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# OBJECTIVITY AND RELATIVISM

*Reinbert Krol*

## Introduction

Obviously, historians agree that lying and making things up is “not done” in the discipline of history. They also acknowledge that historians should be impartial. At the same time, however, historians admit that they – and the past actors they study – are bound to their point of view, their personality, nationality, religious conviction, political affiliations, philosophical views and theories, their social position, the group they associate themselves with and so on. In short, historians exist in some historical context.<sup>1</sup> This has raised questions such as: Can historians be truly objective, and if not: Is a relativist standpoint a threat to history as an academic discipline? These fundamental questions will be addressed from the point of view of four philosophers of history and their views on historical understanding and the role of values in this.

We should start with historicism, for the thinkers in this tradition, in particular around 1900, analyzed more fundamentally and carefully than before the nature of historical understanding and the historicity of values. Historicist thought considered everything to be part of continuous historical development, a unique process, which meant that the idea of their being fixed and universal values – from which one can derive a moral standpoint – was not tenable, for values are tied to time and place and hence relative to some historical development. For two reasons, many historians considered this view an attack on objectivity and a sanctioning of ethical relativism. First, if history could no longer provide for a justification of (absolute) moral beliefs – especially after World War I – a moral orientation in the present (or judgement of the past) is almost impossible.<sup>2</sup> Second, this crisis in absolute norms and values also had its ramifications in the field of historical understanding and writing. Since all historians are subject to a historical context – and therefore cannot be impartial – historical understanding seems to lead to arbitrary choice and scepticism regarding the possibility of writing an objective and impartial history.<sup>3</sup> Historicists, therefore, had to come up with suggestions on how to tackle these problems.

Essentially, the problems are still on the agenda of philosophy of history. To overcome the problems just mentioned, current positions opt for (variations of) intersubjectivity and/or variations of the interaction between the historian and the sources or the cognitive and normative dimensions of historical research. These attempts try to counter relativism – mainly on the level of the partiality of historical understanding – in order to sustain objectivity. Contrary to these positions, I will discuss philosophies of history that acknowledge relativism – on both

the level of a justification of moral beliefs and the impartiality of historical understanding – and keep objectivity without cancelling out the subjective dimension. I will discuss these problems of dealing with objectivity and relativism by means of four thinkers: Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954), Charles A. Beard (1874–1948), Jörn Rüsen, and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), in that order. I consider Meinecke, a representative of 19th-century historicism and its synthesis. His example shows how historians faced the consequences of relativism. Charles Beard, on the other hand, is considered a representative of historical relativism, which he managed to combine with aspects of German and Italian historicism, pragmatism, and presentism. His example shows how one could advocate relativism without falling into scepticism. Both Meinecke’s and Beard’s views are echoed and dealt with by the German philosopher of history Rüsen. He tried to find a balance between objectivity and relativism and incorporate both into narrativism. Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics offers us a view on relativism and objectivity in which moral ground is possible, and an understanding of the required tension between both further proves to be a prerequisite for historical insight. As an introduction to the issues discussed by these four thinkers, I will first briefly touch upon the matter of professionalization and historicization.

### **Professionalization and historicization**

Gradually, philosophers of history and historians in the 19th century became conscious of the idea that there might not be an eternal truth or fixed values, which are universally applicable. One of the first to really struggle with this insight was Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). In an effort to solve this issue, he first attempted to separate the humanities from the natural sciences and tried to work out a clear methodology to secure the autonomy of the former. In doing so, he became aware that all values and belief systems (morality, religion, politics) bear the mark of a unique historical context: within different historical epochs, different values and norms arise. In other words, all values become relative against the background of continuous historical development. Dilthey, however, claimed that even though world views are susceptible to relativism, historical relativism itself is not, for our awareness of this relativism is, according to him, the last step toward the liberation of man. That is, if one is conscious of historical relativism, one can fully enjoy every experience without being bound to a system of philosophy or religion and thus be freed from dogmatic thought.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, Dilthey accepts relativism: “the full acknowledgement that even values and norms that present themselves as unconditional are immanent in historical consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> Around 1910, when he expressed this statement, this still had a soothing ring to it. However, after World War I, the consequences of ethical relativism were more pressing than ever and required more fundamental solutions. It was this issue that the new generation of thinkers in Germany (and elsewhere) were faced with.

### **Friedrich Meinecke’s historicism**

The German historian Friedrich Meinecke belongs to the historicist tradition of Ranke, Droysen, Sybel, and Dilthey.<sup>6</sup> Even though the dangers of ethical relativism did not really shake Meinecke, he felt obliged to come up with a solution. When historicism fell into a deep crisis, Meinecke dedicated a book to its origins, for he claimed that the foundation and identity of historicism were to be found in its history.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the problems surrounding historicism, Meinecke thought the historian should take to heart the unfavourable elements of historicism and preserve the favourable ones: “He must pay good heed to justifiable criticism, but stand by all that is best in [it] [historicism].”<sup>8</sup> That is why Meinecke writes his genesis of

historicism in what he termed an “affirmative attitude.”<sup>9</sup> He was convinced that ethical relativism could be healed by historicism itself. How exactly did Meinecke cope with this, what has come to be known as, the “crisis of historicism”? In order to answer this question, we first should consider Meinecke’s conception of historicism.

Meinecke considered historicism more than “a scientific principle and its application,” for according to him, “it was a guiding principle of life as a whole, from which that scientific principle arose in the first place.”<sup>10</sup> This principle of life is clearly stated in his famous definition of historicism as expressed in *Die Entstehung des Historismus*: “The essence of histori[c]ism is the substitution of a process of *individualising* observations for a *generalising* view of human forces in history.”<sup>11</sup> Notions like “generalising” and “static” Meinecke identifies with the Enlightenment. In addition, he claims the Enlightenment always assumes an “eternal” and “fixed” reason, norms, and values. In contrast, he denotes historicism with notions like “dynamic,” aimed at the individuality and uniqueness of periods, cultures, states, institutions, personalities, acts, morality, and reason. Further, Meinecke asserts:

Historicism was the first to truly apply a temporal dimension to thinking, due to its inherent ideas of individuality and notions of development; thus managing to place every single phenomenon, every personality, states, and peoples at a definitive and never recurring point in the flow of time.<sup>12</sup>

Individuality and development are thus key notions of the historicist view of history.

Even though both individuality and development are central to historicism, Meinecke considers the principle of individuality the most important: “This understanding [of individuality] brought with it a correct estimate of evolutionary thinking, which is often incorrectly taken as the key criterion of modern histori[c]ism, but which is much too ambiguous and versatile for this.”<sup>13</sup> Meinecke’s assertion that the principle of development is too versatile means that it is attributed to many different views. That is, he distinguishes between biological development and historical development. An historical development takes place – this is where Meinecke agrees with the Neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936) – when a spontaneously acting human being, in accordance with values (good, true, and beautiful), realizes an individual creation: “With this an historical individuality ‘evolves’ and all things that evolve historically are always individualities and through evolution alone they are revealed.”<sup>14</sup>

Meinecke’s emphasis on the individual, the inner, the empathizing self (*Einfühlen*) leads, according to some, to a highly subjective view that cannot be scientifically verified and is therefore impractical.<sup>15</sup> Meinecke’s point, however, was that the spiritual-irrational within man as well as events in history are anything but logical and cannot completely be explained in that way, which means that *Einfühlen* (“feeling into”) is the way to gain insight into the (past) individual. Some claim that such an historical view, in the end, will lead to a deep relativism. Meinecke managed to avoid falling into this relativism, for he suggested a view that combines relativism and objectivity. Meinecke came up with a suggestion to counter the consequences of ethical relativism that also has its bearing on the level of historical writing. Both ethical relativism and historical writing are connected since both are about values in history and the question of whether historians can be objective in their research and writing.

### ***Meinecke’s solution to the presumed dangers of relativism***

With regard to the consequences of ethical relativism mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, what solution was suggested by Meinecke? Like Dilthey, Meinecke speaks of a “stream

of becoming,” a directionless historical development. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Meinecke kept a certain calmness regarding the consequences of this notion:

Certainly, “development” must always have a “goal” ahead, but the essence of this goal is its ability to shift steadily within a probably fixed margin, perhaps like the summit of an unknown mountain to which one ascends under various viewpoints, but in the end, one finds out that it is completely different from what one imagined at first.<sup>16</sup>

So, for Meinecke, the idea of the danger of an uncontrolled development, which has (no longer) any direction, does not immediately lead to a feeling of crisis. This has everything to do with Meinecke’s interest in the individual *within* the “stream.”

In this context, Meinecke speaks of a “vertical philosophy of history” which is aimed at the eternal and fixed; I will come back to this. The “horizontal” conception refers to the level of the chronological, linear history. In addition, on this horizontal level, one is overwhelmed by the individuality, uniqueness of everything which occurs in history. This leads to some problems on an ethical level, for if, in Meinecke’s view of historicism, everything is individual, unique, and singular, and is caught in a stream of becoming, on what basis can we then ground our morality? Does this not lead to a deep ethical relativism in which “every historical individual entity, every institution, every idea and ideology, [is considered] a temporary moment in the infinite stream of becoming?”<sup>17</sup> Yes, and Meinecke admits to this: “Thus relativism and histori[c]ism certainly belong together.”<sup>18</sup> Meinecke, however, does not want to leave it at that. He is convinced that historicism, “which gives us a deeper understanding of the historical human being,” cannot be equated with “decay and weakness.”<sup>19</sup> Meinecke was convinced that: “Histori[c]ism must itself attempt to heal the wounds it has inflicted.”<sup>20</sup> But what did Meinecke exactly mean by this? To answer this question, we must first discuss the idea of “positive relativism.”

Meinecke thought ethical relativism could be considered both positively and negatively. To which side the pendulum swings depends mainly on the character of the individual personality.<sup>21</sup> So, in Meinecke’s view, ethical relativism can both have a life-weakening (*lebensschwächend*) or life-enhancing (*lebensteigernd*) effect. In his essay “Von der Krisis des Historismus” he expressed it as follows:

It [relativism] weakens life when one loses faith in unconditionally binding norms of action regarding the innumerable individual powers of life which man encounters in history, and thus, leads him (...), into an “anarchy of thinking.” It enhances life if one consciously and deeply senses and acts on the right to live of one’s own inwardness as well as of the surrounding and nourishing forces of life.<sup>22</sup>

In Meinecke’s essays from the 1920s, one can find the same train of thought. For example, Meinecke claims in “Kausalitäten und Werte;” “that only weak souls of little faith could despair and quit under the burden of this relativizing histori[c]ism.”<sup>23</sup> Meinecke is convinced that relativism will not shake the “stronger person’s” belief in an “unknown absolute” or “common primal divine source.”<sup>24</sup> These last notions are important to Meinecke’s philosophy of history, for not only is character important, but some other fundamental authority – the “primal divine source,” and unknown absolute – is relevant here too. This has everything to do with the foundation of Meinecke’s philosophy of history.

Meinecke's philosophy of history is based on a panentheistic philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Panentheism draws a distinction between reality and God – "God" not in the sense of a personal God but as an abstract principle. In this respect it differs from (Spinoza's) pantheism in the sense that reality is perceived as *not* identical with God. In panentheism, reality is seen as an *emanation* of God. The world is "in" God, while God also transcends the world. That means that God leaves room for individualities to develop at will. It follows that every emanation has a spark of God in itself; man, as an emanation of God, understands the good, true and beautiful, which is in its perfect form "in God." Furthermore, opposites such as "good and evil," "spirit and matter" share the same origin, all being emanations of God. This panentheistic philosophy enables Meinecke to reconcile polarities such as "individuality and the absolute," "subjectivity and objectivity," for they all have the same ground. Which is why everything that the subject or "the self" thinks or does, is in fact God/the absolute which thinks through or acts through the subject – hence, the notion of the "common primal divine source." The subject is therefore able to intuit what is good, true and beautiful, since it has emanated from the absolute. As a result of this unity between subject and object it is possible for the subject to "divine" the absolute within the development of history. Even though we are historically situated, that does not mean we cannot attain certainty. In fact, following this philosophy, one might even claim that through subjectivity one can realize the highest objectivity. This objectivity is not a scientific, verifiable (Kantian) epistemological objectivity, but a panentheistic objectivity in which the subject could grasp the absolute good, true and beautiful in history.

But, as mentioned, Meinecke thought it is the "stronger" who are able to fully think through historicism and its relativistic consequences. They will not fall victim to a paralyzing state of relativism, for they have faith in a panentheistic foundation. In Meinecke's view, it is about finding intellectual control (*geistige Beherrschung*): "Subjectivity, once it had been set free, needed, however, to revert to an objective understanding of the world, without losing the springs of individual experience and effort in the process."<sup>26</sup> Again, to Meinecke it is essentially about a belief in a harmonious, panentheistic God, from which all individualities emanated, and which ensures that subjectivity leads to the greatest possible objectivity, because the object (God/the absolute) works in and through the subject. Meinecke also states this clearly in *Die Entstehung des Historismus*:

Relativism can either lead to the profoundest depths or to the dreariest of plains, according to whether it is or is not backed in the last resort by a strong creative faith; according to whether humility and reverence in the face of the unsearchable [unfathomable] are the result of a relativist outlook on the world, or are absent because of the prevailing view that human insight can discern nothing but an anarchy of values.<sup>27</sup>

Essentially, Meinecke concludes, it depends on the

character of the observer whether this overpowering drama spells out a meaningful or a meaningless history, a world of consolation or a world of despair, whether it leads to a resigned relativism or to a faithful devotion to an idea, in spite of its threatened extinction.<sup>28</sup>

It will be clear that Meinecke embraces a positive relativism that is based on his panentheistic conviction.

Since the absolute or divine, the higher authority, cannot be proved (for it can only be sensed or divined (*ahnen*)), to what authority should a strong personality in concrete terms

appeal to withstand the crisis of historicism? According to Meinecke, that authority is our conscience. Meinecke claims that our conscience is to be located at the intersection of the individual and the absolute, the subjective and objective, for it is a reflection (*Abglanz*) of absolute morality or the divine. That means that the subjective, individual conscience bears a spark of the absolute or eternal good. Meinecke adds that conscience itself is not divine, it is at best akin to God, and in that sense, it is a “relative absolute.”<sup>29</sup> In Meinecke’s view, conscience is thus based on a pantheistic belief in a primal divine source. In his essay “Geschichte und Gegenwart” he expressed it as follows: “All eternal values of history ultimately come from people acting on the basis of their conscience.”<sup>30</sup> It is in this statement that Meinecke connects the individual with the absolute, subject, and object. And it is thus his harmonious pantheistic worldview that enables him to withstand the crisis of historicism.

The historian’s task, in Meinecke’s view, then, is to recover eternal values in order to find (by means of his conscience) a fixed point within the “continuous stream of becoming.” But how does this actually work? Meinecke mentions two, to him unsatisfactory, ways to find a fixed point in the stream: an “escape into the past” whereby a certain part of the past is glorified, or an “escape into the future” in which a future ideal is aimed at. To Meinecke, both are inadequate, for they both are still situated “within,” or affected by the stream of becoming.<sup>31</sup> He, therefore, suggests a vertical – pantheistic – conception of history. In this context, Meinecke quotes Ranke’s famous expression: “Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott” (Every epoch is immediate to God). This expression is, in Meinecke’s view, about overcoming the horizontal development and forces us to search for the “God-like” in history within the individual. In sum, vertically, upwards, to God is what we should focus our attention on. We should search for the eternal and fixed within the change of every individuality. With regard to morality and values, we could, by means of our conscience, approximate the eternal, good, true, and beautiful.<sup>32</sup>

The above makes clear that Meinecke’s vertical conception of history eventually can exist merely by the grace of the horizontal conception. After all, contemplating the good, true, and beautiful is only possible from within a finite position since man is simply bound to or part of the horizontal, chronological history. By contemplating the manifold individualities *within* history, we can catch a glimpse of the transcendent, the good, true, and beautiful, “above” history.<sup>33</sup> It is this idea, Meinecke claims, in which Enlightenment thinking and historicism come together, and it is here that objectivity and relativism coalesce.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Meinecke on historical writing***

Meinecke applied his pantheistic philosophy of history also to historical writing. He suggests the same construction in which the historian – being part of the absolute which “breathes” in and through him – can fathom the past through feeling (*Einführung*) – since the past is also part of the same absolute. This is reminiscent of Giambattista Vico’s (1668–1744) famous dictum *verum et factum convertuntur* – knowable is that which was created by the knower. Meinecke describes it as follows:

This means to enter into the very souls of those who acted, to consider their works and cultural contributions in terms of their own premises and, in the last analysis, through artistic intuition to give new life to life gone by – which cannot be done without a transfusion of one’s own life blood.<sup>35</sup>

Elsewhere Meinecke goes a step further:

All knowledge and all critical research should not remain an end in itself and the final conclusion of a work, but receive only higher and lasting value, if (...) subject [the historian] and object [those who acted] merge into *one* mental unity (...) – where the subject will still remain the source of strength of this unity, but also enters into, and merges into the objective that it represents – and thereby transcends itself.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, historical writing originates from the historian's individual creativity. By entering into "the very souls of those who acted," the historian "merges into *one* mental unity" with those who acted, thereby becoming part of that history – this is what Meinecke means by transcending.

Meinecke explained his whole idea of the task of the historian by means of a metaphor of the so-called creative mirror (*schaffender Spiegel*). During the 19th century, many historians thought they could mirror the past as it actually was, Meinecke, however, adds to this the historian's subjectivity:

The historian may use the term [creative mirror] as a parable for the purpose of his own work. It is not intended to mirror the past in an inanimate manner, but creatively mirror it, to merge the subjective and the objective in such a way that the picture of history thus reproduced represents the past as faithfully and honestly as possible, and yet remains completely animated by the creative individuality of the researcher.<sup>37</sup>

To be sure, we might no longer believe in Meinecke's "creative mirror" or something like panentheism for that matter, but the same principles are still active in our own practice when we write our histories. As the Dutch philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit has claimed: "the historian's breath permeates the past as presented by him."<sup>38</sup>

### Charles Beard's historical relativism

The German debate on relativism and the (im)possibility of being objective as an historian was closely followed in the United States by the political scientist and social-economic historian Charles A. Beard. Besides many books on the social and economic history of the United States, he is also known for his historical relativism and presentism: the objective of history is to serve the present rather than to find out how things actually were. Beard thus seems to break with the Rankean task of history. Moreover, he did not wish to raise some metaphysical system à la Meinecke to protect history from relativism. Historical relativism was the only alternative in his view.

With regard to American historical relativism Beard is always mentioned in connection with Carl L. Becker (1873–1945) who also propagated historical relativism. Before Beard immersed himself in these issues, Becker had already published "Detachment and the Writing of History" (1910), in which he argues that professional historians had trouble detaching themselves of their own circumstances in order to present an objective account of the past. Becker claims: "The 'facts' of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them, and into every fact that he creates some part of his individual experience must enter."<sup>39</sup> Becker goes even further by stating: "Even the will to be purely objective is itself a purpose, becoming not infrequently a passion."<sup>40</sup> A decade later, Becker maintained his standpoint: "the historian cannot eliminate the personal equation."<sup>41</sup> And in 1931, the title of his presidential address to the American

Historical Association sums up his position: “Everyman His Own Historian.” Becker was thus a clear defender of historical relativism. He opposed the central contention of 19th-century scholars that history was a science and aimed at revealing the objective truth.

In the context of this chapter, I will focus on Beard’s position, because he was struggling with the scientific pretension of history given historical relativism, which makes him more interesting than Becker in this context. Moreover, Beard did not share the feeling of “crisis” that shocked the Germans, probably because he held on to the idea of progress in history, even though his confidence in such progress was shaken by World War I and the Great Depression.<sup>42</sup>

Beard combined his progressive view with bringing historical knowledge to bear upon present problems. In this context, he refers time and again to Benedetto Croce’s (1866–1952) famous dictum: “all true history is contemporary history.” Beard, however, is not a mere follower of Italian historicism, he combines it with aspects of German historicism and American pragmatism. He never got tired of reflecting on new currents; he started out as an empiricist and gradually evolved into an idealist, embracing the idea that history was “thought.” Some commentators interpreted this change in position – and in particular his idealism – as evidence of Beard’s vague and confused thought; others acknowledged his contemplative mind and his effort to find moral ground and get a hold on (past) reality.<sup>43</sup>

Initially, in his first major studies Beard was in favour of the (Rankean) plea for objectivity – the historian should refrain from making judgment, be impartial and focus on what has been done –, but during the 1930s a pronounced scepticism regarding historical objectivity took control of him. Around that time, Beard started to reflect on European theories of historicism and the problem of objectivity in historical writing. His famous 1933 address “Written History as an Act of Faith” at the American Historical Association and his 1935 essay “That Noble Dream” addresses these issues.<sup>44</sup> The general response to both was negative: he was accused of rejecting the noble dream of objectivity and the possibility of writing true history. Others, however, acknowledged that Beard had urged historians to re-examine their procedures and recognize that their assumptions were not self-evident truths.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, some even claim Beard was an historical objectivist; this will become clear in the following.

In “That Noble Dream” Beard denies that historians can know the past “as it actually was.” However, he does not say that historians should not aim for objectivity. Even though, as Beard mentions, historians cannot observe the past, they can know parts of the past through fragmentary documentation. However, historians select from this fragmentary documentation and arrange, and apply organizing concepts and impose structures on the past which it did not have. And, Beard goes on, every overarching hypothesis is essentially an interpretation. Further, according to Beard, the nature of the events and personalities of history “involve ethical and aesthetic considerations,” by which he means these events differ from those in physics and chemistry in which the observer can approach the events from a neutral point of view. Historians, in Beard’s view, never approach their research matter with a neutral mind: their minds are formed by the time and place they happen to be living in, their interests, preferences, and so on. These limitations are, according to Beard, always (un)consciously present in the historian’s selection, choice, and arrangement of material.<sup>46</sup> In what follows, I will focus on how he can uphold this position and how he deals with historical relativism without falling into scepticism.<sup>47</sup>

Beard received one of the most severe criticisms from the American philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum (1908–1987). He claimed the above statements by Beard were a denial of the possibility of objective truth.<sup>48</sup> That was, however, not what Beard claimed: “I do not hold that historical ‘truth’ is relative but that the facts chosen, the spirit, and the arrangement of every historical work are relative.”<sup>49</sup> Mandelbaum argues that the relevance assigned to an historical

fact does not depend on the historian's point of view, but is determined on the basis of historical sources. According to him, historians *ascertain* that particular facts cohere with each other or have intrinsic meaning. This would prove, in Mandelbaum's view, that the *valuation* of those facts as historically relevant is not important.<sup>50</sup> Beard is not so much interested in truth in the sense of ascertaining facts, he admits that this is of great importance to historians, but his claim, as Beard goes on in his reply to Mandelbaum, was that:

no historian can describe the past as it actually was and (...) every historian's work – that is, his selection of facts, his emphasis, his omissions, his organization, and his methods of presentation – bears a relation to his own personality and the age and circumstances in which he lives. This is relativism as I understand it.<sup>51</sup>

To explain why Beard thought this historical relativism did not lead to scepticism and why it is partially aimed at the same noble dream of the search for objective historical truth, we need to explain some key concepts Beard uses in order to understand his philosophy of history and evaluate his views on objectivity and relativism.

Beard distinguishes between “history as actuality,” “history as record,” and “history as thought.” History as actuality includes: “all that has been done, said, felt, and thought by human beings on this planet since humanity began its long career.”<sup>52</sup> History as record refers to monuments, documents, artefacts which, as Beard states, provide knowledge of history as actuality. History as thought is to Beard the most important form of history: “It is thought about past actuality, instructed and delimited by history as record and knowledge – record and knowledge authenticated by criticism and ordered with the help of the scientific method.”<sup>53</sup> To be sure, history as knowledge refers to understanding particular historical facts. History as thought refers to a more elaborate conception that is the result of the historian's reflection on these particular facts.<sup>54</sup> However, these distinctions can still be combined with the search for historical objectivity. That changes when Beard claims that the historian that does the thinking and writing “is a product of his age, and that his work reflects the spirit of the times, of a nation, race, group, class.” And the selection and ordering of the historian are influenced by their “biases, prejudices, beliefs, affections, general upbringing, and experience, particularly social and economic.” Beard concludes, every written history – with its selection and arrangement of facts of recorded fragments of past reality – is “an act of choice, conviction, and interpretation respecting values” and ultimately an act of thought.<sup>55</sup> Which means it also reflects the thought of the individual historian and his historical context. As mentioned, this is what Beard understood to be historical relativism.

In this context, the American philosopher Morton White (1917–2016) criticized Beard for confusing the psychology and the logic of historical interpretation. An historian can have some moral view or speculative theory before getting to some synthesis, but that does not mean that the truth or adequacy of his work is compromised, according to White.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, White shows that constructing overarching hypotheses is not limited to history, for they are also practised in physics, and if that is the case, the problem of values should also be present in these sciences.<sup>57</sup> However, that is something Beard rejected. He contrasted history with the sciences claiming that history was susceptible to historical relativism because of its subjective nature, unlike the natural sciences.<sup>58</sup>

Historians should, in Beard's view, employ procedures and terminology appropriate to their own subject matter.<sup>59</sup> Ironically, one of the main notions Beard introduces in his arguments on historical relativism is “frame of reference,” which he most likely borrowed from the new physics associated with Albert Einstein. In physics, it generally denotes where an observer

happens to be standing. To Beard, it became a sort of overarching and complex notion that has to do with historical and personal contexts, bias, values, truth, political views, and ultimately it is what we now call a philosophy of history. Not in the sense of the speculative philosophies of Hegel, Marx, Spengler, but in the sense of a *Weltanschauung*, a world view in the historicist sense, comparable to Meinecke's.

Beard's particular understanding of a frame of reference is key to understanding his view of historical relativism. Beard is well aware of the paradox of relativism, for if it rejects absolutes, it cannot be itself absolute, and thus Beard acknowledges, unlike Dilthey before him, that the conception of relativism itself is relative: "Every conception of history (...) is relative to time and circumstances."<sup>60</sup> But that is not the end of it, for Beard asked himself "to what are these particular times and circumstances relative?"<sup>61</sup> And this is where he, strangely enough, returns to an absolute, for he claims it is the "totality of history as actuality which embraces all times and circumstances and all relativities."<sup>62</sup> In other words, anyone who asserts that ideas are relative to passing times must believe that there is such a thing as the totality of passing times. From this absolute standpoint, the historian has in Beard's view a choice of three fundamental conceptions of history or assumptions on the movement and order of history: historians may choose to conceive of history as chaos, cyclical, or as "going in some direction."<sup>63</sup> The historian's choice for either one of these conceptions of history is, according to Beard, a (un)conscious subjective "act of faith," for we cannot know for certain the order and movement of history. Beard wanted to show that these frames of reference more or less control the selection and ordering of the historian, which, by the way, does not mean that historians should abandon scientific methods, I will come back to that.

Next to chaos, cyclical and linear conceptions of history, Beard includes into his idea of frame of reference notions such as truth, values, importance, political terms like liberal, fascist, communist, and social and political notions such as class, nationality, and race. Further, he includes what he terms "things deemed necessary," "things deemed possible," and "things deemed desirable."<sup>64</sup> These new dimensions do not make it easier to follow Beard's argument, expanding the set of (un)conscious metaphysical and evaluative commitments of the historian. But it is clear that all these different notions that Beard associates with a frame of reference are not of the same order. Some are political, methodological, others are philosophical even ideological. But, according to Beard, all depend on the personality of the historian and the time and place in which he lives.

Two important points can be distilled from Beard's notion of the historian's frame of reference or his (un)consciously held assumptions. First, in Beard's view, the historian should constantly reflect on them and make them explicit to avoid bias. This seems to be easier said than done since we can have assumptions that we are unaware of. But to Beard, this reflection is a way to become aware of one's own context and frame of reference. This task of exploring our assumptions is important to Beard because

we do not acquire the colorless, neutral mind by declaring our intention to do so. Rather do we clarify the mind by admitting its cultural interests and patterns (...) that will control and intrude upon, the selection and organization of historical materials.<sup>65</sup>

Beard, therefore, urges us to ask ourselves questions such as: What do historians actually do when they write history, what kinds of philosophical interpretations are open to us, and which interpretations are chosen and why? In this context, Beard even claims: "Through the discussion of such questions the noble dream of the search for truth may be brought nearer to realization."<sup>66</sup> This is a

remarkable statement for a historical relativist, to say the least. Via a discussion of relativism, Beard now seems to return to the possibility of objectivity.

Beard's second point is no less remarkable with regard to the relationship between frames of reference and historical relativism. He claims that his view of relativism is essentially a "limited relativism," for Beard states that historical relativity is checked "by the recognition of the fact that there are not available as many distinct schemes of reference as there are historians."<sup>67</sup> So, a limited relativity is what Beard advocates. Frames of reference here seem to allow for a sense of objectivity as intersubjectivity. To be sure, he still insists that no frame of reference is eternally valid, for Beard writes that historians are "emancipated from the illusion of the absolute truth of history."<sup>68</sup> At the same time, however, he argues that within every frame of reference, critical use of sources and facts is still possible and required to aim at "a degree of scientific exactness."<sup>69</sup> Beard moreover wants to retain the "method of historicism," for it deepened respect for facts of experience and association, authentication, and verification.<sup>70</sup> Beard adds to this that the range of historical interest has been widened – historicism limited itself to politics and diplomacy – now more attention is given to social-economic and cultural events. This widening of interest and retaining of historicism contributes to "the fullness of its subject matter," or what Beard called insight into "history as actuality."<sup>71</sup> So, even though Beard insists that "perfect objectivity" is "something which does not exist."<sup>72</sup>, he also claims that historians can still hold on to an effort to "grasp at the totality of history (...) even though the dream of bringing it to earth must be abandoned."<sup>73</sup> Beard thus holds a limited relativism in which the noble dream of objectivity is not discarded as an ideal.<sup>74</sup>

Beard considered the community of historians employing what is called procedural objectivity – agreed upon impersonal methods and standards and the like<sup>75</sup> – as very important, but Beard relied most of all upon the moral integrity of the individual historian, comparable to Meinecke's notion of the individual conscience. Albeit that, Beard would not agree with Meinecke's metaphysical foundations. However, Beard eventually also adheres to an absolute: a frame of reference coupled with an "act of faith." But, to be sure, both Meinecke and Beard hold very different views on history. Meinecke was, in a way, a 19th-century historicist upholding a harmonious *Weltanschauung* and simultaneously calling upon historians to use their emphatic sense in writing history without rejecting the possibility of objectivity. Beard, on the other hand, could not agree anymore with this kind of harmonious thinking. Instead of harmony, he came to the conclusion that a presentist, progressive, albeit "limited historical relativism" was the most viable view of the discipline of history.

### **Objectivity and relativism in narrativism**

After World War II, and especially since the linguistic turn changed and challenged the historical discipline, attempts have been made to sustain objectivity and reconcile it with relativism. Objectivity has been associated with an anthropological theory of intentions,<sup>76</sup> perspectivism relative to conceptual frameworks,<sup>77</sup> a dialectics of cognitive and normative dimensions of historical research,<sup>78</sup> pragmatist philosophy,<sup>79</sup> rational argumentative speech acts,<sup>80</sup> and epistemic virtues,<sup>81</sup> to name a few. Almost all of them can be traced back to what Allan Megill called procedural objectivity (shared impersonal methods and standards), and sometimes combined with either disciplinary objectivity (intersubjectivity) or dialectical objectivity (interaction between the historian and her research material).<sup>82</sup> In other words, most of them defend objectivity or try to encapsulate subjectivity in objectivity. Moreover, they more or less have to do with the goal of history as a discipline – an objective account of the past – rather than with the process of historical understanding. An exception is the work of the

German philosopher of history, Jörn Rüsen, who tried to realize objectivity through subjectivity.<sup>83</sup> His argument can function as a bridge to the last section of this chapter, in which I will focus on Gadamer's view of mediating objectivity and relativism and retaining the tension between the two. Moreover, Rüsen also explicitly considers the process of historical understanding.

### **Jörn Rüsen: value-related intersubjectivity**

Rüsen considered objectivity to be generally accepted knowledge based on methods and critical research, which is similar to Megill's notion of procedural objectivity (shared impersonal methods and standards).<sup>84</sup> At the same time, Rüsen shows that attempts of excluding the historian's subjectivity from historical research are futile, for to eliminate it from historical research is to reduce historical knowledge to merely a sum of facts without any structure whatsoever.<sup>85</sup> He even claims: "neutrality is the end of history."<sup>86</sup> Instead, Rüsen suggests we should attain objectivity through subjectivity.<sup>87</sup>

To Rüsen, realizing objectivity through subjectivity means that objectivity is "the result of a specific scientific rationalisation of subjectivity," which is a discursive process of argumentation, in which empirical evidence (facts), theory (context and coherence of facts), and normative standards (values) are synthesized in the narrative. According to Rüsen, this will essentially lead to "objectivity."<sup>88</sup> But instead of "objectivity," which to him refers mainly to "a presentation of facts," he suggests using the notion of "intersubjectivity," since it "concerns historical claims (histories) presented (or told) in such a way that we can generally agree on them."<sup>89</sup> And "generally" in this regard does not exclude different contexts, interests, intentions, and prejudiced notions. For agreement is possible by means of following certain methodical procedures: source criticism, interpretation (on the basis of theory), reflecting on and explaining of normative perspectives. These norms and values are according to Rüsen also not arbitrary, for they are based upon the problems of orientation that follow from the context and standpoint of historical thinking in the present, and in that sense, they are objective.<sup>90</sup> In short, the historical narrative is intersubjective when it agrees with other narratives and has adopted the purpose of cultural and socio-political orientation in daily life: they are considered "our" histories; they offer identity and practical orientation.<sup>91</sup> So, intersubjectivity is, in Rüsen's view, not mainly disciplinary and methodological, which means historians agree on procedures and values, but also pragmatically in that historical narratives are shared as orientation.

Under the influence of narrativism, Rüsen refined his views on objectivity and relativism. He held on to the idea of intersubjectivity but connected it with issues concerning narrativism. In this context, he considered history a mental representation of the past:

It is the result of a very complex relationship between the human mind, the pre-given results of past temporal developments ending in the external and internal circumstances of present-day human life (...) and the experience of the past presented by its remnants.<sup>92</sup>

With "internal dimensions of human life," Rüsen refers to what could be termed "identity," in the sense of a conception of self and the other. With "external," he refers to historical consciousness: history as a means to understand our present day "in time." These, what Rüsen calls "sense criteria," are important for the mental process of appropriating the past from which the historical narrative emerges. That is, the constitutive role of these sense criteria entail that the historical narrative is to incorporate present day social values into the understanding of the

empirical body of the past; social values infuse, so to speak, historical consciousness and give a historical representation – the narrative – orientating value for life.<sup>93</sup> In a way, this is reminiscent of Meinecke's notion of the "creative mirror": the representation of the past allows for orientation onto the future.

Rüsen's refined approach further entails what we may call value-related intersubjectivity. In addition to considering history a "mental representation of the past," he regards objectivity to be a certain relationship between historical representation and an *experience* of the past.<sup>94</sup> Even more so, he regards objectivity as constitutive to historical thought and experience, Rüsen states: "there is something in the narrative construction called 'history' which cannot be invented, which is pre-given and has to be recognized by the historians." The subjectivity of the interpretative process is, in Rüsen's view, still covered in the aforementioned meaning of objectivity: objectivity is a "mode of subjectivity itself; the intersubjective validity of a historical interpretation."<sup>95</sup> According to Rüsen, this prevents the arbitrariness of the historical interpretation. A plurality of points of view is no objection to objectivity, but should be considered as a realization of what Rüsen calls the necessities of "practical coherence," which is "a quality of the historical narrative by which it gains plausibility concerning the practical function it fulfils in the cultural orientation of practical life."<sup>96</sup> Moreover, we should consider pluralism not as leading to relativism, but as a concept "guided by a comprehensive rule of complementarity, mutual criticism in the mode of transparent, reasonable argument, and mutual acknowledgement and recognition."<sup>97</sup> Rüsen further relates this to experience:

Historical experience is not simply pre-given in the relics of the past as the historians deal with them in the form of sources. History is also pre-given within ourselves, particularly as we ourselves are results of a long lasting temporal development. (...) in this presence of the past, intersubjectivity and objectivity in the sense of experience are the same. Only a historical representation of the past, which brings this history into our minds, has the quality of objectivity in which the aspect of experience and the aspect of intersubjectivity are synthesised.<sup>98</sup>

By means of this synthesis, Rüsen attained objectivity through subjectivity. Or maybe he obtained objectivity in the course of encapsulating subjectivity, since the latter is rationalized through "mutual criticism in the mode of transparent, reasonable argument, and mutual acknowledgement and recognition."<sup>99</sup> This realization of objectivity will in Rüsen's view not only help us gain insight into historical understanding, but also lead to some sort of mutual agreement on narrative differences on a national, transcultural, or even universal level. Ultimately, therefore, Rüsen reverts to a more or less universalist frame of reference – and thereby transcends Beard's notion of an individual frame of reference – and ends up in what could be considered a Neo-Enlightened position in which subjectivity, as an inescapable evil, is elevated to objectivity.<sup>100</sup> In what follows I will show that there is an alternative to Rüsen's Neo-Enlightened position. One that acknowledges relativism and simultaneously suggests a mediation between subjectivity and objectivity.

### **Hans-Georg Gadamer: mediating between objectivity and relativism**

So far, we discussed views that aimed at retaining or defending either objectivity or relativism or suggested to reconcile both in one way or the other. In this last section, the focus is on the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. His ontological hermeneutics not only helps us to gain insight into the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity – how to balance them

without cancelling the tension between the two – it is also in all its aspects focussed on the process of historical understanding, not merely on the goal and therefore end-product of historical research.

Gadamer agreed with Dilthey, Meinecke, and Beard, for that matter, that we are historically situated beings, but he disagrees with Dilthey's idea that the humanities should try to find timeless categories of understanding. To Gadamer the discussion on the scientific status of the humanities, which was key to Dilthey, Max Weber, and the positivists, was according to him, completely beside the point. He, in fact, turned against this whole discussion.<sup>101</sup> Gadamer claims the humanities should be understood "more easily from the tradition of the concept of *Bildung* [the education or cultivation of the individual personality] than from the modern idea of scientific method."<sup>102</sup> He suggests to revert to the humanist tradition of thinkers such as Giambattista Vico. This tradition, according to Gadamer, was more or less abandoned, and after that, the source of all the problems that arose are the result of adopting the method of the sciences.<sup>103</sup> In short, Gadamer claims: whatever did not tally with the standards of the objective methods of the sciences was considered "subjective" and "aesthetic," which means it was no longer considered to yield "real" or "pure" knowledge.<sup>104</sup> According to Gadamer, both the idea of adopting the method of the sciences and this "aestheticization" must be rejected (or relativized) to recognize what kind of understanding and knowledge really is at stake within the humanities.

Even though historicism recognized the historicity of all things human, it nonetheless aims at an absolute morality – a metaphysics. We have seen this with Meinecke's solution to the consequences of relativism. Gadamer refuses to follow this historicist path of "delusion." He claims our historical situatedness, which determines in his terminology our "fore-understandings" or "prejudices" (which to Gadamer was a value-neutral notion<sup>105</sup>), are transcendental "conditions of understanding," that is: understanding presupposes our historicity. Gadamer states that one of the delusions of historicism was that it tried to displace prejudice with methods to acquire certainty and objectivity in the humanities. In that way, historicism, according to Gadamer, copied the Enlightenment's obsession with objective knowledge. And in order to free itself from this, it was forced to consider itself also as historically situated and thus criticize its own prejudices, its own tradition. This, in Gadamer's view, cleared the way for a new understanding within the humanities. And that is why the foremost task in understanding, according to Gadamer, should be self-criticism.<sup>106</sup> Or as Gadamer puts it: "to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings."<sup>107</sup> This is reminiscent of Beard's call for a reflection on our assumptions, our frame of reference – Gadamer, however, makes no mention of Beard in this context.

Gadamer's idea of criticism is "not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves."<sup>108</sup> The main questions, therefore, are: How can we know the "correct" fore-projections that permit to let the text present "its own truth"? And, if it is even possible to be conscious of our prejudices, how can we distinguish the right ones from the wrong ones? What are the criteria? To Gadamer, this is the wrong kind of question to ask, for this need for criteria for objectivity is one of the remnants of positivism and historicism. Nonetheless, Gadamer comes up with a suggestion for such a criterion: temporal distance. This solution, however, is not fully satisfactory because it remains to be seen whether temporal distance is always productive.<sup>109</sup> That is also why Gadamer is not that strict in his suggestion: "*Often* temporal distance can solve [the] question of critique in hermeneutics, namely how to distinguish the true prejudices, by which we *understand*, from the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*."<sup>110</sup>

Gadamer has faith in the self-regulating ability, or the reflexivity of tradition over time, for he considers history as tradition: a continuous discussion between generations.<sup>111</sup> That is why he is convinced that temporal distance enables us to distinguish the true from the false prejudices in our tradition in order to understand. However, is it not more likely to learn and find the “correct” prejudices when we mirror them on a past that *differs* from the present instead of seeing it as consistent with the past tradition? To consider the past as distinct from the present was, of course, the view held by historicists like Dilthey and Meinecke. From this, the whole crisis of historicism – ethical relativism – emerged, as we have seen before. Recently, it has been suggested to correct Gadamer’s hermeneutics on the moral consequences of relativism with the historicist ideals of dealing with plurality and prejudices.<sup>112</sup> However, this most likely leads to Enlightened ideals or metaphysical solutions like Meinecke’s panentheism. Which could, of course, function as a way to overcome the dangers of ethical relativism, for the universal and the individual, objectivity, and subjectivity can be reconciled by means of a panentheistic philosophy. And even in ethics (and aesthetics) this could work if one believes that our conscience is a moral emanation of the absolute good, true and beautiful. But it is unlikely that (post)modern historians and philosophers of history will embrace such a philosophy. Gadamer came up with a better and feasible alternative in distinguishing between prejudices on a mediation between past and present. His alternative – which has its bearing on the dangers of relativism and its relationship with objectivity – centres on the notion of what he calls “application.” In order to fully grasp this notion, two other concepts need first to be briefly explained.

Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics ultimately rests on two important notions: “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and “historically effected consciousness.” According to Gadamer, effective history denotes the traditions of interpretations of texts; the history of its effects. Like traditions of interpretation, the interpreter (the historian) is also part of history’s stream of becoming. “Historically effected consciousness” is, therefore, understood to mean that historians should raise their historically situatedness to consciousness in order to recognize how it relates to effective history.<sup>113</sup> So, this process of becoming aware of one’s situatedness is the interpretation of one’s own prejudices. Gadamer states that this process can never be completed, for we cannot completely control effective history.<sup>114</sup> In that sense, we are subject to history; it affects our horizon whenever we understand. Historians are thus embedded in a certain historical context – Gadamer calls this the tradition or a horizon – which they cannot escape. This means that their point of view is already given and cannot be arbitrarily chosen.<sup>115</sup> Further, the moment historians interpret evidence – past texts with their own horizon – a “fusion of horizons” takes place. This fusion of horizons both presupposes and continues the tradition of interpretation, the effective history. When inquiring into the past, this dialectic makes the historian aware of both the tradition and other ways of thinking, which subsequently forces the historian to reflect on his own historically situated horizon, his own prejudices.<sup>116</sup> What basically happens in this process of the fusion of horizons is what we call “learning;” it is a learning process about both the historian’s research subject (the text and its interpretations that he aims to understand) and himself (the prejudice that allow him to understand), who is the result of this history of interpretation. And in that sense understanding is always self-understanding, which is a never-ending process of learning or what Gadamer calls *Bildung* (the education or cultivation of the individual personality).<sup>117</sup> So far this is still close to Dilthey and even Rüsén. But the final step in Gadamer’s theory is decisive for our view of objectivity and relativism.

Understanding, according to Gadamer, always involves, or *is* application, which is the mediation between the past meaning of the text and its present understanding.<sup>118</sup> The notion of application moreover underlines that all interpretations are motivated by our present

situation and the questions we ask. This questioning implies that understanding is not only reproductive, but also a productive action.<sup>119</sup> It is within this process of application that the historian becomes aware of the mediation between subjectivity and objectivity. Gadamer clarifies: “*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.*”<sup>120</sup> To understand the past means to translate it into – apply it to – our own situation, and each new confrontation between the two modifies our present views and the ones that have been passed down from the tradition. What is key to Gadamer’s hermeneutics is that by means of this dialectic of question and answer, the past will open itself up to us. Contrary to, for example, Ranke, the past or the sources do not speak for themselves, nor can we efface ourselves from our work. Successful understanding, according to Gadamer, is the result of the questions and answers mediation between (subjective) historically effected consciousness and the (objective) effective history.

Some consider Gadamer’s idea of application extremely subjective, arbitrary, and relativist. Gadamer counters this accusation in a discussion on theological and legal hermeneutics. Both, in his view, apply a general law or text (e.g. the Bible) to specific, present cases. And here too, Gadamer claims, the interpreter belongs to the (whole) tradition of interpretation of the texts he aims to understand from his present position; he tries to apply to or translate them into the present situation. Meaning is always understood in the present. Further, the ability to apply the general in specific and concrete situations is not only about the interpretation of texts but also about the practical application of, for example, ethics. To Gadamer, morality is not about universals and detachment, for that was what he considered the Enlightenment’s “false objectification”: the practice to base morals on and acquire knowledge by means of universal and absolute methods. Instead, Gadamer’s view of morality is related to Aristotle’s ethics, which considers moral knowledge as practical application: applying the good in concrete situations.<sup>121</sup> This is not a completely subjective act, for it is – parallel to the idea of effective history – participation in an event of a moral tradition. It is this logic that keeps Gadamer from falling into ethical relativism.

In that sense, Gadamer not only offers us an approach to mediate between objectivity and relativism but also an alternative to handle the consequences of ethical relativism that were posed by historicism and narrativism. So, Gadamer’s notion of application offers us a view on the process of historical understanding in all its aspects: the mediation between (subjective) historically effected consciousness and the (objective) effective history, and it gives us solid ground as moral and historical beings.

### Concluding remarks

Can historians be objective? Most historians agree that some kind of method or ground rules is necessary to attain some form of objectivity in historical research. What all discussed thinkers in this chapter have in common, however, is that aspiring to objectivity is not only thought to be idealistic, but too much objectivity could even harm the discipline of history. For, as Rüsen claimed: “neutrality is the end of history.” Likewise, Meinecke made this very clear with his suggestion to “creatively mirror the past,” for a history without subjectivity is bloodless. Beard too was convinced that historians can never escape their historical context, which is why he claimed that every written history is relative. Gadamer, ultimately questioned the whole (historicist) method of acquiring objectivity, for it hides that historical understanding presupposes our historicity.

What follows from most of these positions is that relativism is probably inescapable. But the consequences of in particular ethical relativism – the crisis of the justification of (absolute) moral beliefs – is considered by most historians as a threat to the academic status of the discipline of history, and moreover, it renders a moral orientation in the present almost impossible. Meinecke and Beard suggested metaphysical answers to this question. Rösen proposed an encapsulation of subjectivity into objectivity. Gadamer's notion of application allowed for mediation between objectivity and subjectivity and thereby deepens our insight not only into ourselves but also into the historicity of historical understanding and how historians cope with the problem of values. Still, all of the above have their merits and demerits. One thing is clear, however, for it seems the real challenge to the discipline of history lies not so much in attaining objectivity but in coping with the consequences of ethical relativism.

### Notes

- 1 Thomas Nipperdey, "Kann Geschichte objektiv sein?," in Thomas Nipperdey, *Kann Geschichte objektiv sein? Historische Essays*, ed. Paul Nolte (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013 [1979]), 63–64; W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction*, revised edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 99–105.
- 2 Herman Paul, "A Collapse of Trust: Reconceptualizing the Crisis of Historicism," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2, no. 1 (2008): 64–65.
- 3 Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24–25.
- 4 Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, eds. S. Rudolf A. Makreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 310.
- 5 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 310.
- 6 Perhaps Meinecke belongs even more to the tradition of Herder and Goethe. Late in his life he could be considered to offer a synthesis of the views of Ranke and Burckhardt. See my *Germany's Conscience. Friedrich Meinecke: Champion of German Historicism* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021).
- 7 Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism. The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J.E. Anderson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), liv.
- 8 *Ibid.*, lv.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Friedrich Meinecke, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Historismus und des Schleiermacherschen Individualitätsgedankens," in Friedrich Meinecke, *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1965), 341.
- 11 Meinecke, *Historism*, lv.
- 12 Friedrich Meinecke, "Aphorismen," in Friedrich Meinecke, *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1965), 222–223. My translation.
- 13 Friedrich Meinecke, "Values and Causalities in History," in *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 280.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 280.
- 15 Jörn Rösen, "Friedrich Meineckes 'Entstehung des Historismus.' Eine kritische Betrachtung," in *Friedrich Meinecke heute. Bericht über ein Gedenk-Colloquium zu seinem 25. Todestag am 5. und 6. April 1979*, ed. Michael Erbe (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1981), 89; Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rösen, *Geschichte des Historismus. Eine Einführung* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1992), 8.
- 16 Friedrich Meinecke, *Neue Briefe und Dokumente*, ed. Gisela Bock and Gerhard A. Ritter in cooperation with Stefan Meinecke and Volker Hunecke (Munich: R. Oldenburg Verlag, 2012), 357.
- 17 Meinecke, "Geschichte und Gegenwart," in *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, 93.
- 18 Meinecke, *Historism*, 489.
- 19 Meinecke, "Aphorismen," 232.
- 20 Meinecke, *Historism*, 418.
- 21 Meinecke, "Von der Krisis des Historismus," in *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, 204.
- 22 Meinecke, "Von der Krisis," 204. The paralysing effects of historicism were already addressed by Nietzsche in his *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874). Meinecke agrees with him only where Nietzsche claims, in the words of Meinecke: "dem Schwachen ist sie Gift, dem Starken Nahrung." Meinecke, "Persönlichkeit und geschichtliche Welt in Friedrich Meinecke," *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed.

- Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1965), 52. This essay was first published in 1918, but in 1933 it was reissued. Apart from this statement, Meinecke disagrees with the rest of Nietzsche's thought. He despises his "Anarchie des Subjektivismus." Meinecke, "Erlebtes 1862–1901" in Meinecke, *Autobiographische Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1969), 105.
- 23 Meinecke, "Values," 283. Note on page 439.
- 24 Meinecke, "Kausalitäten und Werte in Meinecke," *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, 83n1; Meinecke, "Ernst Troeltsch und das Problem des Historismus," in *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, 376.
- 25 Krol, *Germany's Conscience*. Panentheism is the leitmotiv of my book on Meinecke.
- 26 Meinecke, *Historism*, 490.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Meinecke, *Historism*, 199.
- 29 Meinecke, *Ausgewählter Briefwechsel*, ed. Ludwig Dehio and Peter Classen (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1962), 362; Meinecke, "Geschichte und Gegenwart," 100; Meinecke, "Deutung eines Rankewortes" in Meinecke, *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, 133. Apart from being relative absolute, conscience is also relative because there are a myriad of personalities with a conscience. Following Troeltsch, Meinecke calls this *Wertrelativität*. Meinecke explains that *Wertrelativität* is about: "Individualität im historischen Sinne, jeweils eigenartige, an sich wertvolle *Ausprägung eines unbekanntes Absoluten* – denn ein solches wird dem Glauben als schöpferischer Grund aller Werte gelten – im Relativen und zeitlich-naturhaft Gebunden." Meinecke, "Kausalitäten und Werte," 83. My italics. So, it is not about the idea that values change and therefore become relative and make us feel that there are no absolute values, no, it is about the fact that each individual has to decide for himself (by means of his conscience) what he has to do, how he has to act. Meinecke, "Ernst Troeltsch und das Problem," 376.
- 30 Meinecke, "Geschichte und Gegenwart," 101.
- 31 Ibid., 96–98.
- 32 Meinecke, "Geschichte und Gegenwart," 101; Meinecke, "Deutung eines Rankewortes," 136.
- 33 Meinecke, "Geschichte und Gegenwart," 98.
- 34 Meinecke, *Historism*, 492.
- 35 Meinecke, "Values and Causalities in History," 283.
- 36 Meinecke, "Aphorismen," 239.
- 37 Friedrich Meinecke, *Schaffender Spiegel. Studien zur deutschen Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsauffassung* (Stuttgart, 1948), 7.
- 38 Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 14.
- 39 Carl L. Becker, "Detachment and the Writing of History," *Atlantic Monthly* 106 (October 1910): 524–536. Reprinted in Becker, "Detachment and the Writing of History," in *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker*, ed. Phil L. Snyder (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 12. I refer to the reprinted version.
- 40 Becker, "Detachment," 14.
- 41 Becker, "What are Historical Facts?," *The Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1955): 335. The lecture was held in 1926.
- 42 Ernst Breisach, *Historiography. Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 331.
- 43 A list of names regarding the reception of Beard is provided by: Lloyd R. Sorenson, "Charles A Beard and German Historiographical Thought," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42, no. 2 (1955): 276; cf. Morton White, "Can History be Objective?," in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 188–202; Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 88–102; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), *passim*, and mainly Chapter 9.
- 44 Charles A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *The American Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (1934): 219–231. I refer to the reprinted version: Beard "Written History as an Act of Faith" in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 140–151; Charles A. Beard, "That Noble Dream," *The American Historical Review* 41, no. 1. (1935): 74–87. I refer to the reprinted version: Beard, "That Noble Dream," in *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 315–328.
- 45 Sorenson, "Charles A Beard," 285.

## Objectivity and relativism

- 46 Beard, "That Noble Dream," 323–325.
- 47 To be sure: relativism differs from scepticism. The latter assumes it is impossible to know (for instance) the truth at all. Relativism however, redefines truth, which means truth is not the same for everyone, but varies with each person, context, society, culture or conceptual scheme.
- 48 Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge. An Answer to Relativism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1938), 19.
- 49 Charles A. Beard, "Review," review of *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: An Answer to Relativism*, by Mandelbaum, *The American Historical Review* 44, no. 3 (1939): 572.
- 50 Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, 174, 177, 201, 211.
- 51 Beard, "Review," 572.
- 52 Beard, "Written History," 140.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 140–141.
- 54 On the logical and philosophical problems of the distinction between the two: White, "Can History be Objective?," 192–193; William Dray, *Perspectives on History* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge, 1980), 29–30.
- 55 Beard, "Written History," 141.
- 56 White, "Can History be Objective?," 199.
- 57 White, "Can History be Objective?," 201; cf. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy*, 88–102.
- 58 Beard, "Written History," 144.
- 59 Charles A. Beard and Alfred Vagts, "Currents of Thought in Historiography," *The American Historical Review* 42, no. 3 (April 1937): 478; Beard, "Written History," 144–147.
- 60 Beard, "Written History," 147.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 *Ibid.* My italics.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 65 Beard, "That Noble Dream," 328.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 Beard and Vagts, "Currents of Thought," 480.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 481.
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 *Ibid.*, 482.
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 *Ibid.*, 480–481.
- 73 Beard, "That Noble Dream," 327.
- 74 Gene G. James, "Was Charles Beard an Historical Relativist?," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 12, no. 1 (1976): 68.
- 75 Allan Megill, "Introduction: Fours Senses of Objectivity," in *Rethinking Objectivity*, ed. Megill (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 1, 10–11.
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- 77 Chris Lorenz, "Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: a Plea for "Internal Realism"," in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 350–354.
- 78 Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 88–92.
- 79 Marek Tamm, "Truth, Objectivity and Evidence in History Writing," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 8, no. 2 (2014): 265–290.
- 80 Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 175–196.
- 81 Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 147–153; Guy Axtell, "The Dialectics of Objectivity," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6, no. 3 (January 2012): 339–368; Arthur Alfaix Assis, "Objectivity and the First Law of History Writing," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 13, no. 1 (2019): 107–128.
- 82 Megill, "Introduction," 5–10.
- 83 Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), 59–74.

- 84 Jörn Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft. Grundzüge einer Historik I: Die Grundlagen der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 117; Rüsen, “Werturteilsstreit und Erkenntnisfortschritt,” in *Historische Objektivität. Aufsätze zur Geschichtstheorie*, ed. Rüsen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 74, 81–86, 95; Megill, “Introduction,” 5–7.
- 85 Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft*, 121.
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- 88 Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft*, 124; Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*, trans. D. Kerns and K. Digan (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2017), 37.
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- 90 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 39–40.
- 92 Rüsen “Historical Objectivity,” 60.
- 93 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 94 Rüsen, *History*, 62.
- 95 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 96 *Ibid.*, 70–71.
- 97 *Ibid.*, 71.
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