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Philosophy of history: Change, stability and the tragic human condition

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Abstract

This paper contends that the role of a philosophy of history in the twenty first century is as a meta-discourse which explains and attempts to understand the role of history as part of human being-in-the-world. Such a philosophy of history will not, as in the past, take the form of a universal history. Instead it will take a phenomenological approach which seeks to explore the historical enterprise as a means through which human beings attempt to come to terms with the fact that, despite their craving for being, they live in a world which is marked by becoming. Change and its implications are at the core of any philosophy of history. History is an attempt to master change and to keep its somewhat frightening consequences under control. Humans both crave being and stability and appreciate that change is their constant companion. That is part of the tragic nature of human existence.

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PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: CHANGE, STABILITY AND THE TRAGIC HUMAN CONDITION.

Gregory Melleuish & Susanna Rizzo

ABSTRACT: This paper contends that the role of a philosophy of history in the twenty first century is as a meta-discourse which explains and attempts to understand the role of history as part of human being-in-the-world. Such a philosophy of history will not, as in the past, take the form of a universal history. Instead it will take a phenomenological approach which seeks to explore the historical enterprise as a means through which human beings attempt to come to terms with the fact that, despite their craving for being, they live in a world which is marked by becoming. Change and its implications are at the core of any philosophy of history. History is an attempt to master change and to keep its somewhat frightening consequences under control. Humans both crave being and stability and appreciate that change is their constant companion. That is part of the tragic nature of human existence.

Keywords: Philosophy of history; Becoming; Stability; Time; Change

Philosophy of history is, in many ways, a curious enterprise. At its most basic level the craft of history is supremely empirical in nature, as its practitioners sift through the available evidence and piece together a plausible explanation of what occurred in the past. Whatever the more theoretical might think of such activity it is crucial if one is to have something resembling accurate history. The astonishing thing is that it is extremely difficult to reconstruct an accurate narrative of the events of the Middle East in the first half of the seventh century, amongst the most significant fifty years in human history.¹

¹ James Howard-Johnston, *Witness to a World crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

The question regarding the place philosophy of history, or historicism,² has as a mode of historical understanding comes down to the issue of the role and purpose which it has as part of the wider historical enterprise. The origin of it as a paradigm for understanding history can be traced in the eschatological-soteriological-messianic expectations of post-exilic Judaism which prompted the trend to identify allusions to future developments in the chronicles of the past. Judaeo-Christianity, strongly influenced by Hellenistic thought and practices,³ inherited such tendency and developed a particular understanding of the notion of Providence, already present among contemporary proponents of Stoicism,⁴ its role in the world and the limits of human free will. The fourth century works of Eusebius of Cesarea and of Augustine of Hippo epitomize the culmination of such development as they explain the relationship between God and the temporal world through the mystery of the Incarnation. Ever since, the quest of grasping the universal laws which lie beyond and govern the *histoire evenementielle* has characterised attitudes towards, and the interpretation of, the past in the West.⁵ The Western mind is, thus, essentially time-oriented as its understanding of the realm of experience is essentially cast within the framework of becoming and of the

² The word 'historicism' has been variously used. In this paper it is assumed to mean the idea that the course of history is governed by laws which operate beyond reality.

³ G Boccaccini, *Il Medio Giudaismo. Per una Storia del Pensiero Giudaico tra il Terzo Secolo A.E.V. e il Secondo Secolo E.V.*, Genova, Casa Editrice Marietti, 1993). See also P. Sacchi, *Storia del Secondo Tempio. Israele tra VI Secolo a.C. e I Secolo d.C.*, Torino, Societa' Editrice Internazionale, 1994, pp. 279-453.

⁴ The Stoic theme of Providence had been developed by Seneca in the treatise *De Providentia*. See in this regard, A.-M Guillemin, 'Sénèque, Directeur d'Âmes', *Revue des Études Latines*, 30 (1952), 202-19; 31 (1953), 215-234; 32 (1954), 250-274. In the IX century, the Arab Muslim philosopher al-Kindi developed a theory of Providence in *On the True Agent* strongly influenced by Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy. See in this regard P. Adamson, 'Al-Kindi and the Mu'tazila: Divine Attributes, Creation and Freedom', *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 13 (2003), 45-77.

⁵ This does not mean that history of philosophy did not and does not exist in other cultures or civilisations. It depends on how cultures understand or conceptualise time or the realm of becoming. In Achaemenid Persia, for instance, Zoroastrianism developed a particular philosophy based on the notion of Zurvan (=Time) envisaged as the ruler of all things, a theory which led to the doctrine of predestination and which was at variance with the traditional doctrine of Free Will. See in this regard R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, New York, Biblo & Tannen, 1955. A perusal of religious cultures, however, seem to suggest that cultures which developed the idea of a transcendental deity vis-à-vis those who developed immanent understandings of the divine tended to develop a particular understanding of the past. Hindu Brahmanical schools, for instance, based their philosophical speculations on two key concepts: śāsvata-vāda (eternalism) and ātman (unchanging self). This position prevents the development of any philosophy of history. Analogously the Buddhist idea of samsāra, or cycle of rebirths, although rejecting the idea of ātman, envisages such cycle as a result of past actions (karma). Each temporal individual life is a mere stage of a process. The cycle will end with the attainment of bodhi, or enlightenment, which leads to nirvana (permanent contentment). See R King, *Indian Philosophy. An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999

phenomenal as it wrestles to move beyond them to grasp the eternal, infinite and immobile realm of Being. From the time of the early search for the *arche* of things of the Pre-Socratic philosophers to the debate concerning the *Universalia* of Medieval thinkers to contemporary theories regarding the origins of the Universe⁶, the Western mind has constantly struggled to overcome the ‘*imperium of Chronos*’ and the limits of language. It is for this reason that the West has fallen ultimately victim to an inevitable ‘metaphysics of presence.’⁷

This particular understanding of the past, although inherently optimistic, since its main objective is to predict the course of historical evolution in a favourable light, has contributed to engendering a sense of arrogant superiority and entitlement, or has been used as a means to justify the ever-increasing dominance of the West over the peoples of the earth. History has often been seen to be on the side of Western values as the course of history seemed to indicate that it favoured the victory of those values over all others.⁸ Such a view was helped by the fact that the history of the West, be it Europe, America or other Western outgrowths, was far better documented, written about and hence known than the history of the Rest. Both history and philosophy of history were, and still are, quintessentially Western enterprises.

This paper will argue that the days when Western superiority was taken for granted are long gone and that with them has gone a philosophy of history which has as its major objective the creation of a meta-narrative explaining why the history of humanity moved relentlessly towards Western dominance. When Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history over twenty five years ago what he can be seen as proclaiming was the end of philosophical history understood as the history of the West.⁹ It was equally an expression of the fundamentally eschatological nature of history as practised in the West, as the latter had reached ‘the end of Time.’¹⁰ This does not mean that the need for a meta-understanding of history has become

⁶ See for instance: S Hawking, *A Brief History of Time. From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, London, Bantam Books, 1988

⁷ The attempt by Derrida and others to oppose to the ‘metaphysics of presence’ a ‘metaphysics of difference’ has had the effect of generating conceptual dichotomies which ultimately amount to a tautology as they both are unable to transcend the limits imposed by language. Both are, in fact, paradigms which are founded on the negation of the premises of the other. For the paradigm of ‘metaphysics of difference’ see J Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London/New York, Routledge, 2001 [1978], pp. 97-192.

⁸ Philippe Nemo, *What is the West?*, Trans. Kenneth Casler, Pittsburgh, Dusquene University Press, 2006

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of history and the Last Man*, New York, Free Press, 2006

¹⁰ Gregory Melleuish & Susanna Rizzo, ‘From Secular Temporality to Post-Secular Timelessness: Trekking the Past’s Future and Future’s Past,’ *Telos*, 163, Summer 2013, 39–60

redundant. Rather, it means that the role and purpose of philosophy of history needs to be re-thought especially because it appears that the West has entered into a post-historical era in which progress has become routine. As this routinisation of progress, produced by the numerous aspects of human life being re-made in a technological fashion, is characterised by an inherent immobility, it voids the possibility of history.¹¹ Consequently we argue that in order to overcome such an *impasse* a philosophy of history must be primarily phenomenological in nature as it explores the nature of the historical enterprise, its motivation and purpose and, especially, the limitations and contradictions involved in the pursuit of historical knowledge. Philosophy of history puts history in its place; it is a meta-historical project.

In days gone by philosophy of history was less complicated than it is today. In the West, only the history of what might be termed extended Europe was known in any great detail, as well as selected areas of the ancient world, especially Israel, Greece and Rome. Large parts of the world were dismissed as having no history, and, in the flush of optimistic hubris created by the Enlightenment and European imperialism it was assumed that the 'torch of history' had been placed firmly in Europe's safe hands.¹² It has become a common refrain that Europe has been the creator, architect and exporter of a wide array of value-laden institutions or traditions such as democracy, capitalism, sovereignty, freedom and individualism, along with emotions such as courtly love, friendship, philanthropy and patriotism. However, it has been demonstrated that such institutions and emotions can be found in many other non-western societies.¹³

Philosophy of history has largely been a European/Western enterprise largely carried out at a time when Europe and then America have been the dominant powers in the world. *1066 and All That* concludes when Britain has been superseded by America as the dominant power in the world.¹⁴ In a philosophy of history that is primarily and essentially Eurocentric in nature, all roads lead to 1945, namely to the 'end of history' considered as the end of European dominance in the world.

This does not mean that the idea of Philosophy of History is a purely Western invention and hence only applicable in a Western context, and consequently now

¹¹ For the idea of the post-historical see A Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology*, trans. P. Lipscomb, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980 [1957], ; cf. A Gehlen, (1967), 'Die Säkularisierung des Fortschritts', in Rehburg K.S. (ed.), *Einblicke*, vol. VII, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1978.

¹² E R Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982

¹³ See in this regard M. Elvin, *The Pattern of Chinese Past*, Redwood, Stanford University Press, 1973; W M Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 1972; W M Weiss. & K.M. Westerman, *The Bazaar: Markets and Merchants of the Islamic World*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1998; Jack Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006

¹⁴ Walter Carruthers Sellar & Robert Julian Yeatman, *1066 and All That*, London: Methuen, 1930

discredited. Certainly, it does not imply that one cannot determine if there is a viable philosophy of history which can be applied to the history of the whole of humanity. It simply means that in the twenty first century the nature of philosophy of history is not as clear cut as it was one hundred years ago.

The conceptual paradigm known as 'Philosophy of history' or 'historicism' is largely the product of the attempt of the European West to buttress its claims to an inherent superiority vis-à-vis the rest of the world, and to legitimate and justify its intellectual and political ascendancy and authority. Historicism is therefore a hermeneutics or interpretative method which attempts to predict the future course of human development. Its inherent aim, as Karl Popper argues, is to identify the rhythms or patterns, laws or trends which cause or lie behind the evolution of history.¹⁵ From Heraclitus to Plato, to Hegel, Marx and Croce the central and often unspoken assumption has been that humanity, since its inception, is on a march towards some pre-established end, and that it was this march which conferred meaning to the existence of mankind. The basic idea, therefore, was one of evolution and progression through time, although the essence of humanity and the world remained the same. It is in this tension between history as change, as 'becoming', and human essence and the essence of human things as unchangeable or *identical* entities that the *apparent* aporias, generated by a philosophy of history, come to the fore. We emphasise 'apparent' as the essence of a thing can only be identified, defined and known through its changes.¹⁶ Static modes of being or cyclic reiteration typical of nature, because finite and hence lacking discontinuities, cannot produce knowledge: the latter is the product of change, generated by the unresolved and fluid tension between opposites. As Hegel once observed¹⁷, the time of nature is static and not creative and this explains why the birth of self-consciousness is to be sought in the fragmentation of being caused by a structural conflict with nature. The birth of self-consciousness prompted the naissance of History or of the becoming, the locus in which the entelechy of that lost primordial unity could manifest itself. Thus, history is a development which takes place in time, while nature is one which takes place in space. The primordial rupture therefore is one between linearity, or progress, typical of history, and circularity or of the eternal return of the same which characterises nature.

Although Nominalism triumphed in the late Middle Ages thus paving the way to the great scientific discoveries or 'revolutions' between the sixteenth and eighteenth

¹⁵ K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London/New York, Routledge, 2002 [1957] p. 3.

¹⁶ Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. 23-30.

¹⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, New York, Dover Publications, 1956, [1833-1836]

centuries, it appears that Realism or Essentialism continued to dominate western conceptualisation of reality and contributed to the development of historicist thought. The persistence of essentialism is largely connected with the nature of human language which orders and structures reality in a particular way. Heraclitus claimed, in fact, that *logos*, ‘reason’, ‘intelligence’ or ‘language, is the rule in accordance with which all things are realised and the law which is common to and governs all things.’¹⁸ It is in the fold of language that the polarity of History-Nature, namely of time and space, that being can finally attempt recovering its original unity of essence and existence by reconfiguring itself as Dasein, as ‘being-in-the-world’.¹⁹

Historicism has thus been and continues to be fundamentally an ‘essentialist project’ as it attempts to moor language to the reality of being notwithstanding the congenital transience and temporality of human life and of the world. Failure to do so would have conferred ontological autonomy to language so that it could be used to fragment and disperse reality in a set of autonomous and solipsistic aphorisms and undermine any attempt to legitimate certain power structures such as the State.²⁰ As Plato points out, the artful use of language, which is not anchored to reality, produces ‘apparent truths’ or ‘verisimilitudes’, distortions of reality or fantasies.²¹ Albeit its claims to the contrary, historicism is far from being connected with the search for some absolute truth, but is rather an attempt to define, affirm and consolidate a particular understanding of the world and of human life through the weaving of an infinite narrative.

In weaving this narrative the creation of a philosophy of history is largely a rationalist enterprise in that it must be constructed by the human mind using a combination of deduction, imagination, intuition and logic. But it is also inductive in the sense that it can be falsified by empirical evidence. This is important because there are two things which characterise human history. The first is what appears to be an almost overwhelming variety in terms of the paths that particular human civilisations, societies and cultures have taken. The second are what look like regularities which intrude into that variety, allowing for certain patterns to be discerned within a meaningless chaos. Of course, those patterns may be an illusion created by an over-active imagination and may be disproved by subsequent investigation. Any philosophy

¹⁸ R. Mondolfo, ‘Il Logos Eracliteo e le sue Interpretazioni’, in E. Zeller & R. Mondolfo, *La Filosofia dei Greci nel suo Sviluppo Storico*, I, 4, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1967, pp. 152-156.

¹⁹ Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1978

²⁰ This aspect of language is amply developed by Plato in his dialogue Gorgias. *Plato: Gorgias, Menexenus, Protagoras*, Trans. Tom Griffith, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

²¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 463b, p. 28

of history can only ever be a work-in-progress because there will always be new historical data emerging. This follows from the fact that history is itself a work-in-progress. Philosophy of history must come to terms with the ever-increasing number of narratives that emerge about the human past.

When discussing history, there are two things to which one might be making reference. One is a thing in the real world to which the term 'History' may be attached. The other is the human creation which seeks to make sense of change over time and which may take the general term of 'history'. In this second sense 'history' can take many forms according to the mode which is used to account for that change over time. Hegel called these two forms of history respectively 'original history' and 'reflective history'. There may, or may not, be 'History' in the first sense but it is impossible for human beings to know if there is a thing termed 'History' because such a thing can only be discerned by someone who had a God like view of the universe and which the German philosopher referred to as 'philosophical history'.²²

This means that as human beings we are left with the second notion of history, and all the limitations which it implies for what can be said about history. For example, such an approach must recognise that history as such is not limited to a single mode of expression and may include not only a range of literary genres but also such things as films and plays. It also implies that any attempt at a philosophy of history will be subject to the same conditions as any attempt to write a history; it will be partial and skewed towards a particular viewpoint which comes out of the time and place from where the person composing the history comes. This mode of history, which is both pragmatic and critical in a Hegelian sense, will be always and inevitably about the present. For better or for worse, all human beings are creatures of the present even as they cast their nets out in search of the past and the future.

Edward Hallett Carr had already foreshadowed this development in the study of history in his celebrated work *What is History?* of 1961 when he stated that history is a dialogue not only between past and present, but past, present and progressively emerging goals,²³ and that history is nothing but a "selective system of cognitive and casual orientations to reality".²⁴ These statements implicitly deny the possibility of a philosophy of history which aims at identifying inherent laws of causation in order to predict the course of history. There is, in fact, no such thing as historical inevitability. On the contrary, as Ricoeur suggests, historical narratives merely reveal the temporal nature of human life. They disclose previous, long-gone worlds and are quintessentially

²² Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 8

²³ E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, London, Penguin, 1990 [1961], pp. 123-124.

²⁴ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 105.

provisional in nature as the discovery of new facts and theories or the application of a different hermeneutics may *tout court* alter their understanding, thus inherently signifying that even present and personal ideas and facts are amenable to ongoing scrutiny and change. Thus the study of history configures itself more an attempt to self-understanding and to the discovery of new possibilities,²⁵ rather than the discovery of some immutable, eternal law operating beyond the pale of events.

It is also clear that philosophy of history should not to be confused with what might be termed universal history or an attempt to put all human history together to form a single pattern leading from past to present to future. As we have argued elsewhere, universal history is not universal but partial in the sense that it tends to be linked to a desire to create a common humanity and appears to be prevalent in times of empire.²⁶ The work of Polybius is emblematic in this regard. However, it must be pointed out that both universal and non-universal histories require a philosophical foundation. A philosophy of history must deal with the mode of human understanding which is called history.²⁷

A philosophy of history must go deeper than the surface of history and beyond the phenomenal; it must look at the basis of history as a way of approaching the world, as a practice in which humans engage, and explaining why they engage in it. For this reason, the approach must be a phenomenological one as it seeks to go beyond that which is directly given in the realm of experience.²⁸ The key to any such appreciation of history, in fact, lies in the relationship of being and becoming, and the reality that all human existence is organically temporal. Time and change dominate the lives of all human beings. History can be envisaged as a means of coming to terms with that change, ostensibly in terms of the past, but also in relation to both the present and the future. It is about the reality, the terrible reality for finite beings, of growth, decay—and death. For example, when the ‘Father of History’, Herodotus, wrote his account of the Persian Wars, his enquiry was not just a celebration of what the Athenians had achieved in the past but also a warning regarding the possible future of the Athenian

²⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88), p. 155. Cf. also P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Other*, (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1990]); and *History and Truth*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965 [1955]). Cf. A. MacIntyre, ‘Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science’, *The Monist*, 60, 4, 1977, pp. 453-472.

²⁶ Greg Melleuish, ‘The Particularity of Universal History’, *Telos*, forthcoming

²⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985 pp. 86-168

²⁸ See in this regard F Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, London/New York, Routledge, 1995 [1874], M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London/New York, Routledge; 1995 [1945], and M Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1978)

empire.²⁹

Of course, change can be disturbing, even frightening, which is why Thucydides can attribute moral decay to the behaviour of the Athenians in the Melian dialogue.³⁰ If democracy can be seen as the cause of Athenian energy, vitality, and their move away from traditional norms governing behaviour based on the aristocratic virtue or ideal of *areté*, then Plato's static ideal of the state (*Politeia*) can be seen as an attempt to banish time, the source of such energy and vitality, and its corrosive effects, from the world of humanity.

In all of this, the act of recording and the interpretation of what has happened in the form of an 'historical narrative' are of prime importance. Human memory is notoriously unreliable and the past can easily be re-made as individuals change their versions of what took place in the past. This can be done unconsciously in an oral society which lives primarily and *ad infinitum* in an apparently unchanging present as its knowledge of the past is dependent on memory reformulated and transmitted from one generation to the other and there is no authoritative, fixed account against which that memory can be evaluated.³¹ Written accounts of the past, which come to constitute history, establish a form of authority which can only grow with time as the chain of memory is broken. These textual or discursive discontinuities constitute the essence of history. These written accounts, in fact, become the past and can only be challenged by other written documents, or possibly material evidence, the sole authority legitimated to challenge those accounts. History is not what actually happened but what written accounts and other evidence lead us to believe what happened. They cannot exist without the human imagination as their midwife. Thus, history is, most of the time, more fiction than fact.

The paradigm or discourse referred to as 'Philosophy of history' then cannot be concerned with the process of history *in se et per se* as if it were an objective thing awaiting the magic wand of the philosopher to make sense of it. As a source of authority which has congealed the ambiguities of the past into something seemingly solid and fixed, historical works often conceal how very shaky their foundations are. As well as the partiality of the historian, any would-be philosopher of history has to contend with the reality that no work of history can be authoritative forever, being always open to revision. The historical work is in itself the product of history, an inescapable tautology with which all historians and philosophers of history must

²⁹ James Romm, *Herodotus*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 53

³⁰ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, Ed. Robert B. Strassler, New York, Free Press, 1996, pp. 351–7

³¹ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 36–

contend. One cannot but wince when reading a work such as Hegel's *Philosophy of History* which is little more than a fantastical account of the history of the world, as he attempts to write a 'philosophical history'. Analogously it can be said of all the nineteenth and twentieth century universal histories with their extraordinary Eurocentric accounts of the historical process which reflect nothing more than the increasing dominance of Europe in the world, just as historians today have to take into account the new reality of international politics, although in the twenty first century the tendency has been to write pragmatic 'world histories' as opposed to 'universal histories'. Within this interpretative framework, Hegel's *Philosophy of History* has become essentially an old-fashioned curiosity in an age when historical knowledge has expanded enormously. It is not so much a philosophy of history as a highly speculative account of the history of the world founded on a very incomplete, limited and, to a certain extent, prejudiced knowledge of that history, the knowledge being that of a late eighteenth century German intellectual.

A philosophy of history in the twenty first century will be something quite different. It must engage with the process of creating history as a human activity and the relationship between that process and the knowledge of the world and its past, which is like restoring a mosaic in which most of the pieces have been broken or are missing. Philosophy of History is thus primarily a discursive practice as it detaches words from things³², and constructs meaningful sequences of past occurrences which inform the present and thus prefigure the future. It is a form of 'meta-activity' in that it looks beyond the mere creation of history in all its manifestations and reflects on the process involved in that creation. It seeks to understand philosophically history as something which human beings do and is constitutive of their 'being-in-the-world', especially once they possess the capacity to create 'history' in a fixed form. It would appear that for literate peoples' history, in its various manifestations, looms large as a means of approaching and understanding the world of experience and their relationship with it.

Discourse expresses itself primarily in language, and is fundamentally temporal.³³ Human beings tell stories as a means of explaining aspects of the world, in particular those aspects which pertain to the actions of human beings. This may be the case because only human beings have a sense of change over time and must account for the meaning, function and purpose of that change. By means of narration they weave themselves into the world of experience and thus articulate intelligibility and generate meaning. In this way discourse becomes constitutive of the existence of human beings

³² M Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1972, pp. 48-49.

³³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H349 (d) , p. 400.

in the world.³⁴

It is thus irrelevant whether these stories have a basis in what actually happened or take the form of fictional accounts which do not pretend to describe the real. Legends grow up alongside facts. Nineteenth century English schoolboys 'knew' that when he was six or seven, Oliver Cromwell had 'had a pugilistic encounter with Prince Charles, afterwards Charles I', and that somehow this explained the English Civil War.³⁵ At times, it may be difficult to distinguish between legend and history, given the state of knowledge, as in the case of biographies of Alexander the Great and the Alexander Legend. There is an episode in a number of supposedly reputable accounts, including Curtius' *History of Alexander*, in which Alexander spends thirteen days making love to the Queen of the Amazons.³⁶ Over time, however, Alexander mutated into a legendary figure, especially in the various forms of the Alexander legend. In the *Alexander Legend*, for example, his true father is not Philip but Nectanebo, the last Pharaoh of Egypt and a magician.³⁷ However, in the *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius Philip is his father while his mother is Chouseth an Ethiopian princess while in the *Shahnameh*, Alexander has a Greek mother and a Persian father who casts off Alexander's mother because she has bad breath.³⁸ These stories cannot be just dismissed as the folk stories of ignorant people. These were how even educated people understood the past. Otto of Freising, for example, mentions the story about Nectanebo in his universal history.³⁹ Equally the story of Alexander locking up Gog and Magog behind a wall in the north is in both Pseudo-Methodius and the Quran.⁴⁰

Even in our own day, there are works of what are now considered to be pseudo history, as in the case of A T Fomenko and Gavin Menzies, which portray themselves as true but which are rejected by reputable historians. Consequently, the ultimate goal of historical narration is not the search or revelation of an absolute truth but rather the creation of a meaning and identity. Fomenko, for example, has created a new narrative of human history which creates a way of understanding human history which appeals

³⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H160-161, pp. 202-205.

³⁵ Charles H Pearson, *Reviews and Critical Essays*, London, Methuen, 1896, pp. 205-6

³⁶ Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, London: Penguin, 1984, pp. 127-8

³⁷ *The Greek Alexander Romance*, Trans Richard Stoneman, London, Penguin, 1991, 35-47.

³⁸ *Apocalypse: Pseudo-Methodius, An Alexandrian World Chronicle*, Ed. and Trans. Benjamin Gastard, Cambridge Mass, Harvard University Press, 2012, 23, Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, New York: Penguin, 2007, p. 454.

³⁹ Otto of Freising, *The Two Cities: A Chronicle of universal History to the year 1146 A.D.* Trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, 180.

⁴⁰ *Apocalypse: Pseudo-Methodius*, p. 25, Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 178.

to post-communist Russians.⁴¹

This accounts for why in history, as in fictional writing, there are a variety of genres depending on how one approaches the nature of time. In fiction, the 'story' can possess a sense of timelessness as if it has been plucked out of the stream of time and placed into an eternal domain in which time proceeds without any real growth and decay. The *One Thousand and One Nights* is emblematic in this regard as the narrator's life depends on the infinite stream of stories without end she can weave night after night. Stories ward off the ontological possibility of death and allow time to continue its journey. The historical equivalent of the story is the anecdote or moral tale, such as Plutarch's *Lives*, or perhaps medieval hagiography which are designed to provide edifying models for behaviour. These are exemplars which allow the narrative to move outside the temporal flux while maintaining the resemblance of a self-contained narrative. Even the aphorism, with its apparent universal, a-temporal and axiomatic nature, can be considered an attempt to overcome the temporality of human existence and the world.

Nevertheless, even in the cases of the story and the moral tale or anecdote the central issue is that of time and the way in which human beings relate to it. Mutability and change are dealt with by removing narrative from the realm of time and placing it under the jurisdiction of eternity. This is the place, the only place, where human beings can live 'happily ever after'. It is the place which Flaubert subverted at the end of *Madame Bovary* and in the *Three Stories*, especially in 'A Simple Heart'. It is arguable that real stories cannot be written under the condition of modernity with its overbearing sense of change and flux. Hence perhaps the greatest story teller of the twentieth century, Isak Dinesen, placed nearly all of her stories on the cusp of modernity, in that lingering, long last moment just before the forces of progress pricked the bubble of eternity. Hence her final story, published after her death in 1963, has an old lady describing the setting for the story as a country which 'may be said to have faded out of existence.'⁴²

But in a sense the story/moral tale is a special case of 'history', which can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the reality of change over time, or of the fact that the world is not in a state of being but of becoming, and what this means for the nature of human beings as they exist in the world. If philosophy of history is to have any explanatory power, there are a number of things it needs to consider.

The first is the problem of change or, to be more precise, of explaining why

⁴¹ On Fomenko and Menzies see G Melleuish, K Sheiko and S Brown, 'Pseudo History/Weird History: Nationalism and the Internet,' *History Compass*, 7, (6), November 2009: 1484-1495

⁴² Isak Dineson, *Ehrengard*, London, Penguin, 1986, p. 4

becoming rather than being is the defining characteristic of the universe which humans inhabit. It is undeniable that the world is in a state of constant flux and while that change may have some regularity, such as the alternation of day and night and of the seasons, there are also irregular and chance events, at least from a human perspective, which threaten human existence, ranging from weather events to natural disasters to the possibility of a cosmic catastrophe. In short, there is no stability or certainty for human beings and for human affairs. A universe which was founded on being would be timeless because there is no place for time or change in a perfect universe defined by being. The latter is, however, an illusion produced by the desire of overcoming the ephemeral nature of human life. Human beings perceive themselves as subjects living in a finite spatio-temporal dimension known as the world. Their thought processes and linguistic production are dominated by rigid rules of logic and grammar, and these processes are inherently sequential or chronological. It would be possible therefore to assume that time is the production of human thought and discourse having not external or factual existence. Although such modal realism would assist in explaining the fictional nature of historical thinking and narrative, it is falsified by empirical observation. Therefore, a perfect universe could only exist in eternity like an abstract mathematical formula, or a story forever being repeated. Considered philosophically, history comes out of the human need to come to terms with a universe which is always changing and in flux. It is difficult to know when human beings came to appreciate the relentless nature of change although in the theme of attempting to escape death it can be found in the world's oldest work of literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Although the reality of change, and its stepchild death, cannot be evaded, it can be tamed through representation be it artistic, literary or, in more recent times, digital. As is the case with the story, history allows human beings to give shape and form to change, to tame it in the imagination, if not in reality.

A universe which is characterised by change and becoming is also one which is imperfect in nature. Things change and mutate; even if they achieve 'being', which might be described as their perfect form, the nature of time is such they cannot maintain that form and are destined to lose it. Time changes all things. But this change is often masked by language, so that things which change retain the same name. This may not matter where objects of nature are concerned. A stone remains a stone and cats vary little from generation to generation. However, complex human creations, the creations of culture, change over time; history is the record of their mutation. Things change, but the word used to name them remains the same. For example, a democratic political system in 2016 is quite different from the same system of 1916, even if the words used to describe it are still largely the same.

The stability, or apparent timelessness, of language masks very real change. It creates the illusion of 'being', of a world which appears not to change. Consequently, the reality of change is only discoverable through intensive enquiry, which is to say historical investigation; it is no wonder that most people mistake the stable word for the ever-changing thing. This inability to discern change, or the masking of change by language, is best termed the 'tyranny of the concept'. The apparent timelessness of the word or logos is a major impediment to human self-understanding; a proper philosophy of history should be the principal antidote to this human failing. It strips away the illusion of 'being' from human 'being in the world' which also means that it strips away the comfort which being supplies.

As such, language is a primary means for creating a measure of stability in the world because the apparent fixed quality of the logos, as opposed to the actual constantly changing world, is created by words making things which are changing seem to be always the same. This stability may be a condition of our 'being-in-the-world' (is it possible to cope with a world in flux AND a constantly changing means of grasping that reality?). But it means that language can only ever provide at best an approximate account of reality. Words make things seem the same even as those things differ, but it does not matter if that difference between things is not great. There are many shades of blue, and the word 'blue' is a blunt instrument, but in most circumstances differences in the abstract concept 'blue' do not affect the way in which we use it. It would make a difference if an appreciation of the various shades of blue were essential for our survival, for example if some things of a particular bluish colour were poisonous. A R Luria demonstrates in *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations* that colour is an abstract concept and that colours exist only as the expression of concrete entities amongst illiterate peoples.⁴³

It is remarkable how impoverished a language such as English is when it comes to abstract nouns which deal with cultural and political matters such as 'love', 'state' (in the political sense) and 'religion'. It would appear to be the case that developed literate societies move away from a concrete and particularistic linguistic means of describing the world to one in which abstract nouns become increasingly dominant. In particular, this linguistic poverty makes historical understanding very difficult. Should one, for example, translate *res publica* as state or does such a translation do violence to the thing we are studying? Even historians of Rome now concede that *res publica* masks several different types of regime.⁴⁴ This poverty of language creates a sense of timelessness in

⁴³ A R Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, trans. M. Lopez-Morillas & L Solotaroff, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 20–30

⁴⁴ H Flower, *Roman Republics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010

history, masking behind a word both difference and change. The apparent timelessness of language means that human beings do not always notice as the water gets hotter and boils.

It is curious that human beings who are encouraged, under the condition of modernity, to seek change, and to go in quest of constant innovation, have not created techniques enabling language to be adapted so that it can monitor and foster awareness of the changing world around them. Any philosophy of history must account for this very human tendency towards thinking which is atemporal in nature. It would appear that human beings, considered in terms of the means which they use to understand the world, are quite resistant to grasping the world as a dynamic entity. This may indicate a certain unhappiness about being placed in a world which has becoming as its central feature. It may also explain the attraction of a digital reality in the twenty first century. One can create a digital persona online which never changes, even in its pictorial representation.

Human beings seem to be disappointed with the universe which they inhabit and crave 'being' in the sense of stability and orderliness. They wish, especially when times are good, that things will not change and that moments of perfection will last forever. Consider the example of the mystic who has achieved an epiphany, a moment of perfect unity with the universe. That moment is, by definition, momentary. The individual must return to the universe of change and flux and endure the imperfection of that universe. The same is true when more mundane and materialist concerns are involved; good times never last forever and are followed by economic crises and wars. In response, humans create the idea of 'golden ages' when the times were good and people were happy, as originally depicted by Hesiod. Or perhaps the ideal of 'Pax Romana'. This leads to attempts to conquer time in politics, as Polybius believed that the Romans had achieved through their mixed constitution.⁴⁵

Then there is Eden and the return to the primal unity. Change is wearying and its effects can be debilitating. The idea that there was once a time when the effects of change were not felt, and the faith that such a time may come again in the future, are very attractive for many people. It may not be so attractive for the affluent few in the modern West who do not feel the effects of change as deeply as most people have throughout history. They seek other ways of conquering time, and hopefully death, through the techniques of science.

One major consequence of the reality of a universe founded on becoming is the

⁴⁵ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert, London Penguin, 1979, pp. 302–352

necessary plasticity of human nature.⁴⁶ Human beings and the culture which they create are necessarily plastic because the world is both imperfect and changing and they can only come to terms with change if they possess a nature which enables them to adapt and change accordingly. Language is a major means through which human beings deal with change. But language has to work in tandem with practice; it is through changes in practice that human beings come to terms with their changing world, by altering the technology which they use to deal with the world. Practices change and languages change, but it is difficult to know how these two sets of changes interact. Nevertheless, it might be argued that the plasticity involved in the development of practices and those involved in the development of words are not only distinct but may go in quite different directions. This process may accelerate under the conditions of modernity.

Under certain conditions words easily lose their connection with reality. This is what seems to constitute the postmodern condition. When this happens, it becomes possible to create fanciful histories, such as discussed earlier. This is the great danger of modernity, especially as it becomes increasingly digital and fragmented, and individuals, because of the pervasiveness of communication technology and the creation of virtual worlds, become more narcissist, egocentric and disengaged from reality. In such a condition, which is reminiscent of Rousseau's warning against the increasingly growing incidence of the civil state in human life, which causes a destructive *amour-propre* to replace an innocent *amour de soi*,⁴⁷ not only does what remains of the distinction between history and fiction appear to vanish, but politics and policy seem to dissolve into a rhetoric detached from reality. An abstract language may be the consequence of a more universal human existence but there is a price to be paid for that abstraction and part of that price involves our understanding of history and hence of human life.

Plasticity is also why human beings require an imagination to enable them to envisage things as being other than they currently are. Of course, the imagination may lead them into incorrect conclusions and, if used to excess, encourage human beings to pursue what are essentially fantasies. These fantasies may become more dominant once writing has been adopted and words and ideas take on a quasi-permanent form which places them in an independent position from the person using them. No longer can they be easily changed as occurs in an oral culture. History is thus a reification of

⁴⁶ G C Melleuish and S G Rizzo, 'Plasticity, Finitude and the Imagination: Why there can never be a Fixed Natural Social and Political Order', *Cosmos and History*, 2015, Vol. 11 Issue 1, pp. 221–238

⁴⁷ J.J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971

the past, the creation of a semi-permanent structure which limits the capacity of the imagination to re-make the past in accordance with the needs of the present and the future. Does this then perhaps mean that history is a form of congealed past created by the imagination which in turn effectively works to constrain the imagination? It is worth remembering that this congealed past may not actually be true, as in the case of the many stories about Alexander; in the absence of evidence from other sources it may simply be impossible to know how true it is. History, then, takes the plasticity of human experience, or at least completed experience, and gives it a fixed form and shape. In this way it enables human beings to chart their passage through time and to make sense of it. It takes the terror out of the flux and change of the universe.

In this sense history is both about recognising change, as opposed to reducing the universe to a timeless 'being', and simultaneously ensuring that the threat which 'becoming' entails is somehow tamed and made less threatening. Human beings both crave being and have a plastic nature which reminds them constantly that they inhabit a realm of becoming. One way in which they do this is through stories; history is a special kind of story in that it aspires to be true. The great virtue of stories is that they appeal to both the cognitive and the affective elements of human nature; they engage people in a way in which rules, precepts and laws, which stand outside of history, do not. A philosophy of history concerns itself with the relationship between 'becoming' which produces human plasticity and finitude, and the way in which history provides a form of 'being' for that process of becoming by giving it a form and a shape through the imposition of logos.

The historical instinct came into being through historical memory and literacy. Without a written record, which establishes the historical narrative, there are only ever changing oral accounts, which can change as the needs of the person providing the story change.⁴⁸ There are a variety of written accounts of the past but once they have been written down it becomes possible to compare them and to decide which one is the superior account. This is not to say that history is always concerned with establishing 'what is the case'. Both Greek and Roman historians inserted speeches into their histories for which they did not possess any evidence. They were there for rhetorical effect. Nor, as the case of the Alexander legend demonstrates, does the writing down of a story necessarily prevent it from mutating and evolving in different contexts.

History is also largely the creation of prose. Only rarely has an author attempted to write history in verse and it is difficult to see what other genre could be used to write history and its step sibling, the chronicle. In comparison, philosophy has used many

⁴⁸ Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*.

genres, including poetry, ranging from the dialogue to the treatise to commentary. But history only seems to work when its mode is 'plodding prose'. It is very much concerned with establishing with what it understands to be a true account of the past which can be accepted as authoritative. Most people do not have the opportunity to check the original sources. Hence, they must accept much of what they read in a work of history 'on trust' without generally appreciating that what is before them may be built on quite flimsy foundations. It becomes even worse when one aggregates these various histories and attempts to create a so-called universal history. Universal history, which is generally created by writers who do not know the various particular areas of which it is composed in detail, is often like a multi storey building which has very shallow foundations. It is the mode of history which relies most heavily on the imagination and its capacity to take a relatively small number of (usually broken) tiles and create a full mosaic. At one level, universal history creates the most comprehensive picture of the past, and hence the one most likely to bring a sense of comfort to any individual, while at another level it fashions the flimsiest of all historical constructions, one which is the easiest to demolish. Any philosophy of history needs to recognise that the historical instinct is at both its strongest, and its weakest, at the level of attempts to create universal history. It is at its strongest because here history comes closest to fulfilling its role in taming time and allowing an individual to feel at ease in the universe. It is at its weakest because universal history is much easier to destroy because it has such shallow foundations. One cannot have both a high level of truth and a high level of explanatory power. The more that history attempts to explain the more likely it is to be false. Taming time on a grand scale may simply mean accepting the fictional nature of the history one creates.

Is it not also the case that history comes into its own at times of great change? If history is about taking the sting out of the effects which time has on human beings, then change should stimulate the desire to 'make' history as an antidote to that change. This may well be the case with the Old Testament which is the creation of a time of change in the sixth century BC. It is what stimulates both Herodotus and Thucydides in fifth century Athens, the creation of historical writing in the late Roman republic, including the universal history of Diodorus, and perhaps also Christian writing. Leaving aside the early Gospel writing, when the Church becomes important in the early fourth century we have the Church history of Eusebius and his attempt to create a universal history through his chronology. Islam creates a history for itself out of the *hadith* and other oral traditions.⁴⁹ Does this mean that when changes occur in a society

⁴⁹ Chase Robinson. *Islamic Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 8–13

with at least a literate minority the use of written texts is used to gain control of the past as a means of controlling the present? For example, Herodotus is an apologist for the democratic regime in Athens; the past becomes a means of both providing 'significant past' for the democratic order while giving some advice about what that past entails for the future, namely the example of the Persian Empire.

History then comes out of what is best described as the tragic nature of human existence. Time and its corrosive effects haunt all human beings because the universe tells them every day that change rules their lives and that death is ever closer. There are times when that change becomes so overwhelming that human beings feel an overpowering desire to control time, to make sense of it and prevent it from engulfing them. History is one expression of that desire. Historians desire that their accounts of the past both be true and an antidote to the effects of change. It is very difficult for history to take on both of these functions. The more it tries to explain the more it discovers that it has to engage the services of that unreliable faculty, the imagination, and the more likely it is to sacrifice truth. The less it attempts to explain and remains 'true to the facts', the less comforting it will be as an antidote to change. That is the paradox which any philosopher of history has to face.

The practice of this thing called 'history' is not universal in human existence, and is more prevalent in some civilisations and cultures than in others. It is an artefact of the plastic human mind and the desire of the mind both to ward off the terrors which a constantly evolving universe poses and to establish some sort of control over that constant change. It only really comes into being once a people has become literate. The desire to exercise some control over the past is equally motivated by an aspiration also to master the future. This can only be done by enlisting the power of the imagination, especially the imagination as it comes to be expressed in the written word. An authoritative written text can be a thing of great comfort as well as one of great power.

There can be no doubt that what can be loosely termed Western civilisation is marked by the strength of its historical approach to understanding the universe. This is linked to the desire by the peoples of the West to control their world and make it subservient to them. This desire for control can be summed up in an image of a chariot being drawn by twin horses named science and history. In the twenty first century those horses are becoming increasingly digital in nature. But, as we have argued elsewhere, control is not the same thing as knowing.⁵⁰ It is a means to possessing power over something even if it means doing violence to that thing. Out of

⁵⁰ Melleuish & Rizzo, 'Plasticity, Finitude and the Imagination'

attempts to control history come such things as the idea of progress and a belief in the destiny of a particular country or civilisation. The illusion of control manifests itself in a large number of fanciful political projects, many of which have done great harm to many people. The historical enterprise in the West has too often been blind to its desire for control, and unwilling, and/or unable, to see that its quest for control and power may have blinded it to what it is doing when it engages in the historical enterprise. The imagination can indeed contain many deceitful demons.

Philosophy in the twenty first century must come to terms not only with the role which science has taken in contemporary (Western) culture but also that of history. History is a constitutive element of modernity understood as a Western creation. Just as science requires a metaphysics which provides an explanation of the universe which enables us to understand both the nature of science and its limitations, so History must also be examined in a similar fashion.⁵¹ This means, as has been argued above, that Philosophy of history must take quite a different form to which it took in the past.

History is a constitutive element of modernity understood as a Western creation. Philosophy of history must recognise the way in which history has come to be and the role that it has come to occupy as a way of explaining human being-in-the-world. History cannot be considered as a simple enterprise in which human beings seek to know the past as it really was. That enterprise is impossible, if only because human beings always live in the present. Rather history is an attempt by people in a literate condition to establish a relationship between human beings and a universe marked by constant and relentless change so that they can aspire to having some sort of control over that universe. It is driven by the tragedy of the human condition which is that of an entity which can desire a condition of being through its imagination, but which ultimately is subject to a relentless becoming and the ultimate fate which becoming entails.

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⁵¹ See in this regard, Carr, *What is History?*, MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science'