University Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations

University Studies

9-11-2021

Blind Spots and Bottlenecks for Philosophy of History

Bennett B. Gilbert

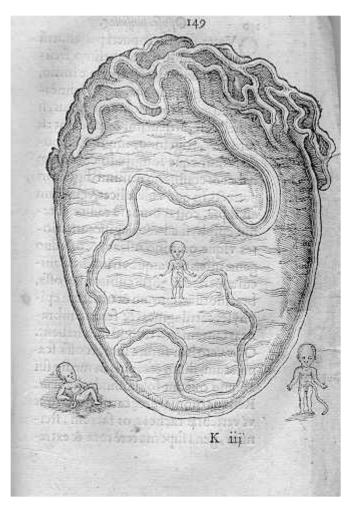*Portland State University*, bbg2@pdx.edu

Citation Details

#ENGLISH / THEORY OF HISTORY POLYPHONIC

Blind Spots and Bottlenecks for Philosophy of History

BY BENNETT GILBERT · PUBLISHED 09/11/2021 · UPDATED 08/11/2021

Severin Pineau, In Chirurgia Mag. I. Opusculum Physiologum & Anatomicum (Paris, Étienne

Realist history does not meet many human needs. History needs a great deal more philosophy, but of what kind?

In his essay on this blog, „Reflections on Theory of History Polyphonic," Ethan Kleinberg suggests that historians often use theory to block change in their work rather than to advance it. One way they do this, he points out, is to include a little theory in order to inoculate themselves against greater and more fundamental challenges. They give or take a blow, and then hoist up their shield, thereby avoiding philosophy and miniaturizing it into „historical theory."

I cannot quantify the resistance that professional historians have shown toward changes of the sort Kleinberg argues for, nor can I add much to a psychology of such defensive

Prévosteau, 1597).

historiography. Some historians just avoid philosophy because it's neither their job, nor their skill, nor their disposition; some have superseding intellectual or moral commitments. Many people from all walks of life simply do not want to be discomfited. As a disciplined young engineer, John Muir was building a clock when a spring in the mechanism popped him in the eyes, temporarily blinding him. While lying in a darkened room for months awaiting the return of his sight, a new vision opened up before him, and he subsequently became one of the great wanderers in American life. Some are clockmakers, some wanderers; most of us try to do our duty while leaving ourselves a certain measure of freedom. Yet good historians are not drudges, as they are highly aware of the complex constitution of any given state of human affairs.

I am more interested in why philosophy avoids history. Is it because of what philosophers do and the way they do it? And what is it that philosophers do that allows some historians to use slivers of conceptual thought to blot out the rest? The almost-forgotten philosopher of history, John W. Miller, said, „To view history philosophically is to consider it as a constitutional mode of experience"[1] It seems to me that the dereliction of the vast existential import of the historical is a great loss. I would like to explore this by commenting on two of Kleinberg's propositions, in order to argue that understanding history non-realistically provides conceptual strength and ethical values for moral and general philosophy, as well as for human understanding.

1. Ontological blind spots

„II.5. Even perspectivalism adheres to the monophonic regime because it is a proliferation of sanctioned and restrictive choices or points of view. It is talking over rather than listening."

In a recent essay, Thomas Mercier went straight to the heart of this problem:

In other words, claiming to sidestep all the problems related to ‚language' and ‚epistemology' by recurring to ‚ontology' can only result in absolutizing a certain ‚language' and ‚epistemology', thus blinding ontology to its own epistemic or linguistic (performative) violence. It cannot think its own violence, that is, the performative violence of ontological sovereignty, wherein ontology, epistemology and politics become indistinguishable…. Pluralizing presence merely confirms the metaphysics of presence.[2]

Each domain in pluralist ontology, as now generally developed, must hold its own against the others in order to ensure that it is not blurred into someone else's monism or dualism. Each one is a monad whose integrity limits connectedness. As a result,

and despite the aims of its advocates, pluralism often stands in opposition to relationality. This problem is especially severe in object-oriented ontology.

As a pluralist ontology, perspectivalism in empirical research uses non-perspectival rationalism in the construction of each perspective. It aims to create pictures that are round and complete through a neutral standard of verification. But the presuppositions of verification—even in the sciences—are undergoing epochal change. The historical perspective required by understanding thus remains a stretch for much of philosophy, even in philosophy of science.

2. Analytical bottlenecks

„III.4. Currently, the field of philosophy of history is occupied by very few practicing philosophers aligned for the most part with the analytic tradition. Their concerns seem to be more with understanding the rules or laws regarding what historians do rather than what history or the past is. Its relation to history and historians is similar to the one Husserl identified between the philosophy of science and the practices of scientists."

Anglo-American analytic philosophy has a complicated relationship with moral and political philosophy, but it is safe to say that analytic philosophy avoids prescriptive claims in these areas. Analytic philosophers also avoid politics and ethics in conceptions of their work. There is of course analytic work in ethics, but one of its chief characteristics is rigid avoidance of diachronesis and historical understanding more generally.

This is partly due to how the analytic tradition approaches the problem of time. It has produced a large body of theories on this topic that essentially cannot be applied to questions of historical and social change. However, philosophy has a body of phenomenological and existential thinking on time, which began with Brentano and was expanded by Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others. These thinkers realized from the start that time shows us relationality[3] This anti-realism and anti-objectivism was at least as important in the process of philosophy beginning with Bergson's basic concept, because it eventually formed a building block of non-reductive scientific theory as well as of philosophy and history of science. In addition, there is a vast body of reflection on temporality, which is one of the great streams of modern culture. Still, only a few academic philosophers of history have engaged with this.

3. The problem: realists reify

Ontological realism still holds out in many quarters of „historical theory" against theory or philosophy of history, to use Kleinberg's terms for the scientistic position and the

many kinds of philosophy I mentioned in the previous paragraph. We can put the problem in the following manner: the realists see history and the human sciences as requiring a scientific method (as currently conceived in the dominant paradigm of science), whereas anti-realists reject this as alienated. The former position is—or seems to be—clear, precise, and stable. The latter is multiform because it can go in many directions, from mystical to Marxist, thereby arousing the realist's suspicion. Leaving aside the difficulties of the correspondence theories of truth on which realism typically relies, the problem of most concern here is that it will not recognize any experience of—or relation to—history that is not the object of empirical cognition, the sort of thing that the word historicity was originally invented to designate.[4]

This is a problem because the position of the detached observer of objects of cognition does not recognize herself as a participant in history. Yet we are both the subjects and objects of history. We cannot have any ethical notion of history that replaces our responsibility for making history with our cognition of history, nor for making the world with our bare knowledge of history. By not taking any of the available routes out of the subject-object binary, realist historiography takes human behavior and society to be directed by nature. The realist reifies nature, so that all human arrangements are under the control of "nature." This casts both the past and nature as a kind of "reality" that suppresses its unique affective, ontological, and moral features. It detaches our actions from our persons; this is good neither for historians nor humankind.

4. Opening up history improves us

Realist ontology takes the desire of rational wholes that is part of our mental equipment past the point of truth or utility. Realist historiography tends to dislike the wandering story because it seeks the causal and linear mechanisms in the stories it tells. It prefers clockmakers to wanderers, yet what we need is more wandering and more interdisciplinarity.

Can the ground of normativity for the values we apply to facts be natural in the way that facts are purported to be natural? If not, then we must admit into the practice of history—and of the sciences and our lives in general—non-realist types of knowledge or modes of reasoning that are social, political, and moral. Facts and values are always mixed together because we have no God-like method of (or standpoint for) verification. Every system of verification is a social product, agreed upon for pragmatic reasons that can and will change. Should we not hold that non-realism has the resources to support a combination of factual and moral claims that realism does not possess?

Another dimension should supersede this ontological strife. That dimension is the moral, which requires a different discourse, one that is by necessity strongly marked by non-realist elements, including the whole range of our moral dispositions and political theories excluded by ontologically realist history and philosophy. It is precisely because scientific and all other views must be historicized that real philosophy of history can expand moral philosophy and include it within historiography.

This problem recounts the story of a century of philosophy. History should be at the center of it. Kleinberg is encouraging us to continue pursuing the path of intellectual and social progress, from which realism would hold us back.

Bennett Gilbert is an Assistant Professor of University Studies at Portland State University (Portland, Oregon), where he teaches philosophy and history. He is the author of *A Personalist Philosophy of History* (Routledge, 2019) and of various scholarly and general papers. His core interest is grounding moral philosophy in our experience of time in order to understand humankind in the present and future.

E-Mail: bbg2@pdx.edu

https://pdx.academia.edu/BennettGilbert

---

1. John W. Miller, *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms*, New York: Norton, 1981, p. 182. [↩]

2. Thomas Mercier, „Uses of ‚the Pluriverse': Cosmos, Interrupted—or the Others of Humanities," *Ostium* vol. 15, 2019, p. 7 and 10. [↩]

3. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: an introduction to phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973, sec. 18. [↩]

4. I have explored this topic in Bennett Gilbert, „Repairing Historicity," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 16, 2020, p. 54–75, http://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/881/1523. [↩]