

## Academic Essays

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# The Locus of Meaning in the Text of History

By Graham Nicholson

*“When I use a word,” said Humpty Dumpty in rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more or less.”*

*The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”*

*“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master - that is all”.*<sup>1</sup>

When all is said and done, histories, however one may write<sup>2</sup> them, and from whatever perspective the evidence is analysed and explained, are written for a purpose. Whether or not that purpose is accepted by others or even comprehended by them at all, histories come forth as the product of a deliberation, not as the chance result of a fleeting conjunction of ideas and events.<sup>3</sup> Whether one considers history as an art or a science or any particular combination between these two poles (and the debate is an old one!)<sup>4</sup>, it is still its function to use statements to make a Statement. That is, from the coherent arrangement of the statements of the evidence, new Statements then arise. These will be either induced or deduced from the evidential pattern prepared, and the meaning attributed to it. They may simply seek to gain new understanding by explaining causal connections needed to show why an event occurred, or they may try to set the event in the context of some greater whole. This is true even if the only “reader” of (or listener to) the finished product is the author. In that limited case, the question of meaning can be limited to whatever the author chooses it to be. The mind that only discourses with itself does not have to worry about whether its interpretations are correct, believable or understood.

But the moment someone else is a part of the process, especially (but not necessarily so) as an intended listener or reader, the simplicity disappears. The earlier monologue has become a dialogue. Dialogue is necessarily external, and once it has determined its subject matter and an area of agreement (even if it is only to “agree to disagree”), it is but a short step to a potentially far greater number of participants as that agreement is observed, discussed, shared, reinterpreted, contradicted or even ignored by others. Thus Keith Jenkins can describe history as “a shifting problematic discourse”, where both history and its participants are subjected to the ever present constraints of epistemology, methodology, ideology and practice.<sup>5</sup>

But the dialogues which define meaningful history are more than the mere retelling of a selection of happenings themselves the result of what some observers chose to record. There are no new statements in that.<sup>6</sup> Even when chronologically

<sup>1</sup> Carroll, L., *Alice in Wonderland*.

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge of course, that histories may be oral and pictographic. However in the sense that these too are symbolically represented, the term “written” will be deemed to include these forms of representation as well, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>3</sup> It might be possible of course to construct an history but whether it would be recognised as such or decodable by anyone other than a psychohistorian is a moot point.

<sup>4</sup> Elton, G.R. *Return to Essentials*, p3-4 see also White, H., “The Burden of History”, *History and Theory*, 5:1966:111-34, and Martin, R., “The Essential Difference between History and Science”, *History and Theory*, 36:(1997):1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Jenkins, K., *Re-Thinking History*, London, Routledge, 1991 p.26.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Munz puts it succinctly when he comments: “If we [merely] find out all there is to be found out about Charlemagne, we end up by knowing no more than he did.” *The Shapes of Time*, Middletown Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1977, p 252.

ordered they do not necessarily reveal a self-evident significance. Without some integrative synthesis which harnesses those events together and explains why that set of happenings is important, how they came about and perhaps even contributed to other important events<sup>7</sup>, they remain as inherently interesting as the various ones and zeroes in an isolated string of binary code or as Ankersmit's pile of leaves fallen in the Autumn of western historiography.<sup>8</sup> It is the historian's task to provide this synthesis.<sup>9</sup> But in doing so (*ie* in using statements to make a *statement*) historians will inevitably reflect something of their own life and world view however neutral they purport (and attempt) to be. How these histories are received, and what significance they are given will depend on how they "resonate" with the world and life view of the readers. These world views need not be identical, but must share at least some common points for any intentional "transmission" of meaning or effecting of change.

The most obvious way to provide for meaning in the understanding of history, is to interpret it in harmony with a presupposed 'philosophy of history'. That is, particular events will be analysed and explained as a part of a universal whole in accordance with a common unifying principle<sup>10</sup> which arises from "outside" the events themselves. Philosophies of history can be divided broadly into those which accept some telic process as an overall metaphysical framework and those which do not.<sup>11</sup> The latter find their necessary universals in abstract general laws which provide explanations of how and why events occurred. The former may also be highly abstract but more often than not are "concretised" into the "telescoped experiences" of mythical stories.<sup>12</sup> The particular events and the narrative the historian produces to unite them merely serve to illustrate and to "vindicate" the particular universal truth or myth. By definition then, it is the theory or myth itself rather than anything empirically observed from the events themselves which defines their overall meaning. This is true even if the theory of history one professes is simply that there is no meaning to history.<sup>13</sup>

Amongst the major religions, history is seen as the outworking of events within an overall pre-defined epistemological framework which may or may not allow for the significance for individual actions. This framework can be linear, highly circular, or somewhere in between. For the "revealed" religions, history's meaning is divinely appointed, moral and personal, and defined by a scriptural canon which

<sup>7</sup> Martin, R., "Objectivity and Meaning in History", *History and Theory*, 32(1993):25-50, p 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ankersmit, F.R., "Historiography and Postmodernism" *History and Theory*, 28(1989):137-153, p 142.

<sup>9</sup> After all, even fallen leaves derive their significance as leaves through their essential relationship with branches and trunks and the wholeness of the concept of "tree"! Otherwise the term is ontologically meaningless and they become not leaves but merely variously shaped and textured pieces of cellulose.

<sup>10</sup> Lowith, K., *Meaning in History*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1949, p 1.

<sup>11</sup> This distinction forms the basis for the often cited separation between "speculative" histories, which require an overall metaphysical goal and "analytical" histories which are more immediate. W.H. Dray, maintains the distinction is "widely accepted and basic". *Philosophy of History*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1964, p 1. Also see Walsh, W., *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, London, Hutchison, 1951, p 27 where "speculative history is defined as that which is concerned with the course of history as a whole." However Fain, H., *Between Philosophy and History*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1970, argues that the difference is primarily one of form, and that "speculative" history need be no less "analytic".

<sup>12</sup> See Munz, P., *The Shapes of Time*, particularly Chapter 5 "Myth: An Alternative Coverage", pp 113-150, especially pp 118-9.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart-Fox, M., *Rationale for the Theory of History*, MA Thesis, University of Queensland, 1979 "... but the alternative to any attempt to formulate a theory of history is either to deny that the past carries any overall "meaning"; or to accept on faith the meaning explicit in traditional views - Christian, Islamic, Marxist, or whatever." p 98.

provides the necessary historical and supra-historical keys to the integration of events and the nature of humanity. For Judaism, the canon comprises the writings of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings and the meaning of history is bound up with the divine plan for the chosen people. For the Christian, the canon comprises the Old and New Testaments, and the meaning of history is extended beyond the nationalistic and ethnic framework of Judaism to include the idea of redemption through the work of Jesus Christ whose incarnation validates and provides meaning to the linear progress of time and history.<sup>14</sup> In Islam the paradigm is altered sufficiently to allow for Mohammed to be the final revelation of the Divine. Despite internal differences of interpretation, all three faiths are strongly eschatological which provides a sense of meaning for the individual as well as the whole.

But “speculative” philosophy of history need not be tied to belief in a personal deity. The slow secularisation of the “teleological heritage of Christian theory of history”<sup>15</sup> gave rise to various alternative progress theories of history.<sup>16</sup> Hegel developed his notion of dialectical idealism in history as the process of a “cunning” *geist* coming to know itself, in the unfolding of freedom despite the actions of historical agents. Comte and those who followed him down the path of applied positivism generally saw the meaning of history in the various expressions of the progress and development of a benevolent but scientifically ordered society and of a Universal reason.<sup>17</sup> Earlier classical ideas of the circularity of history were metamorphosed into patterns of periodicity where civilisations were born, matured and died in convenient parallels to the biological world.<sup>18</sup> Even Marx who claimed to be totally empirical also saw the meaning of history in the outworking of the [highly eschatological, and teleologically deterministic] law of dialectical materialism.<sup>19</sup> This law created its own mechanism for progress through the ongoing class struggle for the control of the means of production.

With all teleological schemes, there is a sense in which the broad sweep of history can be pre-written. The end of history (its ultimate meaning) can therefore be anticipated, even if its future component events cannot. But such theories of historical meaning, if they can claim to be truly fundamental, must also be reducible to cover isolated and even apparently trivial events such as sparrows falling to the ground and the numbering of hairs on one’s head. They must wrestle with the difficult questions of determinism, freedom and choice. This tension is illustrated by the Reformational distinction between a first cause (*ie* God) and ontologically real second causes which

<sup>14</sup> Lowith, K., *Meaning in History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949, pp 166-170.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart-Fox, M., “Evolutionary Theory”, p 417.

<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1957, p 61 summarizes the transition as one whereby history could be interpreted as “the struggle between the dark powers of nature ... and the enlightened powers of reason...”. Cited in Clark, G.H. *Historiography*, pp 295-6.

<sup>17</sup> Berlin, I., *Historical Inevitability*, London, Oxford University Press, 1955, pp 3, and 17-22.

<sup>18</sup> For example the great “speculative” World histories of Spengler and Toynbee.

<sup>19</sup> Agassi, J., “Methodological Individualism”, in *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism*, J. O’Neil., ed., London, Heinemann, 1973, pp185-212. “What Marx said about class interest is hardly open to rational argument and is thus metaphysical...” p 191. However, compare Tosh, J., *The Pursuit of History*, London, Macmillan, 1991, who notes approvingly that “Marx’s thought was developed over some thirty years of research and reflection ... and ... it is entirely appropriate that Marx’s view should be referred to as historical materialism”. Bertrand Russell also provides a “Dictionary” to allow for the de-coding of Marx. The equivalents are: Yahweh = Dialectical Materialism, The Messiah = Marx, The Elect = The Proletariat, The Church = The Communist Party, The Second Coming = The Revolution, Hell = Punishment of the Capitalists, The Millennium = The Communist Commonwealth. *History of Western Philosophy*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1966., p. 361.

could be necessary, free or contingent.<sup>20</sup> It is here that teleological theories are often attacked.<sup>21</sup> However, given that current quantum theory is “happy” to allow for significant macroscopic events to be explained and given meaning by the aggregation of seemingly incoherent and “unexplainable” sub-microscopic events such as electron tunnelling, it is at least theoretically possible by extension, for history to have meaning at a macro level, even if it is not observable or explainable at the micro level.

But the concept of meaningful history has been strongly defended by those who do not see or do not need an overriding teleology. Such theories are genuinely evolutionary and seek to define meanings which do not require anything other than a minimalist “metaphysical” presupposition of empirical realism.<sup>22</sup> Meaningful history in this sense does not require any further ideology, nor the identification of necessary patterns, notions of progress, or values, but is found in the identification and understanding of the causal connections which contribute to an event.<sup>23</sup> The implicit teleology of earlier nineteenth century evolutionary theories is therefore avoided. These causal connections must not only be able to account for all that contributes to an agent’s behaviour, but also need to explain the origins of the idea meaning itself, mechanisms of transmission, and its relevance for a group as a whole.<sup>24</sup> History that is consciously written on these terms may itself be teleologically free. Given its presuppositions it must be. But surely it is still as presuppositionally conditioned as any other theory, and has no defence other than perhaps to powerfully invoke Ockham’s Razor, against the claim that its causal analysis, though internally methodologically and logically watertight, is merely describing events overseen by an “invisible hand”. (Which invocation must be adequately dealt with if evolutionary theory of history is to be challenged.)

Naturally enough for anyone who does not share the same universals as the historian, or at least share sufficient overlap so that there is the possibility of meaningful communication, the same events will be explained differently and infused with different meanings. What to one person may be a benevolent act of God may be cursed as the fickleness of fate, or bemusedly observed as merely the part of an evolutionary process. Even ‘progress’ needs to be carefully defined for what some call progress may be legitimately viewed by other sections of society as catastrophic decline. Furthermore the fact that amongst proponents of the same general theory of history the same events have given rise to a wide variety of interpretations has also discredited the idea of meaning through the application of theories of history.<sup>25</sup>

But if, according to Elton, the inappropriate importation of “ideological theory” into the nature of history is a threat to the work of the historian by forcing the

<sup>20</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 5:1 “Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely or contingently.”

<sup>21</sup> Thus William Dray commented “Toynbee in particular has at his disposal a range of historical data which has never been approached in the history of speculation. Unfortunately, this has scarcely been matched with corresponding philosophical insight.”, *Philosophy of History*, cited in Clark, *Historiography*, p 102.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart-Fox, M., “Rationale for the theory of History”, p 3.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart-Fox, M., “Rationale for the theory of History” p 28: “all senses other than that derived from causal connections are not necessary ... and this latter sense is sufficient alone to make the past intelligible as a totality and as a unity.”

<sup>24</sup> For a rigorous application of evolutionary theory to the questions of meaning, culture, memory, etc, see Stuart-Fox, M., “Evolutionary Theory”, chapters 6-10, pp 170-336.

<sup>25</sup> But, for example, Munz, P., *The Shapes of Time*, p 258ff who recognises this but defends a notion of ongoing progress freed from the ugliness of its nineteenth century constraints.

evidence into pre-determined explanatory schemes, there is he says, another more devastating challenge.<sup>26</sup> Paradoxically this threat also grew out of deliberate attempts to deny the existence of any metaphysical reality and remain entirely empirical.

For if it is relatively easy to accept, and to some extent surmount the limitations of relativism imposed upon the “writing” of history through bias, the availability and quality of sources, and the choice of explanatory theory, is history still held in the separate, more foreboding prison of the relativity of language? The question has exercised minds for a long time! On the basis of his law of non-contradiction, Aristotle declared that ultimately all words could be given singular meanings.<sup>27</sup> What could be put into words was then capable of singular meaning and being recognised by others. Similarly, the medieval theological debates between Realism and Nominalism arose because of the need to explain how words could be used as legitimate signifiers for abstract Universals. Aquinas’ theory of analogy provided a justification for the use of analogical language in the communication of “real” concepts not otherwise describable on the basis of empirical observation.<sup>28</sup> Though theological in intent, the principle is applicable to the use of language in conveying real (and synthetic) historical concepts. Order and correspondence - the very thing meaningful history requires - remained. But these were pre-Kantian days, when the subject and object of knowing did not interfere, and the *ding-an-sich* could be known.<sup>29</sup>

But what if there is *no* order, and *no* correspondence between words and things at all? (ie if even Kant’s *a priori* categories are denied?). Then events can be legitimately “existentialized”<sup>30</sup> at will, and separated from their historical context, for that too must be unconnected and potentially meaningless. Furthermore events themselves cannot be definitively represented by words. As Nietzsche later noted, if God is dead then not only can there be no metaphysics, but there need also be no order in the universe and *no correspondence* between words and things.<sup>31</sup> Once this epistemological nihilism is granted, histories, as discourses, are immediately open to re-assessment.

So if, as Hayden White in following Nietzsche<sup>32</sup> maintained “the historian serves no-one well by constructing a special continuity between the present world and that which preceded it,”<sup>33</sup> it is quite understandable that there need be no significance in past historical events other than those meanings constantly re-created in the ongoing series of “presents”. Apart from curiosity, there need be no value for past meanings in history except in so far as these meanings help us to recreate the new meaning for the present. Whatever and wherever today’s fallen leaves might have been yesterday is of little importance. Today they are on the ground and make a mess! To the extent that it exists, meaning in history now becomes a product of its present representation, rather than anything which arises out of the events themselves.

<sup>26</sup> Elton, G.R., *Return to Essentials*, p 27.

<sup>27</sup> Thus the only possible logical course for one who was inclined to doubt its universal applicability was to say nothing!

<sup>28</sup> Brown, C., *Christianity and Western Thought*, Leicester, Inter Varsity Press, 1990.pp 129-134.

<sup>29</sup> But even Kant, for all his empiricism still believed that “human actions are as much under the control of universal laws of nature as any other physical phenomena.” Kant, I., *The Idea of a Universal History*, cited in Clark, G. *Historiography: Secular and Religious*, p 34. Besides, *a priori* categories (ie Universals) and imperatives still existed.

<sup>30</sup> *ie* in the sense that the “is-ness” of an historical event precedes the “essence” or meaning of it.

<sup>31</sup> Bebbington, D., *Patterns in History*, p 191.

<sup>32</sup> Kellner, H., “A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism” *History and Theory*, Beiheft 19, pp 1-29, especially pp 7 and 16.

<sup>33</sup> White, H., “The Burden of History”, *History and Theory* 5(1966):111-34, p 134.

In demonstrating this, White has identified an elaborate structure of historical literature in an attempt to provide a basis for meaning. Underlying the production of histories lies a “metahistorical” structure quite separate from whatever philosophical and theoretical concepts (and there are only three: formal argument, ideological implication and emplotment) condition a historian’s explanatory narrative.<sup>34</sup> This metahistorical understructure of a narrative characterises its literary form (or trope) as one of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. Each is applicable to the three concepts above, thus establishing a matrix of possible meaning structures.<sup>35</sup> Finally White argues, the historian *prefigures* the meaning of an event through the conscious choice of one of these defined literary structures. The only grounds for preferring one [version of history] are moral or aesthetic.<sup>36</sup> But histories are more than mere “verbal structures in the form of prose”. They purport to be explanatory models of the past and as such much of their structure will be defined by the nature of the events described. While the nature of style and the literary structure can be an indication of an historian’s own disposition towards the subject, (and in this way also be a vehicle for the transmission of meaning),<sup>37</sup> White has not shown (other than by his presupposed and conveniently illustrated matrix of meanings) that this must necessarily be so.<sup>38</sup>

Others have pushed beyond the linguistic and structuralist implications of Saussure to the point whereby all “events” are interpreted textually. “There is nothing outside the text” Derrida declares.<sup>39</sup> But this “text” only ever reflects perceptions and text can only ever be interpreted personally. History has become hermeneutics where even the intent of the author (to the extent that it could have been self consciously perceived as intent!!) is lost, and the search for it as a basis for meaning is irrelevant.<sup>40</sup> Meaning for history then, (and by extension, for anything “knowable”) resides in the mind of the participant, built entirely upon individual perceptions. But if meaning simply resides in the mind of the perceiver, then everything itself is inherently meaningless, and this is paradoxical.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore there can be an unlimited set of arbitrary meanings imposed upon any event. Here is post-modernist relativity with a vengeance! But as Eugene Golob wryly observes, given the constraints of practical history and the reality of evidence “the presupposition that people acted with each other on this planet in times past seems a reasonable one. All historians employ it, and most poets as well.”<sup>42</sup>

But the post-modernist reminder of the limits of certainty and the legitimate possibility of re-centering historical knowledge and explanation are helpful correctives to absolutist histories. Those previously marginalized or ignored have opportunity to gain a foothold in the global struggle for recognition and human identity. The postmodern reading of ‘meaning of history’ thus becomes a vehicle for creating ‘meaning in history’, and the legitimation of cultural distinctives and

<sup>34</sup> White, H., *Metahistory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, p x.

<sup>35</sup> Besides *Metahistory*, this is well illustrated in his “Interpretation in History”, *New Literary History*, 4(1972-73): 281-314.

<sup>36</sup> White, H., *Metahistory*, p 433.

<sup>37</sup> For meaning at both causal and “higher” levels can be conveyed by direct statement, indicated by the disposition of the writer, or implied simply by the nature of the narrative of the events.

<sup>38</sup> Mandelbaum, M., “The Presuppositions of Metahistory”, *History and Theory* Bieheft 19, pp 39-54, p 45.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, J., *Of Grammatology*, G.Chakravorty, trans., Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976

<sup>40</sup> Himmelfarb, G., “Some Reflections on the New History”, *American Historical Review*, 94(1989):661-670. provides a clear critique of attempts to re-centre and deconstruct the past in the writing of contemporary histories.

<sup>41</sup> Stuart-Fox, M., “Rationale for theory of History” p 34.

<sup>42</sup> Golob, E., “The Irony of Nihilism”, *History and Theory* Bieheft 19, pp 55-65, p 61.

collective memories.<sup>43</sup> Meaningful history can no longer be tied to a master culture such as that described by Edward Said as Europe's "universalising historicism".<sup>44</sup> However, in the absence of some sort of "master narrative", even a minimalist one, the new empowerments provided by this plurality of 'meanings in history' do not have any inherent reason to cohere.

But all deconstruction and literary criticism aside, helpful and cautionary as some of the insights may be,<sup>45</sup> the importance of the meaning of history is not in itemizing disjointed events, or in aesthetics. The question of meaning in history is one of "fit".<sup>46</sup> It begins when an historian determines to explain an event (or a sequence of events) in a way that is not immediately self evident, and which is considered more complete or appropriate to the nature of the evidence than any previous explanation. But simple explanation may not be sufficient. Just as words can be spoken and analysed according to grammatical laws, but not understood,<sup>47</sup> so too it is possible for historical events to be related and "explained" by the identification of various causal mechanisms, but still be without any wider meaning. If whole sentences are expected to convey more than their grammatical structure, parsing and lexical meanings of their components then so may the textual record of events. Meaning comes from context and the relationship to the whole, which may be metaphysical, defined by one or more naturalistic laws, "textual", or a combination of all three.<sup>48</sup>

If events in history are understood as the outworking or demonstration of some covering law or laws, then the issue of meaning need progress no further than the validation of the laws themselves.<sup>49</sup> It can be sufficient to know that this event "means" that the "law" is proved. At this basic level, elements of human subjectivity are reduced. Whatever else is added by way of meaning or morality is merely a matter of choice or utility, and is open to change and the manipulations of power elites. But if God is also at work in a rational observable and ordered universe, then the meaning of history is more than simply causal, and not optional, and "I" must in some way relate to Him. The understanding of history is no less complex, but perhaps there is also a "Text".

<sup>43</sup> Briesach, E., *Historiography*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1983, p 411.

<sup>44</sup> O'Hanlon, R., and Washbrook, D.W., "The Third World after Orientalism", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34(1992):141-167.

<sup>45</sup> Thus Elton, "Much of what faces us now took its origin in the perfectly correct reaction against simple-minded notions of objectivity..." *Return to Essentials*, p 28.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, R., "Objectivity and Meaning", pp 43-44: "We seek explanation for the meaning of historical episodes, primarily (but not only) when we are puzzled because something doesn't "fit". ... Once it is (contextualized) we understand what it means."

<sup>47</sup> for example, it is possible to accurately parse a sentence in a foreign language through a knowledge of the structure of the language, but not understand the meanings of the words.

<sup>48</sup> Just how the elements are combined formally will in theory depend on one's world view. But at a more immediate level, this formal combination can be "overridden" by perceptions of knowledge, value, need, and of will. See Stover, R., *The Nature of Historical Knowledge*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1967. The same is true for the historian as well as the reader.

<sup>49</sup> For if an observation of the workings of these laws implies a meaning, or the necessity of a meaning beyond them, then this is teleological, even if the teleos itself may not be presently determinable.

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