critical scrutiny. While some questions provoke a lot of discussion (think of the debate over historical explanation that started in the early 1940s with Carl Hempel's covering law model and lasted until well into the 1960s),[9] many others are pursued by individuals, without much support from colleagues in the field (think, *inter alia*, of Leon Pompa and his project on views of human nature in historical studies, Raymond Martin and his "empirical philosophy of history," or Frank Ankersmit and the intricacies of sublime historical experiences).[10] Philosophy of history is therefore perhaps most realistically understood as an intermediate realm between history, philosophy, and some adjacent fields in which scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds can raise questions for which their home disciplines do not provide sufficient space.[11] Some of these questions turn out to have enough momentum to bring out a momentary convergence of research interests. These,

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[8] Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), x.

[9] Richard T. Vann, "Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and *History and Theory*," in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 40-69, esp. 41-48.

[10] Leon Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel, and Vico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Raymond Martin, *The Past Within Us: An Empirical Approach to Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[11] This is not to ignore that attempts have been made to subsume philosophy of history under either history or philosophy. These, however, are mostly agenda-driven classifications, which tell more about the programmatic ideals of their proponents ("philosophy of history can no longer insulate itself from the rest of philosophy") than about the real existing state of things.

however, are exceptions rather than the rule. Given that quite a few questions raised by philosophers of history are intelligible only against the background of specific "metahistorical" beliefs (e.g., that history is a process, that individuals have a right to choose their own past, that discontinuity in history is more "natural" than continuity), it is even unlikely for them to be recognized across the board as questions meriting sustained attention.[12]

So, despite recurring interest in the four questions with which I started (What is interpretation, what is explanation, what is objectivity, how does research relate to writing?), philosophy of history cannot realistically claim to be a field united by shared problems or common questions. This implies that it lacks at least one of the characteristic features of scholarly disciplines as defined by Mary Jo Nye.

Core literature

If philosophy of history is not homogeneous enough, in terms of the questions it pursues, to qualify as a discipline, then how can the heterogeneity of its research interests be captured without implying that disagreement is the norm ("There was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes")?[13] Perhaps the most appropriate image is that of a *network*, understood here as a group of people who are working on different questions, in different geographical and disciplinary contexts, but also continuously interacting, not only through personal contact and institutional means, but also by citing each other's work and, more

[12] My phrasing here is indebted to Nicholas Jardine's stimulating study, *The Scenes of Inquiry: On the Reality of Questions in the Sciences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Thomas S. Kuhn made similar observations about the "problems" occupying scientists in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 37.

[13] This metaphor has famously been applied to American historical studies by Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 573-629. A thoughtful rejoinder has been offered by Richard T. Vann, "No King in Israel? Individuals and Schools in American Historiography," in *An Assessment of Twentieth-Century Historiography: Professionalism, Methodologies, Writings*, ed. Rolf Torstendahl (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), 175-194.

specifically, by positioning themselves vis-à-vis the work of others. In terms borrowed from social network theory, this implies that there are *positions* (in technical language: "nodes") occupied by individuals and their research projects, but also, equally important, various kinds of *interaction* ("ties") between these positions, established through personal conversations, peer review, and citation practices, among other things.[14]

Evidently, a "whole network analysis" of philosophy of history – one that tries to capture not only individuals and their research projects, but also the conferences at which people meet, the journals in which they publish or for which they act as referees, as well as their informal means of interaction (emails, drinks, shared taxi rides) – is not a very feasible project. Insofar as it would be possible to capture all ties between the nodes, the resulting graph would most likely be unreadable through the density of lines.[15] So when I introduce the network metaphor, my aim is not to advocate social network analysis *tout court*, but to draw attention to a particular kind of interaction between philosophers of history and their research projects. If the network provides space to different "questions about history," pursued by scholars in greater or lesser degrees of isolation from each other, my question would be: To what extent are these projects connected through citation practices (who cites whom?) as well as, more importantly, through positional strategies (how do scholars position their work vis-à-vis that of others in the field)?

This brings us to the second of Nye's definitional characteristics that I singled out for discussion: a "core literature" to which scholars across the field relate in explaining their work. If shared problems or common questions are rare, as I argue in the previous section, it might seem plausible that a core literature to which everyone can position their work does not exist. Does a study like Clayton Roberts's *The Logic of Historical Explanation* occupy the same bibliographic universe as Eelco Runia's *Moved by the Past*? While the former is primarily in conversation with Carl Hempel, Ernest Nagel, Karl Popper, and William Dray, the

[14] Helpful background is provided in John Stott, *What Is Social Network Analysis?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Alexandra Marin and Barry Wellman, "Social Network Analysis: An Introduction," in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Network Analysis*, ed. John Stott and Peter J. Carrington (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 11-25.

[15] Robert Michael Morrissey, "Archives of Connection: 'Whole Network' Analysis and Social History," *Historical Methods* 48 (2015), 67-79, esp. 71.

latter quotes most extensively from Friedrich Schiller and Giambattista Vico.[16] Likewise, Ethan Kleinberg's *Haunting History*, on the potential of deconstructive approaches to the past, shares only few references with William Dray's *On History and Philosophers of History*.[17] If different questions come with different conversation partners and, consequently, with different key references, it seems only natural that philosophers of history occupied with different questions don't have anything like a core literature.

Yet there are some notable exceptions. All the studies just mentioned invoke G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, despite the fact that these nineteenth-century thinkers have long been put aside as "speculative" philosophers of history. This is a broader pattern: there are few twentieth- or 21st-century monographs in philosophy of history that do not at some point refer to Hegel or Marx, sometimes merely to position their own "analytical" work at safe distance from their "metaphysical" conjectures,[18] but sometimes also, more specifically, in the case of Hegel, to argue that there have been philosophical antecedents to William H. Walsh's "colligatory concepts",[19] or, in the case of Marx, to illustrate what "methodological socialism," "functional explanation," and "causal monism" entail.[20] As household names among philosophers of history, Hegel and Marx can apparently be invoked as reference points or as coordinates in relation to which one can position other ideas, arguments, or concepts. In the technical language of social network theory, they are exceptionally well-connected nodes ("hubs"), which as such play an integrative role within the network.

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[16] Clayton Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Eelco Runia, *Moved by the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[17] Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); William H. Dray, *On Historians and Philosophers of History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989).

[18] E.g., Gardiner, *Nature of Historical Explanation*, ix; Rex Martin, *Historical Explanation: Re-Enactment and Practical Interference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 13-14.

[19] Dray, *On Historians and Philosophers of History*, 38.

[20] Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 268-269; Roberts, *Logic of Historical Explanation*, 150, 152; Dray, *On Historians and Philosophers of History*, 56.

To an even larger degree, this is true of White, the only contemporary philosopher of history who is discussed in studies as diverse as Paul Ricoeur's *Temps et récit*, Jörn Rusen's *Historik*, and Alun Munslow's *The New History*.[21] In the field's leading journal, *History and Theory*, White clearly belongs to the most frequently cited authors.[22] If these citation patterns alone would suffice to regard White as a "hub," his central position in the network is confirmed by the habit of philosophers of history to position their work explicitly vis-à-vis White's. David Harlan, for instance, presents his plea for "history as a form of moral reflection" as a remedy to a professional malaise that White already predicted in "The Burden of History."[23] In a more critical vein, Eelco Runia argues that his notion of "presence" may help correct the overly meaning-oriented focus of "Whitean representationalism."[24] Ethan Kleinberg, in his recent book on deconstruction in history, says that he "embrace[s] Hayden White's emphasis on language and the place of constructivism in the historical

[21] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983), 228-239; Jörn Rüsen, *Historik: Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013), 207-209; Alun Munslow, *The New History* (London: Routledge, 2014), 148-179.

[22] A JSTOR search in the 1960-2013 volumes of *History and Theory*, conducted in November 2018, yields 428 hits for "Hayden White" and 142 hits for "Hayden V. White." Most likely, these are overlapping outcomes. As illustrated by the number of hits returned for Marx (641), Hegel (535), Weber (459), Dray (445), Collingwood (420), Foucault (399), Danto (356), Nietzsche (319), Heidegger (265), Ankersmit (257), Vico (243), Mandelbaum (243), Walsh (241), Dilthey (232), Derrida (219), Koselleck (207), Croce (183), Popper (192), Toynbee (179), and Hempel (172), White clearly is one of the most often mentioned authors. Among twentieth-century authors, he even seems to occupy a number one position (or at least a second place, closely after Weber, depending on the amount of overlap between "Hayden White" and "Hayden V. White"). Note that the number of hits refers to the number of *History and Theory* articles in which the search terms appear, not to the total number of mentions.

[23] David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 209-213, referring to Hayden V. White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5 (1966), 111-134.

[24] Runia, *Moved by the Past*, 53.

endeavor," but tries to move beyond constructivism with help of Jacques Derrida.[25] Likewise, in calling his philosophy of historiography a "postnarrativist" one, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen demonstrates his indebtedness to narrativism as represented by White (and Ankersmit), but also, at the same time, his aspiration to modify it with renewed emphasis on "dimensions of cognitive justification" in historical studies.[26] As these examples show, White is not merely cited, but invoked at crucial junctures, in moments of reflection on the state of the field, as representing an intellectual tradition to which scholars feel they have to relate explicitly.[27] Clearly, it is hard to think of any other scholar whose work plays a similarly pivotal role in contemporary philosophy of history.

On the one hand, the relative scarcity of such well-connected nodes ("hubs") implies that philosophy of history is an only loosely connected network. Although scholars and their projects are linked with each other through a myriad of individual ties, the kind of high degree connectivity that is realized by authors to whom everyone relates is relatively absent. On the other hand, this implies that White's position in the field is quite unique. His work is one of the most important "hubs" in the network, perhaps only matched by institutional hubs like the widely read and quoted journal *History and Theory*. White's oeuvre therefore comes as close to a "core literature" as one can get.

A versatile oeuvre

How has White's work come to occupy so central a position in contemporary philosophy of history? Two reasons are of particular importance. First, over the course of his productive career, White has engaged with such a variety of "questions about history" that his oeuvre touches on most of the themes on which philosophers of history have recently been working. This helps explain why analytically inspired philosophers of history (Kuukkanen),

[25] Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, 3.

[26] Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6, 8.

[27] I engaged in this practice, too, when I presented my research line on scholarly virtues and vices as an attempt to draw attention to elements of the historians' work that White-style textualism had largely ignored. Herman Paul, "Performing History: How Historical Scholarship Is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues," *History and Theory* 50 (2011), 1-19.

deconstructivists (Kleinberg), and advocates of liberal arts education (Harlan) alike can hail White as a relevant conversation partner or even as a source of inspiration. At the same time, however, White's provocative interventions gave philosophers of history from all schools and persuasions reasons for criticism. This is the second reason for White's fame: he became a central figure also because he challenged nearly everyone, from logical positivists and hermeneutists to realists and constructivists.

Just how rich a variety of "questions about history" White addressed over the course of his career – the first factor that contributed to him becoming a central figure in the field – can be gathered from the conversations to which he contributed and the authors on whom he wrote at some length. White's first essays in philosophy of history, written in the 1950s at the invitation of Mario Praz, dealt with Christopher Dawson and Arnold Toynbee, whose work (in Toynbee's case especially his later work) revolved around the question: To what extent can Europe survive if it rejects its centuries-old Christian heritage? Although White had little patience with Toynbee's "Gnostic theosophy," he welcomed his prophetic history writing to the extent that it illustrated, in a phrase borrowed from Karl Jaspers, how "[t]he manner in which we think of history sets the limits on our potentialities, or sustains us by its implications, or lures us away from reality."[28] The same entanglement of religious thinking and historical interpretation intrigued him in Dawson, the Catholic historian from whom he borrowed the term "metahistory." In Dawson, too, White encountered a scholar for whom history writing amounted to an attempt to offer a cure for Europe's spiritual ills.[29] This raised the question: How does historical writing help create worlds, or worldviews, in the light of which people subsequently shape the future?

This was not an abstract question, as White throughout the 1950s and 1960s identified as a humanist for whom humanity's greatest challenge in an era of mass

[28] Hayden V. White, "Collingwood and Toynbee: Transitions in English Historical Thought," *English Miscellany* 8 (1957), 147-178, at 177, 178, quoting Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1953), 231.

[29] Hayden V. White, "Religion, Culture and Western Civilization in Christopher Dawson's Idea of History," *English Miscellany* 9 (1958), 247-287. I discuss the origins of the term "metahistory" in Herman Paul, "Metahistory: Notes Towards a Genealogy," *Práticas da História* 1 (2015), 17-31.

technology was to preserve classic humanist notions of human freedom, dignity, and responsibility. If White was intrigued by how historical writing helped shape the moral and political imagination of human beings, this was at least partly because he himself sought to shape a future by "choosing a past."[30] So the more specific questions that guided White's work during much of the 1960s revolved around humanist understandings of the historian's task. What are the marks of a humanist historian? And how would a humanist history of Europe look like? While the first question was central to White's essays on R. G. Collingwood and his Italian source of inspiration, Benedetto Croce,[31] the second one resulted in a two-volume textbook on liberal humanism in Europe, co-authored with Willson H. Coates and J. Salwyn Schapiro.[32] (Arguably, this humanist White from the 1950s and 1960s is the one most congenial to David Harlan's advocacy of a "moral turn" in historical thinking and writing.)[33]

In the meantime, Carl Hempel and his critics had begun to cross swords over issues of historical explanation: What are the conditions that a scientifically respectable explanation of past events has to satisfy? Because White is not often remembered as a contributor to this debate – in the 1960s, he ironically dissociated himself from what he called "the Popper/Hempel/Dray/Donagan/Mandelbaum/Gallie, etc., etc., controversy"[34] – it is worth

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[30] Hayden V. White, "What is a Historical System?" in *Biology, History, and Natural Philosophy*, ed. Allen D. Breck and Wolfgang Yourgrau (New York: Plenum Press, 1972), 233-242.

[31] White's most eloquent tribute to Croce as a humanist philosopher of history was "The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History," *The Journal of Modern History* 35 (1963), 109-124. Collingwood figured prominently in "Collingwood and Toynbee" (1957) and in "Religion, Culture and Western Civilization" (1958).

[32] Willson H. Coates, Hayden V. White, and J. Salwyn Schapiro, *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); Willson H. Coates and Hayden V. White, *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, vol. 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

[33] The term is borrowed from George Cotkin, "History's Moral Turn," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008), 293-315.

[34] Hayden V. White, review of *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* by Morton White, *The Journal of Modern History* 38 (1966), 422-423, at 422.

recalling that his own attempts at modelling historical writing in the early 1970s took the explanatory aspirations of historical inquiry quite seriously. Initially, White presented his focus on historians' narrative prose as merely *supplementary* to theories of historical explanation. Increasingly, however, "explanation" acquired broader connotations and began to encompass, not only the use of deductive-nomological models, but all sorts of ways of specifying relationships between historical phenomena.[35] By 1973, White had come to treat "explanation" as an overarching category within which he distinguished "(1) explanation by emplotment, (2) explanation by argument, and (3) explanation by ideological implication."[36] As these words aptly demonstrate, *Metahistory* did not intend to replace "explanation" by "narrative." Instead, the book argued that historians explain, among other things, *through* narrative means. (This, then, is the White to whom philosophers of history interested in narrative explanation can relate most productively.)[37]

Despite the formalist stance adopted in the introduction, the humanist White of the 1960s was anything but absent from the pages of *Metahistory*. As especially the Ranke and Croce chapters made clear, White's hope was that his emphasis on the diversity of modes of doing history available in the Western tradition would encourage readers to exchange Ranke-style professionalism for a humanist alternative able to celebrate human freedom, autonomy, and responsibility. "The aged Kant was right, in short: we are free to conceive 'history' as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will."[38] This voluntarism helps explain why, later in the 1970s, White responded with dismay to Jacques Derrida, whose "absurdist" criticism he perceived as an antipode to "normal," humanistic criticism. Although, in Dominick LaCapra's often quoted phrasing, Derrida articulated "things that are

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[35] Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History* 4 (1973), 281-314, esp. 298.

[36] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.

[37] E.g., Paul A. Roth, "Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography," *History of the Human Sciences* 5 (1992), 17-35; "Hayden White in Philosophical Perspective," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 44 (2014), 102-111.

[38] White, *Metahistory*, 433. Because of this, Novick aptly characterizes White as "historiography's philosopher of freedom" (*That Noble Dream*, 601).

'inside' White himself,"[39] White rejected a destabilizing of cultural hierarchies that he perceived as "fetishizing" language and "hypostatizing" criticism instead of fostering moral responsibility.[40] (This is the White with whom Ethan Kleinberg engages in his advocacy for a "deconstructive approach to the past.")[41]

And so one could go on, with *The Content of the Form*, for instance. Drawing on themes introduced in the early 1970s, including especially the "pre-generic plot structures" and "archetypical story-forms" borrowed from Northrop Frye,[42] the essays collected in this volume examined not only how different modes of emplotment produce different forms of historical imagination, but also, more fundamentally, how narrative discourse *as such* serves as a means for endowing reality with meaning. White's leading question in the early 1980s was: How does narrative discourse enable human beings to maintain "an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives" – and what happens when this "unreality" becomes apparent, when lived reality can no longer be captured in story form, or when culturally sanctioned narratives are exposed as impositions of form upon a reality that has no meaning in itself?[43] (It is this "constructivist" element in White's reflections on narrative that Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen singles out for discussion in his *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*.)[44]

If one would aim for completeness, one might discuss White's forays into "modernist events," "intransitive writing," witness literature, trauma, the sublime, and the "practical

[39] Dominick LaCapra, review of *Tropics of Discourse* by Hayden White, *Modern Language Notes* 93 (1978), 1037-1043, at 1041.

[40] Hayden White, "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory," *Contemporary Literature* 17 (1976), 378-403, at 400, 398.

[41] Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, 15-18.

[42] White, "Interpretation in History," 294; *Metahistory*, 7-11.

[43] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), x.

[44] Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 37-44.

past," such as documented in *Figural Realism* and *The Practical Past*.[45] Yet I trust the examples offered so far make sufficiently clear that, in Isaiah Berlin's terminology, White was more of a fox than a hedgehog – not a man of one single question or project, but a thinker able to respond creatively to a host of different ideas.[46] As Robert Doran puts it, White had an unmatched ability to engage "with a multitude of seemingly heterogeneous discourse genres: nineteenth-century German philosophy, existentialism, historicism, French structuralist and poststructuralist thought, Anglo-American philosophy, Italian philosophy, literary history, literary theory, rhetoric, hermeneutics, and aesthetics – a supreme example of intellectual eclecticism that has become increasingly rare in an age of specialization."[47] It is this intellectual versatility, paired with White's broad interest in various "questions about history," that best explains why philosophers of history as diverse as Harlan, Kuukkanen, and Kleinberg can draw on White or even claim to continue in his footsteps.

Criticism from all sides

This is only one part of the story, however. Another factor that helps explains White's hub-like position in the network called philosophy of history is the challenge that his work poses to almost all types of research done within the field. This amounts to more than saying that White loved to be polemical, both in teaching and writing, and let no occasion pass to challenge an audience. (As William Dray sighed in responding to White at a philosophy of history conference in 1969: "Professor White has trailed his coat so provocatively in so many directions that it is hard to know where to begin a response to his paper.")[48] More important

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[45] Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

[46] Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1953).

[47] Robert Doran, "Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History," in *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1-33, at 2.

[48] W. H. Dray, "The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History: A Reply to Hayden White," *Clio* 3, no. 1 (1973), 55-76, at 55. On White's polemical teaching style, see Sidney M. Bolkosky, "From the Book to the Survivor," in *Working to Make a Difference: The Personal*

is that his work poses all sorts of challenges to that of colleagues in the field, sometimes by offering direct criticism – think of White's aforementioned attack on "the absurdist moment in contemporary literary theory" – but more frequently by adopting stances or advocating arguments that others perceive as one-sided, misguided, or so untenable as to call for disapproval. (In Dray's words again: "I shall question the view of historical enquiry which emerges most naturally out of his discussion, and I shall express doubt that it is one that White himself would really be willing to live with.")[49] White was, and is, a relevant conversation partner also because his work is perceived as crying out for criticism.

Frank Ankersmit, for instance, has repeatedly argued that White's work is not nearly philosophical enough. Although the tropes introduced in *Metahistory* have epistemological relevance to the extent that they organize historians' perception of the world, just as Kant's categories of understanding organize human perception of the world, Ankersmit laments that White makes hardly any attempt at explaining or justifying his fourfold pattern of tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony). Ankersmit thus reads White from an epistemological point of view, sees something promising in his tropology, and then regrets that White's philosophical aspirations are so underdeveloped that he does not even try to offer a transcendental deduction of the tropes – leaving it to others, such as Ankersmit himself, to venture upon such a project.[50]

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and Pedagogical Stories of Holocaust Educators Across the Globe, ed. Samuel Totten (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003), 1-30, at 2; Hans Kellner, "Introduction," in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1-8, at 2; and, more generally, Ewa Domańska, "Hayden White, Academic Teacher," ibid., 332-347.

[49] Dray, "Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," 55.

[50] Frank Ankersmit, "White's 'New Neo-Kantianism': Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics," in Ankersmit, Domańska, and Kellner, *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, 34-53; "A Plea for a Cognitivist Approach to White's Tropology," in Doran, *Philosophy of History*, 47-65. On Ankersmit's complex relation to White, see Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen, "A Retrieval of Historicism: Frank Ankersmit's Philosophy of History and Politics," *History and Theory* 57 (2018), 33-55, esp. 41-43.

If we zoom in on specific philosophical traditions, such as hermeneutics and realism, similar degrees of dissatisfaction can be observed. Although Paul Ricoeur saw much of value in White's tropology, he feared that White's emphasis on the historians' prefiguration of the historical field ignores the extent to which historical interpretation is a dialogical activity in which both historians and their sources play productive roles. In addition, by not sufficiently acknowledging that these sources set constraints to what historians can say about the past, White runs a risk of erasing genre boundaries between history and fiction.[51] Likewise, David Carr worries that White cares too little about the representational aspirations of historical discourse, thereby fueling skepticism as to the possibility to distinguish meaningfully between historical and fictional narrative.[52] For hermeneuticists, in short, White is not hermeneutic enough: he fails to see that historical interpretation is always a back-and-forth movement between subject and object.[53]

In similar vein, "internal realists" such as Chris Lorenz argue that White downplays the importance of rational debate among historians. While agreeing with White that historians often draw on different metahistorical repertoires, Lorenz does not think that this warrants the conclusion that "the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological."[54] For even if historians cannot prove their version right, they can and, in fact, often *do* assess the relative plausibility of their accounts against broadly accepted standards of accuracy, consistency, precision, and comprehensiveness. In Lorenz's reading, White cannot account for this evaluative practice as long as he operates within a binary opposition between epistemology, on the one hand, and ethics and aesthetics, on the other. Why would

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[51] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 3 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), 224.

[52] David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 11-12.

[53] I explore the complicated relationship between hermeneutic philosophy and White-inspired philosophy of history in Herman Paul, "Gadamer and Philosophy of History: A Conversation Waiting to Begin," in *Hermeneutics and the Humanities: Dialogues with Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Madeleine Kasten, Herman Paul, and Rico Sneller (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), 151-172.

[54] White, *Metahistory*, xii.

historians compare their accounts at length if their disagreements would merely reflect divergent moral or aesthetic preferences? For Lorenz, therefore, the problem with White is that he fails to explain what historians are actually doing.[55]

Although I mention this criticism as a second factor contributing to White's central position in the field – his work is provocative enough to elicit response from all sides – I should add that this criticism sometimes interferes with a kind of "meta-criticism" that is not directed against White as such, but rather against the perceived prominence of a trend or paradigm that his name has come to represent. If White had not been so influential as to cause almost the entire field to "[drift] away from philosophy of science and social science in the direction of philosophy of art, literature, rhetoric, and aesthetics," as Lorenz put it, subjecting his work to critical scrutiny would have been less important.[56] Likewise, if Eelco Runia dissociates himself from White, he does so primarily because of a one-sided influence that has caused philosophy of history to focus almost exclusively on the first half of White's program of establishing "what is fictive in all putatively realistic representations of the world and what is realistic in all manifestly fictive ones."[57] Similarly, in Runia's reading, it is not White, but "Whitean representationalism" that has been responsible for directing almost all attention to issues of meaning, thereby ignoring things like the feeling of "being in touch" with the past that Runia describes in terms of "presence."[58] Criticism of White has therefore not only *contributed* to his hub-like position in the field, but sometimes also is a response *elicited* by the perceived dominance of his work.[59]

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[55] Chris Lorenz, "Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for 'Internal Realism,'" *History and Theory* 33 (1994), 297-327; "Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the 'Metaphorical Turn,'" *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 309-329.

[56] Lorenz, "Can Histories Be True?" 310.

[57] Eelco Runia, "Inventing the New from the Old: From White's 'Tropics' to Vico's 'Topics,'" *Rethinking History* 14 (2010), 229-241, at 240, quoting Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," *Clio* 3 (1974), 277-303, at 287 and echoing Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 3, 224 n. 1.

[58] Eelco Runia, "Presence," *History and Theory* 45 (2006), 1-29, at 4.

[59] On the reception of White's work, see also Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White," *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 143-161; Wolfgang Weber, "Hayden White in

Conclusion

All this confirms that White occupies a special position in the network called philosophy of history. Although there are other figures who enjoy positions of relative prominence in the field, none of them is quoted as often and criticized as heavily as the author of *Metahistory*. More specifically, nobody is as routinely invoked as representing the "state of the art" in philosophy of history as the man who declared of himself that he was not a philosopher of history.[60] In a network that is only loosely connected, due to the variety of questions about history that philosophers of history pursue, White is therefore an especially well-connected node, who as such plays an integrative role within the network. Friends and foes alike position themselves vis-à-vis White.

In this context, however, "White" does not primarily serve as a proper name, referring to a man of flesh and blood, but as shorthand for a position, trend, or approach that is highly charged with symbolic meaning. Debate about White is primarily a debate about a contested oeuvre and its (supposed) influence, even to such an extent that attempts at charting White's development as a philosopher of history sometimes face the criticism of readers for whom White is chiefly responsible for "mischaracterizations that fostered polarization in the historical discipline and reinforced prejudiced understandings of historiography in the wider culture."[61] In such contexts, the author disappears behind the

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Deutschland," *Storia della Storiografia* 25 (1994), 89-102; and Philippe Carrard, "Hayden White and/in France: Receptions, Translations, Questions," *Rethinking History* (2018), advanced access at https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2018.1464745.

[60] Hayden White, "Comment," in Doran, *Philosophy of History*, 209-213, at 209. It is important to keep in mind that White did never seek the central position that his work now occupies in the network called philosophy of history. White was a *bricoleur* who enjoyed playing the role of *provocateur* and felt most at home in marginal spaces that allowed for dreaming, experimenting, and criticizing established practices. White's reception history is therefore not devoid of irony (Paul, *Hayden White*, 7-8).

[61] David D. Roberts, "Possibilities in 'a Thoroughly Historical World': Missing Hayden White's Missed Connections," *History and Theory* 52 (2013), 265-277, at 265.

work. The central position that White occupies in the network called philosophy of history is one that has become increasingly independent of the author himself.

This brings us back to the question with which I started: Does the death of White mark the end of an era in philosophy of history? There is no doubt that White's inspiring personality is and will be truly missed by all those who feel privileged to have been among his students, colleagues, or friends. Yet it is equally sure that his work occupies a rather unique position as a shared point of reference for philosophers of history engaged in the most diverse of projects. As long as philosophers of history maintain the habit of locating their work within the field at large, it seems plausible that they will keep positioning themselves vis-à-vis White's legacy.