

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE:
EXPLORATIONS IN ANCIENT AND MODERN
PHILOSOPHIES OF HISTORY

Aaron Turner, ed., *Reconciling Ancient and Modern Philosophies of History*. Trends in Classics: Pathways of Reception, 3. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020. Pp. vi + 372. Hardback, €104.95/\$120.99/£96.00. ISBN 978-3-110-62710-7.

In his notes for the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Walter Benjamin argues against interpretations of Friedrich Schlegel’s notion of the historian as a ‘prophet facing backward’, which, he says, are predicated on the idea of transposition into the viewpoint of historical actors, from which one ‘prophesies’ a future that has already become past.¹ Benjamin offers a more radical reading, which intertwines the historian’s task with questions about historical time. According to Ian Balfour, Benjamin finds in Schlegel an alternative temporality, indicating that the historian not only changes the past by the act of looking at it, but also achieves a seer’s perspective on her own present by turning her back from it. As with Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, cited in his ‘Theses’, the historian, he writes, seeks to envision her time by way of a departing gaze, whose turn away makes visible ‘that which for one’s own time is far more clearly present than it is to the contemporaries who “keep pace with it”’.²

Aaron Turner’s erudite and wide-ranging volume succeeds at the complex task of raising new questions about history by actualising this temporality of departure towards Greek and Roman historical thought and historiographical practice. The book engages with ‘the genesis of historical thought in antiquity’ (3), in order to formulate an original contribution to ongoing debates in historical theory about neo-positivist evocations of totalising or universalisable modalities of the historical (i.e., in the form of historical laws) on the one hand, and on the other hand neo-historicist paradigms, whose dependence on the sources takes the form of narrative representation of the particular, including the perspectives of historical actors. Its aim, however, is not to engage directly

¹ W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.3, edd. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, 1974) 1235, 1237–8.

² I. Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford, Calif., 2002) 15–17.

with these debates, but rather, as Turner writes, ‘to prepare the way for a reevaluation of the essence of history through a reconsideration of the genesis of historical thought in antiquity’ (3). The authors’ diverse approaches are brought together by their shared orientation towards a horizon of ancient historical thinking that they allow to bear on conceptual conflicts and methodological aporias with which contemporary historians have struggled every time questions of the specificity of historical consciousness and the grounding of historiography have been raised.

This thorough and reflexive enquiry follows a threefold structure. Part I, entitled ‘Awakening Ancient Historical Consciousness’, asks what constituted historical consciousness for ancient writers, but also what terms may allow us to discuss its genesis, modes of expression, and conditions of configuration. François Hartog traces the emergence of historical consciousness as discursive spatiality, which not only involved the demarcation of the ‘historian’s territory’, but also a dialogic interplay, across time, between ‘insiders’, from Herodotus and Thucydides to Xenophon and Polybius, and ‘outsiders’, from Aristotle through Cicero and Quintilian to Lucian. According to Hartog, reinhabiting the places marked by these debates invites us to rethink the positioning of history in the order of knowledge and of the historian in public space. In this respect, delving into ancient historiographical self-positing may contribute to the reconceptualisation of the tension, in contemporary theory, between the quest for the historian on the one hand, to ‘escape the position of the simple storyteller’ supplying ‘examples to decision makers’, and, on the other, the need to maintain history’s specificity within the domain of practical moral philosophy, epideictic discourse, or rhetoric.

Laurence Paul Hemming traces the emergence of ancient historical consciousness in the intersection of the historical and the political, through a reading of Aristotle’s *Politics* informed by Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, but also by a striking detour into European modernity’s recognition of itself as historical, through its historiographical engagement with antiquity. This exploration, shaped by the voices of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Hölderlin, links the foundation of ancient historical consciousness to the space of the polis and the configuration of the human being as ‘speaking being’, wherein speech lets what is ‘here’ be here: it engages the *politēs* and the *polis* in a process of bringing into presence. Within this space, the essence of the political entails that we ‘cannot decide in advance the way in which everything appears, either historically, or in the future’, but nonetheless foregrounds the governing of this unknowable domain by *dikē* in the sense of ‘lifting to the highest’ of us all, in Hölderlin’s terms (39). This temporal realm of undecidability, Hemming argues, offers a corrective alternative to modern and contemporary considerations of the political as a region that can be planned in advance to secure it, because, we presume, ‘it is something we already understand’ (26).

Duncan Kennedy's erudite and timely essay offers an invaluable contribution to the history of historical ontology, translating fluently and critically between ancient and modern concepts and theories. Building on Bruno Latour's ontological reflection, but also on debates about 'being' and 'presence' formulated by writers such as Ian Hacking, Thomas Nail, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Raymond Tallis, and Rodolphe Gasché, the essay explores the emergence of historical thinking in Greece through what Kennedy calls 'historical ontology in action': the configuration of historical consciousness by Herodotus, Plato, and Plato's Socrates as interwoven into distinctively ontological modes of thinking, indicating the emergence, as 'presences' and 'things', of 'history', 'philosophy', 'theory', and 'the study of being'. This innovative survey constitutes a thorough investigation of ancient historical and ontological thought through the lens of modern categories, but also a crucial theoretical quest not to treat the subsequent articulation of these categories as necessary or inevitable, thus challenging the universalist pretensions of the modern paradigm.

Alexander Meeus also deploys a comparative perspective in order to rethink the notion of truth in ancient historical thought in terms that resist developmental and idealistic assumptions of the epistemological authority of the present over the past. Drawing on recent debates about historiographical 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', the chapter systematically questions prejudices about ancient categories of historical truth, which often enter our thinking, even when we seek to write against them. The chapter aims to study ancient notions of historical knowledge as formulated 'through the intellectual activity of a thinking subject'. Yet this evocation of subjectivity remains centred on truth, which takes the form of epistemic virtues: impartiality, truthfulness, mimesis in the sense of mirroring reality, accuracy, thoroughness, industriousness, careful and logical reasoning, experience, and traditionalism. The importance that ancient historians attached to the 'historian's character' (116), according to Meeus, points to the inevitable subjectivity involved in the dual process of creating and transmitting historical knowledge as well as the responsibilities and skills required to achieve the truth in such a subjective enterprise.

Finally in this section, Jonas Grethlein engages with a key dilemma of modern historicism, between the universal and the particular, by returning to antiquity. The chapter configures this opposition by exploring Droysen's *Historik* as a case of historicist emphasis on individuality, which it juxtaposes with a positivist emphasis in Anglophone scholarship on the notion of historical laws and what is general in history. Grethlein traces the prehistory of this dichotomy in antiquity, and particularly in Aristotle's *Poetics* and Thucydides' *History*, which offer the possibility of reconceptualising the terms of the division from new perspectives. Grethlein's nuanced analysis illustrates how ancient narrative flagged the universal within the particular, but also

unfolded forms of ‘paradigmatic reasoning’ wherein a fruitful link between the two categories was created.

The book’s second part, ‘Transcending Representation and Reality’, focuses on the distinction between history as representation of the past and the past itself. Aske Damtoft Poulsen analyses this duality in the domain of historical practice, taking as a case study Tacitus’ *Annals*. The essay utilises Grethlein’s categories of teleology and experientiality³ to approach the historical narrative as a field of tension, wherein devices such as ‘side-shadowing’ interrupt the historian’s teleological perspective. The force of side-shadowing in the *Annals* lies in the space of conflict between teleology and experientiality. It is precisely this tension, Poulsen argues, that allows us to rethink historiography’s role in the restoration of ‘the possibility of (other) possibilities’: alternative futures and temporalities, implied for instance by the acknowledgement that choices or chance were involved in the realisation of particular futures.

In Katherine Clarke’s incisive argumentation, the ‘gap’ between historical representation and the past becomes the focus of critical reflection. This is explored by way of returning to concepts of the historical conveyed implicitly by ancient historiographical practice. Focusing on Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Tacitus, and others, the essay aims at challenging the contrasting model of historiographical antiquity and modernity. This is attempted by highlighting the self-conscious ambiguity of the ancient historiographical enterprise, which is concerned at once with the past and the literary attempts at representing the past. According to Clarke this ambiguity may sustain a theoretical intervention into present categories serving to reinforce the ongoing and self-contesting continuum of historiography. The gap itself stresses the imperfect nature of historiography as a substitute for reality but also—and crucially—the interpretative opportunity opened up by this lack of closure: a condition of relationality and non-identity between historiographical representation and the ‘actual’ past, which ancient historians emphasised through the plural modalities of mimetic historiographical narratives.

Inger N. I. Kuin approaches the same gap from the viewpoint of the historian’s autobiographical elements, which she traces in Plutarch’s self-intrusions into the narrative. This autobiographical voice becomes significant not only for reassessing Plutarch’s methodology, but also in terms of contemporary debates about the relationship between historiography and memory studies. According to Kuin’s insightful argument, the ancient legacy of the historian’s voice challenges the positing of history as theory and analysis, created by outsiders for a universal audience and with a focus on development and change, in opposition to memory’s belonging to in-groups and emphasis

³ J. Grethlein, *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography: Futures Past from Herodotus to Augustine* (Cambridge, 2013)

on continuity between past and present. The existence of quasi autobiographical passages in Plutarch show how memory and history are blended in his biographical and historiographical project.

Ahuvia Kahane's chapter engages with the division between historiographical discourse and the past by focusing on the logos of democracy as formulated by Thucydides in Pericles' Funeral Oration. Drawing on recent interpretations of the Oration by A. W. Gomme, Josiah Ober, Nicole Loraux, Paul Cartledge, and Jacques Rancière, Kahane argues that Pericles accurately represents Athenian democracy in its ambiguous and contradictory, but necessary, state of tension between private and public, governable and ungovernable. The essay points to crucial 'isomorphic' principles of politics, philological understanding, and philosophy, which foreground an immanent reading of the historiographical text as vital to understanding the historicity of Athenian democracy, beyond the need to efface this reading under some external substance, set outside the interpretive focus on the text itself.

The volume's third part, 'Antiquating Modernity', examines aspects of the reception of ancient philosophies of history within modern modes of historical understanding, with a view to opening new perspectives for philosophy of history. Salvatore Tufano approaches Walter Benjamin's historical thought as profoundly immersed in the reading of ancient writers, and particularly Herodotus and Thucydides. This innovative reading offers a rich overview of Benjamin's interest in antiquity, which broadens the field of classical reception by requiring us to rethink the dialogue between antiquity and critical modernity. Moreover, Tufano aptly argues that it is in the context of this dialogue that we need to understand Benjamin's own philosophy of history and complex understanding of historical and political time.

Jerry Toner examines the relationship between historical past and representation by way of a comparison between Augustus' action, reported in his *Res Gestae*, and Theodor Adorno's philosophy of history and politics. According to the essay, Augustus' praxis can be recognised to have anticipated some of the theories proposed by Adorno, and especially those centred on his understanding of mimesis, class, and the ambiguity of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, Toner argues, we may formulate a new reading and appreciation of Augustus' historical praxis by means of Adorno's thinking, particularly the notion of mimetic art as semi-autonomous from the social world and capable of imagining worlds that are different from the status quo.

David Carr's chapter aims at challenging the distinction between representation and experience of history in the field of phenomenology, that is, not by asking what history is in itself or how we know it, but 'how it is given, how it enters our lives, how we encounter it directly' (318). From this perspective, he approaches one's relation to tradition and the past as grounded in a temporality that is not so much about something we know, but something that is already part of us. Historiographical teleology enters this scheme as the

‘transcendental’ articulation of the temporality of our experience of the world which is, nonetheless, to be recognised as illusionary.

For Aaron Turner the question of what history *is* becomes a dominant feature of western thought since at least antiquity, rather than the outcome of a modern historical consciousness associated with the Enlightenment’s comprehension of an epochal shift away from antiquity and the Middle Ages. Turner traces the philosophical opposition to a modern teleological view of the historical to Giambattista Vico and brings it to challenge the self-proclaimed notion of ‘progress’ of historical thought in its modern scientific sense. An alternative to this developmental model is further elaborated by contextualising Thucydides in the present: a reading of the ancient historian that seeks to ‘expose the inherent flaws of the modern philosophy of history’ and ask ‘to what extent can a study of ancient historiography on its own terms’ reorientate ‘modern historical thinkers toward more fruitful avenues of enquiry.’ (344).

In the final chapter, Neville Morley returns to Thucydides through a fresh reading of Nietzsche’s second ‘Untimely Meditation’ from 1874, ‘On the uses and disadvantages of history for life’. This work explores a dialogue that invites us to rethink key aspects of Thucydides’ work through Nietzsche’s categories, and especially those used to address the historiography of the modern age. In this respect Neville asks to what extent Thucydidean historiography represents the different categories of historical thinking identified in Nietzsche’s essay. This self-conscious anachronism further raises key theoretical questions about discontinuity and untimeliness as the basis of historical understanding, but also about the interpretation of ancient historians in terms of a ‘historiography of the future’ that challenges conceptual certainties about historical consciousness and the essence of history.

As a whole, this is a remarkable and transdisciplinary book that moves beyond traditional attempts to highlight either the wisdom of ancient historical thought, or its diachronic relevance to questions faced by modern and contemporary historians and theorists. Turner himself frames this volume as an attempt ‘at preparing the way for a comprehensive rehabilitation of ancient historical thought within the ongoing discourses that continue to plunge history deeper and deeper into an identity crisis that is already over four hundred years old’ (8). In this sense, the idea of reconciling ancient and modern philosophies of history is construed as an act of recovering an ‘originary understanding of historicity that has been lost through history’s constant approximation to other disciplines’ (3).

In a volume that assembles an outstanding group of scholars across a range of disciplines, the dialogue among contributors pluralises its orientation by foregrounding potential theoretical openings, internal tensions, or self-contesting groundings. The question of the essence of history that is explored in the introduction and chapters does not receive a single answer. Rather,

Turner's open formulation of this question invites a remarkable range of conceptual and methodological approaches, which also reflect the diverse and ever-changing relationship between ancient and modern historiography. These include notions of the historical centred on awareness of time and temporal change; categories of distance from which this change may be identified; material, performative, and aesthetic parameters; the tension between experiential and teleological perspectives and their intersection; practices of investigation and transmission of knowledge; memory as a field of negotiating collective and subjective modalities of pastness; and processes of learning from the past in order to change the present, but also, conversely, the active role of the present in shaping the past in its plural historiographical forms.

Equally diverse is the methodological discussion about the ways in which we may think about the role of ancient historiography in current debates in the historical discipline. No historian or philosopher in the volume considers a return to ancient historians that would disregard the mediating routes through which the Greek and Roman historiographical legacies are already constituted by and constitutive of the modern present. Instead, most essays point explicitly to methodological principles that would make us critically aware of the ways in which the historian's gaze towards antiquity is already posited within a horizon of visibility, which it needs to challenge by questioning concepts and contexts which traditional classicism, positivism, and historicism associated with the 'ancient' Greek and Roman worlds.

This self-critical approach generates a fusion of historical, literary, and philosophical perspectives highlighting ancient and modern philosophies of history as a vital field of scholarly research. Above all, it generates questions about the very categories around which this field may be formulated. One may ask, for instance, how to think of the idea of 'awakening' historical consciousness in antiquity: that is, whether we may conceptualise historical consciousness as having an *archē*, as beginning and overarching principle, or as a plural and ungovernable field of discourse, knowledge, memory, or experience, expanding beyond the boundaries of the Greek and Roman pasts. Moreover, the modes of self-contestation arising from our confrontation with Greek and Roman historiography in this volume require us to ask further whether history's essence is inherently conflicting and ambiguous, and therefore lends itself to an anthropologically informed notion of historicity, broadening and exploding the identification of historiographical 'antiquity' with the Greek and Roman intellectual and cultural pasts. Finally, the concept of reconciling the 'ancient' and 'modern' philosophies of history, announced by the volume's title, need not be construed as inviting a cohabitation that inevitably suppresses the ethics and politics of exclusion and self-legitimation on which this encounter is grounded. Indeed, several chapters in the book point to a conflicting or even polemical turn from the present to the past that

may challenge both. In this sense, the idea of reconciliation may be linked to Paul Ricoeur's notion of language 'hospitality' taking form in and through forms of transtemporal translation, as a field that makes it possible to both listen to and speak with the past,⁴ to engage in a dialogue from the viewpoint of different languages defining the historical and construing the essences of history.

The value of this insightful volume seems to me to lie in advancing this dazzling conversation with ancient historians as an enterprise aiming in some way at returning our gaze to aspects of our present that may not be as visible to those 'who keep pace' with it. At the most immediate level this detouring gaze involves rethinking the discursive representation of the historical and its routes moving it back to the Greek and Roman past. But at a more fundamental, and also more crucial, level, it involves reconfiguring the visibility or invisibility of languages, subjectivities, communities, and actions associated with the genesis of historical consciousness and the evoked realms of historicity that may bear upon a globally entangled present and future.

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⁴ P. Ricoeur, *On Translation* (London and New York, 2006); translation by E. Brennan of *Sur la traduction* (Paris, 2004).