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Toward a postproblematic history: Rethinking the discipline in the wake of the linguistic turn

# Toward a postproblematic history: Rethinking the discipline in the wake of the linguistic turn

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Abstract

The article advances the idea of a "postproblematic" history, arguing that the discipline move beyond its persistent focus on epistemology and the attendant fact–fiction debate. It sees these discussions as at an impasse and hindering the field's development. A postproblematic approach entails two key shifts. First, it rejects the seemingly unresolvable epistemological debate that has dominated discussions. Second, it asks that historians abandon the search for "answers." Instead, it urges them to embrace their roles as both antiquarians and politically engaged actors, collecting and presenting historical information while acknowledging that the meanings imposed on the past are inextricably tied to present-day concerns and values. This overall shift requires revisiting earlier theoretical positions, including a reconsideration of the ethical implications of poststructuralist thought, a rethinking of the societal role of the historian, and reaching a better appreciation of the ethical relationship between historian and reader.

Keywords

Construtivismo; Ética para os historiadores; Teoria da história

## Introduction

The idea of "problematic" and "postproblematic" history, as used here, carries a double meaning. Firstly, it addresses the ongoing theoretical debate concerning epistemology within the field – a debate that, despite its importance, seems to have reached an unproductive stalemate. Scholars and practitioners alike seem eager to move beyond this seemingly endless discussion, yet it continues to dominate much of the discourse. Secondly, the notion of a "postproblematic" history challenges the traditional, quasi-scientific model of historical research, which often involves formulating and solving "problems" in a manner reminiscent of the natural sciences. This article argues that history is not about discovering overarching truths, uncovering teleological processes, or revealing pre-existing patterns in the past. Instead, it proposes that history is primarily either an antiquarian pursuit, focused on collecting and preserving historical artifacts and information, or a political one, aimed at shaping the present and future through the construction of narratives about the past. It can, of course, also be both. In this framework, the very idea of posing "problems" to be solved becomes unnecessary and, indeed, counterproductive.

The first part of this article will delve into the problematic nature of the epistemological debate, demonstrating how it often overshadows the more fundamental question of who controls the production and dissemination of historical knowledge and for what purposes. It will also highlight the ways in which this debate has been misconstrued, particularly with regard to the "linguistic turn" and its implications. The second part will explore the practical implications of embracing a postproblematic approach to history. It will suggest several "re-turns" – reconsiderations of earlier theoretical positions – that can help us rethink the role of history in a way that is both ethically responsible and relevant to contemporary society. By embracing this postproblematic stance, history can move beyond its internal theoretical impasses and contribute more meaningfully to broader intellectual and societal conversations.

## Part I: Beyond the epistemological impasse

### 1. A prelude to moving on with the debate

History today appears to be at an impasse. The seemingly unresolvable debate concerning its epistemological status has created a division that can be broadly characterized as existing between "historians" – the more traditional, empirically oriented kind, committed to established historical rules and methodologies and an assumption of truthful representation – and "theorists"

– including those who think more progressively about the foundations of historical research but continue to "do" history despite the theoretical odds. This is one way to view the current situation, at least. However, I want to paint the problematic in a somewhat different light: I will argue that the crucially contested aspect of the debate does not in fact involve epistemology or objectivity *as such*, but instead centres on *who controls history*.

Even the most traditional historians would, I believe, be willing to accept that history writing involves the imposition of present-day, subjective beliefs on a rather formless past – at least if they had some workable alternative to their treasured methodological and professional practices that define history as an institution and defend it from intrusions they experience as being unprofessional and amateurish. If, that is, the theoretical choice they face was not experienced as one between their, at times, rather blind adherence to outdated methodologies and the kind of scepticism that reaches well beyond the epistemological problematic. Since no clear alternative for rescuing the institution has presented itself in these discussions, the contest concerning history has focused not on objectivity or epistemology alone, then, but also on the question of whether history can and should in fact today be seen as a viable discourse at all. No wonder the ferocity of the debate.

If the focus is assumed to be only on epistemology, there can be little doubt that traditional historians who continue to defend the ideal of searching for the true story in the past are in the wrong. The past (just like contemporary reality) did not exist in the form of stories – or even of choice and action-centred games, for that matter – and thus such stories cannot be "discovered." Further, historical writing is necessarily a linguistic artifact and, as such, cannot correspond directly to past reality. Because historical writing is thus always only a matter of linguistic figuration, it always involves a subjective and presentist imposition on the part of the author. Obviously, these matters have been debated and elaborated upon *ad infinitum* (see e.g. White 1978 and 1987; Jenkins 1999 and 2003).

Beyond such simple points, however, the debate most often appears to disintegrate. Historians often take this critique to signify that *nothing* can be known about the past or, in more extreme interpretations, that theorists are saying the past did not exist.[1] Yet theorists advocating for the respective ends of epistemology or history mostly have no quarrel with historical facts, singular statements, or the admissibility of historical evidence (see e.g. White 1987, 45 and Jenkins 1999, 94). In claims concerning the stories historians write on the basis of these facts, theorists' emphasis on invention at the levels of story form and interpretation is not aimed at

1 On such absurd critiques, see e.g. Jenkins 1999. As he writes (14): "Of course, the past *per se* is not imagined in the sense that 'it' didn't actually occur. It did occur, and in exactly the way it did."

refuting this data, only at denying it a role in legitimating the ideological content – the story that the historian has *chosen* to tell. So, while particular facts can be established, they do not determine the story, nor do they carry any inherent ideological or moral content. These are imposed in the interpretation.

The two sides in the debate thus seem to speak past each other, as it were. Where historians are worried about moral relativism (which they seem too easily to confuse with epistemological relativism because of the legitimating function they ascribe to their facts) as well as the loss of professional means to combat it, theorists worry about the unreflected values and ideology that historians bring to their writing as a result of their epistemological naiveté (and sometimes also about the potential this leaves for abuse). Essentially, both parties are grappling with the same question, though: How can history come to terms with its unavoidably ideological nature?

Again, the theorists' answer seems to me to be the one to run with: History is always ideological; the only solution is "to 'fess up" to this and either abandon the practice or seek legitimation for continuing with it in the needs of the present. Hiding behind the illusion of objectivity and the professed "truths" and "lessons" of the past is cowardly. And, if historians were not so concerned with the fate of the tradition of their professional and methodological practices, this answer would, in itself, be enough to alleviate their worries about moral relativism, too. The only real problem is that historians have not (sufficiently clearly) been shown how this answer might help them *as historians* (of some kind at least) but instead are faced with the (to them understandably) distasteful alternative of giving up on history and the past altogether.

This answer – to step up and take responsibility for representational practices – is what I take to be the central inheritance of the linguistic turn and, more generally, of the "postist" thinking following 1968. It has, however, largely been lost in the confused and unnecessarily intense discussion concerning history "as fiction." (For some of these arguments, see Novick 1988 and Evans 1999; classic examples of the confusions in this debate can also be found in the controversies between Hayden White and Carlo Ginzburg, in Friedlander 1992; Frank Ankersmit and Perez Zagorin 1990; as well as in the rants by Windschuttle 2000 and Thompson 2000.) Given the general understanding of postmodern thought as nihilism, this focus on the antireferential interpretation of the theorists' arguments is not a surprise, of course. The claims are taken as saying that history is *only* story and invention. In such populist representations of postmodernist theorizing, no room is left for public accountability or, indeed, for ethics or responsibility. Instead, the "anything goes" interpretation that is given of postist thought is assumed to undercut any arguments for something because it relativizes all positions equally. (Often the term "postmodernism" is employed for this by detractors, which is why I tend to avoid

using it.) Thus, while useful in denying the validity of ideologically oppressive and hegemonic structures, such postmodern thought is maintained to also deny its own validity and that of any oppositional or minority views.[2]

Well, that's simply wrong, as becomes clear enough if one actually reads poststructuralist philosophers like Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, or even Deleuze. Such conclusions result, largely, from a confusion regarding the justified reach of scepticism. (For detailed introductions to this issue, see e.g. Cilliers 2005 or Pihlainen 2023.) It needs to be understood that scepticism is a *philosophical* and not a *practical* position; by which I mean that it does not present an excuse for inaction in the world. For an ethically aware and theoretically thought-out poststructuralist position, the problem of moral relativism as leading to chaos is artificial and irrelevant, and the history debate will, I hope, still be able to take on board these same clarifications. And if abandoning problem-solving history suggests disengagement, this misreads the role of the historian. A postproblematic history is not indifferent to ethics but locates responsibility in the ethical-political where it should be, without attempting to return it to epistemology – in practice, foregrounding the constructed nature of history while refusing to impose authoritative interpretations. The historian's ethical role shifts from determining meaning to ensuring that the curation of materials resists ideological closure.

## 2. Oppositional politics and narrative theory of history

The central dilemma for "oppositional" politics of a postist persuasion lies in the extension of relativism to include the ethical-political. While this difficulty has been solved by various theorists quite simply and pragmatically[3], opponents and detractors of this kind of non-foundational thinking argue that such moves from theory to pragmatics are unjustified. They claim that postist thinkers are, in fact, attempting to introduce foundationalism into their arguments in order to salvage them from an otherwise inevitable nihilism and (moral) relativism. (A very useful look at this discussion is provided by Cilliers 2005, 259 ff.)

A way of looking at the matter that I take to be more convincing, and one that aligns with the general poststructuralist sentiment, is that a denial of the moral or ideological entailments of epistemology does not in any way constitute a denial of ethics or even morality. In other words,

2 The adoption of such extreme populist interpretations of postmodernism has even been presented by some critics as a strategy of depoliticization: oppositional views have been rendered inconsequential and power remains with the institutions. See e.g. Fraser 1995.

3 Richard Rorty's separation of the public from the private sphere perhaps being the most obvious example. See e.g. Rorty 1989.

just because we admit that we cannot know the "truth" about complex matters (but instead prefer to say that what we have are subjective interpretations) and assume that facts do not have moral "weight" in themselves does not mean that we relinquish responsibility for the possible consequences of making interpretations. (And, of course, there is no way to avoid the practice of interpreting.) Further, even the acceptance of relativism regarding moral positions does not release one from the responsibility of choosing. Quite the opposite: because we have no "automatic" position to fall back on, we need to *continually choose*. In this, postist theory is quite existentialist in its orientation, despite the need it had to emphasize its distinctness from that tradition at its early stages.

It is this constant critical moment – the awareness of undecidability and the simultaneous necessity of deciding, and hence of assuming responsibility – that in itself makes postist thought ethical (see e.g. Jenkins 2003; Beardsworth 1996; to me, Jenkins [1999, 28] best frames this in Derridean fashion as that "aporetic moment" we inevitably need to face when making decisions). Yet there is a further element in its ethics that has been perhaps even more commonly overlooked: Poststructuralist thinkers can be read as being fairly united in their condemnation of representational practices as oppressive and unwarranted. In his examinations of the ethics of poststructuralism, Todd May has (to me, quite convincingly) identified this sentiment as "the principle of antirepresentationalism." (Not to be confused with Richard Rorty's use of "antirepresentationalism" to signify an antirealist position.) According to this principle, "the consequences of what we might call representationalist practices are morally suspect, and … *those practices ought to be abandoned*" (May 1995, 57, emphasis added; cf. Pihlainen 2023). This principle suggests that we should be suspicious of every discourse, historical narratives included, that claims to definitively represent the "truth" about a person, group, or event, especially when such representation serves to marginalize or silence certain voices.

The relation between these two aspects of postist ethics needs to be underlined: In constantly deciding and choosing ("always problematize!" [Friedman 1998, 209]), as well as in refusing to impose valuations on others through representational practices (at least in the absence of compelling practical/ethical reasons for so doing), poststructuralism affirms the complexity and inappropriability of reality and the existence of radical alterity. And, in thus avoiding appropriation and colonization, it arguably presents the best (and only?) ethical solution available.

What bearing does this all have on our present debates about history, then? These poststructuralist ethical commitments (and that is what they are, however foreign such a coupling may initially sound) significantly inform the aims and theorizing of the linguistic or narrative turn in history, too, and their *knowledgeable* examination permits a better understanding of the

complexities involved. Further, the possible strategies that the poststructuralist attitude opens up for historical representation (in instances when representing is judged to be necessary and beneficial) have not been thought through in historical theory with a full understanding of or mindfulness to these ethical positions, and hence applications of theory after the linguistic turn have often gone, in my opinion, astray. And this, perhaps, is another reason why practicing historians have not found enough in it to work from specifically – again – *as historians*.

With these preliminaries in mind, it seems to me that a re-examination of the current state of historical theory and theoretically minded history might still reveal some unexplored avenues.

## 3. History's investments in tradition and the status quo

If there exists anything like a consensus view of the impact of the linguistic turn on history, I would take it as saying that traditional history writing (just like narrativist or any other history) is ideological through and through. (For a concise summary of this claim, see e.g. Jenkins 1999, 14–15.) From the historians' point of view, this realization understandably translates into a desire for (and a possible lament for the loss of) historical "truth" as a decisive arbitrator among competing interpretations and hence of, in other words, providing legitimation for some particular view or views. How else, they might ask, can "true" and "correct" interpretations now be decided? Whether one understands this question as signifying an ideal of ultimate truth or a best-fit interpretation is beside the point; the fundamental belief underlying this question is still that the facts can be used to judge the validity of the ideological content – the story – rather than, more moderately, only the thoroughness of the research and professional expertise that has gone into formulating it. Again, no one is questioning the basic criteria of adequate historical research – of (a reasonable level of) coherence, of inclusiveness, and so on. (Indeed, quite the opposite; see e.g. White 1978, 97.)

Debates concerning revisionist histories, for example, serve well to illustrate the dynamics of this way of thinking; in these, theorists of the linguistic turn are vilified for their alleged part in permitting immoral and ideologically repugnant uses of the past, and the "postmodern" is consequently rejected (see e.g. commentaries by Perez Zagorin 1999 and Georg Iggers 2000.) While a postproblematic history resists epistemological certainty, it does not deny that material traces of the past exist. Documents, artifacts, landscapes, and so on, persist outside of textual mediation, even if their meaning is always constructed. Rather than treating these materials as carriers of truth, historians can approach them as anchors that structure but do not determine interpretation. Theorists, too, are certainly aware of the loss of authority that such epistemological scepticism involves: Hayden White, for instance, appears to have focused on finding more effective

literary strategies for history, in part at least, in order for it to be able to reclaim some authority. Since, that is, history cannot justify and privilege its interpretations on the basis of their objectivity any longer, it can turn its epistemological failings (its literariness instead of its literalness) into a strength and strive for literary impact, and – with this now privileged means – foreground societally useful interpretations. (For more on this, see White 1987 and 1999; Pihlainen 1998 and 2017.)

The primary question facing historians confronted with the theories of the linguistic turn – most often with narrative constructivism à la White – is of how to resist interpretations that are experienced as morally unacceptable. In its articulation, this question already presents a partial answer, of course. If something is experienced as morally questionable, then arguments against it should address this moral dimension. Yet, for some reason, moral arguments (of a consequentialist rather than a prescriptive and normative kind) seldom appear in this discussion. What is more, often the moral or ethical force and motivation behind even moral argumentation is disguised as epistemological. As if epistemology somehow "beats" ethics, which in turn somehow "beats" pragmatic consequences. Instead of treating all this as some exotic version of rock-paper-scissors, however, we need a more nuanced reading of the overlaps and interrelations here. One might simply ask, for example, why is it that moral arguments seem to carry less weight than epistemological ones in these debates? Could it be that the dominance of a scientific model of knowledge has led us to privilege claims to truth over ethical considerations?

Outside this epistemology–ethics–pragmatics game, however, the aestheticization of the historical text has led to an aestheticization of the grounds for its justification, too. Thus, the argument goes, to resist ideological collusion as well as abuses of scholarship, history needs to rethink itself by shaking off the rather bourgeois form of the realist historical novel (the model for "traditional," ideologically conforming historical writing) and strive for greater impact through new and experimental literary means. Again, this is largely White's doing. (See e.g. White 1999; Munslow & Rosenstone 2004; Munslow 2007; Pihlainen 2017.) Of course, the reason for this remains a moral one (namely, that historians and history need to take responsibility for the world), even if the discussion largely centres on the hows of doing so.[4] The narrative constructivism of White – and particularly what he has termed his "politics of historical representation" – focuses primarily on the *pragmatics* of writing history, on, that is, the forms and conventions for doing so, while refraining from prescriptive ethical or political pronouncements. Or so it appears on the surface at least.

4 Indeed, Keith Jenkins' reformulation of ethics in relation to history – and the end of history and of any restrictive moral systems – is one of the few attempts at tackling this issue head-on. See e.g. Jenkins 1999 and 2003. At the same time, Jenkins is one of the few historical theorists to have engaged in-depth with poststructuralist theory.

Once we decide to view the fundamentals of the linguistic turn in terms of the poststructuralist principles of constant questioning and responsibility as well as an avoidance of closure and oppressive representations, White's emphasis on fiction, invention, and modernist ("open") literary forms (and one might here again also think of the "open" structure of many digital games) can be viewed as expressly political, even if these have not been explicitly presented in relation to an ethical stance. (Which is not to say that White does not intimate at his ethics and politics. For a clear statement of these, see e.g. White 2000.) Similarly, Dominick LaCapra's interest in poetic and "worklike" texts, as opposed to merely documentary ones, as well as his emphasis of presentism, takes on a political tone in this context (cf. LaCapra 1982, 52).[5] By advocating for more "worklike" texts, LaCapra suggests that historical writing should actively engage the reader in the process of interpretation, rather than presenting a seemingly finished and authoritative account.

## 4. Experientiality and experimental forms

There is a further dimension to the emphasis on alternative representational forms that should be noted here: Especially for White, it seems to me, one motive for advancing modernist and experimental forms as models for historical writing is in the increased *experientiality* they offer. While the literary impact of the form increases its persuasiveness – helping historians "sell" their particular ideologies – the experiential element in such representations also makes history seemingly more "real," thus helping to mitigate the loss that might otherwise be felt to follow from an understanding that history is not "the real thing." At least it can still be experienced in much the same way. Of course, this is part of the recapturing of history's authority too; epistemological authority has been abandoned, but in its place, history can now employ an experientially appealing aesthetic authority.

Yet it further seems that, led by a desire for experience and the "real," constructivism at times takes this formal experimentation too far – or at least too far in the wrong direction and unthinkingly perceives the opportunity for its fulfillment in heightened experientiality[6]; something promised today even more enticingly yet equally illusively by immersive VR installations in

5 he same is not necessarily true of the emphasis on presence and memory in other, more recent historical theory turns. See e.g. the 2006 "Presence" theme issue of History and Theory (45:3).

6 And it is this desire for experience as well as misunderstandings regarding the limits of literary and experimental simulations of experience with respect to the actual epistemological status of knowledge concerning the past that has, on my view, also inspired the kinds of confusions displayed in the various debates concerning "presence" and "historical experience."

museums, for instance. Indeed, it appears to me that even White has on occasion given in to this temptation (which I like to think of as a historian's, in some ways requisite, "phenomenological yearning," a desire that the past could somehow be approached immediately, like everyday experience): In arguing for alternative histories of the "postmodern parahistorical" kind, he presents Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* as an example of the kind of presentations he is after (White 1999, 66 ff.). Yet *JFK*'s effectiveness as (para)historical representation is largely in the intentional (and due to viewers' knowledge and expectations, very provocative) rereading it performs, and hence it relies on discord in the epistemological for its impact. In addition, it does not present us with the kinds of modernist, ideologically open-ended features that White's theory of history is generally after. So, while *JFK* works extremely well with respect to the points White is making in this instance, it easily turns ensuing discussion and theory away from the main ethical/antirepresentationalist point and toward seeking models for alternative representational forms in the sphere of popular entertainment. While certainly a compelling piece of filmmaking, *JFK* promotes a specific, conspiratorial narrative, rather than encouraging the kind of open-ended, multi-perspectival approach that aligns with poststructuralist ethics. And, to me, this is a trend that can be discerned in much of contemporary experimental or "unconventional" historying.

Seeking models for alternative historical presentations in the sphere of infotainment and entertainment more broadly leads, as far as I can see, away from the postist ethical commitments that have so far largely informed constructivist theory, too. (In part, this is intentional, I realize, as it reflects a perfectly understandable counter-reaction to the idling debate.) A challenge to postproblematic history is whether abandoning imposed narratives risks leaving audiences without interpretive entry points. Some structuring – whether thematic, chronological, or conceptual – might still be necessary to avoid rendering history incomprehensible. The key is to maintain openness, allowing readers to construct meaning without guiding them toward predetermined conclusions. Certainly, an emphasis on popular means of representation (which the example of *JFK* inspires despite its own quite committed – but *referentially* based – position) does not automatically seem to provide the kind of history poststructuralist theorizing is after. Indeed – returning this to the constructivist motivation for renewing historical forms – a commitment to change or the avoidance of inherited ideologies seems just as unlikely to thrive in forms borrowed from entertainment as it does in the more conventional one of the nineteenth-century realist novels that constructivist theorists so often criticize. The appeal and usefulness of alternative forms is best expressed by their *experimental* nature: As long as they work toward new understandings and provoke readers to question the given, they fit the bill for committed postist theory. For example, a historical work that presents multiple, conflicting accounts of the same event without attempting to reconcile them, or one that uses fragmented narratives and disjointed timelines to reflect the complexities

of memory and trauma, might be considered more aligned with these principles than a work that borrows the stylistic features of a Hollywood thriller.

## 5. Entertainment as a prime value

It seems reasonable to ask where all this theory has left historians. (Those of them who have decided to pay any mind to it, at any rate.) Viewed from the practicing historians' perspective, historical theory of this kind leads to an aporia regarding the nature of history; history is seen to have no inherent strengths as a genre but is instead expected to find its impact from advances and experimentation in other, aesthetically (or generically) less constrained discourses.[7] Even the originally progressive ideals of such borrowing have been popularized and turned into a more general idea of experimentation and playfulness with form, largely in accord with a simplified reading of postmodernism. Furthermore, this turn to popular forms and entertainment is not discernible only in history as theorists would have it but also in much contemporary historical writing. Entertainment has become a value also for pragmatic reasons related to the reshaping of the institutional view of what history should be. In this, theory and practice have developed at least partially hand-in-hand.

This at least partial victory of form over content that the popular understanding of experimental historical writing presents seems quite thin on theoretical reflection, however. Experiments in history-as-literature or history-as-film appear to be sufficient acknowledgement of theory's one-time-committed ideological goals. Moreover, completely disregarding such developments, much traditional history continues unhindered without even these formal acknowledgements of the theoretical concerns presented by the linguistic turn, narrative constructivism, and other postist theories. From many historians' point of view, this is perhaps sensible: As noted, the majority of them seem indifferent to theory, in large part, I think, because theory as it is often read leaves them no options to continue with their chosen vocation. Consequently, even in terms of the field of historical theory as a whole, it seems that we are now at a moment where alternatives to the linguistic emphasis of recent decades (now presented as an unwarranted overemphasis by critics, an "excessive textualism" of sorts) seem to dominate discussions. It is worth noting, however, that criticism for "excessive textualism" often comes from those advocating for a return to more traditional, empiricist, and theoretically and philosophically unsustainable approaches.

7 The formal and aesthetic constraints that referentiality (the commitment to refer to reality) places on historical writing have been discussed at length by Pihlainen (2002).

Although the theoretical discussion thus has an equivalent in the overtly experimental practices of some contemporary historians, oppositional histories have also emerged in less theorized forms, particularly in the fields of feminism, microhistory, and cultural history. Because of their sharing the same ideological, post-1968 agenda, these approaches can also be seen to share poststructuralism's ethical impetus (at least to some extent, although it remains largely unreflected in theoretical terms), and hence also have (at least emancipatory) aims in common with narrative constructivism. In such "history proper" – as opposed to theory and the occasional experiment with form – the locus of radical aims has remained more concretely on the contents, however, as there has been sufficient room for questioning traditional event-oriented history based on subject matter alone. Thus, while they share a theoretical affinity with constructivism, these forms of history have been able to remain undecided on the question of epistemology and reference. At least in the sense of never actually being forced to think through the full consequences of representation's "aporetic moment." This has been possible because their core aims – to do more with the issue of what constitutes acceptable contents – have not been hampered by their subscribing to a more traditional epistemological paradigm. Indeed, perhaps they have benefited from fitting in in this way, as they now form a crucial part of the institutional practices of history despite deep-seated opposition earlier on. On the other hand, there is no doubt that this institutional acceptance has stripped them of much of their radical potential. For instance, while feminist history has successfully challenged the male-dominated narratives of traditional history, it has arguably, at times, created its own set of orthodoxies that can marginalize certain voices or perspectives within the broader feminist movement. (For a more in-depth examination of all these issues, see Pihlainen 2017, esp. 38 ff.)

Regardless of the specific reasons for it, historical practice has grown closer to popular interpretations of postist theory, both in the increased focus on entertainment (how much of that one wants to attribute to the acceptance of theories relating to form and how much to changes in broader, societal aesthetic sensibilities is beside the point) as well as the focus on new points of view (the institutionalization of the microhistorical approach, for example). At the same time, these developments seem to amount to a forgetting of the urgent political ideals behind alternative histories. (Think of Simon Schama's move from his quite radical and experimental *Dead Certainties* [1991] to more recent documentary work for the BBC and the History Channel, for instance.) What has happened, perhaps, is that epistemological relativism has become more widely accepted (or at least some of the decisive authority of the epistemological has faded away). Crucially, however, just as in the case of the postmodernism–poststructuralism distinction, the difference between all-out relativism and epistemological scepticism has not been sufficiently investigated.

## Part II: Toward a postproblematic practice of history

### 6. A small suggestion and some potential re-turns

As I announced at the beginning, I have one relatively small and straightforward practical suggestion: that we stop posing questions to the past. History could instead become "postproblematic" in its content as well as in theory. No more research questions, no central problems that need to be resolved. Aside from fact-checking, of course, but that doesn't deserve the name of history in and of itself, surely? Hand in hand with this attempt, I think we would need to make partial re-turns – by which I mean we should return to re-evaluate earlier positions and take on board from them what we can instead of rejecting them wholesale, as so often is the case when new alternatives are brought to the discussion. (The wholesale rejection of previous thinking that has been going on is, of course, a natural way to clear the way for "new" ideas since it is often more effective both rhetorically and in terms of career advancement and influence. Yet more measured considerations appear more valuable.)

Together, this suggestion and the reminder of the opportunity for considered re-turns constitute my modest manifesto for postproblematic history, a "disciplinary proposal" for another way of thinking history today, as it were.[8]

Before going on to outline some of these proposed re-turns – the ones I consider to be crucial against the theoretical background described above – as well as to explain what I perceive to be their benefits, I will first discuss the virtues of a postproblematic approach in this second sense of the word. My initial claim is that without the ideal of history as being somehow scientific, in the elaborate sense of an activity directed by research problems structured around relatively complex *whys* and *hows*, historians (in their work as historians) would be free to choose, and

8 If we allow for it, perhaps these re-turns should also include considerations of how new interactive media might help us rethink many of the older theoretical problems. And, while I focus here on poststructuralist and existentialist contributions to rethinking history, other theoretical perspectives could be similary further reconsidered to enrich this postproblematic approach. Despite their theoretical problems, new materialism and object-oriented ontology, for example, challenge anthropocentrism by foregrounding the agency of historical objects and materials, a perspective increasingly relevant in interactive media environments (for more on the challenges, see Pihlainen 2019). Likewise, and again despite theoretical problems (cf. Pihlainen 2014), insights from memory studies could still enhance our understanding of how ideas of collective history and memory structure historical interpretation, reinforcing the emphasis on present concerns shaping the past. While I don't explore these perspectives here, keeping them in mind highlights the broader potential for expanding postproblematic thinking beyond existing theoretical debates and could well inform further research into alternative approaches that resist epistemological closures.

freely move between, the role of the antiquarian and that of the politically and ethically committed individual.

Historical problems are, I would argue, quite limited in kind. What does it mean to ask historical research questions? That is, what *types* of questions can historians legitimately ask? Within, remember, the constraints of research as guided by strict epistemological criteria. Obviously, questions can involve the "what?"–"when?"–"where?" in a quantitative way. (And in part even the "how?" in restricted applicability.) Questions may perhaps also involve the experiences of individuals to the extent that these have been expressed by them. Hence also the answers to them fall in roughly two categories: Either a history ends up listing facts and numbers (so and so did this in such a way or so many things were produced and sold to so many people, etc.) or it tries to engage readers' imaginations by providing "access" to the past through quoting original texts – anything from first-hand accounts like letters or diaries, literary or scientific sources, journalistic speculations of some given phenomenon, philosophical speculations about the state of that particular time, to, say, advertisements. If, that is, it adheres strictly to the traditional epistemological claims, which of course most histories really don't, since they're more complex representations that attempt to also provide a picture and often also a feeling of past reality through argumentation, literary descriptions, and embellishment. But – for the sake of argument – if these two options (and of course a continuum consisting of different balances struck between them) are seen as the poles between which historying should move, then more complex "*problems*" do not even enter the equation.

Which is to say that while answering such questions can undeniably be presented as a goal of research, it doesn't really seem to constitute any research problems. And, to me at least, the question which then arises is: Why prioritize the historian's imagination over that of the reader in such cases? Why not instead leave the reader's imagination free to deal with this material without interference? Or, to put it in different terms, the terms I defend here: Why not refuse to structure materials according to some particular "historical" problem (a temptation that might now be further reduced also by further exploring the affordances of interactive media)? Could not the historian's role be reconceived as that of a curator, assembler, or archivist, presenting historical materials in a way that allows for multiple interpretations, rather than imposing a singular narrative? This curatorial approach does not mean passive collection but active engagement with how materials are framed and presented. Public history, museums, and digital archives already offer models where historical materials are assembled without enforcing singular interpretations. Historians might similarly organize historical narratives in ways that highlight plurality rather than resolution.

There are immediately obvious ways in which this postproblematic attitude would, by itself, already take us beyond the traditional debate:

If historians were indeed to abandon the search for "answers" to questions beyond the strictly factual, history would already largely avoid the difficulties associated with trying to find meaning(s) in the past. In other words, this practical change in how the discipline is seen would in itself resolve the core issue of the epistemological challenge. Of course, to appreciate the need for this kind of change in practices, historians would need to understand the theoretical debate, too, at least to the extent that it places all meanings in interpretations rather than assuming that they somehow reside in the factual or the material world. But perhaps this insight (which is largely a commonsensical one) might be more successfully sold to historians along with such a straightforward practical solution. Then, if this change were to lead historians to reconsider the *whys* of their work (centrally: Why present results concerning their research of the past?), they would be eased into a realization of the necessity for (and indeed unavoidability of) presentism, consequentialism, responsibility, engagement – whatever one wants to call it. History would then, naturally, come to be thought of as an ethical and political pursuit. The only reason to prioritize the historian's voice would then also be a consequentialist one: the historian has an agenda that he/she considers worth defending. (And perhaps this could then be carried out through convincing form and ethical argument rather than ascriptions of meanings and entailments to the past, with their consequent identifications, empathetic (and somehow inevitable) re-enactments, associated guilt-trips, and so on.)

What, then, are those re-turns to earlier practices and insights that I think are needed to support this kind of disciplinary change?

Firstly, *a reiteration of history's strengths as relates to its close connection with the materials of historical research*. This is not, importantly, a return to objectivity or empiricism, since the epistemological challenge is here to stay. What I see as having (unnecessarily) taken place in parallel with the linguistic turn in history, however, is a failure to consider history's generic commitments to describing reality and its consequent constrainment by facts as anything more than a disability or disadvantage. Clearly, history's strengths are not in the aesthetic or in the ethical, so the epistemological commitments could (and I think should) be repositioned and re-presented in terms of their rather obvious capacity for rupturing ideological coherence and narrative closures. (For more on this, see Pihlainen 2002, 2017 and 2026.) If materials were presented without smoothing over contradictions and constructing connections between disparate facts, perhaps today by employing a branching narrative as found in so many digital forms, it seems that at least part of history's oppressive and colonizing effects could be avoided. Certainly,

the moments of meaning-making could be pushed significantly in the direction of the reader. For some reason, and rather curiously, this option has not really been considered on either side of the debate so far.[9]

This kind of foregrounding of rupture, confusion, and complexity already hints at the second re-turn that I think is needed: *an informed evaluation of the radical challenge presented by poststructuralist philosophy*. Primarily this would mean a rescuing of the central ethical-political aspect that has been missed in reductive popularizations of this philosophical sea-change as an "anything goes" postmodernism. With respect to history, such an evaluation has so far really been systematically carried out only by Keith Jenkins, and the details of his work – like Hayden White's, I think – have to date been misunderstood by the majority of historians (and indeed by many of their theorist colleagues). It seems to me that a broader-based understanding of the issues should be achieved before they are simply dismissed from the debate. To make this easier, and diverging from some of Jenkins' conclusions, I think that there might still be a point to continuing with history if it were rethought in this radically descriptive and rupturing way. At least that would permit history to meet (half-way?) the ethical challenge posed by the poststructuralist questioning of received ideologies and of history's amenability to the status quo. While any postproblematic history remains to be properly formulated, numerous existing works of history ranging from Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) to the ESTAR(SER) collective's *In Search of The Third Bird* can provide useful examples for it, as they make important efforts to resist traditional closures and definitive interpretations in favour of inconsistencies and unresolved tensions. In these, a postproblematic focus on resisting imposed coherence is already well exemplified. Likewise, many "alternative" monuments and memorials offer guidance on how contradictions and unresolved gaps can be used effectively and – foremost – ethically, over and against authoritative closures. Such examples suggest that a postproblematic history does not require a complete rupture with existing historical practice but can emerge through a shift in emphasis – toward contradiction, descriptive openness, and an awareness of the ethical stakes. And, perhaps, the offering of a continued role for history and historians would leave them more open to at least considering these ideas. Importantly: this does not imply abandoning historical research but rather reframing it in a way that acknowledges the ethical and political implications of our engagement with the past.[10]

9 What makes this even more curious is it that it has been repeatedly fashionable in the theory of history debates to evoke Walter Benjamin's concept of "dialectical images," where historical fragments are juxtaposed in a way that disrupts conventional narratives and opens new possibilities for interpretation. Perhaps flaneuring and entertainment are preferable conclusions to identifying political responsibility here?

10 Importantly in this connection, while interactive media hold potential to challenge traditional power structures in

The third re-turn that I want to suggest here provides a possible excuse for continuing with history writing by, at least potentially, tempering poststructuralism's emphasis on the impossibility and unavoidable violence of representation. It involves *an increased focus on the communicative contract that is generically inscribed in representation*. Simply stated, the act of writing in the particular genre of history – however defined – engages the historian and the reader in a particular ethical (and pragmatic, i.e., understanding-oriented) relation with respect to the kinds of things and purposes that are acceptable. It bestows upon them responsibilities as well as engenders warranted expectations regarding each other. If these conditions, through a refiguring of the genre of history, are defined in a suitable way, history writing can conceivably work toward agreed-upon goods. The problem is that the generic conventions and readers' expectations do not necessarily always conform to the same conception of history. In other words, all readers may not be up to speed with the fact that history's commitments have shifted in this way. This largely depends on how texts locate themselves in terms of genre and theoretical positions, of course. It is the responsibility of the historian, therefore, to be transparent about their approach and to actively shape the reader's expectations.

In this, as well as in the emphasis on choice and responsibility, this third re-turn includes a refresher in the main aspects of Sartrean existentialism, particularly his conception of literature. For Sartre, the literary text is always an affirmation of the mutual respect between author and reader because it presents both with opportunities for choice and action. (And histories are effectively literary texts at least in the freedom of their processes of construction and reception if not in their generic definition – which is to say that there are no necessary consequences and there is no in-built feedback loop. We won't get lost, for instance, or prepare an inedible dinner because of these kinds of texts.) This third re-turn would also do well to look at the reading of histories in more detail, and here theorists could also learn from the classics of reader-reception theory at least. This is another aspect of the process of historying that has so far been sorely neglected, and one that now takes on new dimensions if we consider the interactive and participatory nature of digital media, including virtual environments. By considering the audience's role in the construction of meaning,

historical representation, they are not inherently neutral or emancipatory. The design choices in video games, VR, and other immersive environments are often shaped by commercial and institutional interests, which can reinforce existing hierarchies rather than subvert them. These platforms frequently privilege entertainment over critical engagement, simplifying historical narratives or perpetuating dominant cultural perspectives. Moreover, the mechanics of interaction themselves – what is made visible, what remains obscured, and how users navigate historical spaces – are embedded with ideological choices that may unconsciously reproduce exclusionary frameworks. As interactive media become more central to public understandings of history, fostering critical media literacy will be crucial to recognizing how these narratives are shaped and whose histories are being foregrounded or erased.

we can further decentre the authority of the historian and move towards a more dialogical model of historical understanding.

In connection with the examination of poststructuralist philosophy and Sartrean existentialism, yet a fourth re-turn or reminder might be useful: *a re-sensitizing to the possibility of ethical demands on us by others' existence beyond any representations we can create*. Although such awareness could conceivably be achieved through Sartre's idea of respect for freedoms as well as poststructuralist emphases on both representational violence and the radical nature of otherness, this re-turn might best be motivated by Emmanuel Levinas' unique articulation of radical alterity. In part because it considers much broader phenomena and is elaborated in more detail than Sartre's (quickly sketched) ideas on literature (and more clearly than Sartre's ethics!), in part because it focuses more on a specifically human (and in its most basic sense, universalizable) ethical stance than the poststructuralists (at least claim to) do. This might motivate a choice for ethics in a *theoretical* or *philosophical* sense, too, although the problems with fitting it in with relativism are obvious. Levinas' emphasis on the face-to-face encounter with the Other, which precedes and exceeds any attempt to categorize or represent them, can serve as a powerful reminder of the ethical limits of historical representation. It suggests that we should approach the past with humility and a willingness to be challenged by what we cannot fully understand.[11]

So, how is all this different from what has been suggested before?

What it certainly amounts to is an invitation to historians to reconsider theory as somehow accepting and supportive of what they (want to) do. More substantially, it recognizes that historians' emphasis on contextualizing is very much to the point. In their desire to see things (people, actions, events, objects, etc.) within a broader (if not vast or indeed even infinite) network of influences (not meanings!), historians are practically relativist and pragmatist. The fact that they avoid using these particular words and identifications does not need to be a focus of contention. Contextualization, perspectivism, pluralism, and so on are not so distant from relativism or scepticism, say, that we need to keep concentrating energy on arguing about the terminology. Discussing the different commitments and intentions behind the distinctions the various sides try to uphold is important, however.

It also serves to remind that the difficulty with all this recognition of perspectivism is still the challenge posed by radical difference and the associated ethical demand. Careful contextualization, even some form of "thick description" or microhistorying, being critical and self-

11 A key introduction for thinking of Levinas in relation to history practices is presented by Anton Froeyman (2015); also see Pihlainen (2019).

reflexive as to what one is doing as a historian regarding the general epistemological challenge, the difficulties with representation, and so on, all remain insufficient if there is an underlying belief in some basic, straightforward and unproblematic human reality. That is, a belief that one is engaged in some ultimate process of "understanding." The violence and colonization that is included in this idea of *understanding* still needs to be underscored. A simple refusal to construct solvable problems and then go after their (necessarily reductive and oppressive) solutions – a refusal that interactive media might help us visualize and enact better than before – would serve as a very potent reminder. This refusal to "solve" the past can be seen as a way of respecting its inherent complexity and resisting the urge to impose a false sense of closure.

Adoption of this postproblematic mind-set would have unavoidable consequences on representational form as well. The whole question–answer and problem–solution mode of argumentation would be set aside. Additionally, it would at least recommend an overall emphasis on the materials of history and their disruptive nature, a formal emphasis of non-appropriation, an abandonment of any ideals of non-contradiction and a foregrounding of indeterminacy, perhaps even the employment of various aleatory techniques, and an unavoidable increase in formal complexity. Very much the kinds of things White and others would see us adopt from modernist and experimental literature. Centrally for my ethical-political argument here, these formal strategies can be seen as ways of enacting the ethical principles of poststructuralism within the very structure of historical writing. And all this would require from the historian, as I see it, is the presence of mind to desist from posing questions to the past (which it's obviously never going to answer) and then, rather unfairly, constructing answers on its behalf.

## Conclusion

The postproblematic approach to history advocated here is not a call for abandoning rigour or for descending into a chaotic relativism where anything goes. Rather, it is a call for a more honest, self-aware, and ethically engaged practice of history. By acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge, the inherent subjectivity of interpretation, and the ethical responsibilities that come with representing the past, historians can move beyond the unproductive debates that have long dominated the field and embrace a new way of thinking about their work.

This entails a shift away from the traditional emphasis on objectivity and truth-seeking, not because these ideals are inherently undesirable, but because they are ultimately unattainable and often serve to obscure the complex relationship between the past, the present, and the historian. It also entails a shift away from the model of history as a problem-solving discipline,

analogous to the natural sciences. Instead, history should embrace its role as a collector and curator of information, a presenter of multiple perspectives, and a space for ethical reflection and debate, tasks that can, again, perhaps be better reimagined and potentially enhanced with interactive technologies like VR and gaming. This requires a willingness to experiment with new forms of representation that can better reflect the complexities and uncertainties of the past, and to engage readers in a more active and participatory process of interpretation.

The "re-turns" suggested here – to poststructuralist ethics, to a renewed understanding of history's relationship to its materials, to the communicative contract between historian and reader, to existentialist ideas of freedom and responsibility, and to the ethical demands of alterity – offer a starting point for rethinking the discipline in a postproblematic framework. They are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive, but rather to open up new avenues for thought and practice. Most important in thinking about them: these "re-turns" are not simply about returning to old ideas, but about re-evaluating those in light of the challenges and opportunities of the present. The continued dynamic of rejecting our predecessors simply for making a career should be resisted here in favour of some serious theoretical and philosophical consideration.

Ultimately, my goal with proposing a postproblematic history is to point to a more nuanced, more responsible, and more relevant understanding of the past. This is undergirded by current generic developments: as historical representation increasingly moves into interactive media, critical awareness of how these platforms structure meaning will be essential. While postproblematic history seeks to open new possibilities for engagement, it should also remain attentive to how commercial and institutional pressures shape emerging historical forms. The key goal is – thus – to recognize that history is not simply a matter of transcription, but an ongoing conversation in which we all participate and for which we should all take responsibility. By embracing and making visible the challenges and uncertainties of this conversation, we can make history a more meaningful and valuable part of our individual and collective lives. And, perhaps most importantly, we might create a kind of historical practice that is more attuned to the ethical demands of a world characterized by difference, complexity, and the ever-present possibility of encountering radical alterity.

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