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The Transmission of our Understanding of Historical Time

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The Transmission of our Understanding of Historical Time

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Abstract

This paper explains a philosophically pragmatic approach to the understanding of historical time, and some implications of that for the transmission of such understanding. The philosophical route from Hume's empiricism to American pragmatism and recent developments in the application of that approach to historiography are summarised. Such pragmatism is a historicising philosophy. Quine's "web of belief" is developed as (1) diachronic and not synchronic; (2) (following Collingwood) idealist and not realist in metaphysics, so history is that which we conceptually count or organise as such; (3) involving narrative structures of time, rather than atomistic beliefs in mathematical point-presents. The ongoing reality of history is then expressed by a rolling web of narrative temporal structures. History itself and the practice of the discipline are both understood in these terms. Analysing our understanding of the "present" with reference to the infant mind, some roles of tenses and voices in the organisation of time are illustrated using brief literary examples, and choices are stressed as foundational, constrained only by practice. The paper concludes with the application of Collingwood's notion of "absolute presuppositions" to our understanding of the distinctions between present, past and historical past, and to the notions of historical distance and hindsight.

Keywords: Quine, Collingwood, idealism, rolling web, narrative temporal structures, tenses, historical time

Thinking as a historian and thinking historically

In a seminar at Birkbeck, University of London, on 22nd February 2012, with an audience consisting almost entirely of established historians and students of history, Hayden White explained what it is to think historically. Very briefly, his answer was that to think historically is to think contextually. He has offered students of history a lifetime of theoretical and practical understanding of that: for him the plot structure of historical narrative is central (White, 1973; White, 1980; White, 1987; White, 1999; Paul, 2011a). Historians – particularly trainee historians – naturally read “thinking historically” as meaning “thinking as a historian”, and the seminar proceeded on that basis. However, history – for better or worse – was recognised by all concerned as an academic *discipline*, and White stressed (without approving) the ways in which the discipline validates intending historians and admits them to membership, much as the legal profession requires a certain level of qualification if one is to practise as a lawyer.

Given White’s theory of history, “context” is here best understood as “narrative context”. Narratives, whatever else they do, refer to stretches of time. We should share with White the observation that narrative is characteristic of much historical writing, whether or not we agree with his view that to think as a historian is, most importantly, to think “contextually”. Some might hold instead, for example, that there is a distinct ability to reason about facts, and that this was most important; or that being a historian centres on certain specialist skills (palaeography and diplomatic, say) which only historians are likely to have; or that the most important paradigms of historical writing are analytical non-narrative works such as Johann Huizinga’s *The Waning of the Middle Ages* or Jacob Burkhardt’s *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*. All narrative theorists, including White, acknowledge the importance of these, but it is arguable that those works of history which seem to be non-narrative nevertheless presuppose a narrative background (Gorman, 2007b, pp. 191-192). Nevertheless, without committing ourselves to White’s position on the centrality of narrative, we should read “context” here as referring to temporal context, whatever other contexts are also appropriate for the material

(geographical or economic, for example). Few historians will dispute that a necessary, even if not the most important, skill of historians consists in dealing with temporal context: primarily, with the past rather than the present.

Nevertheless, that central skill of dealing with the past cannot be limited to historians. “Thinking historically”, as “thinking contextually”, cannot merely mean “thinking as a historian”, as if one had to be qualified for admission to the discipline before one could achieve it. There is, perhaps, some very small merit in holding that only a qualified lawyer can think in a proper legal way (although, if the law is to apply to non-lawyers, this point has limited application). By contrast, there is no merit at all in holding that only a qualified historian can think in a historical way, given that this is to be mainly understood as thinking “contextually”. We all of us, historians or otherwise, live in time, in history. We share with each other the everyday and its historical context, and our history is continuous with our present. Our shared memories, cultural heritages and historical beliefs take many temporally stretched forms, not all of which are appropriate for the disciplinary treatment which historians are able to provide. “Not every culture has developed historical consciousness in the same way as the West”, remarked Hayden White (White, 2007, p. 235).

We may wish to distinguish the understanding of historical time within the discipline of history from our everyday understanding of historical time. We may even imagine two cultures of historical consciousness, that of historians and that of non-historians, possibly even perceived as rivals in understanding the past. But this move is too quick. Plausibly, historians’ understanding of historical time presupposes our everyday understanding of historical time. Indeed, history is widely conceived by historians as essentially “common sense.” (Kitson Clark, 1968, p. 9) “Historical reasoning is continuous with our everyday reasoning about matters of fact,” remarked Leon Pompa (Pompa, 1981, p. 182). History is in many ways continuous with the everyday. Yet this, also, is too quick a move. It is not as if the nature of our everyday understanding of time is transparent to us. Before recognising that everyday understanding of time as foundational for historical understanding, we need to make better sense of it.

When we try to make sense of our everyday understanding of time, including historical time, it is appropriate to turn to our best philosophies of time. Our best philosophies do not stand still, and a particularly influential philosophy at present is that of American pragmatism, whose major thinkers include C.S. Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William James, John Dewey, with later developments by W.V.O. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty. We will draw on a version of that philosophy here (Gorman, 2007b). Pragmatism is best seen as a historicising philosophy: it presupposes historical time, and invites us to see matters with hindsight, so privileging historical perspective. But this does not mean that we should put the discipline of history back in a privileged position. Rather, we should observe that historical perspective is not merely historians' perspective but also, given pragmatism, a proper perspective of everyone, including philosophers. Pragmatism breaks down the artificial barriers between historical understanding on the part of historians and historical understanding on the part of the rest of us. We should not think of rival cultures here. If historians are to be understood as having some unique grasp of historical context, it is to be found within a pragmatic understanding shared with non-historians, given the continuity of historical understanding.

The road to pragmatism

We need to make sense of our everyday experience of ongoing time. Attending to "experience" may suggest that our approach should be empiricist, and some may think that we should therefore follow the philosophy of that arch-empiricist David Hume (Hume, 1739). Hume saw the human mind as receiving "impressions" from the world outside, and saw mental operations, including the construction of all our knowledge, in terms of the association of the various ideas which merely copied those impressions. He thought of impressions and ideas as ultimately simple things which were associated, both in our experienced world and in our knowledge of that world, into complexes. He invited us to seek the laws and principles which governed these associations. This philosophical approach was itself supposed by him to

derive from experience, but it does not do so: we do not experience the world in simple bits (what is here mere assertion is addressed later in this essay). Hume's view that experienced reality comes in simples which amalgamate into complexes is a metaphysical dogma rather than itself the outcome of experience. Moreover, Hume's philosophy led to overly sceptical conclusions: it left us doubting what we thought we knew perfectly well.

Immanuel Kant, famously awoken by Hume's arguments (Kant, 1783, p. 9), recognised the necessary input of human conceptualisation and categorisation into the constitution of experienced reality. With Kant, we typically think of the achievement of knowledge not as the passive reception of external input, as Hume thought, but as the active focussing of attention. We must understand that human conceptualising plays a constitutive and not merely a copying role in our experience. Such focussing operates within the limits imposed by the conceptualising categories of the mind. These structure experience. For Kant the world as we experience it is a complex requiring both what is given in unstructured perception and also the application of mental categories.

With regard to our experience of time, Kant thought that Isaac Newton was right: time and space provide an absolute and objective background which frames all possible experience. Our individual subjective understanding of time, what Kant called the *a priori* form of inner sense (Kant, 1787, p. 77), is also the objective time of the universe itself. Here our grasp of time awkwardly attempts to embrace both sides, the mental input and the external given. Kant was forced by his distinction between mental input and the external given into postulating a real but unknowable world of noumena, of "things-in-themselves".

Kant thought that Newton's triumph illustrated the achievement by universal reason of substantial results about the structure of the experienced world, results which were eternal and absolute, and necessarily what they are. Kant applied this view to the course of history (Kant, 1784). That things change over time Kant saw in terms of the predictable and inevitable advance of reason. Given that reason, for him, was also the foundation of morality, this amounted to claiming the inevitable advance of morality towards a final perfect state. History is, necessarily, progress.

These conclusions of Kant's philosophy are no longer regarded as plausible. The horrors of revolutions and wars in the twentieth century have made the operation of reason in history an unacceptable moral idea. There has been and continues to be a historical advance of science itself (Kuhn, 1970), and even Einstein's physics is not treated as absolute truth in the way that Newton's once was. To treat Newton's – or anybody's – ideas about space and time as absolute truth is now seen as glaringly arbitrary, while the postulation of an unknowable world of noumena has long been seen by philosophers as unnecessary and unintelligible. Such difficulties with Kant's rationalism have contributed to giving empiricism, as very broadly understood, the central place which it has in much western philosophy today. American pragmatism is, in this very broad sense, empiricist. By contrast with Kant's belief in rigid rational absolutes at the foundation of knowledge and understanding, this pragmatic empiricism holds, as do no doubt most historians, that the world is not necessarily what it is, but is rather a matter of contingent occurrences. There is no *a priori* pattern to history.

Yet a crucial Kantian point remains. Hume is still wrong. Our concepts and categories do not merely copy experience, but play a constitutive role in its construction. Against Hume, concepts and categories frame experience and are not derived from it; but against Kant, it is not a matter of fixed eternal rational categories. Current pragmatic empiricism recognises that it is not merely that the experienced world is a matter of contingency, but also that what we count or organise as the experienced world, in thought and language, also varies with the contingency of circumstance. As Isaiah Berlin observed (Berlin, 1980, p. 8), "the facts ... are not at all identical for all men at all times". Counting or organising reality through the classifications of our language happens not in terms of fixed categories, but is something human beings can consciously do by choice (Gorman, 2007b, p. 138 and *passim*).

The pragmatic frame of history

The American pragmatist W.V.O. Quine uses a metaphor (Gorman, 2011a; Hesse, 1966), to explain our knowledge and beliefs. These, he holds, form a “web” which expresses reality as a whole. Truth is not picked out by the web in an atomistic way, with each belief or claim to knowledge matching or copying its own little bit of reality. Rather, the various beliefs are mutually supporting, with those with the fullest support counting as knowledge. As a result, for Quine, “no statement is immune to revision”; “Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system” (Quine, 1961, p. 43). Yet we cannot believe what we like. We may desire to change our beliefs for various practical reasons, but if we do so we risk inconsistencies with other beliefs in the web. To avoid these, we may find we have to revise some of those other beliefs. Counting or sorting the world differently from the way we currently do characteristically requires – in our own judgement – adjustment within our system of beliefs. However, in practice we do not seek to make revolutionary adjustments to our current web of beliefs, for it has in most commonsensical ways a satisfactory level of consistency and practicality. Many of our beliefs are hence in practice regarded as “established”, and we commonly think the burden of proof lies on those who wish to revise them. Ongoing slow revision is the central mode of change in the web (Gorman, 2007a).

For this pragmatic model to be appropriate for framing our understanding of history it needs to be interpreted in a certain way (Gorman, 2011a). Some see the web as if it were an ideal equilibrium of resolved inconsistencies between beliefs. Seen like this, it is a synchronic abstraction, a durationless slice of time. By contrast the web should be seen in practical terms as expressing the actual world of beliefs: real people believing things, noting the beliefs of others and where they disagree, and seeking resolution, improvement or even agreement to differ. Such things take time: the web should be understood diachronically and not synchronically. The web organises time for us in its ongoing existence. The ongoing reality of history is expressed by this web, since history is that which we conceptually count

or organise as such. History itself is inherently diachronic, and so are both our everyday understanding of it and the practice of the associated discipline (Gorman, 2007b; Gorman, 2011b).

Earlier we noted that truth is not picked out by the web in an atomistic way, with each belief or claim to knowledge copying its own little bit of reality. Rather, the web involves the mutual support of beliefs. It is important to understand that this philosophy does not seek merely to replace an atomistic copying of reality with a holistic copying of reality. The web *expresses* reality, and is in no way an attempt to “correspond” to it or to copy it. This philosophy needs to be interpreted as an idealist metaphysical position, and that is particularly necessary if we are to make sense of history (Gorman, 1982, 69-80). Idealism denies the “given” in unstructured perception as a reality wholly independent of us (Sellars, 1956). It denies Kant’s unknowable noumena. It denies what is sometimes called “realism”, that metaphysical faith in a reality wholly beyond us. “The whole distinction between a subjective and an objective factor in experience loses most of its significance with the abolition...of the vicious Kantian distinction between the ‘given’ in perception and the ‘work of the mind’”, as the idealist A.E. Taylor stated (Taylor, 1903, p. 242). Given his commitment to noumena, Kant’s so-called “transcendental idealism” is not a true idealism.

A simple “realism” holds that reality is independent of us, so that it is able to provide an objective unbiased touchstone against which we may measure the truth of what we claim to know. This may sound like everyday commonsense. Yet historians, of all people, should resist this realist thought. We cannot look up from writing our histories to check with historical reality to see if we have got it right. Historical reality is not “out there”. Any attempt to grasp this supposed “independent” reality faces impossible difficulties, for imagining that reality is a touchstone available for use within the world as we experience it requires that reality to be available in a form which is unavoidably in terms of our own conceptualisation of the world. There are no unconceptualised experiences (Sellars, 1956; McDowell, 1994). Otherwise that reality cannot be used to justify our beliefs, it cannot be adopted as a reason for believing what we do. The very intelligibility of reality requires that it exist in categorical and conceptual terms which

used to justify our beliefs, it cannot be adopted as a reason for believing what we do. The very intelligibility of reality requires that it exist in categorical and conceptual terms which are grounded in what our own understanding permits. Equivalently, the more independent of us we suppose “reality” to be, the more unintelligible it becomes, the less it could be a “reason” to believe one thing rather than another. To suppose the full independence of reality is to suppose something unintelligible and unusable.

Thus “realism”, the philosophical position opposed to “idealism”, if it is understood as asserting the complete independence of reality from us, is asserting a position which makes “reality” unintelligible. Yet the words “reality”, “real” and their cognates are intelligible; they are everyday words which lose their meaning unless we can understand them as correctly usable on some occasions, and we must not allow them to be hijacked by a dubious philosophical approach. “Real” must be a word which the idealist is able to use successfully, just as the rest of us do, without commitment to an unnecessary metaphysical position which turns the intelligible into the unintelligible. A properly expressed idealism will account for all our concerns about reality without loss of meaning. In recent decades, with developments in the philosophy of language and of mind, the opposite of “realism” has been taken to be “anti-realism”. Simon Blackburn introduces the term “quasi-realism”: a quasi-realist is “a person who, starting from a recognizably anti-realist position, finds himself progressively able to mimic the intellectual practices supposedly definitive of realism” (Blackburn, 1993, p. 15).

When one is an idealist, “ideal” and “real” are not to be understood as opposites. That great idealist philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood said: ‘the ideal and the real are not mutually exclusive. A thing may be ideal and also real’ (Collingwood, 1925, p. 150). Many will unthinkingly see that as a contradiction. This will typically be because they are aware of the conflict between “realism” and “idealism” as that has sometimes been understood by philosophers: as involving the conflict between, respectively, the assertion and the denial of the view that reality exists independently of us, as just described. And, so understood, “realism” and “idealism” are indeed opposites. But “real” and “ideal” are not opposites. We should join Collingwood in opposites recognising

that privileging some particular thought by calling its intended reference “real” is itself an act of thought.

Certainly there is a distinction to be drawn between the “real” and the “unreal”, but the “real”/“unreal” distinction itself lies within the “ideal”, within thought: hence “real” is not opposed to “ideal”. Thus reality, including historical reality, depends on us; it is to be idealistically understood as what we pragmatically count it to be, and in principle we can choose, and have chosen, to count it as we do and have. We live with the outcome of our inherited pragmatic choices, most of which we are not able to revisit simply because we no longer see them as the outcome of choices, while many more choices, even if we wished to revisit them, are not in practice revisable because an alternative belief system consistently permitting change is not available to us; or so we characteristically judge.

In order to make sense of historical understanding, we have now seen two developments of the pragmatic Quinean web: first, that it be understood diachronically and not synchronically; second, that it be explicitly understood as an idealist position. A third development needs now to be stressed. When we think of the web as being of “beliefs”, involving concepts and expressions which sort ongoing reality for us, we may imagine that the point being made here refers only to simple concepts and to beliefs expressed in comparatively short sentences. That is not correct, for it is too limited. Historians and the rest of us express historical reality in much larger units of meaning than mere beliefs, commonly in terms of book-length narratives or sagas or indeed in temporal structures or periodisations much greater still.

Narratives, like the ongoing web itself, offer far more than merely a list of discontinuous atomic facts, but unify them into wide-ranging temporal structures. Indeed, the facts are commonly sorted as what they are in virtue of the narratives which contain them. Some historical “facts” can be treated as having existence independent of their containing narratives, while others exist as a result of their containing narratives, for only that narrative construction permits their existence. Hence, more accurately, the web is to be seen not as a web of “beliefs” but as a diachronic web of *reality-sorting expressions*, of whatever temporal size. The structure of historical time in past, present and future

is the pragmatic diachronic web. We create and understand historical time in terms of the ongoing web. It is a contingent matter how far the ongoing web is best characterised in terms of a “master narrative” or a substantive philosophy of history such as that of Marx, Hegel, or Spengler. Sometimes, from a general belief in the perfectibility of humanity to the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, cultures have perceived the world that way. Now, the web permits chaos, pluralism and an uncertain characterisation of the future.

The transmission of temporal understanding

Transmitting temporal understanding could be a matter of killing or brainwashing those who will not accept some totalitarian story. Rather more familiar and commonplace is the teaching of history in schools. Moreover there is much that psychologists and anthropologists and others can tell us about our perceptions of time (Hareven, 1977; Bainbridge, 2012; Hammond, 2012, say). Here, a pragmatic philosophy suggests instead the question how we can teach children about time, given the degree of conceptual choice now explained. Is our basic grasp of time a matter of nature or nurture? Since at least Plato’s *Republic* there has been an issue in the philosophy of education, between, on the one hand, those who think, with Socrates, that children are born with innate knowledge, so that “education” is entirely a drawing out of what is already there, and, on the other hand, those (perhaps following Aristotle) who see teaching as an input from the outside to the inside of a person, as nothing but writing on a *tabula rasa*. These approaches are extremes: they leave no room for saying that some knowledge is innate and some not.

The views of Kant and Hume plainly have implications for this choice, and we have already adopted, in pragmatism, a somewhat Kantian approach. However, here we need more detail when we are trying to make sense of time, and the first point to note is that the *tabula rasa* metaphor breaks down where time is involved. Think of the mind as a blank slate. However blank you imagine it to be, you are still imagining an object, something persisting through time. To deny such persistence is to deny the mind itself, it is to deny the persistence of

consciousness. Even Avicenna, with his view that the mind, as *tabula rasa*, is pure potential that is actualised through education, understands education as taking place over time, *within* time; it is not the teaching of time. Time is not something written on the slate.

It might be supposed – it is difficult to hold that it might be imagined – that the *tabula rasa* persists for the duration of a mathematical point in time, and that anything of longer duration needs to be taught or trained into existence. We may perhaps think of the elementary infant experience of time as being experience of “the present”, conceived as a mathematical point-present, and that anything more needs to be taught: complex past and future tenses, for example. Yet Collingwood said, “The real is the present, conceived not as a mathematical point between the present and the past, but as the union of present and past in a duration or permanence that is at the same time change. Thus the past as past and the future as future do not exist at all, but are purely ideal; the past as living in the present and the future as germinating in the present are wholly real and indeed are just the present itself. It is because of the presence of these two elements in the present ... that the present is a concrete and changing reality and not an empty mathematical point” (Collingwood, 1925, p. 149). As an idealist, Collingwood holds that reality as a whole lies within the world of thought, and that has to include time itself. “Time, as succession of past, present and future, really has its being *totum simul* for the thought of a spectator, and this justifies its ‘spatialized’ presentation as a line of which we can see the whole at once” (Collingwood, 1925, p. 150).

Adult humans are very sophisticated in their organisation of time, and I here accept Collingwood’s view when we are trying to make sense of the historical understanding of time. Yet it does seem somewhat implausible to ascribe an understanding of “the whole at once” to the infant mind, which we may perhaps imagine is susceptible only to understanding in the present tense. But, if so, it cannot be the present tense as referring to an empty mathematical point; indeed, the concept of an empty mathematical point is as abstract a thought as they come, and imagining an infant having that as its sole innate understanding is also well beyond the plausible. I am now writing this essay, and it is still “now” as I come to the end of this sentence. Furthermore, and crucially,

the present tense does not always refer to the present. “The present tense... is a grammatical tense that locates a situation or event in present time”, says *Wikipedia* firmly, in its entry on “present tense” on the 27th February 2012. But it doesn’t always do that, and we don’t always understand it that way.

Consider this, from *The Help*: “But Miss Celia, she just smiles, washes the muck off her hands in a sink full of dishes. I wonder if maybe I’ve found myself another deaf one, like Miss Walters was. Let’s hope so” (Stockett, 2009, p. 31). The narrator, despite the use of the present tense, is here referring to the past. In large part, with as much temporal (if fictional) truthfulness, it could have been written partly as follows, using the past tense: “But Miss Celia, she just smiled, washed the muck off her hands in a sink full of dishes. I wondered if maybe I’d found myself another deaf one, like Miss Walters had been”. However, the conversion to the past tense of “Let’s hope so” is less easily available. While a conversational cliché, “Let’s hope so” has imperative form, albeit weak in its impact. “Let us” addresses an imagined audience around the fictional narrator, including the reader. It thus invites the reader to share immediate inclusive intimacy with the narrator and that audience. As such, the reader shares in the thought at the imagined time of its imagined occurrence, and shares also in the imagined “presentness” of that thought. (Infants, incidentally, find the imperative mood particularly understandable, if only when they are using it themselves.)

Yet this “present” actually occurred in the past of the fictional narrator. Using the past tense can sometimes distance the reader from intimacy with the narrator and this may remind the reader that what is described is fiction; by contrast, using the present tense, as in *The Help*, can permit the reader to suspend disbelief and share a vivacious sense of what was “real”. Use of the present tense is a rhetorical device to make the past vivid. No wonder a reviewer of *The Help* says “The two principal maid characters...leap off the page in all their warm, three-dimensional glory” (Stockett, 2009). Reading such a text is not unlike attending a play, which we watch in a real emotional present. Iprison? They still eat there, they smoke; they play their instruments! My dead push up the grass, silently turning to dust; two who were like flowers....the killers, in prison, coolly gazing at the mountains...”(Lorca, 2007, Act 1, Scene 1).

Yet the past tense nevertheless can make the imagined reality immediate, if it is well done: “That was when I saw the Pendulum. The sphere, hanging from a long wire set into the ceiling of the choir, swayed back and forth with isochronal majesty...the magic of that serene breathing” (Eco, 1990, p. 1). As with the narrator of *The Help*, the story’s vividness is here brought about in part by Umberto Eco’s use of the first-person singular; a play is similarly and typically an explicit demonstration of first-person singulars. Tenses, voices; these are among the foundational concepts of literary understanding. They are also among the foundational concepts of our understanding of time, and among the foundational concepts of historical understanding, so in part justifying Hayden White’s attention to literary theory in his philosophy of history. Historical writing is not usually written in the present tense, although in principle it could be. One could, for example, describe the court of Philip II of Spain by stating: “there, before you, appears this gracious, slightly built man with pale blue eyes”, and continuing with similar detail in the present tense. Yet, while vivid, in the context of writing history its style is artificial, its artificiality placing a barrier between the reader and what is meant to be an expression of historical reality.

The past tense, even where the first-person singular is involved, is dispassionate and traditionally regarded within the discipline of history as a more appropriate style for expressing objectivity; and readers commonly take it that way, although they are well advised when reading to “know your historian”. Budding scientists are somewhat similarly taught to write laboratory reports in the passive tense, again in order to share the scientific profession’s traditional view of itself as being “objective”. It is a silly view, no more than a verbal pretence that the observer (inevitably with particular characteristics) did not exist in the experiment or in the creation of the report. Sadly the academic humanities and social studies sometimes try to ape this attitude by anonymising authors. But in art – in much philosophy and history, as in much painting and sculpture – provenance, like context, is crucial.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (Douglass, 1960) was published in 1845, seven years after his escape from slavery, and this adopts the approved dispassionate style to the point where his personal involvement is easily forgotten: “Master Thomas at length said he would stand it no longer. I had lived with him nine months, during which time he had given me a number of severe whippings, all to no good purpose. He resolved to put me out, as he said, to be broken; and, for this purpose, he let me for one year to a man named Edward Covey” (Douglass, 1960, p. 87). Here the reverse of Eco’s mode occurs: is the passage so plausibly true, if the narrator is able so easily to distance himself from the reality he asserts? In addition, it is natural to hold that the Holocaust, for example, was a matter of such evil that it would be morally wrong to adopt a dispassionate expression of it (Gorman, 2008; Gorman, 2004).

The selection of style, voices and tenses is a *choice* (Gorman, 2007b), but the infant knows none of this sophistication. All these frames of time have to be taught, even the distinction between past, present and future. Nevertheless, what is being taught are ways of organising time which *presuppose* the infant’s ongoing temporal experience and persistence of consciousness. We were made “looking before and after”, observed Shakespeare’s Hamlet (Act IV, Scene 1V), although we academic persons look “before and after many times as far” (Cornford, 1973, p. 14). As Collingwood said, time is all there in thought at once. As adults we conceptualise it in complex ways; as infants we experience what we adults call past, present and future even though we do not yet distinguish them, not having the concepts. Yet those first distinctions are grasped very early, even when we cannot express them.

As we have seen, for an idealist the world of thought is not to be contrasted with some external reality. The distinctions we are taught to conceptualise in explicit language between “the past”, “the present” and “the future” are in principle distinctions that we choose, for, following our idealist pragmatism, the world is what we count it to be. But the infant does not have a choice, and nor in practice do we; the choice is free only in principle, for we have inherited these major divisions in the conceptualisation of time. We do not in the ordinary course of events query them (theoretical physicists do; historians don’t). We share time

with others; indeed, we share consciousness with others. We have to transmit that which is already successfully shared, and we teach our complex understanding of time to our children, for their sake and ours. Our complex language of time reflects the fact that we frequently count the present as being of much longer duration than that of immediate personal experience. We have to teach tenses, even the present tense; but the grasp of time is innate, ready for organisation; it frames the world, idealistically understood. It is not the ultimate object but the ultimate subject of experience.

That the phenomenology of the experience of time shows it to be continuous and extended beyond the present – that it is not a “mathematical point” – is indeed widely accepted. Time is not experienced in bits, even by an infant. In the first years of schooling a child might be asked to put sentences like the following into the right order: (1) He started up the engine; (2) Mr Smith opened the garage doors; (3) He got out and closed the doors behind him; (4) He drove out of the garage (Gorman, 1974, p. 329; Fain, 1970, p. 283). The child will not be taught the right answer to questions of this kind (there may be more than one answer here), but it will have to think it through from its own experience, which from the beginning was temporally extended in terms of what happened and what happened next. Hearing a piece of music is another example of experiencing continuity over time which nevertheless involves our counting some or all of the experience as taking place in the present, and children respond to music (even if only to repetition of sounds) when still in the womb.

Distinguishing the present from the past

We need to be exact in our understanding of the claim that in practice we do not query our distinctions between past, present and future. We do not query that these are to be distinguished, nor indeed that we do distinguish them in everyday contexts; but we can and do query where the distinctions are to be drawn. There is, in general, much freedom about how to sort the present, and there is no fixed duration for “the present” in our experience. Looking back (a metaphor reminding us of our internal image of time as like a line in space), it is clear that where

the present ends and the past begins is not fixed. A straightforward view, in the light of Hayden White's approach and what we have said so far, is that temporal structure is determined, for any one context, by the narrative that structures that context, and the issue is decided on the ground of whether we see ourselves as part of that story or not. In this situation, we may well wish to distinguish "the past" from "the historical past". A story which continues now may have started long ago, and so cover much which is past; but if the story continues now we would not normally think of the past it includes as being the "historical" past, for that might suggest, wrongly in this case, that it was only of interest to historians. Is the Holocaust history? There is no doubt that it is past, but the story is still unfolding, so no. The First World War still lives on for many, even if only just; it is part of some people's present. There is a vast range of stories that may be told, and these have different implications for our many distinctions between the past and the historical past, which lies outside our extended present.

Here, following material in a paper "The limits of historiographical choice in temporal distinctions" which I gave to a Workshop on Time organised by Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage at Freiburg in April 2011, I will attend to an idea of Collingwood's that marks a period when occurrences are clearly far away from us in historical time, in what is very properly called the "historical past". Collingwood introduced the notion of an "absolute presupposition", which is a belief or assumption underlying the beliefs and attitudes involved in our ordinary ways of life, an assumption which is a historical absolute for a time, in that it is contingently *uncriticisable* at that time (Walsh, 1963, pp. 160ff. Collingwood, 1940; Collingwood, 1939, chap. 8). "Uncriticisability" we understand as pragmatic impossibility at the time in question: it is not even entertained at that time as a conscious thought, as something true rather than false. Only later, with hindsight, may it be in practice possible to doubt it or actively contrast it with a serious alternative. Only later might serious alternatives arise. It is a mere contingency whether they do so. Hence an absolute presupposition is unthinkingly presupposed by past agents.

One difference between the “present” (with its associated “past”) and the “historical past” lies in when we stop sharing with the individuals concerned the same absolute presuppositions. As Collingwood said, “in actual history, events overlap” (Collingwood, 1925, p. 141). In terms of the ongoing pragmatic frame of history outlined above, at any given period there will be a range of presuppositions, some with “absolute” status and wholly unexamined, some consciously known and fixed because alternatives are not available, and some doubted with an active search for such alternatives as may yet become available. Looking backwards, the historical past comes into anti-realistically understood existence when the past individuals in question have some absolute presuppositions which we no longer share. Again, the past slips into the historical past when people in the relevant ongoing stories become conscious of presuppositions which people in the historical past were unconscious of. However, because so many overlapping historical stories can be told, just what count for historians as the central differences in absolute presuppositions is a matter for historical judgement.

Relevant changes come when, because of changes in the status of what were once absolute presuppositions, we no longer feel or think in the same way. The historian Herbert Butterfield remarked: “At one period it is felt to be the natural thing, as well as the proper thing, for the clergy to be amenable only to ecclesiastical law; but in another period things are inverted, and, without any consciousness of running to paradox, ordinary people will refuse to believe that the clergy should not be amenable to the law of the land, like everybody else” (Butterfield, 1971, pp. 5-6). He also observed that there are “things that the men of 1600 shall we say – but the men of 1900 similarly – do not have to explain to one another, and the result is that they do not always get into the historian’s evidence” (Butterfield, 1971, p. 6). Again, “it took a lot of work, a lot of insight, on the part of Namier and others, to discover those dim unavowed things that the men of 1760 had not even needed to talk to one another about” (Butterfield, 1971, p. 7).

Collingwood thought that the recovery of absolute presuppositions could only be by historiographical method, by which he meant empathetic understanding, that is, the re-enactment of past thought (Collingwood, 1946, pp. 282ff.). However, the re-enactment of past

thought is arguably *impossible* as a means of recovering absolute presuppositions, since absolute presuppositions are not consciously thought. Here Collingwood was writing about the nature of metaphysics, not history; otherwise he would surely not have missed so obvious a point, that we could not put ourselves in the position of the past agent and recover a thought which was never consciously there. To recover absolute presuppositions without empathetic understanding, without evidence, we may have to engage in the philosophical analysis of past writings, or have to ascribe presuppositions and choices to past agents, using a model such as neoclassical microeconomic theory which is inevitably anachronistic and only applicable with hindsight (Gorman, 1991, chap. 5; Friedman, 1979). Only hindsight allows the practical ascription of truth or falsity to absolute presuppositions.

Moreover, even if the actual thoughts were there and recoverable, alternative thoughts plainly were not, and we, looking back, could not uninvent our own understanding of the thought, which typically comes complete with the alternatives. The *meaning* of the thought would inevitably be ours, and not the past agent's, on this approach, since meaning involves the possible ascription of the words "true" and "false" in this context. How can we knowingly transmit to our children our own absolute presuppositions? We can't, not knowingly; we can't empathise with or transmit a thought that is not consciously there. These are transmitted as presuppositions of other parts of children's education. Hence education may close down choices which might be unreflectively apparent to an untaught child. This is one reason why it is good to teach philosophy to children. Philosophy involves questioning and analysis.

The ability to think of alternatives to received or established wisdom involves examining them and reflecting on the possibility of alternatives; it involves *revising* them (Gorman, 2007a). Philosophical engagement with what has been transmitted from the past brings absolute presuppositions to present consciousness, but at the cost of no longer sharing with the past those thoughts as absolute. Absolute presuppositions cease being absolute when they reach the light of day. This gives a break with the historical past, and thereby introduces the appropriate degree of historical distance, another spatial metaphor (Hollander, Paul and Peters, 2011).

We can then question the past in the relevant area without passionate or partisan engagement because, where absolute presuppositions are concerned, past agents themselves are neither passionate nor partisan, since they are not conscious of the issues concerning them (Paul, 2011b).

Yet this is not an argument for avoiding passion or partisanship on the part of historians. Notice that history was once seen as teaching morality by examples, and we can and still do use historical stories for that purpose. This use requires that we regard the relevant past reality as influential within our own moral present, so that such presuppositions as distinguish our present from the historical past cannot be absolute – unthinkingly unconsidered – with respect to moral understanding. A past with which we shared no presuppositions at all, not even any kind of self-understanding of what it is to be human, is no source of moral lessons. Even the historical past has its continuities with our present, whatever assumptions we no longer share. “Once upon a time there was an evil witch”; the parable of the Good Samaritan – to be efficacious, the historical past, even the past of myth and fable, cannot be disconnected from our own moral realm. We can make millennia part of our present, if we choose. Such moral and cultural transmission is also the transmission of our understanding of historical time.

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