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Leibnizian philosophy of history: a conversation

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ABSTRACT

In this interview Marek Tamm asks questions concerning some of the main developments and arguments in Frank Ankersmit's thinking about history, focusing on the Leibnizian dimension of his work. The following topics are discussed: the role of the philosophy of history within the academic philosophy and history writing, the relevance of historicism for contemporary philosophy of history, the distinction between descriptive sentences and representations in history writing, the importance of Leibniz for the future of the philosophy of history, the representational character of Leibniz's substances and the problem of relations in his philosophical system.

KEYWORDS Historicism; historical experience; historical representation; Leibniz; monadology; philosophy of history; substance

Tamm: Let me get right to the most delicate point: how do you see the role of the philosophy of history within the academic philosophy in general? It is my impression that this question is rarely raised among the philosophers of history, while you clearly keep thinking on it. In 2005, you offered a rather desolate diagnosis: “‘Mainstream’ philosophers, philosophers of language and science and so on (...), never show any interest in what contemporary philosophers of history have been saying and writing. Apparently philosophers of history are not expected to have anything to offer that could be of use to philosophers of language and science.” (Ankersmit 2005b, 23) And in one of your autobiographical articles you seem to agree with Arthur Danto's opinion that contemporary philosophers tend to look at the philosophy of history in the same way that musicologists tend to look at military music – as a noisy and unsophisticated genre practiced by less talented amateurs, whose company one should avoid if one wants to be treated seriously by one's colleagues (Ankersmit 2003b, 433). However, you have been arguing for decades that the philosophy of history is crucial to make a progress in the philosophy of language (‘philosophy of

language is a mere torso which needs completion' [Molven 2007, 10]), and also your last book, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, is written with a hope to 'open the eyes of philosophers of language to issues that they have so far remained blind to' (Ankersmit 2012, IX). How do you judge the current situation and have you noticed any reactions from the philosophers of language to your recent work?

Ankersmit: You're right, this question is absolutely crucial for me and the problems occasioned by it have been my main guide in my career as a philosopher of history. When discussing the writing of history I always had two things in mind: (1) how to account for the writing of history and (2) what does this imply for the relationship between historical writing and other disciplines (especially, the sciences). And where the second question was no less important to me than the former. I've always believed that there is in historical writing a lesson of the greatest importance for all of philosophy and that up till now philosophers have rarely, or never been open to. One always tried to fit history within the matrix of existing philosophical thought, whereas I'm convinced that history has the potential to spring this matrix at least partly. Needless to say, the second question I mentioned just now invites an encounter with philosophy language and of science. Equally obviously, this encounter will have to focus on the issue of whether philosophy of language and of science can be expected to contribute to a better understanding of historical writing.

When addressing the issue my main move has always been to distinguish between (1) historical research (in German *Geschichtsforschung*) and (2) historical writing (in German *Geschichtsschreibung*). Historical research concentrates on the establishment of historical facts, whereas historical writing addresses the problem of how best to account for the past on the basis of generally accepted facts. Most of historical discussion is centred on the second rather than the first question. Admittedly, this may be different for parts of the past of which relatively little documentary evidence is left. But if you think of, for example, Western history since the sixteenth century where the historian is literally swamped by documentary evidence of each conceivable kind, the emphasis is not on the establishment of facts but on the issue of which facts will have to be mentioned in the historian's text in order to give us a proper grasp of the past. Just have a look at the reviews historians write of each other books: these reviews rarely deal with the question of whether a historian gets his facts straight but focus almost exclusively on what the historian has done with the facts. This certainly does not mean that historians are allowed to be lackadaisical with regard to the facts. Far from it! The historian who gets his facts wrong will be pitilessly taken to task for this. But in the practice of history this rarely happens. With the result that what divides historians are not the facts but the issue which facts have been, or should be highlighted in order to adequately represent some part of the past.

Now, I'm ready to grant that there is a certain overlap between how respectively the scientist and the historian establish the facts relevant to their research. And also that on this level the philosopher of history might be well advised to take into account the claims made by philosophers of science. But in all of my career as a philosopher of history I never came across an analysis by a philosopher of science making sense of historical writing as understood here. So here history has an autonomy of its own if compared with the sciences. Moreover, in my view it cannot reasonably be doubted that historical writing has its own contribution to make to the knowledge we have of the world we live in. Hence historical writing presents us with a variant of rationality unknown to the sciences. And I see it as the philosopher's main assignment to clarify this hitherto unaccounted variant of rationality. To take it all together, when asking oneself where, and in what way history may at least partly explode the matrix of contemporary philosophical thought, it's the writing of history (*Geschichtschreibung*) and not historical research (*Geschichtsforschung*) one should focus on. This is not meant to downplay the significance of historical research – again, far from it! Without historical research no historical writing. My only claim is that from a *philosophical* point of view historical research is of less interest than historical writing. The real philosophical gunpowder is in historical writing.

Finally, my answer to your question of how I judge the current situation. To begin with, the claim of the autonomy of historical writing if compared to the sciences is an old and familiar one. Just think of Windelband's venerable distinction between the nomothetic and the idiographic sciences and of all of hermeneutics, in both its Anglo-Saxon and German guise. I feel little inclined to commit myself to a pronouncement on these philosophies of history. Decisive is for me that neither of them addresses the issue of historical writing in the sense meant here. Next, as far as I know no philosopher of history has been prepared to accept my distinction between historical research and historical writing. Each time any of them addressed the issue the distinction was rejected by an appeal to the thesis of the theory-ladenness of empirical fact whose validity for the sciences is, indeed, beyond any reasonable doubt. But applying that thesis without any further critical reflection to historical writing necessarily presupposes the belief that the relationship between historical fact and historical representation should be basically the same as that between fact and theory in the sciences.

And this is, indeed, mere belief. Instead of giving now a shortlist of the differences between historical representation and scientific theory, I'd like the reader to invite to open a textbook on e.g. thermodynamics and another one the history of England. In my view each reasonable person will then have to admit that the onus of proof rest with those who believe in the basic similarity of the kind of argument you'll find in both textbooks (and of scientific theories and historical representations) and *not* with those who deny it. But, strangely

enough, in spite of what even a child will immediately recognize, few philosophers of history are willing to agree with this reasonable person. The logical positivist's thesis of the unity of the sciences is still as universally accepted in practice as it is decried in theory. Apparently we're running up here against a prejudice of truly monumental proportions. Whatever may explain this stubborn prejudice, I do not know; but I *do* know for certain that it obviates already the beginning of a satisfactory account of the practice of history. And, similarly, of what makes historical writing of interest not only for philosophers of history but for anyone with an open and alert mind for the varieties of rational argument and research.

Tamm: The other side of the same question is the role of the philosophy of history within the academic history writing. In connection to Hayden White, you have stated with good reasons that 'historians have generally remained suspicious of philosophers of history down to the present day', adding, 'moreover, historians' animosity towards historical theorists does not seem to have an analogue elsewhere' (Ankersmit 1998, 183). But again, in your own work you keep repeating that the task of the philosophy of history is to reflect 'on the results rather than on the presuppositions of contemporary historical writing' (Ankersmit 1994, 135), and in the discussion with prof. Roth you declared: 'My method is to take historical writing as it is and I then try to make sense of it as well as I can.' (Ankersmit 2013c, 580) In the same spirit, you gave recently advice to younger colleagues to 'begin humbly with the beginning – hence, with the simple, manifest facts about the writing of history and especially of narrative and representation – before diving head-long into the boundless oceans of philosophical abstraction.' (Ankersmit 2015, 135) However, in reading your work, one notices that you engage very rarely with the contemporary historical writing; except a passing interest for microhistorians, your preferred historians belong all to previous centuries (from Gibbon to Huizinga). Could you please present your understanding of the relations between history writing and philosophy of history as well as to explain your apparently little (philosophical) interest in contemporary historical practice?

Ankersmit: This has to do with two things. In the first place, in my view the historicists of the early nineteenth century made historical writing into the discipline as it is largely down to the present day. Just as any physicist will recognize that what Newton, Bernoulli or Maxwell were doing in the seventeenth, the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was basically the same kind of thing they do still now, so will historians acknowledge that, in spite of the differences between the kind of historical topics addressed by the historians of a century ago and by those writing now, the disciplinary aims, methods and modes of argument are still recognizably the same. This gets me to my second remark. One of the unfortunate aspects of the reflection on historical writing is the problem of examples. Maxwell needed only four basic equations for the deduction of all of this theory of electro-magnetic phenomena. This provides

the philosopher of science with a handy and manageable example. But even a relatively short historical work will often go already beyond some 100,000 words. That's not something you can quote in full length in your text as a theorist and discuss, next, in order to make your point. Hence, if the philosopher of history decides to discuss a work of history and be fairly sure that his audience will have an idea of what he is talking about, he has no other choice than to refer to some classical work of history he may safely assume his readers to be familiar with. Hence, my choice of examples has nothing to do with a bias against contemporary historical writing, but is the result of nothing else than my wish to facilitate the communication between my readers and myself and to make sure they will know exactly what I have in mind.

Next, in my view respect and humility should guide the philosopher of history in his approach to historical writing. Historical writing has been one of the great adventures in the (intellectual) history of the West, and in several ways no less so than the sciences. The discovery of the past and of how to deal with that discovery is a no less important part of the West's history than that past itself. Hegel was wholly right about this. It follows that the philosopher of history should never ever allow himself to be tempted to make categorical statements about what is right or wrong in historical writing. The philosopher of history failing to meet this requirement only demonstrates his ignorance of the discipline or, even worse, his deliberate embrace of such ignorance. Some of my colleagues have said that historical writing should be useless, irreparably on the wrong track or even 'that historians don't think'; but when saying this kind of things they only condemn themselves to a well-deserved irrelevance and oblivion. John Locke once characterized the philosopher's task as follows: 'it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge'. Very well said and so it is.

Tamm: From the very beginning, you have inscribed your philosophical approach in the venerable tradition of histori(ci)sm (in the non-Popperian sense), or as you put it yourself, 'the *ceterum censeo* in all my writings has always been an adhortation to return to the historicism of Herder, Ranke, Humboldt and so on.' (Ankersmit 2003b, 434; see also Ankersmit 1995; 2010a) Historicism is in your opinion 'a perfect theory of history' (Ankersmit 2010b, 399, n. 23) and you present your last book as 'an attempt to translate the historicist theory of historical representation into a more contemporary philosophical idiom' (Ankersmit 2012, IX). However, historicism has had many critics, like, for instance, Walter Benjamin, who considers it as one of his main enemies in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Let me give just one quote: 'Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years.' (Benjamin 2007, 263) What would be your response

to Benjamin's criticism and would you agree to summarize once more your understanding of the relevance of historicism for contemporary philosophy of history?

Ankersmit: Well, I have no problem with Benjamin's observation and I think the same would be true of Herder, Ranke or Humboldt. Causes are always established *ex post facto*. And I have no problem in acknowledging that it may sometimes take centuries or even millennia to establish the relevant causal connections. Hence, I see no conflict between historicism and Benjamin's statement about causality.

Next, the relevance of historicism for contemporary philosophy of history. In reaction to what it took to be the 'mentality' of the Enlightenment, historicists always emphasized the unique individuality of the object of their study. Each historical period, each nation, each political system, each institution should, according to them, be regarded as a unique individual, of interest not because of what it *shared* with other such historical periods, nations, and so on, but because of what made it *different* from them.

Historicists have often been accused of inconsistency. For the historicist's critics would argue that historical periods, nations, and so on, can never be completely unique. If only because there must necessarily be at least one thing they all have in common. Namely, the property of being historical periods, nations, and so on. And then the universal will return on the scene again. The domain of the universal can then be enlarged again at the expense of the individual. The end-result may even be that we will have to recognize that the universal gives us, in actual historiographical practice, a better and more secure grasp of the past than the individual. Clearly, this would mean the end of the pretensions of historicism.

In my view this criticism of nineteenth century historicism is basically correct. But it is not if the historicist thesis is understood as a claim about the linguistic instruments used by the historian in his effort to get a grasp of the past, instead of being a claim about the nature of the past itself. In one sentence: historical representations are unique individuals in the sense meant by the nineteenth century historicists. And so it is with most, if not all of the historicist's arguments about the nature of the past and the historian's task: all the arguments should be translated into arguments about the nature of historical representation. Then they will give you the heart and the essence of historical writing. And, at the same time, a challenging and thought-provoking intimation of what unexpected new dimensions the reflection on the nature of historical writing may add to existing philosophy of language and of science.

Tamm: If you allow me to bring in yet another influential critic of historicism – Leo Strauss. Strauss defines historicism as 'the depressing spectacle of a disgraced variety of thoughts and beliefs' (Strauss 1953, 18) This means that, according to historicism, everything we do is based purely on our historical influences and the era in which we live, that no ideas can ever claim any sort

of universal validity. Strauss holds that ‘historicism is incompatible with philosophy in the original meaning of the word’ (Strauss 1988, 227), if we accept historicism, he argues, philosophy becomes impossible – the philosopher can never transcend his own historical situation. You have briefly addressed Strauss’ criticism in your *Political Representation* (2002, 17, 32–33), but I want to ask in more general terms whether you are ready to historicise the philosophy itself (while, for instance, Danto never agreed to extend historicism to philosophy)?

Ankersmit: Strauss’s criticism of historicism was, basically, a rehearsal of the so-called ‘crisis of historicism’. The historicist claim that everything is a product of its past implied that there could be no time-transcendent norms and values. This led to a head-on collision of historicism with the neo-Kantianism *en vogue* in most German universities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Most variants of neo-Kantianism had inherited from Kant the conviction that values must be eternally valid in order to count as values we can allow to guide us in our moral dilemmas. This is obviously at odds with what history has on offer. This caused a profound and almost existential despair in the minds of neo-Kantian philosophers and of theologians, such as Ernst Troeltsch, also hoping for absolute and time-transcendent moral and theological truths. Not surprisingly, historicism was accused of having been the source of the neo-Kantian’s discomforts. And so it was with Strauss.

Three comments are appropriate. In the first place, each historian, whether historicist or not, will recognize that no (moral) values have been valid for all times and places. So if the neo-Kantian, the theologian (or Strauss) decides to remind stubbornly blind to this for them so unpleasant fact, and if they wish to avoid any future exposure to it, they will have to abolish *all* of historical writing – and *not* just historicism. Secondly, if there is such a conflict between plain historical fact and the neo-Kantian’s dreams of eternal moral truths, had we then not better awaken from these dreams? What’s the use of hoping for something that will never be given to you? Thirdly, and most importantly, it is not part of the meaning of the concept of norms and values that they should be universally valid. Only moral philosophers with a background in natural law philosophy or adhering to a more orthodox formulation of the Kantian categorical imperative will believe otherwise. Paraphrasing H.L.A. Hart’s argument on the concept of law, we might argue that moral rules are ‘rules for action’ and, next, that these rules will depend on the kind of social order they should regulate. Each epoch has its own set of such rules and is in need of such time-specific rules; if one were to apply for example those of the Middle Ages to our own time, chaos would be the result – and vice versa. As moral beings we are historically conditioned, and we can only rejoice in this. For only this enables us to cope in a more or less successful way with the ever-changing social order we happen to be living in. Self-evidently, the historicity of norms and values does not in the least exclude that their appropriateness can at all times be rationally discussed. On the contrary, reason may unite and guide us in our

debates on what moral order we prefer and on how to achieve it. So from this perspective the crisis of historicism has been much ado about nothing; and one can only be amazed that historicists surrendered to their neo-Kantian opponents so easily and effortlessly (see Ankersmit 2012, 5–6).

Tamm: In philosophical terms, you have another long-term ally – Leibniz. This is a rather unusual companion in contemporary philosophy of history, however, in recent years you are making an increasing use of his work again. You argue also that the historicist tradition owes much to Leibniz, and already in your first book one of your aims was to ‘demonstrate the resemblance between Leibniz’s logic and the historicist philosophy of history defended in this book’ (Ankersmit 1983, 130) You consider the Leibnizian monadology to be ‘the kind of metaphysics ideally suited to the world of history and of historical writing’ (Ankersmit 2002, 229, see also Ankersmit 2008, 92; 2014, 104) and declare in one of your latest articles: ‘Decisive for philosophy of history’s future is, therefore, whether it will follow Leibniz or be content to continue being Spinozist.’ (Ankersmit 2013a, 425) I would like to ask, first, how did you discover Leibniz as your main philosophical ally, and secondly, could you give us in a nutshell what is the importance of Leibniz for the future of the philosophy of history.

Ankersmit: I don’t recall how I discovered Leibniz. But it goes back quite a long time since his monadology, or theory of the substance has been absolutely basic to me right from my first fledgling and still desultory attempts to get hold of the secrets of the writing of history down to the present. His theory of the substance has always been the logical backbone of my reflection on the nature of historical writing.

It’s like this. Already in my student days in the early 1970s (and this is where Ernst Kossmann has had a decisive impact on me) my intuition was that a work of history (book or article) is, basically, an argued proposal of how to look at a certain part or of the past. And I identified these proposals – as seemed to be the obvious thing to do – with the historical text used by the historian for expressing them. Throughout my career I have used different notions for characterizing these proposals, such as ‘narratio’, ‘narrative’, ‘pictures of the past’, ‘historical thesis’, until finally settling on the notion of ‘historical representation’.

In order to adequately investigate narrative, representation and so on, I needed a philosophical theory, discourse or vocabulary enabling me to do so. This got me to Leibniz’s predicate-in-notion principle, hence the idea that all the properties of a thing are included in the concept of that thing. In agreement with Leibniz’s big principle I could argue that these proposals or historical texts relate to the sentences contained in the historical text in the same way as stated as Leibniz’s concepts and the predicated that can be attributed to them. In sum, Leibniz predicate-in-notion principle provided me with the logical apparatus for discussing historical writing. And in my book on narrative logic I tried to show what insights into the nature of historical writing can be inferred from it.

The funny thing is that though my theory of history is Leibnizian through and through, no one ever paid any attention to this aspect of it. It's as if in all the discussion provoked by Hayden White's work everyone had always kept silent about his theory of the tropes. As far as I recall you really are the first one to mention the Leibnizianism of my philosophy of history and to ask me about it. As will be clear from all of this interview, you got closer to my intentions than anyone else – I'm not only impressed by this, but would also like to thank you most warmly for your effort!

Perhaps I'm allowed to add a little autobiographical detail here. After the completion of my book of 2012 I decided to write a book getting to the basics about the Leibnizian aspects of the logic of historical writing. It's a project I had had in mind for a long time already. The articles you mentioned in your question (Ankersmit 2013a; 2014) were based on what I had by then of that book. It then happened that Ethan Kleinberg was so kind to invite me to come to Middletown at the beginning of 2013 for giving a talk there. I decided to present at that occasion one more part of the book.

Well, my presentation was not a success, to put it mildly. The incomprehension was near to total. Nobody had the foggiest idea of what I was talking about. I might have come from the moon or the Andromeda nebula. As was to be expected, the main obstacle to a meaningful discussion was my claim that historical representations are not determined by anything outside themselves – a claim which is, of course, in agreement with Leibniz's theory of the substance. As Rutherford put it when discussing Leibniz's notion of the individual (substance) or monad: for Leibniz 'whatever is true of a substance must be true in virtue of its own nature, and not in the nature of something else' (Rutherford 1995, 126). Clearly, this is in direct and total conflict with all that post-positivists such as Quine and Davidson have always argued for and what is generally regarded as a *κτῆμα εις αἰ* in contemporary philosophy and that no one in his right mind should wish or even dare to question.

And not only the post-positivists. For the idea that each fact, each notion, each theory and so on is co-determined by other facts, notions and theories is embraced by all contemporary philosophical traditions as far as I know. Everyone, from the extreme position of Davidson to the opposite extreme position of Derrida, is nowadays a holist in the sense that it is assumed that such facts, notions and theories can only be understood as being parts of a larger whole. Indeed, with Leibniz I reject this holism – though with the all-important qualification that the *components* of a monad or a substance (Leibniz) or a historical representations are, indeed, parts of a larger whole (i.e. the monad, substance or representation). But – and now it comes! – these monads, substances or representations themselves are *not* part of larger wholes in their turn, in the sense that there should be something outside themselves (co-)determining their nature. *For they are determined and defined by themselves only.* They are 'windowless' (to use Leibniz's well-known metaphor) with regard to what is

outside them. All this is a repetition of what separates Spinoza from Leibniz. For Spinoza everything is a modification of the One Substance – and in this way part of a larger whole; Leibniz's world, however, is a world, of individual monads or substances wholly enclosed in themselves. In Spinoza individuality is always only partial; in Leibniz individuality is basic and absolute. Spinoza gives us the sciences; but Leibniz historical writing and representation.

Having come home again I thought the experience in Middletown over for some time. I concluded that the book I was working on would put me at loggerheads with all of contemporary philosophy – with the possible exception of some Leibniz-scholars (who will rarely have, however, any good reason to be interested in how Leibniz's philosophy might be applied to the writing of history). I considered it Quixotic to start a fight with all of contemporary philosophy (of history). Taking into account all this, my initial conclusion was that I should acquiesce in the impossibility of getting my message across, had therefore best abandon working on the book and start with something else. That's why I decided to return to my other main philosophical interest – political philosophy – and am now writing a book entitled 'How the Middle Ages returned in our political systems'. I hope to complete the book within a year, or so. However, when pondering now what to do after then, I'm sure I'll find it simply impossible to resist the temptation to return to the book on the Leibnizian foundation of historical representation. I therefore hope to write the Leibniz book, after all.

Tamm: I suppose, as you refer also in your answer, that one of the main reasons why your Leibnizian philosophy of history has not gained a wider understanding is the fact that the Leibnizian system challenges most of the existing philosophical orthodoxies. From a Leibnizian perspective a great number of current post-positivist certainties in the philosophy of science are at stake. Do I understand correctly that you are aiming nothing less than to call into question the whole edifice of the contemporary philosophy of science?

Ankersmit: No, my claims are far more modest than that. I'm happy to leave philosophy of science to philosophers of science. My only ambition is to grasp the nature of historical knowledge as well as I can. And this means, in practice, three things for me. In the first place that Leibniz's theory of the substance is best suited for achieving a satisfactory understanding of historical writing. Secondly, that philosophy of science, leaving no room for Leibniz's notion of the individual (substance) can be of no help for deepening our insights into the secrets of historical writing. And, thirdly, that the philosopher of science should begin with being willing to listen with an open and unbiased mind to what might be said about the writing of history from the perspective of Leibniz's theory of the substance, instead of indulging in the Pavlov-reaction of immediately and automatically condemning everything not being in agreement with post-positivist dogmas. In fact, the post-positivists penchant for dogmatism is the last thing one would expect since they always praise themselves for their rejection

of apriorist approaches of the sciences and for their openness to the varieties of actual scientific practice. Nevertheless, as soon as history is at stake this liberal and open-mindedness is wholly abandoned and historical writing is ruthlessly forced within the post-positivist model believed to fit all of the sciences. One of the funny aspects of post-positivist philosophy of science is that everyone rejects there in theory the old logical-positivist idea of the unity of science while, at the same time, holding on to it in practice. For no post-positivist philosopher of science is prepared to question for even only a moment the wholesale applicability of Quine's and Davidson's thought to history and the humanities. Post-positivists remain deliberately blind to the varieties of human knowledge and understanding and lack the intellectual curiosity that has always been the condition for philosophical progress. Narrow-mindedness is taken by them for philosophical sophistication.

Tamm: The key-term in your philosophical oeuvre is clearly 'representation'. This is the concept that connects your different philosophical interests (philosophy of history, political philosophy, aesthetics), and in many ways, one could call your work as a 'philosophy of representation'. 'All of our awareness of the world has its ultimate origins in representation; representation is absolutely basic,' you wrote in a recent article (Ankersmit 2010b, 395), stating elsewhere that 'everyone is *unconsciously* a representationalist' (Ankersmit 2013b, 192), that 'representation defines reality' (Ankersmit 2003a, 320) and 'no representation, no past' (Ankersmit 2006, 328). The strict distinction you make between description and representation is very much the starting point of your philosophy of history, or as you put it, 'description and representation are different things and (...) each effort to model the one on the other is doomed to failure' (Ankersmit 2003b, 424, see also Ankersmit 2010b, 375; 2001, 39–48). While each descriptive statement describes reality, then taken together, they will help to create a representation of past reality that is more than just a sum of descriptive statements. This clear distinction between description and representation has been challenged by some of your colleagues, like Chris Lorenz and Eugen Zelenák, for instance. They argue that this distinction is based on the empiricist idea that descriptive statements do not contain any perspectival element and that they can be 'fixed' in observation, while actually, they state, there is no description that is not already theory-laden (see e.g. Lorenz 1998; Lorenz and Tamm 2014, 503–504; Zelenák 2009). In your recent reply to Lorenz, you said that you are completely indifferent to the nature of the descriptive sentences, but reaffirmed that it is very important to keep the distinction between the levels of description and representation (Ankersmit 2015, 133–134; see also Ankersmit 2001, 52–56). However, it is exactly this very distinction (and not the nature of the description) that is put into question by your critics. In other words, when there is no description that is not already a kind of representation, how can we keep the strict distinction between descriptive sentences and representations?

Ankersmit: In my reply to your first question I distinguished between historical research and historical writing. The distinction runs parallel to that between description and representation: historical research typically results in descriptions of isolated states of affairs in the past, whereas historical writing must be associated with the issue of the integration of the results of historical research in the historical text *as a whole*, hence with the representations of the past historians offer in their books or articles. Hence, if you eliminate the first distinction (as Lorenz and Zeleňák do) the second one will also have to go. But inversely, if you maintain it, the second one will also have to be maintained.

Next, I should emphasize indeed that the notion of ‘representation’ is absolutely basic to all of my work. Hence, when questioning representation by suggesting that in one way or another the notion could be reduced to that of description, critics of my writings such as Lorenz and Zeleňák challenge what has always been my main source of inspiration when discussing philosophy of history, aesthetics and political philosophy. Representation is what, for me, ties these three things together. This is, too, what made me move continuously between these three things in the sense that I always asked myself in what way what I had discovered about one of them might elucidate issues regarding the other two.

And when raising the issue of representation, you will inevitably run up, sooner or later against Leibniz, the greatest philosopher of representation in all of the history of philosophy. Paul Köhler (1913) was right when claiming that the notion of representation crowned all of the Leibnizian system and that Leibniz philosophy of representation offers the synthesis of uniqueness (i.e. of the monad’s point of view) with universality (i.e. what is seen from that point of view). This is how Leibniz’s ties together logic and metaphysics.

Tamm: I do agree that the fundamental importance of ‘representation’ in your philosophical system seems to stem also from Leibniz. He emphasizes the representational character of monads on different occasions, for instance in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1989, 42): ‘... every substance is like a complete world and like a mirror of God or of the whole universe, which each one expresses in its own way, somewhat as the same city is variously represented depending upon the different positions from which it is viewed’. But most famously in his *Monadology*: ‘Just as the same city viewed from different directions appears entirely different, and, as it were, multiplied perspectively, in just the same way it happens that, because of the infinite multitude of simple substances, there are, as it were, just as many different universes, which are, nevertheless, only perspectives on a single one, corresponding to the different points of view of each monad.’ (Leibniz 1989, 220) This statement is very close to your idea that (historical) representations are defined by the perspective they have on the world: ‘One might then say that historical reality arises out of these monads [i.e. historical representations – M. T.] just like space and time arise out of Leibniz’s monads.’ (Ankersmit 2008, 92) One of the problems in Leibnizian system that

has generated many discussions is the nature of inter-monadic relations as well as relations between the monads and reality. Leibnizian world looks like a set of monads which agree on the things represented, while disagreeing on the perspective from which they are represented. What is your take on this question in the context of the philosophy of history?

Ankersmit: The issue of relations you raise is, indeed, basic for a proper understanding of Leibniz and of what his thought may mean for a proper understanding of historical writing. In his correspondence with Clarke, Leibniz mentions the issue himself already. He then invites Clarke to think of two lines L and M and of which L is the longer and M the shorter one. The ratio or proportion between L and M can then be described by either a statement having L or another one having M as its subject-term and informing us about the ratio of their respective lengths. But there is still a third possibility: namely, a statement merely expressing the ratio of the lengths of L and M.¹ And then Leibniz goes on to say:

But which of them will be the subject in the third way of considering them? It cannot be said that both of them, L and M together, are the subject of such an accident; for, if so, we should have an accident in two subjects, with one leg in one and the other in the other, which is contrary to the notion of accidents. Therefore we must say that this relation, in this third way of considering it, is indeed out of the subjects; but being neither a substance nor an accident, it must be a mere ideal thing, the consideration of which is never useful. (Leibniz 1976, 704)

Russell (1967, 13) already emphasized the importance of this passage and it easy to see why. If you agree, with Leibniz, that the world consists of substances (or monads), this world will leave room only for statements about these substances (or monads) only. Hence, for statement having the subject/predicate form. But, as Leibniz recognizes in this letter to Clarke himself, relational statements do not have the form of subject/predicate statements.

Now, this is by no means a matter of mere technical significance! For scientific laws, expressing scientific knowledge are, basically, relationalist by stating how the variables mentioned in the scientific laws relate to each other. And recall that things such as space, time and number are all relationalist. So a philosophy of the proposition à la Leibniz (and his scholastic predecessors) leaving little or no room for relations is in serious trouble if compelled to account for what happens in the sciences. In fact, this was one of the reasons why scholastic (or Aristotelian) logic was abandoned for modern symbolic logic at the end of the nineteenth century (see Ankersmit 2014). And it is no different for history and historical representation. For our notion of the past emerges in what one may call the interstices between different historical representations as expressed in and by the substances or monads of individual historical representations of the past. Both science and history are relationalist in the sense of depending on statements expressing relations.

As is clear from the passage I quoted a moment ago from the correspondence with Clarke, Leibniz was aware of the problem of relational statements; but because of his nominalism he believed them to be no less construction of the human mind than universals and therefore to be devoid of interest when we ask ourselves how logic and metaphysics are related. However, since no philosophical account of both the sciences and of history is complete that cannot account for relational statements, we cannot leave things there. Now, generations of Leibniz-commentators have wrestled with more or less success with this problem. Elsewhere I have said a few things about their efforts. But in this context I'd best focus on how Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1999) dealt with the problem. To get an idea of their argument, think of the following two statements: (A) 'Caius is wise', (B) 'Titus is wise', and from which we may move on to (C) 'Caius is similar to Titus', which obviously is relational since similarity expresses a relationship between the things that are said to be 'similar'. In this case we have two strictly monadic statements² (A) and (B) and, next, a relational statement about two representational monads or substances corresponding to it. The old difficulty that relational statements cannot be reduced to purely monadic ones has then be avoided; moreover, we now have a model for how to move from monadic statements two relational ones. It might be objected that it is not clear how asymmetric relations, such as being larger or being smaller then, or being the father or being the son of, do fit in the model. And next, that the meaning of (A) and (B) is different from (C) because (A) and (B) are silent about similarity as mentioned in (C). But Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1999, 77–83) are fairly successful in defusing these objections; and I shall not pursue the issue any further.

One interesting issue remains, however, and this is that (C) does not say *in what respect* Caius and Titus are similar, whereas, obviously (A) and (B) permit us to say *only* that they are similar *as far as their wisdom is concerned*. This has the interesting consequence that if (1) Cover's and O'Leary-Hawthorne's argument is valid and (2) symmetric relations can be rephrased in terms of similarity, relational statements will introduce *aspects* in our considerations. And where it must be emphasized that in this context these aspects can not be equated with general properties such as 'being wise', for (C) only follows from (A) and (B) on the condition that the similarity between the representational substances Caius and Titus is explicitly restricted to the sort of wisdom that *they* exemplify in their strict monadic uniqueness. This is suggestive of an intimate affinity between the present argument about relations, on the one hand, and my claim defended elsewhere, on the other, according to which representation is not a *two*-place, but a *three*-place operator compelling us to distinguish between (1) what is represented by a representation, (2) the representation itself and (3) those aspects of the world that are singled out by the representation – and where aspects are less than things but more than properties (see Ankersmit 2012, 68–73, 106).

Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne call their theory the 'supervenience model' of how in Leibniz's system relational statements and purely monadic statements can be connected. The idea is that the former are 'supervenient' upon the latter. That is to say, there is a clear demarcation-line between the two and there can be no question of the former invading the world of the latter, and *vice versa*. Nevertheless, on the basis of monadic truths relational statements can be formulated. Hence, the Leibnizian system leaves ample room for relational statements while, at the same time, avoiding a clash between the embrace of relational statements, on the one hand, and Leibniz's doctrine of the complete concept, stating that any truth about a monad permits of (re-)formulation in terms of statements having the subject/predicate form, on the other. As Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne sum it all up: 'Generally, then: monadic facts simply determine relational ones; reduced relational facts obtain because the monadic, reducing ones obtain. And conversely? No.' (1999, 82)

So in this way substances, monads and historical representations can be rescued from complete isolation. In this way the possibility of a meaningful relationship between them can be guaranteed, while at the same time their irreducible individuality, in the sense that their being dependent on themselves only for a complete definition of their individuality is respected as well. And this then gets me, next, to your question of how they relate to reality.

Let me prepare the ground here with the following quotes from Leibniz:

Accurately speaking, however, matter is not composed of these constitutive unities [and here Leibniz has in mind *substances* or *monads*] but *results from them*, since matter or extended mass is nothing but a phenomenon grounded [*fundatum*] in things, like a rainbow or a mock-sun, and all reality belongs only to unities [...]. Substantial unities are in fact not parts but foundations [*fundamenta*] of phenomena. (quoted in Rutherford 1990, 21)

The idea here is, clearly, that the phenomenal world, the world containing rainbows or mock-suns results from (the interaction) of substances or monads. This gives us what one calls Leibniz's phenomenalism. An even clearer expression of Leibniz's phenomenalism we may find in his observation that:

yet all these bodies and all we attribute to them are not substances, but only well-founded phenomena, or the foundation of appearances, which are different in different observers, but which are related and come from the same foundation, like different appearances of the same city seen from several sides. (quoted in Rutherford 1990, 23)

Leibniz's phenomenalism raises two problems: (1) how may phenomenal reality arise out of the relations between substances or monads. Leibniz's answers this question in an essay of 1683/1686 with the telling title 'De Modo Distinguendo Phaenomena Realia ab Apparentiis':

...yet the most powerful criterion of the reality of phenomena, sufficient even by itself, is success in predicting future phenomena from past and present ones, whether that prediction is based upon reason, upon a hypothesis that was

previously successful, or upon the customary consistency of things as observed previously.³ Indeed, even if this whole life were to be only a dream, and the visible world only a phantasm, I should call this dream of this phantasm real enough if we were never deceived by it when we make good use of reason. (quoted in Garber 2009, 282)

Hence, the coherence is, as Leibniz puts it himself, ‘the sign of truth’ (quoted in Garber 2009, 288). Admittedly, this cannot be the last word about this issue, but let’s grant Leibniz the benefit of the doubt here. There is, however, a more serious problem. Leibniz’s phenomenalism places us for an unpleasant dilemma. We may either take his phenomenalism in the literal sense of that word, implying that phenomena arise in some way or other out of the perspectives on the world as generated by the substances. But it is not easy to make much sense of this proposal. Or we may think of the world as being prior to the monads and the perspectives they have on the world. But that is at odds with phenomenalism and, worse still, with the whole drift of Leibniz’s philosophy granting absolute priority to the monads or substances. My own proposal for how to escape from this dilemma is as follows.

It is *us* who say that there *either* is a material external world (implying that Leibniz’s substances of monads offer us perspectives on that world), *or* that there are monads and substances (and then the problem arises of making this consistent with the belief in the existence of an external, material world). *But it might well be said that the Leibnizian system aims precisely at avoiding this either/or, and to replace it with a relationalist conception of how to think of monads or substances, on the one hand, and external reality, on the other.* Just as statements like aRb do not admit of a correct analysis as long as we stand with one leg in a and the other in b, so it is here. It is not a matter of either a or b being basic, but the relation between the two of them is basic. Put differently, substances or monads and the external material world are the two sides of one and the same medal; and we should avoid both the phenomenalist and the anti-phenomenalist temptation of privileging one side of the medal to the other. As philosophers we should put ourselves in the same position as God when He created the world in which we live, namely by taking up His position in the *relationship* between the two sides of the medal. God is the relationalist par excellence – and when reflecting on the nature of His creation we have no choice but to become relationalists ourselves.

And, finally, this would then also be how we should conceive of the relationship between (part of) the past and how it is represented by the historian: neither epistemology nor ontology will be of any help here, we shall have to rely, instead, on a logical analysis (as suggested by Leibniz’s phenomenalism) of the model of relational statements on representational monads or substances (see also note 2).

Tamm: In the eyes of the many, the most surprising and incomprehensible turn in your career has been the turn from the study of historical representation

toward the study of historical experience (see, for instance, Domanska 2009; Icke 2012). I take *Sublime Historical Experience* as your most personal book, an attempt to move beyond epistemology (Enlightenment) and to find an intimate and emotional (Romanticist) relation to the past. In the beginning of the book you declare openly that ‘this book is a rehabilitation of the romanticist’s world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past,’ adding, ‘How we feel about the past is no less important than what we know about it.’ (Ankersmit 2005a, 10) I find convincing Anton Froeyman’s succinct explanation, when he says that when you talk about historical representation, you are referring to historical reality as we constitute it, but when you talk about historical experience, you have in mind the past as it constitutes us (Froeyman 2012, 397). In retrospective, do you consider that regardless of numerous misunderstandings and criticisms, your adventure to move beyond epistemology was successful?

Ankersmit: It’s like this. In my career as a philosopher of history I discussed two themes: (1) historical experience and (2) historical representation. These two themes do not exclude, but complement each other. The former has to do with how we relate to the past. Hence, with questions such as why do we decide that there should exist such a thing as the past at all instead of some kind of eternal present in which the distinction between the past, present and the future has no existential meaning to us. Recall Nietzsche’s famous observation at the beginning of his *On the Use and Abuse of History*: ‘think of this herd in the meadows before you, it does not know what was yesterday and today, it moves around, it grazes, rests, ruminates, moves again, and so from the morning to the evening and from one day to the other, directly tied with its feelings of pleasure and discomfort to the peg of the moment and, hence, neither melancholy nor bored’ (Nietzsche 1969, 3, my translation). At some time in the history of mankind things must still have been like this.

But then, at some decisive moment in that history, mankind became dissatisfied with this way of looking at itself, and it started to discern between past, present and future. Past and future now detached themselves from a former ‘being-in-the world,’ to put it in Heideggerian terms, still subsuming them in itself. Mankind now stood in a relationship between to the past and the future and needed to clarify the nature of that relationship. This relationship announces itself in our experience of the past – and in the many forms this experience may take. My book on sublime historical experience addressed this issue.

However, after the past came into being as a category of human existence, after it had assumed an autonomy of its own with regard to the present, the question arose how we can account for it, what it means to do so and how to do so in a responsible way. What does it mean to have knowledge of the past, and how can we achieve it? And this gets you, in my view, to the notion of historical representation. In sum, historical experience has to do with the question of why there is a past at all. And historical representation with the subsidiary question of how to achieve knowledge of the past *if* there is a past.

Finally, then, your question about epistemology. It will be clear that the issue of historical experience is to be related to ontology (the existence of the past) rather than to epistemology. But I avoided epistemology in my account of historical representation as well. I always emphasized the aestheticist dimension of historical representation. And as we know from art, there are no fixed epistemological rules or algorithms for how to connect represented reality to how it is represented. Though I insist that this does not reduce the writing of history to arbitrariness and mere opinion. There are, admittedly, no rules for how to generate historical representations – this is where the historian has the same freedom as the painter or the novelist – but as soon as we have different historical representations of roughly the same historical topic we can decide on the basis of fact and rational argument which of them is the best. Collingwood was right: history is a science, but of a different kind than the natural sciences. Historical writing is based on fact and rational argument. I have always had the greatest respect for Hayden White's philosophy of history, but would not go as far as he with entrusting history to aesthetic and ethical judgment.

Tamm: It is my impression that your Socratic demon is a passion for discussion. Your long career is hemmed with fiery debates with different colleagues, from Perez Zagorin to Paul Roth (Ankersmit 1990, 2013c). But it seems to me that this eagerness for debate is not just a question of temper, but also something more important. In 2003, you stated that 'discussion in our discipline is dead before it is even born', adding, 'This is what I personally find the most depressing feature of our discipline and the most difficult to live with.' (Ankersmit 2003b, 434) Would you agree to elaborate on this idea and define your understanding of the need for debate in the philosophy of history?

Ankersmit: You ask me to elaborate on these quotes. Well, my diagnosis would then be that we have enough discussion but that it tends to fail being fruitful for two reasons. In the first place you have the division between philosophy of history and historical theory. And where the problem is that the former may know a lot of philosophy but have no feeling for, or knowledge of the practice of historical writing. Philosophers of history are mostly philosophers having an only impressionist idea of it and of what it involves. Historical theorists, in their turn, are often historians by training but lack the capacity of philosophical argument. Philosophers are right as far as their philosophy is concerned, and the historians (or, rather, historical theorists) are right as far as their history is concerned – but 'the twain do never meet'. With the result that philosophy of history is, in practice, a *contradictio in terminis* and the discussion between the philosophers (of history) and the historians (or historical theorists) an endless 'dialogue des sourds'.

In my view the philosophers of history are mainly to blame for this sorry state of affairs. I especially have in mind here their lack of openness to what is peculiar to the writing of history. What is accepted wisdom in contemporary philosophy of language and science is for them the final word and they are

unwilling, or incapable of being open to anything that might be in conflict with how they have been trained to look at the world. Which is all the more amazing since, again, the post-positivists never tire of denouncing apriorist theorizing and of insisting that the philosopher should draw his inspiration from the practice of science. This, then, is why the relationship between philosophy of language and science, on the one hand, and philosophy of history, on the other, has always been a one-way traffic. The big question was always what philosophy of history could or should learn from philosophy of language and of science. It was never asked in what way the practice of history might complicate, or even question accepted certainties in philosophy of language and of science. This has also been my main disappointment as founder and chief editor of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*. For when I began the journal my main aim was to transform this one-way traffic into a two way traffic. But now that the journal is close to its tenth anniversary I have to recognize that this aim was an illusion; it's still a one-way traffic all over.

In the second place, philosophers of history nowadays have the funny tendency to withdraw themselves in groups stubbornly ignoring the existence of any other such groups. You have the hermeneuticists, the post-positivists, the followers of White, the Collingwoodians and a host of groups with some more obscure affiliations. And though a lot of discussion is going on within these groups themselves, a discussion *between* them is impossible to organize. Whiteans only talk to Whiteans, Collingwoodians only to Collingwoodians, and so on. It's a distressing state of affairs and I guess the result will be that, in the end, the theorists of history will wholly take over. They are still fed by the warm blood of the writing of history itself, whereas philosophers of history tend to get lost in the idle abstractions constructed by themselves. Moreover, they tend to remain blind to what falls outside the scope of the group to which they happen to belong. And in the skirmishes they fight amongst themselves history itself has little or no role to play.

Notes

1. Obviously, this possibility involves a loss of information by remaining silent about which of the two lines is the longer and which is the smaller one. And it is not immediately clear how this loss of information can be avoided without the use of statements having L and/or M as their subject-terms.
2. Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1999) present (A) and (B) as 'monadic' statements. But statements about things in the world are not monadic. (A) and (B) are monadic only if understood as being part of a representational monad or substance on what the statements (A) and (B) refer to. This qualification is necessary for making Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne's argument do what they expect from it.
3. This can be read, of course, as a summary of Leibniz's philosophy of science.

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