



2025

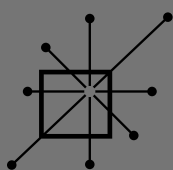
V.18

# História da Historiografia

International Journal of Theory  
and History of Historiography



ISSN 1983-9928



Sociedade Brasileira  
de Teoria e História da  
Historiografia



UNIRIO



UFOP



Special Issue

SI

Koselleck, Danto, and Total History





# Koselleck, Danto, and Total History

---

Ralph Shain

[rshain@missouristate.edu](mailto:rshain@missouristate.edu)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8401-5773> 

Department of Political Science and Philosophy, Missouri State University, United States

**Abstract**

This paper argues that there are still lessons that theorists of history can learn from the linguistic turn in philosophy--in particular from its most influential practitioner, Wittgenstein. I take a Wittgensteinian approach in examining the concept of "total history" as it appears in the work of Koselleck and Danto. I argue that the concept is a pseudo-concept which has effects on their work even though each argues for the impossibility of its achievement. The implications are drawn for considering history as ongoing inquiry and the multiplicity of the types of questions that history seeks to answer. This approach avoids philosophical pseudo-problems and is a more assured way of establishing "history in the plural", the phrase that has become attached to Koselleck's work by his partisans.

**Keywords**

Philosophy of History, Linguistic Turn, Reinhart Koselleck, Wittgenstein, Danto



Much of Reinhart Koselleck's work can be thought of as bringing a linguistic turn to theory of history. Koselleck's main idea, that historical questions and accounts are posed in language at a particular time in a particular context, converges with Wittgenstein's idea about philosophical questions and accounts. Thus it seems worthwhile to approach his work from a Wittgensteinian perspective, the perspective which seeks to dissolve philosophical problems, seeing them as arising from confusions. In doing so, we will see that Koselleck doesn't take the linguistic turn far enough. Danto's work on history converges with Koselleck's in their concern with retroactivity in doing history. While Danto's work in general is not a product of the linguistic turn, his philosophy of history can be taken to have been influenced by it owing to the prominence and centrality of his concept of "narrative sentences". As with Koselleck, my argument with regard to Danto is that he did not take the linguistic turn far enough.

I will consider the concept of "total history" in Koselleck's essay "Social History and Conceptual History" and in Danto's *Narration and Knowledge* as incoherent, a philosophical confusion, and will argue on Wittgensteinian grounds that it is a pseudo-concept. Although this concept might seem to have a very minor role in Koselleck's and Danto's overall theories, addressing it will lead us into important issues--such as the goal(s) of historical discourse.

## Linguistic Turns

The term "linguistic turn" has a broader meaning and somewhat different valence among theorists of history than it does in its earlier use in Anglo-American academic philosophy--the latter epitomized in Rorty's classic anthology *The Linguistic Turn*. In the expanded meaning used by theorists of history, theorists often examine the linguistic or textual dimensions of history, but not the linguistic dimensions of their own theorizing as prescribed by the prior linguistic turn in philosophy--most notably by the later philosophy of its most famous and influential practitioner, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Although Rorty's anthology is referred to as a landmark by Judith Surkis in her article on the linguistic turn in history, the issues presented in it are not prominent in most such discussions. One reason for this is pointed out by Surkis. The anthology presents--and one should note the expression used as its title gets its meaning from--philosophers in or arising from the analytic tradition, not the Continental philosophers of greatest interest to historians (Surkis, p. 705).

One theorist of history who does address analytic language philosophy, and indeed builds a significant part of his argument on that philosophy, is Frank Ankersmit. In setting out a



position in *Historical Representation* which he characterizes as the position of the linguistic turn, Ankersmit begins by citing Wittgenstein:

Philosophical problems arise when, as in Wittgenstein's famous formulation, "language goes on holiday" and begins to create a pseudo world in addition to the world that language has to do deal with in its ordinary workdays (Ankersmit, 2001, p. 30).

But this is misleading. He builds his "linguistic turn" entirely from the philosophy of Quine, specifically the attack on the synthetic/analytic distinction and the concept of "semantic ascent". Only 15 pages later, tacked on at the end, does Wittgenstein resurface:

Finally, the linguistic turn is not only to be associated with a claim about the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths but also with a philosophical method. The philosophical method in question is that many, if not all, philosophical problems can be solved, or rather be dissolved, by a careful analysis of the language in which these problems were stated (p. 45).

Ankersmit then hastens to clarify his point through an application of the synthetic/analytic distinction and an explanation of his distinction between representation and description, which would never have been allowed by Wittgenstein in the form Ankersmit presents it. This happens as well in the two or three other occasions in the book when Wittgenstein surfaces - immediately he is followed by a non-Wittgensteinian example or explanation, and thus disappears. This disappearance is complete when Ankersmit interprets Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical approach to be a variation of a particular standard philosophical theory - linguistic transcendentalism (p. 64, 160)<sup>1</sup>. Ankersmit is committed to theorizing in the conventional philosophical way opposed by Wittgenstein.

Given this commitment, it is pointless to go through all of the points in Ankersmit's arguments which fall afoul of Wittgenstein's strictures. One finds them in nearly every step of his arguments on any epistemological issue. So I will limit myself to just one, the aforementioned distinction between representation and description, because this is central to his entire project. As he says in introducing the book: "The main shortcoming of (most) contemporary philosophy of history is that it takes description - instead of representation - as its model in its attempt to deal

---

<sup>1</sup> He reiterates this point in *Sublime Historical Experience* (Ankersmit, 2005, p. 65).



with historical writing (p. 12). Yes, Wittgenstein criticizes the pervasive consideration and reduction of all thinking about language to descriptive language, but the problem is that one sets up one type of language on which one models all of language. The problem is in the use of models, and this problem is not resolved by replacing one model with another or by multiplying the number of models. Ankersmit remains trapped by a picture of how philosophy must be done, and that picture is one that Wittgenstein opposed.

One analytic philosopher who took Ankersmit to task for his treatment of the linguistic turn is Paul Roth. But one will be disappointed if one is looking for a Wittgensteinian approach. Although Roth attributes the arguments he presents as derived from “Quine, later Wittgenstein, and Davidson” (2013, p. 553) and “Quine, Sellars, Wittgenstein and Davidson” (554), this is misleading. As Ankersmit points out, Roth’s view is entirely based on Quine (Ankersmit, 2013, p. 571). Wittgenstein’s disappearance is subtler than in Ankersmit, but clearly marked for those familiar with the history of Wittgenstein reception. Roth limits Wittgenstein to one specific point concerning rule-following, which is marked with the following footnote: “Current discussion centers on Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following and normativity, and has been heavily influenced by Kripke’s (1982) work. The secondary literature here has become immense” (p. 567). Kripke interpreted Wittgenstein as presenting a skeptical argument, and this reinterpretation of Wittgenstein as a conventional philosopher triggered the avalanche of secondary literature which entirely occluded Wittgenstein himself. Roth’s paper is a document of this occlusion - Kripke’s book appears in its bibliography, but the *Philosophical Investigations* does not.

One doesn’t find anything different when analytic philosophers approach Koselleck. In his review of Koselleck’s *Zeitschichten*, John Zammito provides a lengthy reconstruction of Koselleck’s philosophy which stresses that it is a transcendental philosophy. Then his own position is presented as a “moderate (Deweyan) Hegelianism” (2004, p. 135) which highlights Quine’s underdetermination thesis (p. 131) as a model of a “non-foundationalist, naturalist historicism” (p. 135). The Wittgensteinian approach is non-foundationalist; the rest of the views combined by Zammito are epicycles introduced to reach a conclusion more directly reached by Wittgenstein.

The points made so far are sufficient to explain why theorists of history who turn their attention to their linguistic turn have missed Wittgenstein. But I think there is another reason which will not be found in the literature, specific to Koselleck and Danto, equally or more important as the above, for why theorists of history think it unnecessary to turn to Wittgenstein. Addressing this reason will help explain why I have chosen Koselleck and Danto for this paper.

Metaphysical errors are quite properly considered as usually following from atemporal philosophical views. It is reasonable to think that philosophers like Koselleck and Danto, who



don't merely consider issues of temporality but are extremely philosophically sophisticated in their consideration of temporality and make it the focus of their theories, couldn't possibly make the sort of mistakes that one needs Wittgensteinian techniques to diagnose. Such thinking is especially plausible given that Wittgenstein's response to Augustine in the "Blue Book", in which he attempts to dissolve problems concerning philosophy of time, is not very convincing (Wittgenstein, 1968, 26-27). These considerations are what make Koselleck and Danto especially interesting. Considerations of temporality, I believe and have argued elsewhere (Shain, 2017, 269-274) can helpfully supplement but do not supercede Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The argument of the present paper is that theorists of history, even those who focus on temporality, do still have something to learn from Wittgenstein.

## Koselleck and Total History

There is no real discussion in the secondary literature of the concept of total history in Koselleck's work. Koselleck has been taken to be the champion of "histories in the plural", most notably in Niklas Olsen's monograph on Koselleck's work, and this view of his philosophy has not received significant challenge. In order to see why this is so, and why this view is open to question, I will examine the comparative study of Koselleck and Ricoeur by Roberta Picardi. Picardi's study is useful for this purpose because she explains how the avoidance of total history -- or at least one version of "total history"- has been central to his work from the 1960's. It is also useful because I think it is typical of how Koselleck scholars give him too much credit in their belief that he avoids problems related to total history. From the fact that Koselleck was constantly aware of and successfully avoided one version of total history, he is given credit for avoiding all versions.

Picardi explains how Ricoeur and Koselleck attended a colloquium organized by Gadamer in Heidelberg in 1969 at which Karl Löwith presented a critique of Heidegger's *Being and Time* in which Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik* resulted in a view of history which fell back on a Hegelian, totalizing view. In Picardi's view, Koselleck and Ricoeur accepted the force of Löwith's critique. As transcendental philosophers whose theories both took Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik* as their starting point, they developed their theories in - differing - ways to avoid this problem.

Specifically with regard to total history, Picardi says that "[c]omme Löwith, Koselleck refuse également de concevoir l'histoire comme une totalité achevée, ce qui était déjà un des fils conducteurs de ses premiers travaux" (Picardi, 2017 p. 127). She then notes that he devotes a paragraph to the "impossibility of total history" (p. 127, n. 38). Each time the issue surfaces, Picardi refers to total history as a completed or accomplished totality: "*Contre la prétention des*





*philosophes modernes de l'histoire à concevoir l'histoire comme une totalité achevée - à la manière hégélienne - Koselleck et Ricoeur explorent tous deux une voie alternative...*" (p. 136). Near the end of the paper, she notes that Koselleck "avoids in a deliberate manner every teleological orientation, based on Lowith's presupposition that any reference to a telos of history, conceived in any manner, compromises the allowance of the plurality of histories" (p. 143). In contrast, Ricoeur - believing that Koselleck's solution leads to relativism--continues to "think history as one" as a limit-idea and regulative ideal (p. 141-142).

Clearly, Picardi does not take "total history" to be a problematic, or even complex, concept. She accepts that avoiding it in its maximal, Hegelian form is sufficient for to say that one doesn't "conceive of history as a totality." So even Ricoeur, who maintained a conception of "the past, conceived as the sum of what actually happened" which is "out of reach of the historian" (Ricoeur, year, p. 98) and explicitly conceives of the impossibility of accessing the total past as analogous to the unattainability of Kantian noumena (p. 99), is said to not conceive of history as a totality<sup>2</sup>. But the question to be considered is not whether these thinkers thought that total history was possible in terms of being known, or whether they rejected some aspect or aspects of the maximalist conception of total history (such as teleology), but whether they maintained the concept in some form by which their thinking was affected by the concept; that is, whether they drew epistemological or other substantive conclusions from their reflections on the concept.

Picardi doesn't address the use that Koselleck makes of the concept in the essay in which he relies on it; his statement that it is impossible to achieve is sufficient. Below I will examine the specific passages and show that they do not support the sort of sweeping claim that Picardi makes.

## Total history in Koselleck and Danto

Koselleck uses the concept of total history in making an argument for the special position (and separation<sup>3</sup>) of social history and conceptual history vis-à-vis various branches of history. He argues that social history and conceptual history are not mere regions or branches of history on a par with others because they are found in all regions of history and thus are closer to the ideal of total history:

---

2 Given our consideration of Danto, it is interesting that Ricoeur also protests against Danto's argument against speculative history and tries to hold out for the possibility of a meaningful (theological) discourse about the "whole of history" (p. 144).

3 I wish to thank a reviewer for this journal for assistance on this point.



There is no history without societal formations and the concepts by which they define and seek to meet their challenges, whether reflexively or self-reflexively; without them, it is impossible to experience and to interpret history, to represent or recount it. In this sense, society and language belong to the metahistorical premises without which *Geschichte* and *Historie* are unthinkable. Social-historical and conceptual-historical theories, questions, and methods thus refer to all possible areas within the discipline of history. Thus, too, the wish to conceive a “total history” occasionally sneaks in. Though for pragmatic reasons the empirical investigations of social or conceptual historians concern limited topics, this self-limitation does not lessen the claim to generality; it follows from a theory of possible history, which must presuppose society and language (Koselleck, 2002, p. 23).

Having used the concept, he goes on to say that total history is impossible - that it is not possible “so far as content is concerned, to write a ‘total history’ or even to conceive it” (p. 23). One might, on the basis of Koselleck’s attribution of the focus of historians on limited topics to “pragmatic reasons” in the above quote, interpret the impossibility of achieving total history as merely an empirical matter. However, for Koselleck this impossibility seems to go beyond mere empirical possibility, although it is not clear in what way he conceives of this as a conceptual impossibility. But it is clear that it is tied up with the fact that concepts change over time which precludes the writing of total history. Koselleck expresses this in two ways. First, there is a “disaccord” between social history and conceptual history:

When social history and conceptual history are referred to each other, the differential determination between them relativizes the claim of each to generality. History neither becomes resolved in the mode of comprehending it, nor is conceivable without such comprehension (p. 24).

This disaccord results from the fact that concepts used to understand an event or social formation in the past may not have been available to the those alive at the time and thus were not part of their self-conception. Second, the concepts historians use in the future may differ from those used by historians now. Koselleck concludes the essay “Time and History” with the observation: “It may therefore be that at other times one will speak differently about historical times than we have done this afternoon” (Koselleck, 2002, p. 114).



It is clear from other essays that this *horaire decalage* of language is at the heart of Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*. In "*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History":

All historiography operates on two levels: it either investigates circumstances already articulated at an earlier period in language, or it reconstructs circumstances which were not articulated into language earlier but which can be worked up with the help of specific methods and indices. ...In either case, *Begriffsgeschichte* makes plain the difference prevailing between past and present conceptualization, whether it translates the older usage and works up its definition for modern research, or whether the modern construction of scientific concepts is examined for its historical viability (Koselleck, 1985, p. 90).

This retroactivity is the subject of "*Neuzeit*: Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement," where Koselleck says that retroactivity of later terms places us "in a methodologically irresolvable dilemma: that every history, while in process and as occurrence, is something other than what its linguistic articulation can establish; but that this "other" in turn can only be made visible through the medium of language" (Koselleck, 1985, p. 232). After tracing the origins of this historical perspectivalism to the 18th Century and establishing an additional meaning to the term '*Neuzeit*', Koselleck notes the results as an impossibility of "adequately establishing" the history of the present and an "incomplete totality of history" (p. 255)<sup>4</sup>.

This point needs to be stressed - whereas, the treatment of history as an "incomplete totality" show that some sense of the unity of history remains with Koselleck. In addition to his reference to history as an "incomplete totality" in the *Neuzeit* essay, in the conclusion of "History, Histories, and the Formal Structures of Time," where he refers to the necessity of conceiving history as a totality: "Likewise, the modern concept of history draws its ambivalence from the necessity (even if only decreed aesthetically) of conceiving of history as a totality that can never be complete, for as we know, the future remains unknown" (Koselleck, 1985, p. 104). When Koselleck was specifically asked about his reputation for championing histories in the plural, his answer was quite equivocal. Yes, he opposes idealist systems because of their claims to totalize history and the resulting political implications of that claim.

---

<sup>4</sup> In the concluding section of this essay, Koselleck argues that the expectation of dramatic future change led Enlightenment thinkers to use new concepts "ideologically", and this idea is the basis for Koselleck's claim that *Begriffsgeschichte* will allow for political critique. Examining this idea is beyond the scope of this essay.



One can deploy the idea of a plurality of histories theoretically, in opposition to these philosophies, and this is justifiable to my mind, but with an important caveat: ...that the multiplicity of single histories... nonetheless also points to a single common history... (Koselleck, 2018, p. 251).

He says that this single common history is a problem, so the full quote is not quite as straightforward as my excerpt. But the equivocality is my point; I am claiming that total history is a significant and important idea for Koselleck, but I am not trying to specify the contours of this idea for him - it doesn't seem to be especially clear - nor how this idea affects other areas of his thought.

Arthur Danto also discusses "total history" in *Narration and Knowledge*. There is a difference in terminology between Danto and Koselleck; Danto limits the use of the term "total history" to speculative philosophy of history which claims knowledge of future events as well as explaining the past, of which Marx's history is his prime example, and uses the term "total past" to refer to all past facts, which is what I take Koselleck to usually mean by "total history"<sup>5</sup>. The distinction hardly matters, not only because it is merely terminological, but also because Danto applies the same argument for the impossibility of attaining a total history to attaining a history of the total past. I will follow Koselleck's usage and refer to what Danto calls the total past as total history.

Danto's argument for the impossibility of total history, as is well known, involves the way historical descriptions are made up of narrative sentences which refer to events which happen later than the event being described. While Koselleck doesn't provide specificity as to why change in concepts used by historians makes total history impossible, Danto, in setting forth one variation of his argument, does, and thus provides an argument which fills in the gap in Koselleck's discussion. Danto's example involves intellectual historians who look back to classical texts and find elements of Romanticism in them. Historians could not do this, according to Danto, without a concept of romanticism, and that came centuries later than the texts being considered (Danto, 1985, p. 168-169). "To be alive to the historical significance of events as they happen... It will be necessary to know which future events are relevant, and this requires predicting the interests of future historians" (p. 169). Rather than speculate about what Koselleck might have had in mind, I will take Danto's argument as the explanation.

---

<sup>5</sup> Usually, but not always, as the quote which refers to the future in the previous paragraph shows.



There remains a difference between Koselleck's view and Danto's regarding total history. Although both agree on the essential impossibility of attaining or conceiving a total history, Koselleck grants enough legitimacy to the concept to use it as some sort of regulative ideal, even if he doesn't explicitly say so as Ricoeur does. Danto believes the essential impossibility of attaining total history disqualifies it as a regulative ideal, and wishes to substitute the task of organizing the past as the aim of history. I will argue that Danto's view of history runs afoul of some of the same conceptual confusions as Koselleck's, but this will require a few additional steps.

### Context and "totality"

One need not follow Wittgenstein's claim that all philosophical problems are pseudo-problems, and hence that all philosophical theorizing and argument is nonsense, in order to think that Wittgenstein's views apply to the present case. I noted earlier that some problems in the philosophy of time are not pseudo-problems. Nor are problems in social theory. Wittgenstein fell into the error that he pointed out as a key flaw in philosophy--the overgeneralization of claims. However, I am contending that Koselleck's claim that "history does not resolve" is philosophical nonsense, as is "total history".

Koselleck's adoption of the linguistic turn focuses on one aspect of the context of historical utterance, the meaning of concepts used in description. That "context" is a temporal term is a significant point of Wittgenstein's. However, adopting Wittgensteinian insights further would require that one consider the context of one's philosophical terms as well as other aspects of the context of historical utterance.

"Total" and "all" are words like any others - their meaning derives from their use. In some contexts and uses, the words have a very clear meaning. If a pie has been cut into pieces, to say that someone took all of the pieces, or all of the remaining pieces, has a readily understood sense. These unproblematic contexts tend to involve, to use J.L. Austin's expression, "middle-sized dry goods". Even here, failure to consider context can lead to problems, counting all books can be problematic if one fails to consider the context as this might mean all physical copies or all of each specific book published. The phrase "all books" might include magazines if used in instructions to someone to pack all of the books on a specific set of shelves, otherwise it would usually not include magazines.

When it comes to pieces of pie or books, the terms "all" or "every" usually have a clear meaning. But when used with other terms, these words have a much less clear meaning. Wittgenstein, in the "Blue Book", says,



a treatise on pomology may be called incomplete if there exist kinds of apples which it doesn't mention. Here we have a standard of completeness in nature. Supposing on the other hand that we have a game resembling that of chess but simpler, no pawns being used in it. Should we call this game incomplete? Or should we call a game more complete than chess if it in some way contained chess but added new elements?" (Witgenstein, 1960, p. 19).

"All details", "all meanings", "all facts", "all events", "all narratives" are phrases where the meaning of "all" is much more difficult to discern. Here purpose and context will have to be closely scrutinized, but of course, in their philosophical use they are removed from context. If one tries to solve this problem by saying that philosophical use aims to satisfy all contexts and all purposes-- this obviously is question-begging, since "all contexts" and "all purposes" are also phrases where the meaning of "all" is highly questionable. When someone says, "tell me everything" about some event, they mean for their informant to provide a comprehensive, or detailed, or elaborate account. They do not mean to mention every insignificant detail, relevant or irrelevant. Danto makes this point (although he does not draw all of the conclusions from it that I do):

Suppose I wish to know what happened at a court trial. I may ask my informant to leave nothing out, to tell me all. But I should be dismayed if, in addition to telling me of the speeches of the attorneys, the emotional attitudes of the litigants, the behavior of the judge, he were to tell me how many flies there were in the courtroom, and show me a complicated map of the precise orbits in which they flew, a vast tangle of epicycles. Or mention all the coughs and sneezes. The story would get submerged in all these details. When I say, then: 'tell me the whole story, and leave nothing out' I must be (and am) understood to mean: leave out nothing significant: whatever belongs in the story I want to be told of it (Danto, 1985, p. 131).

Furthermore, the phrase "the aim of history", which Danto uses (and which later we will see applies to Koselleck as well) creates confusion in two ways. First, it is ambiguous. It means both the minimal conditions for discourse to be history - how history differs from other endeavors--and the goal of practicing historians - which involves the writing of good or superb histories. The latter includes the former but goes significantly beyond it. The easiest way to see this is to consider the importance of new findings in historical investigation. One may investigate the events which took place at a certain point in the past and write an account of these events which comes up with no new findings. This would clearly be an historical account, but it would not be an



original or significant or important historical account. (More will be said about this below.) In short, it is important to distinguish the conditions for an account being history from the conditions for an account being good history.

All historical utterance takes place in a context of inquiry. At the time of investigation, there is what is known and unknown, certain and uncertain, hypothesized or suspected, investigated or ignored, and so on, about the topic of investigation. All discourse about the past takes place within a context of previous investigations and discourse about the past and thus the state of investigation at the time of utterance makes up the context of historical discourse. The minimal condition for discourse to be history, then, is that it answer a question about the past. According to the account presented here that is both a necessary and sufficient condition.

Bringing the specific question to the forefront in reflections on historical practice is not new. "*Probleme-histoire*" was a key term for Lucian Febvre and consequently for the *Annales* school. With *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, Febvre placed "*probleme-histoire*" in the title. Braudel also saw his work as problem oriented history: "The framework of research is the problem..." (quoted by Hexter, p. 105) J.H. Hexter noted the conflict between Braudel's ideas of total history and problem-oriented history (p. 105-107), and Hexter advocated vigorously for problem-oriented history (p. 140-144)<sup>6</sup>.

The view that I am presenting also resonates with one put forth by Ricoeur in a different context. According to Ricoeur "...it has to be affirmed that the initiative in history does not belong to the document (...) but to the question posed by the historian. This question takes logical priority in historical activity" (p. 99). Ricoeur makes this assertion in concluding an epistemological discussion, one which appears as a pseudo-question from the Wittgensteinian viewpoint. The emphasis on the questions, which I agree with wholeheartedly, should not be thought of as having "logical" priority. It should be considered as the context of history as a practice.

The second way the phrase "the aim of history" leads one astray is by collapsing the multiple types of questions, and thus multiplicity of aims, into a single one. There are (at least) 5 or 6 types of that historians try to answer, and answering any of these questions is sufficient for discourse to be history. These six are:

a. What happened?

---

<sup>6</sup> Following Hexter, Peter Burke asked Braudel about this problem and Braudel side-stepped the question (Burke, p. 39).



What happened in Plato's academy? What happened at Wounded Knee? What did Marcel Duchamp do on February 3, 1948? Who was "Jack the Ripper"? These are typical historical questions of this form. An answer to any of these questions will provide historical discourse, and although it sounds odd, one can say that it provides a history. One should think of it as analogous to reporting the news and its similar questions "What happened today?" or "What is happening now?" Any single news item is "news", and any single historical item is history. Thus, contra Danto, a history can be a single sentence. Was Rabelais an atheist? This question could have been answered in a single word, as well as in the large book by Febvre. Who carried out the Katyn massacre? At one time, this was an important historical question<sup>7</sup>. The answer, whether provided in a single word or a lengthy book, is historical discourse.

One key implication of this point is that histories don't have to be narratives, as has been contended and extensively discussed - so extensively that some theorists take the discussion of the narrativity of history to be coextensive with the linguistic turn. I cannot go into this topic at length, but would note the significance of Roger Chartier's position on this point. Although Chartier is a member of the *Annales* movement which had as motivation replacing narrative history, Chartier strongly advocates for the claim that all history is narrative, repeating this point several times in his collection of essays *Au bord de la falaise* (Chartier, 2009, p. 104, 126, 197, 293-294, 373). He cites Certeau, Ranciere, and White in support of this view, but it is only Ricoeur's reading of Braudel that he discusses at length and to whom he continually returns. Since he takes Ricoeur's discussion to be definitive, it is worth considering very briefly.

An examination of Ricoeur's reading of Braudel's *Mediterranean* shows the fragility of his conclusion. Ricoeur admits that the three levels of Braudel's work lack narrative coherence and are structured not by events but structures and conjunctures. The "trend" tends to take the place of a plot (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 213-214). His claim is that it is when taken together "that the work's three levels constitute a quasi-plot" (p. 214). How "quasi" is this quasi-plot? It is implicit: "...Braudel proceeds analytically, by separating planes, leaving to the interferences between them the task of producing an implicit image of the whole" (p. 215). It is virtual: "In this way a virtual quasi-plot is produced..." (p. 215). "Having said this, we must admit that the overall plot that constitutes the unity of the work remains a virtual plot" (p. 216). It is suggested: "With one stroke, the fabric of the plot is already suggested..." (p. 215). It is an entirely new type of plot: "Finally, by his analytical and disjunctive method, Braudel has invented an entirely new type of plot" (p. 216). A quasi-plot which is implicit, virtual, only suggested, and of an entirely new type - what Ricoeur has established is that Braudel's work can be re-written as a narrative work - that a narrative can

---

<sup>7</sup> Once it became known, it was no longer an important question. The answer is still historically important.





be read into it if the reader wishes<sup>8</sup>. Peter Burke makes the same Wittgensteinian point even more directly when commenting on Ricoeur: “All the same, to call the *Mediterranean* a narrative history is surely to employ the term ‘narrative’ in such a broad sense that it loses it’s usefulness” (Burke, 1990, p. 90).

It should be noted that Ricoeur doesn’t discuss Febvre’s *Problem of Unbelief* or problem oriented history. As noted by Burke, problem-oriented history was conceived by *Annales* historians in opposition to narrative history and to be substituted for it (p. 2). Nor does Ricoeur discuss later works of *Annales* historians. “Most of the regional monographs of the 1960s and 1970s went further than Braudel in the sense that they included no narrative at all” (Burke, p. 90).

A history can be a list rather than a narrative. In Febvre’s *Problem of Unbelief*, there is a list of words that were not available in French in the 16th century (Febvre, 1982, pp. 355-358). Looking outside of the *Annales* school, an excellent example is provided by Henri Lefebvre’s *Les Unités perdues*, a nearly 100 page list of lost items. Finally, large historical books can be non-narrative. Examples would be Foucault’s *The Order of Things* and Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The fact that all three of these books were not written by those within the academic discipline of history suggests that the limitation of histories to narrative might have an institutional basis.

#### b. Why did it happen?

This form of question asks for an explanation of an event or action. If the answer is itself an event, then the answer to this question will also be an answer to a question of the first type. “Why did the first world war happen?” was a question that seemed quite popular among historians at one point. “Why did witch burnings take place in Europe?” would be another question of this type. Historical explanation need not provide every causal factor involved, just the ones which are unusual or previously unknown.

#### c. What happened that was significant (or what is significant about what happened)?

Historians also try to answer questions of the form “what happened that was significant?” A variant of this type of question is “what was important about what happened?” This question may

---

<sup>8</sup> Further elaboration of this critique would explore Ricoeur’s epistemological and metaphysical motivations for tying history to narrative and why he sees the separation of historical time from the length of an individual human life posed by the long durée as a disastrous consequence (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 224).



seem to pose difficulties for the realist view of historical endeavors that I am sketching because it appeals to judgments of value and these sometimes are intractably opposed. However, a number of factors indicate that the task of answering this type of question is often quite factual:

(i) Some interests are shared because they arise from shared conditions. People are interested in deaths in history (and the news) because they are worried about their own mortality.

(ii) We can look for consistency in historical interests. If people are only interested in the history of one religion or one side of a war, then one should look for bias.

(iii) Distinguishing different types of significance. Danto distinguishes four types of historical significance: pragmatic, theoretical, consequential, and revelatory (Danto, 1985, p. 132-135). Disagreements about significance may concern differing concepts and thus be only apparent.

(iv) Interrelation of fact and value. It is not often (if ever) that values are held *sui generis*, entirely independent of facts. An important argument that values involved in moral disputes are indeed tied to facts is made by Kopelman in her case study of the practice of female circumcision/genital mutilation (Kopelman, 2000). In his early study of Eastern philosophy, *Mysticism and Morality* - which is entirely independent of his work on philosophy of history - Danto provides a book-length argument for the dependence of believing in certain values on the belief in specific facts (Danto, 1987).

(v) Examination of specific arguments for historical relativism. Here we can consider Danto's specific argument for historical relativism, based on the argument discussed above concerning "retroactive realignment of the past" (Danto, 1985, p. 168), which he shares with Koselleck. The specific example involved finding "Romantic" elements in classical texts, something which could not be done prior to the much later romantic era. Very briefly, Danto argues that as historians chart "temporal structures"- complex, discontinuous events - the interests of historians will determine which events are part of the temporal structure because the criteria for deciding will be relative to the account the historian is providing (p. 166-167). The key point here is that Danto's argument has the same structure as Kuhn's for scientific incommensurability, with Kuhn's paradigms replaced by temporal structures. It fails for the same reason--that the solidity and cohesion of all parts of the temporal structure and the interests of the historian has not been established (Laudan, 1984).

These factors are not intended to show that all arguments for historical anti-realism are false; true to the spirit of Wittgensteinian anti-foundationalism, I would contend that no such definitive "once and for all time" argument can be provided. But they do show that answering this type of historical question is not as problematic as may appear.



d. What could or might have happened?

It is not clear whether this should be treated as a separate type of question. It is often asked in order to ascertain the answer to a different type of question. A substantial part of Febvre's showing what did happen - that Rabelais was not an atheist - involves describing what could have happened - what patterns of thought were available at the time and place. Judgments of the reasonableness of historical actions depend on the possibilities available to those acting. Ethical judgments of historical actions depend on the patterns of actions at the time, how widespread these patterns were, and what happened to those who did not conform. This question could also be asked for its own sake. Geoffrey Hawthorn has argued that one understands the past, in a specific sense of "understanding", when one locates actions and states of affairs "in a space of possibilities" (1991, p. 185). Although I have doubts about parts of his argument, the basic idea seems right. In this last case, the question could be considered under the type I discuss below - what was it like?

e. What should someone have done?

Here I would include the two types of questions mentioned just above--judgments about the reasonableness of actions and ethical judgments of actions. Given the distinctness of these two, one might want to expand the list by treating them separately.

f. What was it like?

This type of question takes us closer to the claim of history to be a recreation or representation of the past<sup>9</sup>. Answering specific questions of this sort is a legitimate historical task, but it is no more a matter of providing a totality of factors than the others. A couple of examples readily shows this:

(i) the opening of Richard Hofstadter's *America at 1750* where he describes how the forests on the east coast could be smelled miles out to sea<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> Koselleck tries to formalize the answers to these sorts of questions with his concepts of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation", which he universalizes. Whether his attempt to produce a general theory by doing so is open to objections, some of them Wittgensteinian, is outside the scope this essay.

<sup>10</sup> James Scott contends that the density of the forests at that time was a result of the widespread, deadly epidemics among "North America's indigenous fire farmers" (Scott, 2017, p. 39). He notes that the claim is disputed. See footnote 3, p. 259.



(ii) the extensive description, over several pages, of what was involved in washing clothes in rural Texas in the 1930s in Robert Caro's first volume of his LBJ biography (Caro, 1990, p. 502-515).

This type of question is interesting in that it provides a legitimate place for historical fiction (novels or films) and even recreations in the practice of history. This place will always be equivocal, however, since fictions and recreations will also provide false or unsubstantiated answers to questions of what happened.

Overall, answering a question of any of these types is history. Each is a sufficient condition for historical discourse<sup>11</sup>. History "resolves", contra Koselleck, any time an answer is found to a question of one of these types. Historians typically want to answer many questions, and questions of more than one type, in their investigations. We need to keep separate what counts as history, and what counts as good or important or ambitious history. This distinction will be explored further in the next section.

### Trapped by a picture

One of the ways Wittgenstein says that philosophers get stuck talking nonsense in trying to resolve pseudoproblems is that they become "trapped by a picture". Typically, a Wittgensteinian dissolution finds one picture behind a philosophical problem or theory, but I think that total history is more complex, with multiple pictures at play. I believe that Koselleck, Danto, and other theorists of history are trapped by one or more of four pictures.

a. Thinking of history as a single process or mass, one transfers concepts of part and whole from the context of a single object, like a pie, where they make sense, to history where their sense is doubtful. This point has already been covered.

b. The "picture" picture. Here the presentation of history is conceived as presenting a picture or representation of the past in the way one generally thinks of producing a photograph, or film, without thinking of any specific viewers. The key to this picture is that the viewer - that is, reader of history - is passive and need have no prior knowledge. Someone can have no idea

---

<sup>11</sup> It might be thought that I have provided a theory of history, contra Wittgenstein's opposition to philosophical theories. But a disjunction of sufficient conditions is sufficiently untheoretical that calling it a theory is a matter of playing with the word "theory". Cf. section 67 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein responds in this way to an analogous objection (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 37).



who a specific person is, let's say JFK, and a photographer can produce a photograph to show them. Analogously, someone might have no idea what the phrase "Cuban missile crisis" refers to and a historian thinks of providing them a history. But histories are always produced in contexts which involve what is previously known and unknown, and this holds for both professional and nonprofessional readers. The fact that photography doesn't actually work quite this way is no objection to the Wittgensteinian claim; Wittgenstein notes in section 193 of the *Investigations* that philosophers who are trapped by the image of language working like a mechanical process have a very idealized and inaccurate picture of machines and how they work (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 84). Koselleck's view that history doesn't "resolve" suggests this picture, as "resolve" here suggests a blurry picture that doesn't come into focus. (It might also suggest, instead or in addition, a narrative which hasn't yet concluded or in which there are loose ends.)

c. The "revival" picture. Here the picture is one of presenting a re-creation or reconstitution of the past. Danto explicitly states this: "Historians, when they ask questions about acts which have happened, seek in a way to reconstitute the act as it was in its moments of vitality" (Danto, 1954, p. 95). In Koselleck one finds this in his privileging the terms in which events were conceptualized by the people living through them - in the sense that they have a special role in historical accounts. If this is taken to be the condition for historical discourse rather than as merely a helpful caution concerning errors of anachronism, then one will have to answer lots of questions of all of the types. The argument presented earlier shows that while historians may take this as a goal, it is not the only possible goal, and thus not a necessary condition of historical discourse. Revivification is a very grandiose goal, but the more modest goals of answering fewer questions of only one type are sufficient. The introduction of this picture results from a failure to distinguish between historical discourse and great or ambitious historical discourse.

d. The "prize" picture. This picture also results from the failure to distinguish historical discourse from awesome, amazing historical discourse. The picture theorists of history have in mind when they think about history is the image of an extremely ambitious history--a big work, a major work, one that deals with events of great interest, one which finds new evidence and offers interesting interpretations. It is the kind of work which will win prizes and secure prestigious jobs. Again, this sort of history requires that one answer lots of each of the types of questions.

## Conclusion

I think at this point it is safe to say that aspects of Koselleck's view of history is expressed by his suitably paradoxical expression - an "incomplete totality". The expression is suitably



paradoxical because it is a pseudo-concept. However much Koselleck may have wanted to write “history in the plural”, or however much his followers want to attach that commitment to his work, there remained an idea of history as having some sort of unity which provided a goal for historians. My argument has been, using the conceptual tools and strategies of Wittgenstein, an attempt to break the spell of conceiving history as a totality, neither complete nor incomplete. I think it is clear that the Wittgensteinian approach is a much surer approach to accounting for and holding to “histories in the plural”.

It does so without the conclusion, drawn by Danto, of historical relativism because it no longer works within the picture of history as providing a revivifying representation of the past. The view put forward here can take into account Danto’s (interesting and valuable) analyses of narrative sentences, temporal structures, and retroactive realignment. The pivotal point of Danto’s argument - that new histories will be written when historians have new interests and new questions is shown to be right on the mark. But the relations between those new histories and the previous written ones will be contingent, specific, and contextual, not single, metaphysical, and transcendently imposed.

One may wonder about the scope of my critique with regard to Koselleck. Koselleck is a multidimensional thinker. Does the concept of history as a totality affect other aspects of his thought, beyond what is presented here? I don’t have an answer to that question, but see no reason to think that it doesn’t - the image of the “contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous”, for example, has the potential of being a totalizing concept<sup>12</sup>. In addition, there might be other sorts of Wittgensteinian critiques which could be directed towards Koselleck, either of stray concepts or of his theory as a whole. His theory as a whole as interpreted by Picardi and Zammito, as transcendental philosophy, would be a straightforwardly foundational philosophy which should prompt critique. However, Picardi seems to sense that there may be more to Koselleck’s theory, as expressed in her - isolated and rather cryptic - statement that “it is necessary to admit that Koselleck’s approach is more historical than theoretical” (Picardi, 2017, 137). My hypothesis is that Koselleck felt that he had come up with a theory which functioned both as transcendental philosophy and as a substantive, empirical theory of the ambitious type which enabled new approaches, such as those of Marx and Braudel. And furthermore he felt that the bivalence of this theory would solve problems which arose from the two different theoretical types, rather than combining and compounding those problems. I stress that he “felt” this, since this is not clearly stated so far as I know, but I think that this is why historians tend to be drawn to his work.

---

<sup>12</sup> Even if it is not totalizing, it might be suspect for other reasons. It might be deployed merely to protect Koselleck’s theory of periodization from contrary evidence.



Finally, I hope that my discussion indicates that the analysis provided here reaches the point where we can leave Wittgenstein behind. I noted above that I believe that Wittgenstein fell afoul of his own strictures by overgeneralizing his method of dissolving philosophical problems. In considering the question of what comes after the linguistic turn, I would return to Rorty and focus on one answer that he proposed. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty called for, and expected, philosophy to shift from its focus on epistemology and metaphysics and become culture criticism. Returning to the analysis presented here, one can ask why theorists are trapped by the pictures underlying the idea of total history. In addition to confusions of language and the impulse for overgeneralization, what desires or psychological factors make these pictures so compelling? What institutional imperatives, social pressures, and political desires cause these pictures to repeatedly resurface in theorists' conceptions?

## References

- ANKERSMIT, Frank R., **Historical Representation**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- ANKERSMIT, Frank R., **Sublime Historical Experience**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- ANKERSMIT, Frank R., "Reply to professor Roth" on how antidogmatism bred dogmatism," **Rethinking History**, 17 (4). p. 570-585.
- BURKE, Peter, **The French Historical Revolution**. The *Annales* school 1929-1989. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- CARO, Robert, **The Path to Power**. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- CHARTIER, Roger, **Au bord de la falaise**. Paris: Albin Michel, 2009.
- DANTO, Arthur, On Historical Questioning, **Journal of Philosophy**, LI (3), 1954. p. 89-99.
- DANTO, Arthur, **Mysticism and Morality**: oriental thought and moral philosophy. New York: Basic Books, 1972.
- DANTO, Arthur, **Narration and Knowledge**. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- FEBVRE, Lucien, **The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century**: The religion of Rabelais. Translated by Beatrice Gottlieb. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- HAWTHORN, Geoffrey, **Plausible Worlds**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- HEXTER, J. H., Fernand Braudel and the monde braudellien... In HEXTER, J.H., **On Historians**, Harvard University Press, 1979. p. 61-145.
- HOFSTADTER, Richard, **America at 1750**: a social portrait. New York: Vintage Books, 1971.
- KOPELMAN, Loretta, Female Circumcision/Genital Mutilation and **Moral Relativism**, In MOSER, Paul, and CARSON, Thomas, editors, *Moral relativism: a reader*, edited by Paul Moser and Thomas Carson, Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 307-325.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, Begriffsgeschichte and Social History. In KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **Futures Past**: On the semantics of historical time. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985. p. 73-91.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, History, Histories and the Formal Structures of Time. In KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **Futures Past**: On the semantics of historical time. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985. p. 92-104.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, Neuzeit: Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement. In KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **Futures Past**: On the semantics of historical time. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985. p. 231-266.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **Futures Past**: on the semantics of historical time. Translated by Keith Tribe. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985.



- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, Social history and conceptual history. In KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **The Practice of Conceptual History: timing history, spacing concepts**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. p. 20-37.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, Time and history. In KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **The Practice of conceptual history: timing history, spacing concepts**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. p. 100-114.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **The Practice of Conceptual History: timing history, spacing concepts**. Translated by Todd Presner et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, Histories in the Plural and the Theory of History: An Interview with Carsten Dutt. In KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **Sediments of Time: On possible histories**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. p. 250-265.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, **Sediments of Time: On Possible History**. Translated by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hofman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.
- LAUDAN, Larry, Dissecting the Holistic Picture of Science. In LAUDAN, Larry, **Science and Human Values**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. p. 67-102.
- LEFEBVRE, **Les Unités perdues**, revised edition. Paris: Manuella Editions, 2011.
- OLSEN, Niklas, **History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck**. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012.
- PICARDI, Roberta, "Penser l'histoire" apres Lowith: Koselleck et Ricoeur," **Revue germanique internationale**, 25, 2017. p. 119-143.
- RICOEUR, Paul, **Time and Narrative**, vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- RORTY, Richard, ed., **The Linguistic Turn**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- RORTY, Richard, **Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- ROTH, Paul, "Whistling History: Ankersmit's neo-Tractarian theory of historical representation," **Rethinking History**, 17 (4), 2013. p. 548-569.
- SCOTT, James, **Against the Grain**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.
- SHAIN, Ralph, "Temporality and the Dissolution of Underdetermination Skepticism." In TADDIO, Luca, editor, **New Perspectives on Realism**. Milan: Mimesis International, 2017. p. 269-294.
- SURKIS, Judith, "When was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogical Account", **American Historical Review**, vol. 117, no. 3 2012. p. 700-722.
- WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig, "The Blue Book" In WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig, **The Blue and Brown Books**. New York: Harper & Row, 1960. p. 1-74.
- WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig, **Philosophical Investigations**, 4th edition. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- ZAMMITO, John, Koselleck's Philosophy of Historical Times and the Practice of History, **History and Theory**, 43, 2004. p. 124-135.

## Additional Information

### Academic Biography

Ralph Shain is an associate professor of philosophy at Missouri State University in the United States. He specializes in social theory and continental philosophy. His most recent publications include "The Rejection of Benjamin's Habilitation" (*Cultural Critique*, 2022) and "Is There a Trace of the Future? Metaphysics and Time in Derrida" (*Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 2019).





### Contact address

Missouri State University  
Department of Political Science and Philosophy  
901 South National Avenue  
Springfield, MO 65897  
United States

### Funding

Not applicable

### Acknowledgment

Many thanks to Arthur Alfaix Assis, Christophe Bouton and the other scholars who attended the INTH session where I presented an earlier version of this paper for their comments. I am also grateful to Andrew Baird for helpful discussions on these matters and to the reviewers for this journal for their extremely helpful comments.

### Conflict of interests

Note applicable

### Ethics Committee approval

Not applicable

### Editors

Rebeca Gontijo – Editor-in-Chief  
Walderez Ramalho – Executive Editor

### Copyright

Copyright © 2025 Ralph Shain

### Editorial Review History

Submission date: 22/01/2025  
Edited: 25/07/2025  
Approved for publication: 21/10/2025

### License

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

