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Mesocosmological Descriptions: An Essay in the Extensional Ontology of History¹

Abstract

The following paper advances a new argument for the thesis that scientific and historical knowledge are not different in type. This argument makes use of a formal ontology of history which dispenses with generality, laws and causality. It views the past social world as composed of Wittgenstein's Tractarian objects: of events, ordered in ontological dependencies. Theories in history advance models of past reality which connect—in experiment—faces of past events in complexes. The events themselves are multi-grained so that we can connect together different faces of theirs without counterfeiting history. This means that, on the basis of the same set of facts, historians can produce different models of past events, in which different dependences are brought forth. A conception of this kind substantiates an objectivist account of the recurrent falsifications of the theories in history.

“All flesh is grass, and historians, poor things, wither more quickly than most.” —R. H. Tawney

1. Opening

This paper addresses the fact that historical theories are falsifiable at high rate: historical theories are repeatedly revised.² This situation is felt to be a scandal to history because historical theories have an “existential import” by definition. Indeed, their objective is to tell exactly what happened, i.e., what *was*, in the past. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that despite this *prima facie* unreliability of historical knowledge, it is objective in principle.

Further, the paper advances a new argument against the autonomy of historical knowledge.³ The old argument, to remind the reader, was set out in Karl Popper's and Carl Hempel's view that knowledge in a historical study is not different in type from knowledge in a study of nature. Of course, there is a major difference between history and natural sciences. This, however, is a difference in their justification, not in the type of their knowledge. The difference in question arises mainly because the laws of history are laws of particular events and thus are of high complexity, whereas the laws of science are general and, because of this, are much simpler.

In particular, I strongly oppose Popper-Hempel's “covering law model of history” and suggest an alternative scientific philosophy of historical knowledge. To be more specific, I develop a scientific treatment of history, following, what I shall call now, the “ontology of mesocosmology”. It views the social world as a mesocosm,⁴ which is situated between the microcosm of the private world of the individual person, and the macrocosm of the geographical and, even further, of the astronomic

world.⁵ These three cosmoses, however, are built up in one and the same way. That is why the academic disciplines which study them are not different in type.

My next claim is that the events both of the past and in the historical theories are ordered one to another in ontological dependence, thus resulting in complex wholes out of which the historical mesocosm is made. In particular, the models supplied by a theory of history order historical facts and events so that the theory makes the form of every event experimentally touch another event. By this ordering, some facts are made to depend on each other ontologically. Apparently, here we have not causation or implication but colligation: touching, overlapping, permeating and comprising of events.

2. Mesocosmological Ontology

To elaborate on this understanding, I follow a particular interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.⁶ It accepts that the world consists of objects (facts, events, states of affairs) which are stuffy or voluminous individuals. The objects have borders, or faces, which are in contact with the faces of other objects. Being voluminous, they fill up the world. The complex objects (cluster of events, of states of affairs) are arranged by way of connecting the objects' forms (faces). It is of importance to note that what makes the objects stick together is the very docking (colligating) of their faces—this is what secures the cohesion between them. There is no third, connecting element between them, no copula, no external relations, no “mortar”.

From an ontological perspective, the events with their forms are parts of the sum of all possible configurations in which they can occur; in other words, the forms of the events are the possibilities of events' occurring in any imaginable cluster of events.⁷ We can even postulate that there is one overall comprehensive construction of elementary possibilities, situated in the logical (as different from geometrical) space: the block-universe of all possible worlds, in which all implicit configurations are folded up one into another. Metaphorically, we can present all possible events as logically folded polyhedrons, the faces of which are their forms.⁸ The block-universe of all possible states of affairs is one massive cluster of such folded up polyhedrons, the faces of every one of which touch the faces of other polyhedron-object.

There are two ways in which the possibilities of this block-universe can be actualized and so can produce actual events and structures:

(1) They can construct actual facts of nature. To this I would like to add the following comment: following Wittgenstein, I understand the *real* world as the tip of the iceberg of the all concatenations of possible forms of events. This tip is what is actualized out of the pool of all possible forms now, at this moment. In it, some possible forms are cooled down to actual configurations of states of affairs. A *change* in the real world occurs when a new configuration, constructed out of possible forms of objects, is actually produced.

(2) Such actualization can be also produced by knowing individuals. Indeed, scientists, historians included, construct in their theories new, imaginary states of affairs (models)⁹ which either agree with reality, or they do not.¹⁰

3. Constructing Historical Theory

Here is this conception as applied to history:

According to the social ontology I argue for in this paper, the “surface of the social life”¹¹ is an aggregate of events which can be seen as solid, stuffy pieces (planks, chunks). Understood this way, social events can be treated as Tractarian objects which are connected to one another as explained in §2. In particular, every possible social object, including large-scaled events, for example, the outbreak of the World War I, can be presented as a solid polyhedron which has, practically, innumerable many faces. These faces have in them a myriad possible connections with the faces of innumerable other facts of the social history; i.e. the connection of World War I to (i) imperialism, (ii) nationalism, (iii) socialist movements of the time, etc. Some of them were actualized; others remained potential.

My deep (in contrast to surface) social ontology follows an assumption which was best expressed in L.N. Tolstoy’s claim that once the agent is involved in relationships with other agents, she is no longer free but is a part of an inexorable stream of the “complexity of life.”¹² “[The agents] are part of a larger scheme of things than we can understand. We cannot describe it in the way in which external objects or the characters of other people can be described, by isolating them somewhat from the historical ‘flow’ in which they have their being.”¹³ We cannot present the social world from outside as if it were one object among others.

This means that attempts to outline the “real causes” of human actions in the past are doomed to failure from the beginning. The complexity of human life is endless so that the historian can only describe, or “explain”, a small part of it. Tolstoy’s conclusion was that “no theory can possibly fit the immense variety of possible human behavior, the vast multiplicity of minute, undiscoverable causes and effects.”¹⁴ I add to this: the most we can hope for in history is to advance illuminating models of some past events, explaining them only partially.

To be more specific, when historians investigate past social events and further advance a historical theory (tell a story) about them, they experimentally put a piece (chunk) of social reality, i.e. a past event, next to other past events and set them in a relation of ontological dependence, thus constructing a historical model (a theory). In this way historians do a quasi thought-experiment with past events. They do not make inferences: indeed, inferences are made only in logic. Inferences are necessary—we are compelled to do them. In contrast, we make theories in history voluntary, following our intuitions. We arrange the past facts in patterns, as for experiment, in order to *model* historical events.

Especially important is that historians can also connect the facts as they were never connected in the past in exactly *this* formation; nevertheless, this connection (theory) could be most illuminating.¹⁵ This can be explained by referring to the quasi Leibnizian “pre-established harmony” between actual and potential events (states of affairs) of the block-universe,¹⁶ so that even if we bring together elements which never met in practice, they can fit together exactly.

This conception provides support for the following picture of historical knowledge. We experimentally rearrange past events in ever new ways, putting them next to facts we have learned

recently. Thus, a historical fact which occurred in, say, 1850, can be investigated from new perspective, for example, from the perspective of the new feminism, of environmental ethics, of the racism/antiracism debate, etc. Seeing it from one of these new perspectives, we usually believe that this historical fact was “caused” by events about which we had previously been either ignorant, or which we simply hadn’t noticed despite the fact that we knew them. Of course, this conception does not mean that there is no past—rather, it claims that we can find in the past events faces that can be put together to faces of certain recent high profile events. That is why we can contemplate past events from the point of view of today.

This is exactly how history was advanced in the last two centuries or so.¹⁷ Ever new perspectives in investigating past events¹⁸ were opened, allowing for fresh examinations of the old events. It is worth noticing here that, on the one hand, most of these new perspectives are objective,¹⁹ in the sense that they refer to real faces of real facts which occurred in the past. On the other hand, however, they are also subjective, in the sense that any of these theories (or visions)—i.e. experimentally constructed large-scale state of affairs—exists only in our head.

Let us recapitulate our conception of history as developed so far. The subject-matter of history as an academic discipline is the description of parts of the stream (the course) of the events in past social life. A theory of history puts the faces of different past events next to one another, showing them in ontological dependence. In this way, it constructs, as in an experiment, theories, to be more precise—hypotheses about how things “really happened” in the past. I also claim that when rightly done, this approach helps us to see the past facts with the eyes of their producers—the agents of history.

But how is the arrangement of individuals in the model done? Following the thesis of mesocosmological ontology, I accept that historical individuals (events, facts) are voluminous things which fill up the “logical space” of history. In this sense, we can see them as having the form of polyhedrons with many facets. Being such, they obey the laws of mereology and topology: The polyhedron of this particular historical fact / event can, for example, comprise (include) the polyhedron of another fact either in part, or in full. Furthermore, these polyhedrons can permeate one another, they can cover one another—wholly or in part,—they can slide over one another, etc. Here all topological variations are possible.

The mereo-topological ontology of history suggested in this paper accepts that when advancing a new theory in history, the historicists as it were play—experiment—with historical individuals, constructing new models of past events out of them. In such cases the events under scrutiny can be put in all possible extensive (geometrical, topological, mereological) relations: they can wander inside and outside the individuals who are seen as comprising them, etc.

Of course, historians are engaged in such “playful” practices in the good faith to deliver a most “realistic” (“truthful”) picture of the world. They believe that their task is to make mimetic models of reality which second the past events (exactly like Wittgenstein’s models in the Paris court!). This is not surprising since, as already noted, not only do historians’ advance theories, they also *claim* that the theories they advance are true.

Furthermore, both historians and their audience judge different theories in history as true/false

exactly on the grounds of whether they cohere with the past reality or not. This procedure of verification helps to correct and improve models. Our ability to judge this way, however, does not mean that we know what *exactly* happened in the past. In other words, it does not disprove the agnostic claim with respect to what *really* happened in the past made in the beginning of this section—indeed, we can judge the rightness of this or that picture of the past without being in a position to analyze it.²⁰

4. Criticism of the Concept of Causation in History—Perspectivism

Historians, both oral and academic, are prone to speak about causes in history. Fortunately, philosophers have already shown how suspect this concept is.²¹ One of the most convincing criticisms of causality was brought up by Gilbert Ryle in his *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle's claim was that what scientists really establish in cases of supposed causality are laws which provide “inference-tickets” that are used when reasoning on that matter—and nothing more.²² Nobody knows how exactly one event has “caused” another one.²³ Especially misleading is to assume that cause is something third between two events. In philosophy of history, Ryle's argument was adopted by William Dray in his work *Laws and Explanation in History*.²⁴ In particular, Dray insisted that historical agents act for *reasons*—their actions are not just “caused”.

The conception of historical explanation advocated in this paper dispenses with the notion of causation in a way which differs from that of Ryle and Dray. I agree with these authors that what are asserted in history are dependencies of facts, actions, reasons, etc. However, the problem is to specify the nature of these dependencies which can be of different kinds. They can be intensional, by which the *explanans* completely determine the *explanandum* in the sense that the first quasi logically entails the second; or they can be extensional, in particular, ontological (mereological, or mereo-topological), with only a conditional dependence between them. In this paper I plead for extensional dependences in history. More precisely, I claim that historical events, both of past reality and of historical theories, are simply ordered one to another in ontological dependence, thus resulting in complex wholes out of which the historical mesocosm is made.

Furthermore, the models supplied by a theory of history organize—in the form of descriptions—historical facts and events so that the theory makes the form of every event experimentally touch another event. There is no third link (usually called *cause*, which Ryle criticized, or law, which Ryle didn't criticize) between them. By this ordering, some facts are made to depend on each other ontologically. Apparently, here we have not causation or implication but colligation: touching, overlapping, permeating and comprising of individuals (events). The very topological relation determines the ontological dependence. That is why, instead of speaking of causation in history, I prefer to talk about *occasioning*, or of *conditioning*, or of *originating* in history.

This conception of philosophy of history is close to what is known as “perspectivism” in philosophy of history. Perspectivism has two main variants.²⁵ One of the most convincing forms of perspectivism, set out in W.H. Walsh's *Introduction to Philosophy of History*, claims that whereas scientific study is objective,²⁶ historical study is of necessity made from a point of view, from a perspective, which is connected with certain particular moral and metaphysical assumptions. Value-judgments play a leading role in historical study.

Now, despite Walsh's insistence that different points of view do not contradict one another—they are just distinct facets, or aspects, of the truth,—his reference to the value-judgments in historical studies gives to the latter a rather subjective coloring.²⁷ Karl Popper, in particular, used to claim that different points of view in history are incommensurable, so they cannot be testified, in particular, cannot be refuted. Consequently, they are not theories: they are subjective visions.²⁸

In contrast to Walsh's perspectivism, the perspectivism embraced in this paper is thoroughly objective. It claims that correct points of view in historical theory²⁹ simply describe different, objective chunks of reality—different events of the social past which we now investigate. To be more precise, various perspectives produce different arrangements (chains) of these objective individuals, putting them in different ontological dependencies.

This variant of perspectivism is inspired by a Wittgensteinian Theory of Conceptual Shifts. The theory in question was developed on the basis of the Tractarian ontology and of the aspect-changing epistemology of *Philosophical Investigations*. Unfortunately, since Wittgenstein put enormous stress on the primacy of language, the authentic ontology and epistemology of the Theory of Conceptual Shifts are very difficult to reconstruct and articulate. They were developed in full only by two followers of Wittgenstein's: Friedrich Waismann and John Wisdom, as well as by the pupil of Wisdom, Renford Bambrough. Unlike Wittgenstein, these three philosophers put the problem of how we produce and understand language in brackets.

According to John Wisdom, for example, the task of philosophy is to introduce new ways of seeing things. Most often, a new perspective discloses something which is already known to us; however, it puts it into a new pattern of connections.³⁰ In fact, it does not convey new information but new apprehension, which is both illuminating and truth-relevant. This procedure requires a sound judgment, or what Descartes once has called *bona mens*: a judgment which rejects all irrelevant connections of facts in order to pick out only the most illuminating ones (for the present purpose).

Following this understanding, I shall reset the task of the mesocosmological ontology of history as making *conceptual shifts*. History does this in two ways: First, it produces descriptions which are nothing but seeing well-known events in a new way. This is what makes their cognitive point.³¹ A good example here is the way Eric Hobsbawm saw European history from 1914–1991: as *Age of Extremes*; and again as *The Short Twentieth Century*.³² Secondly, we can look for new facts in order to produce a new perspective which would help to see past events in a new way.

It is often claimed that conceptual shifts present contingent pictures which are neither true nor false.³³ To the contemporary deconstructivists, in particular, every point of view is contingent and subjective.³⁴ In contrast, I insist—referring to the mesocosmological ontology as elaborated in §2—that the products of the conceptual shifts are objective and truth-relevant.³⁵

The task of the technique of conceptual shifts is to discover and outline a “new physiognomy”. Such a technique was used, for example, in Oswald Spengler's examination of patterns, or making Gestalt-analyses of historical events set up in his *Decline of the West*.³⁶ Unfortunately, Spengler's analyses were speculative to the extreme. Wittgenstein admired Spengler's book but advanced his own Gestalt-analyses method in philosophy (including in philosophy of mathematics), which is

more down to earth. He also noted that the realm of history is especially appropriate for such analyses. It is this method that this paper follows.

5. Theory of Colligations, Against the Covering-Law Model of History

From a logical point of view, the topological relation of comprising of two past events can also be seen as a relation of implying: we can see the comprising element as implying the comprised. That is why comprising plays the central role in our mesocosmological ontology. Its importance results from the fact that exactly this relation substantiates deduction in history, on the basis of which we are inclined to speak about “causes” and “effects” in it. Further, In every particular historical theory, the quasi general—in fact, comprising—historical event is only docked to (it colligates to) some of the facets of the comprised event; they do not fuse one into another. This, in turn, means that the comprised events are independent from the comprising event—despite the fact that we present them, in our experiment, in a relation of dependency. An example: The killing of the Austrian crown prince in Sarajevo in 1914 can be seen as comprising—i.e. “causing”—the outbreak of the World War One. However, the connection between the two events is not necessary—in fact, they can exist independently from one another. That is why we can consistently suggest another cause of the World War One.

The standard argument against conceptions of this kind is that they cannot discern between social “causation” and accidental regularities such as “the cat is on the mat.” From here the conclusion is made that to describe is not to explain; explaining is something more than (over and above) describing. Against this argument, I would like to set out that mesocosmological colligations historians make are not merely series’ of events but ones with an asymmetric relation of ontological dependence between them.⁴³ In fact, the models they construct are based on such dependencies. To take the same example: Some historicist puts the outbreak of the World War One in ontological dependence from the killing of the Austrian crown prince.

Every new model in history defines which facts are important for a particular investigation and which are not so important;⁴⁴ and also which facts occasion other facts. However, the mesocosmological analysis made in this paper claims that this ontological dependence is to be accepted only *as if*, for the purpose of this modeling. In truth, the individuals of these dependences remain autonomous (atomic) units and thus are free for new, alternative arrangements. Needless to say, every historian sincerely believes that what he/she suggests is the absolute truth about how past events really happened. They are *serious* about what they claim; indeed, this feeling is a presupposition of their theoretical work.

One of the implications of this conception of history is that a historical study cannot suggest valid general or universal laws. This also means that the covering law model of history is mistaken. The covering law model of history, to remind the reader, was introduced by Max Weber and was further elaborated by Karl Popper and Carl Hempel. It claims that explanation in history is achieved exactly like it is achieved in science: by subsuming what is to be explained under a general law. It is a deduction of events: (1) from antecedent conditions; (2) from relevant laws (in form of points of view). Popper, in particular, claimed: “To give a causal explanation of a certain event means to derive deductively a statement which describes that event, using as premises of the deduction some universal laws.”⁴⁵ The difference is that while sciences usually establish universal laws, historians

advance general laws. The logical form of the procedure, however, is the same.

My objection to this conception of Popper–Hempel echoes Wittgenstein’s (neo-Humean) claim from the *Tractatus*, 6.3–6.33, that there can not be logical dependence between physical events. This is even more so in history which, as Popper had correctly noted, is a science of the particular. The acceptance that historical explanations reveal logical dependencies between events leads to illusions, in particular to the illusion that theories in history explain entities.⁴⁶

The mesocosmological philosophy of history, in contrast, claims, first, that by explaining a historical event the historian takes an individual *a* which, in a topological sense, is more voluminous than another individual *b*. Then the historian sees *a* as comprising *b*: for example, the “assassination of the Austrian-Hungarian crown prince in Sarajevo” as comprising “the outbreak of World War I,” and so as ontologically implying it.

Here it is another example of this conception: The acceptance that the event of

(1) The German National Socialist Party coming to power in Germany in 1933

was due to

(2) The social peculiarities of Germany in the approximately 130 years preceding 1933⁴⁷

sees (1) as following from (2). The very possibility of this thesis, however, is based on two events known rather independently from this judgment. We know event (1), and we know the horizon of events in which it can be docked to (which we can make to follow from) it. Now, one of these events is (2); this specific thesis of history colligates the two. This colligation of events, however, doesn’t substantiate a relation of causal dependence. Rather, the two events are set in an ontological dependence, and all this only in experiment. The experiment—the new historical theory—is performed with the purpose to articulate the “sense” of the past event,⁴⁸ i.e. to say exactly what happened in the past.

Here I would like to remind the reader that the theory of colligations was introduced in philosophy of history by W.H. Walsh, with reference to William Whewell. According to Walsh, historians use “the procedure of explaining an event by tracing its intrinsic relations to other events and locating it in its historical context.”⁴⁹ To this purpose, the historian chooses some important ideas which serve as a principle for colligating events. In this way the historian “aims to make a coherent whole out of the events he studies.”⁵⁰ Up to this moment, Walsh’s philosophy of history is in agreement with our mesocosmological ontology. Similarly to Walsh, my historicists chooses important events as comprising others. The difference between the two theories is that Walsh’s philosophy of history is not a theory “of the ultimate moving forces of history.”⁵¹ That is why he advised historians to use plenty of other explanations as well; general principles, causal explanations, etc.

The mesocosmological philosophy of history laid out in this paper claims that such explanations too can be discussed in terms of collocations. For this purpose, it uses the term “colligation” in a wider sense. History not only seeks to connect the large-scale event under scrutiny with relevant (related) facts which came in contact with it in the past (or which simply could have come in

contact with it in the past); it also explains this event in terms of these facts, putting it and them in well-formed description (models).

6. History and the Sciences

In §4 I criticized the view that historical knowledge is subjective. Here I shall examine the claim that the ever new perspectives from which historians see political, social and intellectual facts of the past are autonomous and thus incommensurable. I disagree with this argument and argue that different perspectives in history have a common ground—the real past events which, despite multi-faceted and so complex,³⁷ have fixed (invariant), and objective parameters. These real past events guarantee the communication between different perspectives in history, in particular, succession between them.

The succession of accepted real past events which we put in ever new perspectives of history explains, in turn, how progress in academic history is made: by making use of ever new past facts in historical study, putting them into ever new connections. The aptitude for progress, incidentally, is another fact which supports the relatedness of history to science. Indeed, “the point [of history] is not merely [to set out] one new perspective next to another. Its point is [to receive] better, richer knowledge; to correct, revise, or enlarge the knowledge we had thus far.”³⁸

The progress of historical knowledge is a matter of fact. To be sure, only an extravagant mind would claim that our knowledge of, say, the Great French Revolution 1789–1795 had not improved in the last hundred years or so. Consider also the progress in our knowledge of the German history, comparing Johannes Haller’s *Die Epochen der deutschen Geschichte*³⁹ with the standard Ulf Dirlmeier et al., *Kleine deutsche Geschichte*.⁴⁰ The difference between them is like the difference between our knowledge of the Moon’s geology in 1923 and in 1995.

Another argument for accepting that history is a science is that technically, it develops as any other science does: in academic historical journals new theories are presented as new discoveries which aim at refuting, or correcting, the old ones. They are examined through referring to facts, documents and authority. This is exactly how biology, physics and chemistry develop.

Some authors claim that what makes history different from science is that “[history] is made out of actions, of their collective intricacy; [and we are to] view human behavior not only in its reactive aspects [as we do in science], but also under the aspect of being purposive, calculated, planned.”⁴¹ When we do this, we do not look for causes or subsume the actions under a single law. That is why, so goes this argument from free will, history will never become a science.

For philosophy of history based on mesocosmological ontology, however, the fact that history is made of actions based on free will is not a hindrance to considering it a science. Truly, the laws of this science are extensive, not intensive, as are the laws of physics, for example. That is why we scarcely find general truths in it. Extensive are, however, also the laws of some other sciences. So climate-changes are contingent. This fact notwithstanding, there is such a science as meteorology which produces weather-forecast maps of this or that moment, at this or that place. Similarly, history produces patterns (*Gestalten*) which can help orient ourselves in the past events.

The mesocosmological ontology of history also conceives historical study as similar to the science of *geography*. This is the case because both disciplines describe extensive chunks of reality, and so perform cognate tasks: recognition of one—the right—relevant pattern (*Gestalt*), out of many possible ones, and its articulation (expression).⁴² Further, both disciplines present extensive entities in a concise (encoded) form. The main difference between them is that, whereas geography presents in this way spatial objects, history presents in this way temporally situated events, or clusters of events.

These considerations suggest that our conception of historical studies can be validly illustrated through the practice of geographical study. One example: You can produce a map of London from quite different perspectives. You can make London photography from the air, or you can produce a map of London's restaurants, or a map of London's sporting venues, etc. Now, all these pictures and maps are different perspectives of the town, every one of which reveals different faces of it. This also means that the perspectives in question are objective and so do not contradict or refute one another. The same can be said about the history put in terms of the mesocosmological ontology. It shows how it is possible to interpret one and the same cluster of past events differently, without some of these interpretations being necessarily contradictory.

7. By Way of Epilogue: Our Conception of History and Some Recent Developments in It

In this last section I would like to demonstrate that the extensional and realistic ontology of historical study, suggested in this paper, is also in agreement with the developments in history in the last eighty years.

Similarly to many other philosophical disciplines, philosophy of history of the late nineteenth century was revolutionary in intention. This revolution was connected, above all, with the name of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey who, in the 1880s, embraced a program which had as an ideal the most rapidly progressing discipline of the time: psychology. Above all, Dilthey insisted that the objects of science and history are qualitatively different. In particular, he claimed that the subject-matter of history, as well as of other humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), is human life, and that the stream of human life consists of experiences which have *meaning* and *value*. In contrast, the subject-matter of science is the “brute facts” which do not refer to these two concepts.

The point is that “we relate to life, both our own and that of the other persons, with understanding.”⁵² That is why human studies should use an idiosyncratic method: the method of empathy towards the actors on the historical stage. Scholars, who follow this method, try to reach the mental content—the idea, the feeling—manifested in the historical facts; to enter—in a thought experiment—the mind of the historical agent.⁵³ A remote follower of Dilthey, R. G. Collingwood, said later: “History did not mean knowing what events followed what. It meant getting inside other people's heads, looking at their situation through their eyes, and thinking for yourself whether the way in which they tackled it was the right way.”⁵⁴ In other words, the task of the historian is to discover and reconstruct the thoughts and intentions (the mental contents) of the agents on the historical stage—and this is a rather intricate task.

By way of commentary on this point, I would like to note that programs like that of Dilthey–

Collingwood were reactions to the domination of the idealistic philosophy of history (of Hegel, in particular) set out by scholars like Leopold von Ranke and J. G. Droysen, which placed an emphasis on seeking “general truths” (laws) in history. The philosophy of history of Dilthey–Collingwood can be seen as an attempt to substantiate a new method in this discipline which reveals new layers of past events. Unfortunately, Dilthey and Collingwood used for this purpose methods of another discipline—that of psychology, which eventually turned out to be unsatisfactory for history.

A really new history was born only when a new, objective method was introduced in it. Here I have in mind above all the movement set out by some French historians, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre among them, grouped around the journal *Annales*, which was started in 1929. This *nouvelle histoire* movement didn’t focus on political events of the past only; and when it does, then not only on the big structures which shape them—governments, wars, states,—but also on the “little” past facts of *la vie quotidienne*. Besides political events, it also investigated geographical structures, economic conjunctures and small-scaled social groups. Typically, it places an accent on investigating the mentality of the agents in history and on their worldview.

The manifesto of the *nouvelle histoire* group is considered to be Marc Bloch’s book *Les Rois thaumaturges*.⁵⁵ In contrast to the grand narratives of the conventional history in the hey-day of the nineteenth century, which had the ambition of tracking down the “true panorama” of the respective epoch, Bloch’s history started as an investigation of a small-scale fact: of the fact that the French Royalty of the eleventh century legitimated their power through an alleged ability to magically cure their subjects. In an attempt to explain this fact, Bloch produced a fresh reconstruction of the social order in France of this period. His new picture of the past was based not only on analyzing the economic, juristic, or military power of the ruling class, but also on investigating the manipulation of the convictions and beliefs of the subjects by the royals.

The effect of this new approach to history can be summarized as a radical widening of the subject-matter of the discipline by the opening of new layers and levels in it, thereby disclosing new chunks of past life.⁵⁶ It was in this way that history as academic discipline was revolutionized—not by following Dilthey’s project for empathizing history, but by doing piecemeal investigations of well-known periods of social history, and revealing fresh perspectives in it. The dream of a general *passé partout* to the specific historical themes was abandoned in favor of an extensive investigation of real historical objects, of a different caliber and level.

I hope this paper has shown that these new developments in history can be best clarified in terms of the extensive, mesocosmological ontology of history laid out in it. Indeed, this kind of ontology substantiated a wide variety of ontological levels (past events, clusters of events) which deserve academic study. That is exactly what the *nouvelle histoire* school did.

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NOTES

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2. Cf. the motto to this paper.

3. New arguments for the scientific character of history are to be also found in Tucker 2004.

4. The term *mesocosm* as denoting the social world was recently introduced by Barry Smith as “the ecological niche of the living creature man.” (Smith 1998, p. 527)

5. Similar intuition is also expressed in Popper 1957, p. 137. Popper, however, speaks only of microcosm and macrocosm.

6. See Wittgenstein 1922. This interpretation was developed in Milkov 1999, 2001, 2002.

7. This conception can be put in Wittgenstein’s Tractarian terms so: “If a thing *can* occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself.” (2.012)

8. See Milkov 2002.

9. About science as making models see Morgan and Morrison 1999.

10. A paradigm example of such construction is the model made in a Paris court which depicted a car-accident which suggested to Wittgenstein his picture theory of language. Hence, it is not a surprise that natural languages can be seen in the same way: its sentences can be seen as models which can be compared with reality, thus being rendered true or false. (See Milkov 2001)

11. A term suggested in Schatzki 1996. It came to pick out what is independent from the deep-levelled, value-laden parts of social life which can scarcely be a subject of academic inquiry.

12. A concept also used by the later Wittgenstein.

13. Berlin 1978, p. 74.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

15. This is so not only in history. In science too we regularly advance theories which do not deliver the facts as they really occur; these theories, however, are often most illuminating. (Cf. Cartwright 1983)

16. To paraphrase Wittgenstein (as quoted in n. 7), this pre-established harmony is, in turn, based on the assumption that “if a social event *can* occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the event itself.”

17. In § 7 I shall relate the philosophy of history presented in this paper to the developments in history in the last 80 years.

18. Including mental events, i.e. events of agents’ mentality.

19. Of course, not all of them are objective—some perspectives are simply false; that is, they are

based on badly done investigations or conjectures.

20. This point is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 4.002: "Man possesses the capacity of constructing languages, in which every sense can be expressed, without having an idea how and what each word means—just as one speaks without knowing how the single sounds are produced.

Colloquial language is a part of the human organism and is not less complicated than it. From it it is humanly impossible to gather immediately the logical of language."

21. See for example Norton 2003.

22. See Ryle 1949, pp. 117 f..

23. In fact, Ryle's claim here is a variant of causal agnosticism, which we already discussed in the form it was expressed by L. N. Tolstoy in § 3.

24. According to Dray, the historian does not speak about causes. He only "says that from the set of factors specified, a result of this kind could reasonably be predicted." (Dray 1957, p. 39)

25. William Dray lists six variants of perspectivism (see Dray 1989, pp. 66–71).

26. See Walsh 1951, p. 95.

27. The German neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert advanced more than hundred years ago the "principle of value-referring", according to which while natural sciences aim at articulating general laws, historical investigations refer to values. (See Rickert 1899, p. 85) Rickert's conclusion was that this explains why humanities "are believed to be subjective" and so radically different from natural sciences.

28. See Popper 1957, pp. 150 f.

29. The predicate "correct" signals points of view which do not rest on facts which are false.

30. See Wisdom 1953, pp. 112 ff.

31. According to Norman Graebner, too, the conceptual revisions in history took place "less by calling upon hitherto unknown or unconsidered evidence than by reinterpreting what he takes virtually all historians of the period and most of their readers to know." (Dray, p. 93)

32. See Hobsbawm 1995.

33. We have already mentioned that Popper had a similar view.

34. Some of them refer—misleadingly—to Wittgenstein for support of this point. See e.g. Lyotard 1984.

35. For a similar view see Bambrough 1978.

36. See Spengler 1918–22.

37. As described in §3.
38. Nipperdey 1986, p. 276.
39. See Haller 1923.
40. See Dirlmeier 1995.
41. Bubner 1984, pp. 160–1, see also p. 158. This argument, in fact, repeats the already discussed (in §4) point of William Dray that the agents act for reasons.
42. See Milkov 2006.
43. On ontological dependence see Lowe 2005.
44. The fact that “the cat is on the mat” will surely not fall into the spotlight of whichever historian and so would not be accepted as determining other historical facts.
45. Popper 1952, ii, p. 262.
46. White 1963, p. 4.
47. A thesis developed in Wehler 1987–95.
48. I use “sense” here in Frege’s sense.
49. Walsh 1951, p. 59.
50. Ibid., p. 61.
51. Ibid., p. 62.
52. Dilthey 1910, p. 196.
53. In more recent times, this conception was revived by Edward Said (see Said 1978), which complained the lack of understanding of historical events and agents, demonstrated by the Western scholars of the Middle East.
54. Collingwood 1944, p. 43.
55. See Bloch 1924.
56. See Campbell, p. 190.

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