

The Subject of History: Historical Subjectivity and Historical Science

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Abstract

In this paper, I show how the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions and method converge on their treatment of the historical subject. Thinkers from both traditions converge on the following thesis: that subjectivity is shaped by a historical worldview. Each tradition provides independent grounds and methodological approaches which provide accounts of how these worldviews are shaped, and thus how essentially historical subjective experience is molded. In the second part of this paper I argue that both traditions, although offering helpful ways of understanding the way history shapes subjectivity, go too far in their epistemic claims for the superiority of subjective over positivist or academic history. They propose that the historicity of subjective experience is unexpressed and therefore inexpressible in positivist or academic history. I propose that although the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to historical subjectivity is both fruitful and valuable for understanding both history and human nature, it cannot and ought not replace academic or what I will call ‘critical’ history. By showing the importance of historicity, and the force of historical consciousness on our actions, philosophers of history in these traditions expose the epistemic and perhaps even ethical requirement to engage in a rigorous critical history, one which recognizes the importance of historical consciousness. Such critical history is necessary to move beyond the subjective horizon of history as experienced to understand how events shaped this historical horizon.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, Phenomenology. Historicity, weltanschauung, historical horizon, Carr, Dilthey, Mink, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty

The historian observes, even though his object is not there.¹

In the quotation above, Paul Ricoeur highlights the seeming paradox of historical investigation. We claim to investigate history objectively, scientifically, and empirically – but the past, the object itself, by necessity, no longer exists. In this paper, I will investigate a related but slightly different question. Rather than, ‘what or where is the object of history?’, I will ask, ‘what is the subject of history?’ I mean this in two senses: what is the importance of the human subject in history, and what is the subject and aim of the science of history. In order to answer these questions I will engage two philosophical traditions, hermeneutics and phenomenology, both of which shift the question of the ‘object’ of history to the ‘subject’.

Phenomenology and hermeneutics come together in understanding the world as interpreted by and through the subject. The aim of phenomenology, as articulated by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and David Carr, is to reinsert the subject as the center and source of objective knowledge. The aim of hermeneutics, specifically that of Dilthey, is to center knowledge and interpretation on the self-reflective subject who is the center of a meaningful historical nexus. Both traditions place the subject at the center of inquiry, and both agree on the importance of lived experience for understanding history. We will see that for an understanding of history, that is precisely where the subject belongs. In this paper I will work out this intersection between phenomenology and hermeneutics; I will show where they converge in their attempt to include the subjective and the subject in history, and their consequent calls for a new method and understanding of historical inquiry.

First, I will plot the development of the role of history in phenomenological theory, proposing that in the later work of Husserl, in Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and finally and most explicitly the work of David Carr, phenomenologists came to understand subjective experience as essentially historical. Carr, in his work *Time, Narrative and History*, develops this phenomenological historicism most fully. He uses Husserl’s notion of time to argue that we are essentially historical, and that our conceptions of the world and ourselves are constituted by our historicity. Without understanding the historicity of our experience, he argues, we can neither fully

¹ Paul Ricoeur. *History and Truth*. C.A. Kelbley (trans.). (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 23.

understand the world, nor properly understand ourselves. I will then show how Carr's phenomenological method converges with the hermeneutic approach of Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey, famous for his conception of *weltanschauung*, and the notion that subjectivity is shaped by a historical worldview, offers a deep and extended account of how these worldviews are shaped, and thus how this essentially historical subjective experience is molded.

Although this phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to historical subjectivity is both fruitful and valuable for understanding both history and human nature, both Carr and Dilthey make a further, and I will argue, unwarranted epistemic claim; they propose that the historicity of subjective experience is unexpressed and therefore inexpressible in positivist or academic history. Dilthey and Carr argue that positivist or academic history, by ignoring this historical subjective experience, have failed to understand the role history plays in our lives, and further have misunderstood human nature. So, they propose, since positivist science and academic historians have ignored this fact, that there is a priority to this subjective understanding of history. Dilthey even goes so far as to propose that the subjective and the objective understanding of history are different in kind, and argues for the superiority of the former.

I will show that if these theorists are correct that an historical narrative mediates our sense of the world and ourselves, this provides positivist or academic history with an essential role as critic of this pre-reflective narrative. Carr and Dilthey in particular offer great insight into the historical nature of human experience, but they misunderstand the valuable role to be played by positivist, 'objective', or academic history. I will argue that what they show is that objective history can be a valuable tool for critiquing and improving our pre-reflective historical consciousness. Finally, I propose that we can accept the essentially historical nature of human subjectivity, while still finding an important role for academic, or 'objective' history.

Phenomenology and History

The phenomenological method does not seem to be, at first glance, a particularly useful tool for understanding history or individuals as historical subjects. Phenomenology, particularly the phenomenology of the early

Husserl, appears to bracket, or put aside, historical concerns as it puts aside all particularistic aspects of phenomena in order to identify their essences. Husserl's method identifies essences – the timeless ideas and essences that transcend lived experience. History, as lived experience, appears to be exactly the sort of concern and subject matter that a phenomenologist would purposively ignore.

In “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man”, Merleau-Ponty identifies a major shift in Husserl's thinking about the relation between essence and existence. Whereas in his early work, Husserl aims to found phenomenology as a science of essences, he later recognizes the relation between existence or experience of the world and essences as interconnected and reciprocal. Merleau-Ponty sees this change in Husserl as analogous to a change in the human sciences that he thinks brings phenomenology and scientific practice closer together. Merleau-Ponty writes, “As his thinking developed, Husserl was led to link more and more what he had at first sharply separated – the possible and the actual, essence and existence. This movement corresponds to evolution of the human sciences, in so far as they are tending to free themselves from their scientistic and positivistic postulates which perhaps favored their beginnings but which now require their further development.”² The ‘positivistic postulates’ to which Merleau-Ponty refers are the methodological views that the proper objects of science are those things that are independently observable. Subjective experience, as necessarily private, is excluded from such inquiries, and thus placed outside the scope of science. Just as the phenomenology focused on essences seemed to exclude lived experience from its study of essences, so positivist science excluded subjectivity from its own inquiry – essentially, leaving human experience outside the realm of the comprehensible.

Merleau-Ponty proposes that Husserl moved from a position where essences were primary (though ontologically agnostic), to one where experience and essence were interrelated and only properly understood from a phenomenological point of view where the object of science was not objectified, but understood as experienced.

The lesson that Merleau-Ponty takes from Husserl's turn from essence to existence is that we are situated in the world, and that the foundations of

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, James M. Edie (trans.) “Phenomenology and the Human Sciences” in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 84–85.

our knowledge are particular, contingent, and influenced by where and when we are situated. This contingency should not lead us to deny the validity of our knowledge. Rather, contingent lived experience shapes our being and the objects of the world. If we don't include lived experience and subjective understanding of the world and our experiences among the 'furniture of the world', then we will fail to understand the 'world'.

We must understand how our lived situation impacts our thought. The project for Husserl, after *The Crisis of the Human Sciences*, is to find a method that does not rely solely on facts with no universal meaning, or on essences, unconnected to the world of life. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "It is a question of finding a method which will enable us to think at the same time of the externality which is the principle of the sciences of man, and of the internality which is the condition of philosophy, of the contingencies without which there is no situation, as well as of the rational certainty without which there is no knowledge."³ Thus, the method that we need is one that understands the interconnectedness of experience and meaning, of situated existence and transcendent truths through the subjective experience of the embodied subject in its situation.

Merleau-Ponty proposes existential phenomenology as just such a method. Existential phenomenology is a method that focuses not on the priority of essence or of existence, but one that understands that the two are in a sense equiprimordial in the experience of a living subject. In this way, Merleau-Ponty and the later Husserl return phenomenology to its Hegelian roots – we cannot understand the object, history, or the world, until we understand the role of the subject in its creation. Thus, any science ought to be a science of the experience of that living subject. Instead of taking elements of that experience and objectifying them: behavior, language, mind, history, phenomenology should be the study of lived behavior, lived language, lived mind, lived history, etc. We must not leave subjective experience out of our investigations of phenomena, at the risk of misunderstanding the phenomena.

Merleau-Ponty's work investigates how incorporating subjective experience into psychology changes the study of the human mind and behavior – he does not tackle the science of history. What would it mean to incorporate subjective experience into the sciences of man, in particular, into the

³) Ibid., 52.

science of history? What does this shift in the phenomenological method mean for understanding history? How will positivist or objective accounts of history need to change in order to include lived experience and subjective understanding of history?

In *Time, Narrative, and History*, David Carr takes up this question. Carr argues against the view that academic historical inquiry is paradigmatic of our relation to history. He proposes that academic historical inquiry is secondary to our own lived and imagined history, through which we make sense of and give meaning to the world around us. It is only because of the importance of this subjective historical experience that we come to engage in academic or objective narrative histories. Prior to such academic investigations of the past, Carr argues we have a closer pre-thematic understanding of the past that functions in all of our perceptions of the world. Carr proposes that history – lived, imagined and subjectively experienced – functions as a horizon for all of our actions. ‘Horizon’ is a technical term in phenomenology, meaning ‘reality’ as conceived by the individual or collective. History serves as a horizon for our actions in the following way: we come to understand the world around us as historical, as shaped by historical forces. Thus, the objects in our world and the actions of those around us are seen as having meaning within a conception of history. The historical ‘horizon’ is just this background conception of history against which actions and objects are understood.

Carr bases his phenomenological understanding of history on Husserl’s schematization of the structure of time. For Husserl, Carr argues, time was not empty, but was lived. Lived time is time that is full of events, full of action. Time is lived through events. Time connects our experience in the present to that of a past whose meaning is very real to us. Carr takes up Husserl’s ideas about the fullness and structure of temporal experience to show that our perception is structured temporally. Using Husserl and Carr’s example of the melody can clarify this temporal structure. When one hears a melody, one must hear it in time, one note after another. Even though one hears the notes as discrete, one organizes them into one object, ‘the melody’. This is possible, Husserl argues, because of the temporal structure of our perceptions. When we hear a note, we retain that note in our memory for a period of time, in what Husserl calls retention. This retention, along with present perception, is retained on the basis of a *protention*, where one waits in expectation for the next note in the melody. This note,

once heard, will be added to the forming idea of the temporally extended object, the melody. Thus, Carr shows, we could not experience the melody if we were not both attuned to the past and to the future. Since all of our experience is in time, and thus all of the objects of our perception are temporally extended, in order to perceive, let alone understand, anything we must have both *retention* and *protention*, memory of the recent past and expectation of the near future.

On both a pre-reflective and reflective level, subjects use history and understanding of the past in order to act and in order to project themselves into the future. That is, our background understanding of history shapes the meaning of our actions. Carr writes, “The horizons of future and past are not empty forms. We can no more conceive of an experience of empty future than one empty of past – speaking here, not of the recollected past or the expected future, but of those of retention and protention. As these notions are understood by Husserl, without past and future there can be no present and thus no experience at all.”⁴

Our expectations of the future, our protentions, are based on past experience. We only know what to expect from what we have experienced in the past. Thus we are always expecting a future, and this expectation is based on our understanding of our experience in the past. This does not mean that the future cannot surprise us, but it does mean that we will have to take a moment to reflect on how this new surprise coheres with our knowledge of the world so far. Just as we act with a view toward the past, we project ourselves forward into the future. Carr cites Heidegger as an example of a phenomenologist who sees humans as projected toward the future. Heidegger writes, “Human existence is characterized by its... projective character.”⁵ This projective character means that action is focused toward the future, toward the goal of action. However, Carr writes, “This emphasis on the future-orientation of action, and on the role of the end in organizing ‘backward’ in time the various phases of action which are the means to its realization, must not obscure the fact that the agent is still rooted in the present... Any retrospective element in action can only be a quasi retrospection.”⁶ We may look forward towards our goals and backwards toward our understanding of the world, and our experience so far, but we

⁴) Ibid., 29.

⁵) Ibid., 39.

⁶) Ibid., 40.

do not live in the future, or in the past. We are only ever in the present, which our understanding (horizons) of past and future make visible. Carr writes, “the present ‘stands out’ from the past and future horizons which make it what it is: present.”⁷

According to Merleau-Ponty, our past experience serves not only as a horizon but also as a guide and orienting principle.⁸ Our experiences in the past teach us what to expect of the world, how to understand and recognize phenomena. Further, we are habitual creatures. Once we learn a behavior we incorporate it into our life as a habit, and do not necessarily consciously reflect on it. Thus, many of our current actions are simply carried over from previous experiences and habits. We carry our past experience along with us in our present behavior in the form of habits we have learned. For Merleau-Ponty our current action is the result of our pre-reflective and reflective synthesis of what we have learned from the past. We need to understand the past, because it is our horizon for meaningful action. It is the basis on which our actions are possible and make sense. Our actions are also goal oriented and directed toward a future. Thus, the past and the future are horizons for my present experience. I look backward toward the past and forward toward the future to act in the present.

However important this pre-reflective experience is, Carr also allows that we have a reflective understanding of the past that is necessary for self-identity and for understanding our situation and world. In reflecting on the meaning of our lives or our past, we engage in such reflective synthesis. We do not merely live through events as temporally extended objects; we ourselves are temporally extended objects. The individual develops in time; it has its own past, which it understands as both connected and distant from the present. Thus, Carr explains, our identity depends on being able to synthesize our past with our present in order to carry ourselves forward to project ourselves into the future. Following up on Husserl’s insight that, “the ego constitutes itself, for itself, in the unity of a history,”⁹ Carr writes that we should understand the unity of self, “not as an underlying identity, but as a life that hangs together, not a pre-given condition but an achievement.” In the process of reflecting on our past and incorporating new

⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Colin Smith (trans.). (New York: Routledge, 2002), Chapters 1 and 2.

⁹ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 73.

experiences and bringing along old experiences into a unified self, Carr writes, “what we are doing is telling and retelling, to ourselves and others, the story of what we are about and what we are.”¹⁰ We achieve a synthesis, a unified self, by reflecting on our present and past experiences, and synthesizing them with a view toward the future.

For Carr, this synthesis of our identity does not happen in a vacuum. Space is filled not only with events but also with other people. We are in a historical, social world. Society and culture can affect even passive perception through the learning process. Carr writes, “Traditions, styles of life, ideals and values are not just handed over to us by others but are first of all handed down by our elders when we are young.”¹¹ The social world does not merely influence but in fact constitutes my consciousness of the world. Carr writes, “the individual’s engagement in the ongoing tradition of a socially constituted endeavor is essential to what individual consciousness is about; and its relation to that tradition affects everything it does; certainly its active pursuit of truth, but also, at least possibly, even its most passive perception of the world.”¹² My involvement in a social world, which extends temporally before my birth to after my death, shapes how I understand the world, and extends my understanding of and identifications with history. Family and early childhood life situations are important, because it is in these contexts that we learn the world. We learn history and we learn the present, we learn how to do things and how to talk about things. We learn how to organize our experiences, how to move our bodies, and how to think. Much of this we can do on our own, but there is an important situational aspect, which includes what we need to know about the world, the past, and our situation in order to survive and flourish.

For Carr, each individual embodies a historical moment while carrying it forward and constructing its future. Carr explains:

For the individual, his or her own narrative, whether of work, or other particular projects, or of life, exists within a larger temporal context which is itself narrative in character and which involves other people in a predecessor-successor relation. The importance of configuration for narrative obtains here as well: just as any part of a story acquires its significance from the narrative

¹⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹¹ Ibid., 109.

¹² Ibid., 106.

whole to which it belongs, so any particular story depends for its sense on the larger narrative context of which it is a part.¹³

The historical subject achieves a sense of identity and learns the world from their communities and societies.

Academic history – the objective investigation into what ‘actually’ happened – arises out of our investigations of this primary subjective historical sense. Academic history, he argues, is a rather different pursuit than our everyday understanding of history. Carr understands academic history as arising out of individual reflective history, where the individual consciously examines his or her past in order to create a synthesis in the form of a narrative which links up to former narrative understandings of themselves in the past, and to larger narratives like the history of their community or world. It is secondary, he proposes, to this initial subjective historical understanding. History, for Carr, is secondary to historicity.

Historicity vs. History: Mink’s Objection to Historical Phenomenology

Louis O. Mink argues that the phenomenological concept of historicity, by making historical understanding the model for all understanding, robs the discipline of history of its special subject matter and method. His project is to identify what is unique and important about historical understanding, and he sees the concept of historicity as ignoring the fact that there is something special about historical comprehension, which must be the case if history is to be a separate discipline. Mink writes, “Although the theme of the so-called historicity of man’s being in the world has increasingly come into focus in the thought of succeeding phenomenologists such as Heidegger, what it reveals is that positing historicity as the ground of all experience and understanding does not give the differentiae of specifically human understanding . . . which alone can justify history as a discipline.”¹⁴ It may be that historical comprehension, the relating of particulars to particulars, is the model of all understanding, but regardless of whether or not this is true, the concept of historicity, that we are in a historical situation and that our actions are linked with the past and create the future, points out not

¹³ Ibid., 115.

¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

the uniqueness of history, but it does lead us to the other feature which Mink wants to prove, the importance of historical understanding. Mink writes that making history a part of the everyday way we reason strips it of its uniqueness, but I would argue that it shows its importance.

If Carr is right, and our historicity – our background understanding of ourselves – shapes our conception of ourselves and our actions, then academic history is essential, rather than a mere addition to the human sciences. If our background conception of ourselves and the history of our community is *wrong*, then this can affect our actions and our sense of ourselves in profound and terrifying ways. Academic history, understanding ourselves in the context of what has happened and how attitudes and subjective experiences of others have shaped this experience is essential in order to understand and explain the world and ourselves. Historical understanding, thus, becomes a precondition to all of the human sciences. It is not, as Mink worried, stripped of its importance, but finally recognized as essential to our wellbeing.

This insight, that historical understanding shapes our subjectivity and creates the future on the basis of this subjective understanding of history is an axiom of Dilthey's hermeneutic philosophy of history. Dilthey also understands the individual as historical, as a locus or center of a meaningful historical nexus, and as interpreter and creator of history. Dilthey distinguishes natural and human sciences (like history) on the basis of the importance of the subject and of subjective concerns for these inquiries. Dilthey writes:

The difference between the human and natural sciences is not just about the stance of the subject toward the object; it is not merely about a kind of attitude, a method. Rather, the procedure of understanding is grounded in the realization that the external reality that constitutes its objects is totally different from the objects of the natural sciences. Spirit has objectified itself in the former; purposes have been embodied in them, values have been actualized in them, and understanding grasps this spiritual content that has been formed in them. A life relationship exists between me and them. Their purposiveness is grounded in my capacity to set purposes, their beauty and goodness in my capacity to establish value, their intelligibility in my intellect. Furthermore, these realities are not reducible to my lived experience and understanding: they form the nexus of a representational world in which the externally given is connected with the course of my life. I live in this representational world,

and its objective validity is guaranteed to me through a constant interchange with the lived experience and understanding of others. The concepts, the universal judgments, the general theories [of the human sciences] are not hypotheses about something to which we relate external impressions but derive from lived experience and understanding.¹⁵

For Dilthey, because the historical-social world is made by humans, and made by the purposive, evaluative, intelligent beings, it must be understood in terms of these 'subjective' elements: purposes, values, ideas, which he argues are not part of the objective of history. Thus, the subject, the creator of purposes, values, and ideas, must be the subject of inquiry, as a subject, not as objectified. For Dilthey, the subject is enmeshed in a historical-social world. The individual is historical. Dilthey writes, "a single person in his seemingly self-reliant existence is already a historical being. He is determined by his position in the time line, his place in space, his role in the cooperation of cultural systems and communities."¹⁶ The subject is always oriented, or pulled along toward the future through being concerned or outwardly directed towards its environment. Dilthey writes, "The individual existence of single persons unfolds into an infinite richness of life on the basis of their concerned relations to their environment, to other people, and to things. But each individual is also a point of intersection of systems that penetrate both it [and other] individuals, that exist within them, but that also reach beyond their life."¹⁷ Thus, for Dilthey, the subject exists within a meaningful nexus shaped by its past and its projection towards its future, towards which it is pulled.

Does this mean the objective science of history is really separate from this endeavor? Can there really be no role for values in objective history? Can understanding and explanation not be two aspects of one critical endeavor? Despite his protests against positivist history, Dilthey proposes a science of history that, while beginning with the subject, does not end there.

¹⁵ Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences. Selected Works, volume 3*. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, (trans., eds.). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 141.

¹⁶ Ibid., 157.

¹⁷ Ibid., 156.

Dilthey's project is a critical one – he wants to show the importance of lived experience, and the centrality of the human subject. According to Dilthey, the historian's task is to understand the present individual as a synthesis and as a locus of outwardly directed interests and meanings. Dilthey writes, "The historian must, therefore, understand the whole life of an individual as it manifests itself at a specific time and place. It is the overall continuum proceeding from individuals – insofar as they aim at the development of their own existence – to cultural systems and communities and, finally, to humanity at large that constitutes the character of society and history. Individuals, as much as communities and systems, are the logical subjects of history."¹⁸ Dilthey's contemporaries, historians who sought to find the meaning in history through the movement of systems rather than through the lived experience of individuals, may not have allowed for the importance of subjective experience. However, his account does not rule out critically examining the past.

Like Carr, Dilthey sees the subject in the present as at an intersection and also as a synthesis of the past and the present, directed toward the future. He writes, "This lived experience contains a structural nexus of consciousness: objective apprehension forms the background for an attitude of care and sadness about the objectively apprehended state of affairs as well as for striving to get beyond it. All this is there for me as a structural nexus. I bring the whole situation to distinct consciousness."¹⁹ Our outward-directedness into the historical world is a relation much like that of phenomenological intentionality. My outward directedness constitutes my consciousness. My thoughts and my actions are from somewhere, about something, towards something. Dilthey writes, "All this 'about', 'from', and 'towards' all these relations of lived experience to what is remembered and to what lies in the future, pull me along both backwards and forwards."²⁰ For Dilthey, the individual is a productive nexus of meaning. The subject creates history and meaning through its life experience. The history and culture and systems of value that individuals and communities make "attains reflective awareness of itself in the human sciences."²¹ Reflection

¹⁸) Ibid., 157.

¹⁹) Ibid., 161.

²⁰) Ibid., 161.

²¹) Ibid., 176.

on the meaning of this synthesis is the goal and the project of the human sciences.

The individual appropriates his or her past in both a reflective and pre-reflective way. Carr has shown that in order to have the kind of experience we do, we must have a sense of the past and a sense of the future in order to be able to act in the present. To hear a melody as temporally extended object I must be able to remember the last note and look forward to the next one as part of the same object. Carr invokes Husserl's concepts of *pro-tention* and *retention*, as this simultaneous looking backward and forward in experiencing the present. This is the pre-reflective sense in which the subject is historical.

There is also a reflective moment of looking back at one's actions, and perhaps at the actions of others in order to determine their meaning. This can happen on an individual level, to make sense of one's life experience, to understand it as a unified whole or unified story, or it can happen at the level of a community. A community or a member of a community looks back on the meaning of the events in the community's history to get a sense of their meaning, where they have brought the community to in the present, and how they affect where the community will go in the future. Carr takes this community history to be the model for academic history.

Historians, Carr argues, do not investigate history *ex nihilo*. As members of communities and as historical individuals they have what Carr calls a 'pre-thematic understanding of history' that allows them to begin their investigations. Instead of starting from particulars and rules of evidence, Merleau-Ponty and Carr suggest that one must start with an idea, or pre-reflective, pre-thematic understanding or orientation in order to know where to begin looking and what to look at. In reflection one reflects upon what one has experienced and this reflection is brought forward into the future to all future experiences. Thus, reflection on the past helps shape the understanding and the conceptualization of all future events. Now, at any time one could stop, reflect, and find that the synthesis of the past that one had made is inadequate. One's individual past is the medium through which one acts; it is one's conditions of possibility and conditions of one's possibility. It is reflected upon, and thus experience becomes conceptualized. One interprets one's experience, but only in reflection, in retrospect.

The academic discipline of history, in which each of the members is immersed in the study of the past of all cultures and periods, creates a

community of its own. The academic historian has pre-reflective notions of history as such from this community and from his or her own experience as a historical being and as a member of a socio-historical community. Thus, each investigation of the past is influenced by these pre-reflective understandings that may be made explicit and revised in the historian's work.

For Dilthey, the individual subject is just the beginning point for historical inquiry. He writes that we must move from insights into particular lives to the universal nexus "contained in them"²² In order to arrive at universal knowledge we must surpass the subject. "The certainty attributable to personal life-experience differs from the universal validity of science . . ."²³ at which any objective history must aim. But how does the historian move from understanding the specific meaning of an individual life to a larger nexus? These are important questions, and ones that we will be better able to address after a short discussion on the reasons that we do history, and what a history ought to be. We shall see that problem of moving from individual subjective meaning to general or universal meaning is one that is shared by both hermeneutics and phenomenology. But first we must add to our initial query the further question, why do we study history?

Why do we study history? Nietzsche suggests, "Every person and every people . . . uses a certain knowledge of the past."²⁴ However, they do not need history for purely academic or intellectual reasons, or because knowledge of the past is an end in itself. Instead, he writes, "the understanding of the past is desired at all times to serve the future and the present". Knowledge of the past is useful for those in the present, serving both the present and the future. Why should this be? Why should knowledge of the past be important for action or understanding of the present, let alone the future? Perhaps to answer these questions we should focus on investigating, not history but humanity. What is it about human nature that encourages the study of history? In order to properly understand historical understanding, we need to have an understanding about what kinds of beings we are, what kind of understanding we are looking for, and what answers will satisfy us.

²²) Ibid., 27.

²³) Ibid., 154

²⁴) Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*. (1873) Ian C. Johnston (trans.). (Nanaimo, British Columbia: Malaspina University-College, September 1998). <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm>

Phenomenologists suggest that we are in a situation that we are thrown into the world. This world is not fully formed on our arrival, but has been developed over time. Many civilizations have left their mark before we arrive on the scene, and shape the world into which we so arrive. Our everyday world is historical. The rules of the road developed over time, our national diet is a product of agricultural and cultural history. Not only our world but also we ourselves are historical. By the time we reflect on history proper, we have already lived long enough to accumulate some of our own. Our lives and our world are sedimented with layers of meaning from the past which we live through, which we presuppose and which gives meaning to our existence. Carr writes, “To say that we are ‘historical beings’ and ‘intertwined with history’ is not meaning to say that we are all in history as part of the historical process. It means that we are in history as we are in the world: it serves as horizon and background for our everyday experience.”²⁵ We are beings for whom our Being is an issue, as Heidegger suggested. We are interested in our lives, in understanding the forces that act upon us and the results and consequences of our own actions. From the moment of our birth we are reaching outward to grasp this world, to understand it, to understand ourselves and our place in it. We are thrown into the world, into a situation, into a particular body, and history has worked to shape all of these and our ideas about them. Exploration of the past arises from our exploration of our world in general. There is much we need to know and to understand in order to function and to thrive in the world. Our situation is historical, and thus, we must engage in historical investigations.

We have seen that the individual subject is historical, and this alone would provide reason enough for historical inquiry, or for showing the importance of including the subject in history. The subject is not merely a historical object, but is the center of a historical nexus. The individual lives in time, in history, and creates history. The individual, in its present action, is a living embodied synthesis of the past, present, and future. The individual is the center of this nexus of meaning. The subject is historical, and brings the past into the present in its grasping toward the future.

When Mink looks to find the past, he says that it is gone, and echoing Gertrude Stein, writes that there is no *there* there. What can we make of this? Is there a realm of the historical that we access through old documents?

²⁵ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 4.

Does the historical world persist? Yes and no. The historical world is our world. The focus on the subject shows us that the past is *present*. That we either bring it with us into the present and future, or it is lost. Artifacts, documents, archives, historical institutions, and memory are all we have of the past. The past is here. It is now. There is no other place that it could be. We relate to the past in a multitude of ways. Our past, and the past of the community to which we belong influence how we see the world and how we understand our context and our situation. Thus, to understand ourselves, we must understand not only our own past, but the past of our communities. Thus, the subject of history, as an individual acting in the present, and as member of a community and world, is the center of a historical project. The subject is the center in that it in its actions it synthesizes the past with a view toward the future, and creates the future on the basis of this synthesis. The locus of historical understanding is the individual in the present. Carr writes, “I am always ‘located’ in the now with respect to past and future experiences.”²⁶ We live in the historical nexus of the past, present, and future. Studying history, then, for Carr, becomes an individual obligation – part of the project of self-understanding. Can we then, return to the methods of positivist or academic history? Do we have an obligation to do so?

How We Study History

While Carr and Dilthey offer us new and valuable ways of understanding why we study history, the question of *how* we ought to study history remains. Is it enough to explore our pre-reflective understanding of history? Is this a replacement for positive historical method?

Carr seems to suggest that historicity is prior to the academic study of history, thus supporting Mink’s worry. However, what he shows is only that the horizon of subjective history is temporally epistemically prior – that is, we experience and ‘know’ this subjective narrative of history before we come to investigate the world as academic historians. However, given the importance of our sense of history in shaping our individual and collective identity, Carr has given us the beginning of an argument for the epistemic priority of academic history.

²⁶ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 27.

If our background sense of the world and its history shapes the way we act and interact, and in fact, as Carr argues, shapes our very notions of ourselves, then the academic study of history gives us the ability to understand the world *as it is*, and ourselves, *as we really are* – or at least the possibility of revising our extant conceptions.

Let's consider the stakes of such investigation. Should we live in a country which we suppose to be benevolent and righteous, and thus understand ourselves to be the inheritors of a tradition of benevolence and justice, learning otherwise would change not only our conception of ourselves, but also could threaten to challenge everything we know about the world. Any revision to our historical consciousness can shake us to our very foundations.

Academic history, insofar as it challenges our pre-reflective historical conception of the world and ourselves, has enormous power and importance. Academic history, which on Carr's view is always an attempt to investigate or revise our pre-reflective historical understanding, is thus both essential and extremely dangerous. Given our historical consciousness, any divergence from our background understanding of the narratives of who we are and what the world and our community mean, threatens to undermine individual self-understandings, social trust and community identity. Yet, despite these dangers, the aim of phenomenology and hermeneutics is still to understand the world and us. If our background conceptions are false, we must revise them.

The phenomenological investigation into our historicity – our subjective historical sense – is still important. It shows us where we start, and how our historical conceptions of the world and ourselves shape our actions, perceptions, and collective identity. However, the revision of that subjective horizon, academic history, gains immensely in importance. We could all be wrong about who we are, and how we came to be this way. Our conceptions of ourselves and the past might not be correct. If our self-conceptions and collective identity rest on fictions, then academic history has enormous power to unsettle these identities.

From Situation to Science, Historicity to History

The phenomenologists and hermeneuticists we have looked at find the source of the historical synthesis in the individual. Both seek to find meaning in the subjective experience or the subjective qualities of human

experience, which is supposed to center and guide our aim of universal or general understanding of the world in general and the historical world in particular. But how should we move from individual understanding to understanding as such? This is a problem both for hermeneutics and phenomenology, and while their solutions to this problem are importantly linked, they are different enough to merit discussion.

For Dilthey, the end of historical knowledge is the ability to characterize the spirit of ages and epochs past. From this identification, we can better judge individual past actions. For Dilthey, the relation of a past individual to the spirit of his or her age is of a part to the whole. The whole is the generalized meaning of the age, and the part is the individual who is acting of and through this spirit. The individual realizes the spirit of his or her age to a greater or lesser extent and can be judged and more fully understood on this basis. Dilthey writes of the individual life, “In this life-course, each particular lived experience is related to a whole. This life-nexus is not the sum or totality of successive moments but a unity constituted by relations that link all its parts.”²⁷ Thus, the meaningful nexus that the individual creates with his or her life is connected to a larger nexus. Understanding both the particular and the larger general or universal nexus is the project of history. Dilthey writes, “It is the task of historical analysis to find in the concrete purposes, values, and ways of thinking of an epoch a concordance about something common that governs it. This common background determines even the contrasts. Thus, each action, each common creation, in short, each part of this historical whole, has its significance through its relationship with the whole of the epoch or age.”²⁸ Each individual will be judged by this benchmark.

The method that he suggests to use for determining the spirit of an age is induction. He writes, “Lived experiences present us with the reality of life in its manifold references, but the experiencing as such seems to only give us knowledge of something singular, namely, our own life. It remains knowledge of something unique, and no logical aid can overcome this limitation of the individual lived experience, which is rooted in the way it is experienced. Understanding first overcomes this limitation of the individual lived experience and, at the same time, bestows the character of life-experience to personal lived-experiences. Extending to various people,

²⁷) Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, 162.

²⁸) *Ibid.*, 177.

creations of human spirit, and communities, it widens the horizon of the individual life and, in the human sciences, opens up the path that leads from the common to the universal.”²⁹ Understanding the particular life requires knowledge of the general,³⁰ however, understanding of particular life cannot quite achieve universal knowledge. The circle emerges: in order to understand individual lives, we must identify a spirit of their age; however, we must follow an inductive method, looking to individuals to find out what spirit they are exemplifying. This circle cannot be breached unless another element is added. One must pick the right examples.

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s insight is of help on this point. For Merleau-Ponty, no induction is ever pure. Merleau-Ponty writes, “induction will remain blind if we do not know it in some other way, and indeed from the inside of consciousness itself, what this induction is dealing with.”³¹ No scientist of note ever collects examples and merely from this collection comes to an idea of their unity. Rather, Merleau-Ponty suggests, one begins with an idea of what one is looking for, and from this idea, one begins collecting examples, and from these examples clarify this basic idea. Induction, if it is to be successful, according to Merleau-Ponty, cannot be a blind assemblage. Rather, the process that great scientists use is more a process of clarification or reflection. This “reflection is not at all the noting of a fact. It is, rather, an attempt to understand.”³² The scientist does not wait for the random examples of phenomena to lay themselves out in order, or to speak the connection between them; the scientist does not find connections, “He forms it actively; he constructs it. Then, having constructed this idea, he verifies it by showing how the confused empirical facts... can then be understood through the introduction of additional conditions which explain the difference between the facts and the pure concept.”³³ Instead of induction, Merleau-Ponty calls this a “reading of the essence”. We can suggest that Dilthey’s method of circular induction is just such a clarifying process. General ideas are employed in understanding specific cases, which are then interpreted and clarified, and seen as exemplifying the general idea or spirit or not.

²⁹) Ibid., 162.

³⁰) Ibid., 164.

³¹) Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 58.

³²) Ibid., 64.

³³) Ibid., 69.

How does this compare to the phenomenologist's search for universal meaning? From the early phenomenology to the later interpretation by Merleau-Ponty, we can educe two separate solutions to the problem of gaining universal knowledge from particulars. The problems of objectification and external determinism are related for both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, and the existential phenomenological answer to the problem of universal knowledge from particulars is related to these concerns. When you take humans to be objects, it becomes easy to see them as determined products of external forces which create them, determine their actions from without (external determinism – history, society, culture) and within (still, an external determinism, psychologism). However, when you understand humans as conscious, active creators and discoverers of meaning in the world, it is no longer possible to take them as externally determined. Thus, by misunderstanding consciousness, leaving out subjective experience, and taking humans to be objects, science misunderstands the actual existence of humans and the possibilities of the world. Looking at history from the viewpoint of philosophy, for the later Husserl means rediscovering the relation of philosophy to life, of ideas to existence, of thought to the world. The move to universal validity then becomes a search for intersubjective meaning. This whole, this transcendent meaning is reinterpreted by Merleau-Ponty³⁴ to mean intersubjective meaning. For these phenomenologists, we must recognize and think through our contingent experience and situatedness, and move beyond it to reach universal, intersubjective meaning. Thus, we are required to aim at thinking the whole. This means thinking the whole of history *and* the present; thinking the whole of the world, and our experience of it. What even existentialist phenomenology does not relinquish is the task of thinking beyond one's particular experience.

Science and history must understand the place of their inquiry. This self-consciousness means that we, as subjects and creators of history, must become aware of our particular moment in history and our particular conditioning – we need to recognize our contingent foundations, but we must not rest with this knowledge. We must take a further step to try to understand beyond our limited positionality. We are required, as philosophers, to think the whole, and to attempt to transcend our particular knowledge. This transcendence is concrete and practical, however. It is

³⁴ Ibid.

not a mere leap to the infinite from the finite, but it is reformulated in Merleau-Ponty (and he says in the later Husserl) as intersubjectivity.³⁵ In other words, we can only transcend our particularity by thinking the whole in terms of understanding the particularity of others and trying to come to a truth that is intersubjective. If the aims of philosophy are to discover the essential, the structural, the timeless, how does situating it and understanding it as lived philosophy change its meaning and its aims? For Husserl, showing that philosophy was rooted does not entail showing that it is without truth. These historical/sociological/existent conditions are both conditions of possibility and limits. But it is their meaning (what the conditions mean) and not just their existence (that there are conditions) that determines their effect on the validity of what we say or theorize.

Once we understand that we are historical, in that we are the product of history, and the creators of history, what then is our responsibility to the past and to the future? How does our practice of history change?

Walter Benjamin writes that we have what he calls a ‘weak messianic power’ with respect to the past.³⁶ We cannot bring the dead to life, but we can keep their memory alive. In the wake of writings and rewritings of history, we have the responsibility, to make sure that the dead survive, to make sure their proper meaning is not lost to time and to misinterpretation. This idea echoes the roots of the hermeneutical tradition. Hermeneutics is the sacred art of salvaging from the past that which is no longer understood and clarifying it, in order that the meaning of the past may live again in the future. History is written by the victorious, Benjamin writes. Even with only the power to write, we must do our part to save those who can no longer defend themselves. Dilthey, with his emphasis on universal history sees us as both redeemers of the past and makers of the future. We redeem the past in that we try to understand how even the smallest detail was important and meaningful with respect to the whole. For Dilthey, we are creative beings who make the future, but this making is importantly influenced by how we understand our past and how we see the relation between the past, present and future. In this paper, I have shown that our obligation to under-

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

stand history extends not just to our ancestors, but to ourselves. If, as Dilthey and Carr argue, we shape our conceptions of ourselves against a historical horizon, then investigating history can reveal truths not just about the past, but about us.

Phenomenologists, especially existentialist phenomenologists, also see our relation to the past as one of responsibility. We must take up the past, but we have a choice. We can either take it up unreflectively, or we can take it up reflectively and choose to continue it or to disavow it. Through the process of reflective engagement, and interpretation of the past, we orient ourselves toward a future, which is educated by this interpretation. Although Carr and Dilthey disavow the project of positive or academic history, this is just what the tools of objective history are for – to test and critique our pre-reflective understandings of the past. Taking up these traditions, our responsibility seems to be to understand the past, in that it has brought us the present and will affect our future, and to understand that we create not only the future, but in a large part the past in our decision to take up or leave behind what we know of it. This is the ethical import of positive, or rather, critical history. We must understand the way we are shaped by our understanding of history, but we must also investigate our understanding of that history, given its power.

Subjects, as individuals, inhabitants of the world, and members of groups carry the past along into the future. Time is not empty. We fill space with our actions, and pull along our past with us in the present. Our actions synthesize our past and present and bring into being the future. This offers a preliminary answer to the question, why do we need history? We reflect on the past anyway; and at a certain point in time we understood that our own past was tied to the past that we learned as children, that our language is sedimented with meaning from the past and to understand our world, the world through which we live, we need to understand how those meanings came to be, and further, how they work through us. The subject lives in the present, but with a view toward the past and future. We are historical beings. We make history, and in living toward the future we bring our past with us. In taking our history along with us, we incur a certain responsibility toward the past. We must understand ourselves as connected with it, and from this recognition, begin the sometimes-discomfiting task of understanding the past critically.

In focusing their inquiries on the human subject as center and synthesizer, as interpreter and maker of history, phenomenology and hermeneutics are united; the gains made by each together yield a promising philosophy of history. The concept of historicity yielded by later phenomenology and Diltheyan hermeneutics proposes that a subjective understanding of history, while primary, is insufficient for knowledge of the world and ourselves. Instead of supporting a merely subjective understanding of history, this phenomenological-hermeneutic concept of history rather elevates the academic study of history as a precondition to all the human sciences, and simultaneously as a precondition to understanding ourselves. The horizon of historical understanding against which we understand the world and ourselves must be questioned, critiqued, investigated.

Subjective and Objective History: The Phenomenological-hermeneutic Method and a Critical Science of History

The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms.³⁷

Phenomenology and hermeneutic approaches to historicity, to making experience visible, do not necessarily challenge the veridicality of that experience. However, making experience visible, the first task of a phenomenological-hermeneutic historical practice is a necessary precondition to reflecting critically on the horizon of historical experience and meaning through which we understand the world and ourselves. Critical reflection, in the form of academic history, is an essential move in this epistemic game of increasing our knowledge of the world and ourselves.

Rather than an essential divide, we can forge a productive connection between subjective experience and the reflective positive investigation. We may begin by reflecting on our subjective experience, but if we do not move past our subjective reflection to some conception of the world and ourselves that brings us beyond our pre-reflective consciousness, then hermeneutics cannot call itself a science of any kind. Rather, what Carr's

³⁷ Joan Scott. "Experience" in Judith Butler and Joan Scott (Eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 25.

and Dilthey's investigations into the nature of historical experience and its constitutive role in our self-conceptions and social interactions show us is that our historicity *requires* reflection, and indeed requires the kind of positive or academic history which Carr and Dilthey in a sense seem to want to displace. It is because our subjectivity is essentially historical that in order to understand this subjectivity we must move beyond our pre-reflective consciousness.

The phenomenological move towards the importance of lived historical experience, somewhat surprisingly leads us back to the need for academic history. By showing the importance of historicity, and the force of historical consciousness on our actions, Carr, Merleau-Ponty, and Dilthey expose the epistemic and perhaps even ethical requirement to engage in a rigorous critical history, one which recognizes the importance of historical consciousness.

