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THE LIMITS OF HISTORY: AN EXCHANGE

What really happened in the past? And can we know it? These questions still haunt us, despite our post-Rankean sophistication about historical epistemology. Last year the University of Chicago Press published Constantin Fasolt's *The Limits of History*, an important contribution to the literature on the origins of historical consciousness and the limits of historical knowledge. It is a demanding book that confronts historians "with the

metaphysical implications of their own practice." Fasolt maintains that historians have sufficient tools to produce "adequate representations of the past" without resorting to the dead end of "historical metaphysics." We asked Allan Megill and Gabrielle Spiegel to engage Fasolt's argument. Fasolt begins the exchange with a synopsis of his book and concludes with a rejoinder.

THE LIMITS OF HISTORY IN BRIEF*

Constantin Fasolt

The purpose of this essay is to state in brief what I have written at much greater length in *The Limits of History*. I would prefer you read my book. Yet the book is long, and life is short. And it would neither be honest nor polite not to acknowledge the pleasure this author takes in being given another venue for his ideas. Moreover, authors generally like to hear informed responses of the sort this essay is intended to provoke, and readers have a right to ask the author just what he had in mind.

Let me divide my answer to that question in two parts. First, I will present the main points I tried to make in *The Limits of History*. Then I will explain the method I used to get those points across. First *what*; then *how*.

What?

The Limits of History deals with history in the sense of a certain kind of knowledge—knowledge of the past—as well as the techniques by which such knowledge can be gained and the activities required to that end. It makes three basic points. First, history is not as innocent as it appears to be. It is not merely a form of understanding, but also a form of self-assertion. As such, it is tantamount to taking sides and inseparable from political activity, at least political activity of a certain kind. Second, history's most important function—the function that makes it inseparable from political activity—is to remove the possibility of doubt from certain

elementary assumptions that tell us who we are, what we can do, and what the world is like. The knowledge of the past that history provides is merely a means toward that end. Third, ever since the purpose of history came to be identified with the pursuit of knowledge of the past as such—Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—the means and ends of history have been confused. That has cast growing doubt on both. As a result, the ability of history to furnish adequate knowledge of the past as well as its ability to remove the possibility of doubt from certain elementary assumptions have been impaired. Let me take up each point in turn.

First, we tend to think of history as nothing other than a form of knowledge. The value of that knowledge is debated among humanists, historians, philosophers, social scientists, natural scientists, and other kinds of people. Some think it is essential to the survival of civilized society; others, that it is a kind of unnecessary frill. But there seems no dispute at all that history is harmless in itself. Harmful are only the lack of history, the misrepresentation of the past, the ignorance and lies that history is intended to correct. Everyone agrees that lies about the past can be the source of grave injustices to living human beings and to their memories. Historians spend their lives in libraries and archives in order to prevent that sort of harm. They lie awake at night worrying if they have missed important evidence or misinterpreted its meaning. But so far as I can tell the sleep of historians is never once disturbed by the possibility that they might get their history right. In that regard the conscience of history is completely clean.

This seeming innocence of history is probably its most seductive quality. It allows historians and their readers to go about the business of gathering knowledge of the past without having to ask themselves whether their business may not in some important way involve them in a cause they might not like at all if they knew better what it was. History calms the mind. It has a soothing function. It issues safe-conducts to passengers through time by drawing a firm line between the present and the past: that was then, and this is now. What was then is past—dead and gone. It happened, that much is true. But now it can no longer pose a threat, nor can it help in any way. The present and the future may worry or excite us, as the case may be. The past does not, except to the extent that we have not yet understood it properly. It lies still, just waiting to be known. Its stillness gives us the confidence we need in order to confront the future and make our fortunes and ourselves. Precisely because it turns attention away from here and now toward the stillness of that past, history assures us that we are free and independent agents with the ability to shape our fate, the obligation to act on that ability, and responsibility for the consequences.

History thus is not innocent at all. It is more than a form of knowledge. It is a form of political activity. It upholds a certain view of order and is effectively designed to defeat alternatives that could be taken up in lieu of history. Take, for example, providence. Providence teaches that everything happens by God's design. God is the only agent. Even the Devil is but God's instrument. When human beings act, their actions are the battleground on which a cosmic drama can unfold.

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That view conflicts with history. In history people act, not God. History leaves no room for providence, except as a belief that certain people used to hold and other people hold today. History cannot allow providence to enter into its own array of explanations without turning from a kind of knowledge into a kind of religious faith. History must hold that people who believe in providence deceive themselves about what really happens; what really happens is that they project their actions on some imagined deity and thereby, perhaps unwittingly, absolve themselves from a responsibility that is essentially their own.

Another alternative is custom. If providence displaces agency from individuals to God and the Devil, custom replaces agency with imitation. Agents who act from custom do not really act at all. They imitate. They follow customs not of their own design. They bear no individual responsibility, nor are they really free. They follow an example. Of course, they need to think about their actions, and sometimes they need to choose. But their thinking and their choices are contained within the limits established by the example of elders and superiors. Where custom is the ground of action, there is no room for individual liberty or for the line dividing the present from the past. Custom straddles the ages and suspends individual autonomy.

History can therefore not give room to custom any more than it can give to providence. It can treat custom only as an object of historical analysis. It can of course allow that human beings act by following examples. But it insists that in so doing human beings act. They exercise a choice. Perhaps they bow to elders, ancestors, and rulers. Perhaps they bow to social forces beyond their comprehension. But if they so desired, they could act differently. From the perspective of historians, examples set by superiors and elders do not in fact explain why someone acts in one way rather than another. Nor is custom immemorial at all. It was created by individuals, and it is constantly being recreated. If history were to endorse belief in custom, it would have to abandon original research and be content to copy the works of ancient masters. From a historical perspective, belief in custom, like the belief in providence, can only amount to a kind of false consciousness. The consciousness is false because it conceals the agent's agency.

I do not mean that history is nothing but a form of political activity. There is a difference

between studying documents and seeking power. Nor do I mean that history is political because historians are inevitably biased in favor of one or another party (which of course they are). Least of all I mean that history is political because it does, or ought to, deal with politics (which it by no means needs to do). I rather mean that the dispassionate study of the past as such, quite irrespective of the results to which research may lead, serves to confirm a certain view of what human beings and their relationships are like. To study history in order to produce an adequate account of the past is in and of itself to take a stand in favor of individual autonomy against all other possibilities, including, but by no means limited to, providence and custom. History as a form of political activity is at its peak not when it is biased or focused on politics but, quite the opposite, when it succeeds in eliminating every last trace of bias and extending its understanding to all areas of life.

Second, the most important function of history is to remove the possibility of doubt from the assumption that we are free and independent agents of the kind that I have just evoked. History fulfills that function by making an intellectual move that seems so obvious and simple as to permit no doubt about its justification. When asked to explain the meaning of some piece of writing from the past or, for that matter, some other kind of object (which is potentially to say, any piece of writing and any kind of object), history does not immediately answer, but insists that something else needs to be done before an answer can be given. What is it that must first be done? The piece of writing (or the object) must first be placed into the context of its time and place. Only thereafter is it possible to understand its meaning.

To make this claim is to assert a fundamental principle. The principle is that the materials in front of us are to be taken as sources of information about the past. They must be viewed as traces of something someone did or thought at some specific time and place that cannot be correctly understood unless the circumstances of that time and place are reconstructed first.

To say these things is at one and the same time to say that there exists a definite connection between the evidence in front of us and the past person whose circumstances we seek to determine. The link consists of that past person's responsibility for the evidence. That person's responsibility is the sole ground on which it is possible to use the materials in

front of us as sources of information about that person's time and place. If Paul could not be held responsible for having written the letter to the Romans—if the letter to the Romans were merely a copy of some ancient practice, merely the outcome of some chain of physical events, merely God's word to Man spoken through his apostle—the letter to the Romans would tell us nothing specific about the state of mind in which Paul wrote, much less about the circumstances of his time and place. If—the god of history forbid—we could not attribute the evidence to some specific agent acting at some specific time and place, our historical machine would spin its wheels in vain.

Thus, in the very act of demanding that sources must be interpreted according to the context of their time and place, history asserts that sources reflect the thought, action, or creation of some individual agent who can be held responsible for what he thought, did, or made at some definite point in past time and space, because he was at liberty to think, do, or make something else. History does not assert these things by saying they are so. It rather asserts them by engaging us in an activity that makes no sense unless their truth can be assumed. It limits our imagination to a point at which alternatives can be ruled out by definition, as opposed to ruling them out by reason or experience. Ruling out such alternatives is history's most important function. The knowledge history draws from the analysis of evidence in terms of time and place is merely a byproduct picked up along the way, a necessary means without which history could not achieve its ends.

Thus history removes the possibility of doubt from the belief in individual liberty by something like a combination of ritual and taboo. The taboo consists of the prohibition on anachronism. What the taboo prohibits is any form of understanding that is not mediated by historical considerations. The ritual consists of the turn to the sources—*ad fontes*, as the humanists once used to say—in order to ascertain the context from which a mediated understanding is to be obtained. Each time that turn is made, someone is being held responsible. Each time someone is held responsible, the liberty of individual agents is reaffirmed. The ritual is constitutive of history. The knowledge to be expected from the performance of the ritual is not. That is the reason why the perpetual failure of historians to achieve an adequate representation of the past amounts to no valid argument against the

utility of history at all. It rather constitutes an eminently useful spur to resume the search for knowledge about the past, repeat the ritual, and thereby reaffirm the principles that history is consecrated to uphold.

Professional historians accordingly resemble priests who minister in the religion that governs the modern world. They are experts trained in practicing a sacred art. They know how to draw liberty from reading ancient texts as monks once drew salvation from reading Holy Scripture. As monks looked forward to the life to come, historians look forward to adequate knowledge of the past. By writing well-researched histories, they teach their reading flock how to maintain the faith, and they administer the sacrament of penance before the altar of liberty by taking confession from the past and granting absolution to the future. They exercise the care of souls for people who have grown unable or unwilling to follow providence or custom.

Third, ever since the purpose of history was identified with the pursuit of knowledge, the ends and means of history have been confused. That has cast growing doubt on both. In early modern times, history was better placed. By “early modern times” I mean the period from, roughly speaking, the conflict between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip IV in the early 14th century down to the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in the early 19th century. What gives unity to this long stretch of time from the perspective adopted here is that it witnessed a protracted battle between two hostile parties. One party thought anachronism was quite right; the other party thought that it was wrong. The former was led by popes and emperors who claimed the right to rule the universe. The latter was led by princes, humanists, and reformers who advocated sovereignty for states (monarchical no less than republican) and moral autonomy for individuals acting from principles of conscience (subjects no less than citizens). The former rested their case on anachronistic interpretations of the Bible, Roman law, and canon law. They saw themselves as rulers of one and the same Roman Empire that had been founded by Emperor Augustus at the

birth of Christ—the last of four world monarchies, which would not end until the end of time. The latter rested their case on historical interpretations of the same documents—the Bible, Roman law, and canon law—and they replaced the history of four world monarchies with the familiar succession of three great periods: antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the revival of ancient arts, politics, and faith with

dead and gone. Alciati, Budé, and Cujas turned Roman law into a subject of historical analysis. And Hermann Conring reduced the right of the Roman emperor to rule the world to historical absurdity. The Bible was never historicized to the same degree as Roman law, and the papacy is still alive and well. But even so it has long since become impossible to quote a verse from Scripture about two swords (Luke 22:38) as proof for theories of papal supremacy. By the middle of the 17th century history had done a lot of work. The papacy’s annulment of the Peace of Westphalia could safely be ignored, and not much later the Holy Roman Empire fell to Napoleon.

Throughout early modern times the difference between the knowledge that history produces and the purpose that it serves was reasonably clear. That changed as soon as the historical perspective won the game. Once universal hierarchy had been eliminated from the range of politically legitimate possibilities, the meaning of history was severed from the context in which it had arisen and identified with the pursuit of knowledge of the past as such—*Ranke’s wie es eigentlich gewesen*. As a result history entered a vicious cycle. Knowledge of the past began to grow by leaps and bounds. It has not yet stopped growing. But since that knowledge was isolated from the context in which it was taking shape, it was disabled from preventing doubts about the assumptions on whose truth its meaning rested. Such doubts immediately gained strength.

They were particularly clearly stated by critics on the Left (Marx) and Right (Nietzsche) who were not historians themselves and therefore better placed to recognize that history was losing meaning. Historians responded by improving their knowledge of the past—only to find their knowledge perpetually failing to catch up with their doubts. By now, those doubts have entered so deeply into the study of the past itself that historians can hardly afford not to attend to them directly.

The condition in which history has found itself since Ranke may therefore be described as a combination of escalation and polarization. By escalation I mean the growth in the speed and intensity with which historical knowledge is being produced and destroyed



Hermann Conring, 1606-1681. Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

which the modern world announced its beginnings in Renaissance and Reformation.

During those centuries, history served as a weapon against a certain form of government. Marsiglio of Padua used it precociously in order to deny that the New Testament supported papal primacy. Lorenzo Valla used it to prove that the decretals collected by Saint Isidore and the Donation of Constantine were forgeries. John Colet pointed out that Saint Paul’s injunction to obey the powers that be for conscience’s sake was merely meant to reassure the Roman emperor that Christians posed no threat to his authority. Erasmus drew attention to the fact that *ecclesia* does not mean “church” but “congregation.” Luther pronounced the Roman Empire

in successive corrections to the established picture. The cycle is familiar. It started in the 19th century with the inclusion of the Middle Ages among the subjects worthy of sympathetic study (as opposed to the critical obloquy the Middle Ages had suffered from humanists, reformers, and enlightened *philosophes*), continued with the turn to social and economic history (admirably modeled by the *Annalists*), then extended the reach of history to the whole world, and has most recently resulted in histories doing better justice to women and sexual minorities. Each new departure followed the same basic pattern; each was intended to achieve a more adequate representation of the past; none satisfied the underlying need; and all were therefore superseded in their turn.

In this regard the turn to medieval history is paradigmatic. Given history's origin in the great early modern war on medieval forms of order, the turn to the Middle Ages was not only the first and, in a sense, the greatest correction to our knowledge of the past historians could possibly have made, but also the most spectacular to fail in its purpose. The boundary dividing medieval from modern history and the strange ghetto to which it continues to confine medievalists—deprived of full recognition in some ways, specially privileged in others—are an abiding scandal in a profession seeking to comprehend the past without discrimination, and a haunting reminder that medieval history may be impossible to fold into plain history without abolishing the conditions to which historians owe their existence.

By polarization I mean the divorce of theory from practice and the resulting divisions in the profession. In its heyday, history was theory: a theory of the past arising directly from the practice of examining the evidence in order to achieve a knowledge adequate, not to the past, but to the purpose of undermining the foundations of an eminently present form of political authority. Practice and theory were harnessed to one and the same goal. No further theory was needed. As soon as the purpose of history was confined to achieving adequate knowledge of the past, practice and theory began to go their separate ways.

Theory passed out of history into social science and the philosophy of language, and practice took on a life of its own. The result is an ongoing series of dysfunctional debates. Those on the Right insist that there is nothing wrong with the practice, but only with our failure to live up to the standards set by the historians who came before. Those on the Left conclude that history is fodder for social science or, since the linguistic turn, nothing but the kaleidoscopic play of signs in self-referential systems that never make contact with reality. Meanwhile those who keep walking

past, the whole past, and nothing but the past. Historians are divided over the question of whether or not such knowledge can be attained. But they are certain that it should. That certainty puts them at odds with themselves. On one hand, they insist that the meaning of all documents depends upon the (changing) context in which those texts are written. On the other hand, they insist that the meaning of the books they write depends entirely upon their (timeless) adequacy to the past. They make an exception for themselves. That can have only one effect: to reproduce

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the battle that once pitted historically minded humanists against defenders of political anachronism (as tragedy) within the study of history itself, where it now pits defenders of the text against proponents of theory (as farce). That is not

on the straight and narrow path toward the truth that history can offer are forced to assert the very thing that they deny. Steven Shapin captures it perfectly in the opening sentence of *The Scientific Revolution*: "There was no such thing as the Scientific Revolution, and this is a book about it." The candor, good cheer, and unflinching sense of professional responsibility embodied in that sentence do honor to its author. But they can scarcely alleviate the predicament of a profession forced to choose between knowledge and meaning.

The trouble history faces today does therefore not consist of the excessive specialization in research so commonly singled out for criticism. It may well be true that we know more and more about less and less. But that truth goes to the meaning of our knowledge, and not to its extent. A good case might even be made that our knowledge, so far from being too specialized, is not specialized enough. It was nothing if not specialized research that allowed Erasmus to insist that *ecclesia* meant congregation, and Valla to prove that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery. Nor does it hit the mark to claim that standards are declining. By any measure I can trust, the standards by which history is measured are just as high today as they have been at any time before, and possibly much higher.

The trouble rather stems from the enduring strength of the conviction that history ought to result in adequate knowledge of the

necessarily to be deplored. The escalation in the pursuit of knowledge and the polarization between theory and practice that are displacing history from the preeminent position it used to enjoy may rather deserve to be understood as the best means available to creatures who have no knowledge of the future with which to divest themselves of beliefs that are no longer in accord with the times.

It would be a sad misunderstanding to conclude that history has therefore lost its uses. At its best, history still functions as it should. But the cost of keeping history at its best is rising, and the pursuit of knowledge of the past no longer has the meaning that it used to have. To the extent that the turn to the sources serves only to achieve more knowledge of the past, it has been severed from the cause it was once meant to serve. To the extent it has been severed from that cause, it has lost meaning. The time for the great triumph that history celebrated in the 19th century is past. What used to be a sacred ritual is now routine. History has run into a logical dead end from which it is unlikely to extricate itself without a reconsideration of its purpose more fundamental than can be carried out within the limits of the profession.

How?

What I have said so far is not particularly difficult to say. Admittedly it is far too

schematic not to require qualifications. But qualifications are easy to supply. The real difficulty (and the reason why I have made a schematic case) is how to get the point across. To put it in appropriately paradoxical terms, the argument demands that we suspend the same belief that it asserts we have. Precisely to the degree that history removes the possibility of doubt from the belief in individual autonomy and the requirement that we must place the evidence into the context of its time and place to understand its meaning, so must we reject the argument that history is a ritual from which those beliefs draw strength. If we are able to believe it, the argument is false. If it is true, it cannot be believed. Wittgenstein made just this point, I think, in writing, "One can mistrust one's own senses, but not one's own belief. If there were a verb meaning 'to believe falsely,' it would not have any significant first person present indicative."

That ruled out two ways in which I might otherwise have tried to make my point. One was to write a sort of history of historical writing or of historical consciousness. This has of course been done, and the results have often been superb. But even the best of these studies rely on the same assumptions on which history in general relies. They differ only in their choice of subject from other kinds of history. Instead of focusing on economy, politics, society, or war, they focus on what people thought and wrote about the past, the forms their writing took, the history of those forms, the various schools of historical thought, the literary devices they employed, the degree to which the people and their histories managed to live up to the standards they had established for themselves, and so on. Meanwhile the method continues to consist of placing certain pieces of evidence into the context of their time and place and ruling out certain alternatives that rest on different assumptions. That path was closed to me.

The other path was to examine history with the help of philosophy. That might have been more promising. But two distinct considerations stopped me from going in that direction. One was that I lacked the appropriate intellectual technology. I enjoyed reading philosophy and flattered myself that for an amateur I knew it reasonably well. But I did not practice philosophy as my profession and did not believe it would be wise for me to try without the proper training. That was a purely practical consideration. The other consideration turned on a point of principle. It seems to me that history and philosophy are

not enemies at all, but rather allies in the same logical cause, maintaining, with different means and from different points of view, the same basic understanding of what the world is really like. I cannot possibly be sure that this is so. But I could find no way toward a form of philosophical analysis that would not either fail to challenge the ritual in question or seem to call for a return to the alternatives that history had displaced (universal empire, divine providence, custom). That would have been unbelievable at best, and completely illegitimate at worst. The path through philosophy therefore seemed blocked to me as well.

The method I chose instead was to impersonate a historian. The best way to reveal the assumptions that lie beneath the study of the past, I thought, was simply to put them into practice, not for the sake of adding to our knowledge, but rather for the sake of pushing them to their limits. At those limits, so I hoped, it would become apparent that the pursuit of knowledge of the past serves to maintain a certain form of order and to eliminate potential rivals from the field.

Impersonating a historian was not particularly difficult for me. I had been trained in history and had been practicing it in the academy for quite some time. As a matter of principle, I could have chosen any subject. As a matter of practice, I chose a subject from the history of early modern political thought: the German physician and historian Hermann Conring (1606-1681).

There were two different reasons for that choice. First, I knew enough about early modern political thought to have a professionally informed opinion on what needed to be done about its history in order to arrive at the more adequate understanding of the past that is the official goal of my profession. Second, Conring was instrumental in the turn from anachronistic universalism to historical consciousness. If he is still remembered for anything at all, it is his lucid demonstration that Roman law derived its validity in Germany, not from any supposedly universal rights of the Roman emperor, but from the fact that German students went to Italy to study law and, when they returned, practiced the law that they had studied there.

From the perspective of the argument I wanted to make, Conring combined two equally important qualities. On the one hand, he was fully invested in the historical enterprise that had got started in the later Middle Ages. He was as firmly convinced as any one

of us could be that if you want to understand the meaning of a text, you must first place it into the context of its time and place. That makes him similar to us. On the other hand, he was fully aware of the political significance this knowledge had. He was aware of it because he needed it in order to cut down the universal aspirations of emperors like Ferdinand II, whose effects he witnessed during the Thirty Years War. He did write history (the history of the Roman Empire from antiquity to the present). But the meaning of that history did not turn on its (severely limited) adequacy to the past. The meaning rather turned on the degree to which that history permitted Conring to deny universality to Roman law and to affirm the liberty of territorial states and individual people acting according to the circumstances of their time and place. That made him different from historians today. A study of Hermann Conring, I believed, would therefore make it relatively easy to show that the meaning of history depends upon the context in which historians themselves are working, and how that meaning can be eroded by the search for adequate knowledge of the past.

I state the general argument in Chapters One of *The Limits of History*. Chapter Two is a straightforward account of Conring's life and works. It ends with the conclusion that there remains much more to be learned about what Hermann Conring thought.

Chapter Three is devoted to the close analysis of a piece of evidence in the context of its time and place. It focuses on Conring's *New Discourse on the Roman-German Emperor*. Since the *New Discourse* began as a dissertation that Conring supervised and was then published in a pirated edition, it offered much latitude for me to exercise the craft of the historian on many of the technical difficulties involved in attributing a certain piece of evidence to a certain author and coming to firm conclusions about that author's responsibility. When everything was said and done, it turned out to be impossible to describe what Conring really thought in terms resembling the sort of thing to which historians commonly refer as an "idea" or an "intention."

Chapter Four contrasts two pieces of evidence from different times and places in order to determine what had changed. One is the *New Discourse on the Roman-German Emperor*; the other is the account of the Roman emperor's right to rule the world that Bartolus of Sassoferrato had given in the 14th

century. Since Bartolus's writings are difficult and subject to notoriously conflicting interpretations, here too there was much latitude for putting the tools of history to work. The upshot was that Conring's argument missed the point that Bartolus had made, begged the question, and changed the subject under investigation. No historical development could be identified that would explain the change in question. Chapter Five states conclusions.

QED

The point is not that historians are biased. The point is that studying history is in and of itself to take a stand in favor of a certain form of order. Taking that stand is to exclude by definition some other stands from the impartial presentation at which history ostensibly aims. To the extent that we identify with history, we are disqualified from seeing what it excludes, except perhaps indirectly, out of the corner of the eye I tried to open in *The Limits of History*. That may not come as much of a surprise. Surprising, to me at least, is only the self-confidence with which historians seem to believe that it is possible to take a stand on

history without excluding anything at all from comprehension.

In order to avoid confusion I would like to emphasize that I share none of the gloom arising from the view that language is a self-referential system, such that its signs do not allow us to gain access to reality itself, but only to linguistically constructed reality. The gloom may be a fair price to pay for those who are convinced that knowledge does not qualify as real unless it is as clear and distinct as Descartes maintained it ought to be. But I do not believe that it is tenable for creatures who rely on language for their knowledge to distinguish between linguistically constructed knowledge and knowledge of "real" reality, even if the distinction is made only to rule out the possibility of knowing "real" reality. I could not agree more that our knowledge is linguistically constructed. But far from making it unreal, that is what makes it knowledge. As far as I can tell, we do know what is real, and we can tell what happened. We just never know it as clearly as we would like. Precisely because it is real, our knowledge is fuzzy, incomplete, and changing. I do not see that anything is wrong with that. Taking no stand at all is certainly not an option.

Thucydides is famous for having said that in writing the history of the Peloponnesian War he wanted to produce a possession for all time. If by "possession for all time" he meant (which I do not believe he did) a kind of knowledge that can be carried from one context to another without requiring any change at all, he would have been wrong. The reality we perceive is partially the product of our knowledge. The knowledge of the past that we can have is therefore just as fleeting as the past we study—no more, no less. That is no counsel of despair, but merely an acknowledgment that all things change.

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A DANGEROUS FORM OF CRITICISM

Allan Megill

Constantin Fasolt's *The Limits of History* is a remarkable book. On one level it is about Hermann Conring, who, although he was one of the most prominent scholars in 17th-century Lower Saxony, has hardly been heard of since. Conring was not up to the level of, say, Leibniz and Hobbes, both of whom were writers of such depth and imagination that subsequent philosophers have turned to them again and again for stimulus in thinking about ontology and politics. Were *The Limits of History* only about Conring, few people would find it worth reading. But Fasolt has had the wit to go beyond the book that he might have written—a rather pedantic and inconclusive study of a now obscure thinker—and has instead

written a book of far broader significance, one that addresses historical understanding itself.

I say "wit" advisedly. There is a puckish and somewhat subversive intelligence at work in *The Limits of History*. It is also an elusive intelligence, and after a number of readings of this book I am still not entirely certain what Fasolt wants us to think. But this is perhaps part of his charm. One must read him warily. For example, in his brief and pithy Preface he tells us that "our" attitude toward the past "is governed by three principles": that "the past is gone forever"; that "to understand the meaning of a text, you must first put it in the context of its time and place"; and that "you cannot tell where you

are going unless you know where you are coming from" (ix). However, each of these "principles" is at most only half right, as Fasolt well knows but is coy about saying. True, the past is "gone" and is also, as Fasolt adds, finished and immutable; but as Arthur Danto taught us many years ago, we inevitably engage in its "retroactive realignment."¹ True, to understand the meaning of a text for people in its time and place, one needs to study its relation to that past context; but meanings are also, necessarily, meanings for us, now, and hence transcend past contexts. Finally, as for the claim that "you cannot tell where you are going unless you know where you are coming from," it is so glaringly unjustified in its implied attribution of a

knowable future direction to history that one finds it surprising that readers do not collapse with laughter in reading it.

One suspects that Fasolt's coyness about informing of us of the inadequacy of these so-called principles is part of a considered rhetorical strategy on his part. The principles are commonplace truisms of the historical profession, and were he to attack them directly he might well find himself with no audience of historians (and no other audience either). In fact, his book reads like an attempt to flatter the pride of historians while cunningly criticizing them. Perhaps he advances his criticisms indirectly out of the thought that one of the best ways to transform readers is to give them space to discover for themselves what one might otherwise have simply told them. A lesson discovered is usually more effective than a lesson merely heard, especially when it goes against what one would prefer to hear.

Fasolt's book offers historians a founding myth that is both flattering and disturbing. According to the story, when Conring declared that for all practical purposes the Roman Empire was dead and gone, he helped to establish history as we professional historians know it. To say that the Roman Empire was dead was to posit a break between the present and the past—in this case, between the Middle Ages and “now,” but Conring's point can readily be generalized beyond the Middle Ages/modernity distinction. The separation of the “now” from the “then” led historians to “subject the past to critical examination,” an enterprise whose “irresponsibility” vis-à-vis the present they excused by making “claims to objectivity” (36). But Fasolt argues that history was more than just a technology for investigating the past. On the contrary, he suggests that history also freed human beings by releasing them from the trammels of the past. He claims that Conring reduced the Roman Empire to, at most, “a mere shadow of its former self” (112). But Fasolt's claim is broader than this: it is that historians *always* “turn the reality they seek to grasp into a shadow of itself” (229). In doing so, history shows itself to be “a form of self-assertion” (230). Indeed, Fasolt claims that the work of historians opened men's minds to the possibility of a sovereign politics, in which it is the activity of human beings that makes the world. In

short, historiography did much more than simply divide past from present.

It is a heroic story. I am also persuaded that it is a true story, so far as it goes. (I would only add that if our focus is on the temporal preconceptions of professional historiography, one needs to add to the break between present and past that Conring discerned another break between present and future that Barthold Niebuhr, Ranke, and other 19th-century historians observed in the French Revolution and Terror.) The rub is that historiography hardly lives up to the heroic origins Fasolt attributes to it. It is worth noting that two 20th-century historians, Lucien Febvre

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and Michel de Certeau, made exactly the argument that Fasolt makes, namely, that history separates past from present in an attempt to liberate present from past (others whom I do not know may well have made the same argument).² But in the hands of how many historians today is history “a dangerous form of knowledge” (to cite the title of Fasolt's first chapter)? Fasolt knows perfectly well that such a description hardly seems to suit most historians today. He goes out of his way to note that the Renaissance humanists, Conring's predecessors, did not see themselves as rebels at all, but rather as restorers of ancient truths (22). As for Conring's successors, Fasolt identifies a reversal that took place in the 19th century, when many historians turned to an enthusiastic rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, in contrast to Conring's attempt to bury the Middle Ages. As Fasolt puts it, the “business of history” was changed from “the creation and defense of a new order of the good” to “an unending process of self-critical revisions, of which the turn to the Middle Ages was merely the first in a long line that has not ended yet” (27). The voice of history, Fasolt holds, became, and still remains, either ironic or cynical; and whereas history began in an anti-authoritarian mode, it came to embody “the very authority it had so

valiantly sought to overturn” (27).

It seems to me that Fasolt has zeroed in on an important aspect of the historical discipline in its current state. No informed person can deny that history possesses a set of implicit and explicit rules and practices that, when they are correctly followed (an important proviso), offer an unparalleled means of avoiding error with respect to the past. But our possession of this remarkable intellectual technology too easily leads to complacency. Fasolt offers an antidote to this complacency, for he shows, by his study of Conring and his works, an instance of how the serious, attentive, thinking application of this technology yields not just historical knowledge but also, and perhaps more important, a knowledge of the limits of such knowledge.

“What could history be if not the study of evidence?” Fasolt asks (36). Some seem persuaded that this is too restrictive a pursuit, and are inclined to “call the whole thing off” (37). One option then becomes a “self-indulgent relativism” that would put history into the service of whatever good cause the historian is inclined, at the moment, to support; another option, “opportunistic revivals of tradition whose authenticity is belied by the facility with which they sacrifice history to popular demand” (37). Readers are invited, if they wish, to think of examples of these two options in present-day historical writing.

Although he does not say it, Fasolt's book suggests the need for a historical epistemology, that is, for a serious consideration of matters of evidence. The very word *evidence* advertises its own inadequacy, and the complexity of what it denotes, for in general there is hardly anything *less* evident than what it is that the evidence of history really shows. There is thus a need to attend to evidence, to attend to its limitations, and (in an explicitly speculative mode) to go beyond both. To be sure, this is not a sufficient condition for doing good history, but it is a necessary one.

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1. Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, including the integral text of *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), 168.

2. Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History and*

Other Essays, ed. P. Burke, trans. K. Folca (Harper and Row, 1973), 41: "history is a way of organizing the past so that it does not weigh too heavily on the shoulders of men." See also Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (Columbia University Press, 1988), xxv-

xxvi, 46-47, 85, 99-102, 218-19, and *passim*. Fasolt cites neither predecessor, and to all appearances arrived at his conclusions independently of them.

RESPONSE TO CONSTANTIN FASOLT'S *LIMITS OF HISTORY*

Gabrielle M. Spiegel

As I read it, *The Limits of History* presents itself as a profoundly moral intervention into the question of what it is historians do—the illocutionary acts they undertake that constitute the writing of history—and the moral posture, or absence thereof, with which they conduct themselves. At the moral center of the book lies a concern with responsibility, a concern that is directed as much at us, the contemporary practitioners of a kind of history first generated by the humanists, as at the humanists and their successors in the Enlightenment, for whom Hermann Conring stands as an exemplary case study. The principal finding of the book is the need to take personal responsibility for the activity we call history. Indeed, a primary thesis of *The Limits of History* is that our current practice is haunted by moral compromises made centuries ago and long since forgotten.

The book's central argument is that our attitude to the past remains governed by a view of history first born in the humanists' struggle against the authority of medieval universalism—in both its papal and imperial guises—a view that matured during the Enlightenment and was finally objectified in the 19th century with the rise of historicism and positivism. In Fasolt's opinion, the moral core of history derives from its irreducibly political character, political in the sense that, in challenging the divine authority of pope and emperor, the humanists crafted a vision of history that engendered nothing less than a new kind of humanity, entailing a belief in the free, autonomous subject in charge of his or her own self with the power to affect the fate of others. No longer dependent on the authority of the past incarnated in God's representa-

tives on Earth (pope and emperor), human beings were seen as free and independent agents of their own destiny. As a result, whatever history can or cannot do—whatever its limits, that is—it can never, Fasolt contends, "absolve human beings from the responsibilities of freedom," for "history does nothing more effectively than to assert that liberty that is a necessary precondition for responsibility—and politics" (xvii). The politics of history are, therefore, the politics of freedom and responsibility.

The embedded political character of history, in turn, derives from its technological operations, which consist in submitting the past to historical investigation, an act that at the same time pronounces the past "dead"—absent and immutable—and liberates humanity from its bondage to authority, creating the possibility of an unlimited and illimitable future by freeing humanity from time itself. In that sense, the very practice of history forms part of the history of mankind's liberty. History underwrites the freedom of the self that is engaged in its examination and thus, Fasolt seems to argue, is critical for our survival "as the human beings that we have made of ourselves." I confess that my most outraged marginalia were devoted to these sections of the book, since they suggest an understanding of history in the 20th century (and especially its latter half) that I find incomprehensible. Surely this was a time when freedom and autonomy, personal responsibility and dissent from authoritarian powers were, in many parts of the world (including Europe), conspicuous by their absence and, indeed, their impossibility. I say he "seems" to argue, because, in the end, it is precisely this idealized vision of history and

its operation that Fasolt wishes to *limit*, thus relieving us of our bondage to time, though not of our responsibility for history.

One reason for so limiting history, he argues, is that we have forgotten the original political gesture that lay at the heart of the humanists' challenge to authority, a challenge that, in subsequent ages, was further compromised by the separation of public from private (hence political from moral), and by the inability of all but the bravest—Luther, Machiavelli, Hobbes—to speak truth to power. Ever since the Renaissance, Fasolt argues, the "fear of authority contaminated history with a subliminal degree of dishonesty that has never been altogether shed" (25), and history has become a discourse, as Roland Barthes long ago argued, for which no one takes responsibility, relying instead, on a "referential illusion": the impression that the referent—the past, history, event—is speaking for itself. History thus "became objective in a novel sense."

But historical self-consciousness, Fasolt argues, was "forced to pay a growing price for the lack of self-knowledge that first led it to victory" (27). The modern practice of history, Fasolt warns us, is haunted by a ghost in the machine of history, a ghost that he figures by borrowing from the German legend of the sleeping emperor, an emperor who seems to have been displaced into the past forever, transformed into an impotent and insubstantial figure, but survives nonetheless, and returns from that mountain as a new state of mind, the shadow cast over modernity. Under this shadow modern subjects conquered empires, brought civil war into the modern world, turned conscience into the enemy of sovereignty and history into the enemy of

nature. It inspired Napoleon, he says, to teach the world how to transform liberty, equality, and fraternity into reasons for imperial expansion, and in its specifically German form produced the “monstrous descent into madness that followed when Hitler managed by some black art to endow the shadow of the emperor with a real living body” (42). In the end, we need to liberate ourselves from both the ghost in the machine and the technology of history. And what this requires, Fasolt proclaims, is nothing less than a declaration of independence from historical consciousness itself.

Now this, I submit, is an odd conclusion to a book so centrally concerned with the practice of history and the putative benefits—all acknowledged—achieved by the humanists’ original “historical revolt” (16) against enchanted authorities. Since Fasolt avers that we are the product of that historical revolt, he surely cannot intend the abandonment of historical consciousness so much as an acknowledgment of the specific, paradigmatically modern logic that inhabits it. Or is this, indeed, a new kind of post-*histoire*? But even this suggestion is countered, finally, by his affirmation that, in the end, an “adequate understanding of the past is within reach” and that “[h]istory needs no improvement. It is as good as it has ever been and needs to be no better” (40). All that is necessary is that history’s limits be affirmed. And since those limits cannot be logically articulated (so goes the argument), they must be *experienced*.

It is unclear to me why “experience”—which in this case indicates the experience of reading—occupies such an unproblematic place in Fasolt’s thought, especially in the light of current attempts to theorize experience as a historiographical category. But let us take it at face value and ask if the “experience” of Conring’s thought such as proffered here actually leads us to apprehend that “one blurry image and two empty spaces” (221), or gaps in knowledge, by which Fasolt “modestly” sums up the fruits of his historiographical labors. My emphatic answer is no. Perhaps the “blurry image” is inevitable, given the gaps in our knowledge of a 17th-century thinker, although what Fasolt can and does know about Hermann Conring far exceeds anything I know about the authors I usually write about, most of whom are bibliographically grouped under the letter “A,”

among that most prolific of medieval authors, “Mr. Anonymous.”

The more serious question is whether we can know what Conring “really” thought by examining what he wrote. In pursuit of this question Fasolt productively exploits the differences between three texts—the *Exercise on the Roman German Emperor* of 1641, which was written as a thesis (under Conring’s supervision and with his approval in a university setting) by one of his students; its subsequent—unauthorized—publication in 1642 as the *New Discourse on the Roman-German Emperor* under Conring’s name (a publication he vehemently disavowed as his “primitive supposititious child” because it bound his name in public to radical ideas about the disappearance of the Roman Empire, despite the fact that the ideas

The more serious question is whether we can know what Conring “really” thought by examining what he wrote.

expressed precisely mirrored those of the earlier *Exercise* written under his supervision and, in all likelihood, accurately reflected the opinions he articulated in his university lectures). These two virtually identical texts stand in sharp contrast to the 1644 treatise entitled *The Roman Empire of the Germans*, in which Conring retreated from their conclusions by proclaiming the Roman German Empire alive and well, thereby issuing a public rebuttal to the usurpation of his name and prestige by the printers of the *New Discourse*. Fasolt concludes that the differences between the first two texts and the third “had nothing to do with Conring changing his mind and everything to do with wishing not to be held accountable for the contents of a piece of writing published against his will” (119). This, then, was not a denial of truth, but a disavowal of responsibility for *The New Discourse*, one that produces, we are told, a fatal uncertainty in us about what Conring “really” thought.

Leaving aside the larger question of whether or not we ever know what anyone really thought, Fasolt’s explanation for Conring’s retreat is so persuasive, so sensitive to the political context in which he was writing and to his overriding desire for peace in Germany that I feel that I understand

extremely well what Conring really thought and why he chose not to publicize it. Further, I am left with a degree of admiration for the gesture that led him to suppress his private views in the interests of what he perceived, mistakenly or not, to be the common good. As Fasolt presents him, Conring chose not to say what was merely politic, and “to that degree saved the command of conscience to tell the truth,” but “neither did he say simply what was true” (139-140).

Yet this “gap” between “true” thought and publicly acknowledged writing is no easier to accept than the first “blurred image.” If Conring vacillated, it was because he lived at a time of great uncertainty. (Luther, we are told, seems to have used up all the moral courage of the age.) Thus, the irreducible doubt at the heart of Conring’s thought reflects that of his time, and even represents “a doubt that is basic to humanity and ought to be basic to intellectual history as well.”

The second gap (or empty space) is of quite a different nature, and it is in relation to this question that I experience not the limits of history but an (admittedly) atavistic medievalist’s protest. In setting forth Conring’s critique of the claims made by the medieval jurist Bartolus of Sassoferrata for the right of the Roman emperor to rule the world, Fasolt claims that Conring did not offer a response to Bartolus, but rather “begged the question, missed the point, and changed the subject.” Thus, instead of grasping the nature of Conring’s accomplishment in answering Bartolus, what we witness is an encounter between two different conceptual systems, neither one of which is translatable into the other. The world of Bartolus’s thought, Fasolt asserts, is lost to us forever, and in understanding Conring we implicitly take his side, which is, in the end, ours, for we are heirs to the same disenchantment of the world that makes Bartolus so alien. Although in his synopsis of *The Limits of History* Fasolt acknowledges that the Middle Ages were included in “modern history” beginning in the 19th century, their sympathetic study was doomed to failure, and they have been ever since relegated to a “strange ghetto,” which, in his opinion, persists in depriving medieval historians of their full recognition as professional historians, because “medieval history is impossible to fold into plain history without abolishing the conditions to which histo-

rians owe their existence.” This is tantamount to arguing that medieval historians lack the autonomy, agency, and full liberty of modernity and would strike any medievalist as nonsensical, especially since it runs counter to Fasolt’s own insistence on contextualization. Our context, political and professional, is precisely that of our contemporary practitioners of history.

Moreover, in the light of this wholesale rejection of the possibility of “folding medieval history into plain history” (whatever the latter term might indicate) it must seem churlish to point out that Fasolt has given us a brilliant explanation of Bartolus’s thought. In Fasolt’s opinion, we cannot negotiate the gap between Bartolus and Conring except by “pure guessing” at the possible intervening connection, for Conring’s mode of argumentation depended on a break from the past so novel and thoroughgoing that the boundary dividing the Middle Ages from modernity refuses to yield to the most well-intentioned

efforts at reconciliation. History, we are told, is ill equipped to grasp this change, although why this should be so is never explained. In consequence, all attempts to bridge the gap between the Middle Ages and modernity are bound to fail, and medievalists are condemned, he claims, to “oscillate between irreverent incomprehension and reverent idealization—or lose their meaning” (228). I suspect that were Fasolt not so intent on tracing the “great divide” between the Middle Ages and modernity and not so committed to the question of origins, this dilemma could be avoided. A fetishizing of “origins”—of which medievalists are most routinely accused—creates that unbridgeable abyss between the conceptual worlds of the Middle Ages and modernity, and in the end simply reenacts the analytic gesture by which modernity originally defined itself against the Middle Ages. This is not a small point, since it has huge historiographical consequences for medieval studies, for which I would like

Fasolt to take responsibility.

In the light of Fasolt’s disinclination to consider poststructuralist/postmodern critiques of history, there is, I believe, a serious failure to acknowledge the degree to which those critiques address precisely the issues with which he is so centrally concerned. For he shares with poststructuralists the same rejection of history’s claims to objectivity, the same belief in the inability to stabilize meaning or grasp authentic authorial intentions, the same suspicion of claims to authority on the part of states, and the same interrogation of the roots of the modern self. In my view, Fasolt’s neglect of these affinities limits the force of his argument.

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RESPONSE TO ALLAN MEGILL AND GABRIELLE SPIEGEL

Constantin Fasolt

Allan Megill believes that in *The Limits of History* I sought to criticize “commonplace truisms of the historical profession,” but did not do so directly, because attacking them directly might well have left me “with no audience of historians (and no other audience either). In fact,” he says, my book “reads like an attempt to flatter the pride of historians while cunningly criticizing them.” The reason why I made that attempt, he speculates, is that “one of the best ways to transform readers is to give them space to discover for themselves what one might otherwise have simply told them. A lesson discovered is usually more effective than a lesson merely heard, especially when it goes against what one would prefer to hear.” He got the point exactly.

Gabrielle Spiegel regards “the need to take personal responsibility for the activity we call history” as “the principal finding of

the book.” In her view, “a primary thesis of *The Limits of History* is that our current practice is haunted by moral compromises made centuries ago and long since forgotten.” Those moral compromises have led historians to exaggerate what history can do, “and it is precisely this idealized vision of history and its operation that Fasolt wishes to *limit*, thus relieving us of our bondage to time, though not of our responsibility for history.” Her characterization is different from Megill’s. But it goes equally to the core of the argument I tried to make. I could not be more pleased to have been heard so clearly.

Megill also writes that “after a number of readings of this book I am still not entirely certain what Fasolt wants us to think.” And Spiegel concludes that “in the light of Fasolt’s disinclination to consider poststructuralist/postmodern critiques of history, there is, I believe, a serious failure to acknowledge

the degree to which those critiques address precisely the issues with which he is so centrally concerned.” Both have other criticisms to make, but these focused my attention.

Let me put my response like this: *The Limits of History* is an attempt to liberate history from the tyranny of metaphysics by confronting historians with the metaphysical implications of their own practice. Kant put metaphysics on the defensive long ago, and it may well have been left reeling under the onslaughts launched by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.¹ But metaphysics continues to exercise a far more powerful hold over our minds than we realize, and widespread rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, history still serves as one of its best preserved redoubts.

Given how many meanings can plausibly be given to the term *metaphysics*, I should explain what I believe it means.² Metaphysics

was invented by the ancient Greeks and is closely identified with the philosophy of Aristotle. Metaphysics is not interested in any of the things existing in the world. Those things it leaves to empirical examination. Metaphysics is focused on the question of what all things have in common. It rests on the assumption that we must go beyond appearances and grasp the reality beneath. What is a "thing"? What makes it "real"? What is "existence"? Metaphysicians are convinced that we can never gain *real* knowledge until we find the answers to those questions.

There have been two or three main versions of metaphysics since antiquity. For Aristotle the task of metaphysics was to understand the nature of being *qua* being. In that guise it is called ontology—the generalized study of all things, not as the specific things they are, but simply in their character as things, regardless of their kind. Thanks to the doubts of René Descartes, ontology was replaced with the philosophy of consciousness. The task of metaphysics became to explain how it is possible for us to know anything with certainty about the external world. What is a subject? What is an object? And how can a subject know an object? Most answers fell into one of two classes: empiricism and idealism. Empiricists maintained that subjects learn about objects from the impressions objects leave on subjects' senses. Idealists maintained that subjects and their ideas were all you needed to account for reality; perhaps there was no external world at all. Kant's transcendental critique made both Aristotelian and Cartesian metaphysics untenable. But it left room for things-in-themselves in theoretical philosophy and for free agents in practical philosophy. So far from removing the spell of metaphysics once and for all, it was immediately followed by German idealism, surely one of the most luxuriant flowers ever to have been planted in the metaphysician's garden. Even today the sweet scent of that flower continues to perfume the air of intelligent reflection.

Since antiquity, the pursuit of knowledge has thus been governed by the assumption that reality lies somehow hidden behind appearances. Whoever wanted real knowledge of the world—true knowledge, "scien-

tific" knowledge—was sworn to go behind appearances and look for subjects, objects, and universal truths of being in order to determine what *really* was the case. All other forms of knowledge paled into mere agglomerations of random observations.

This view of knowledge continues to rule supreme in history. Most obviously it rules in all attempts to produce an "adequate representation" of the past out of the evidence. Whether it is in the name of Ranke, Marx, or Collingwood, historians use evidence as a source of clues to the reality that lies beneath. They do not merely play a game of hide and seek. They base their whole existence on dividing the world into representation and reality, things seen and things unseen.

Since antiquity, the pursuit of knowledge has thus been governed by the assumption that reality lies somehow hidden behind appearances. Whoever wanted real knowledge of the world was sworn to go behind appearances.

But metaphysics also governs the minds of postmodern critics of history.³ Of course postmodern critics now deny conventional historians' claim that it is possible to know what really happened. But in the very act of denying that possibility, they assert the existence of the reality they claim cannot be known. They reinscribe the metaphysical interpretation of knowledge into their own critique. They deny that subjects can know objects. But they perpetuate the metaphysical distinction between the two. Hence they are left with half of metaphysics: subjects without objects, and representations without reality.

There are two reasons why metaphysics deserves to be expelled from history. One is that metaphysics leads historians into despair. Their task is neither to paint adequate pictures of the past nor to deny the possibility of doing so, but rather to make true statements about the past and thereby take their stand in the present moment. The other is that metaphysics leads historians to misconstrue their responsibility. Their responsibility is not to serve as high priests in the church of individual autonomy by practicing the rituals of accurate historical interpretation in order to secure the independence of the present from

the past (as I believe they tend to do), nor is it to fight the orthodox establishment in the name of impersonal forces or to profess the impossibility of truth. It rather is to listen to the obligations placed upon the present by the past and answer to them conscientiously.

Perhaps the reader is inclined to ask, "Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" In part I did not say so because I did not know how to say it. In part I did not say so because I had forgotten how thoroughly my thinking had been shaped by studying with Ernst Tugendhat in the mid-1970s, before I got distracted by studying history. Having reread his *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie* (Suhrkamp, 1976) and *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung: Sprachanalytische Interpretationen* (Suhrkamp, 1979) since *The Limits of History* was published, I can say, though only with the benefit of hindsight, that I could not have made my case had I not been convinced by Tugendhat's

lucid critique of the grand tradition of philosophy from Aristotle to German idealism, and the coherent uses to which he puts the insights of Aristotle, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.

Mostly, however, I did not say so because I knew it had been said before, and said more clearly and profoundly than I could ever hope to do. What would have been the point of saying it again? Heidegger and Wittgenstein had got it right. But still historians were undeterred, as though Heidegger and Wittgenstein had never said a word. They were hardly going to listen to me.

So I proceeded in the fashion that Megill identified. I did not attack the commonplace truisms of the historical profession directly. Instead I tried to show just what must follow if those truisms are taken as seriously as their standing in the profession demands. If you believe that historians ought to reconstruct what actually happened by studying the evidence, *then* you will end up in the dead ends of metaphysics. If you believe that historians ought to reconstruct what someone—Hermann Conring, for example—really thought, *then* you will chase forever after a product of your own metaphysical imagination. If you believe that historians ought to

reconstruct what really changed from one time to another, *then* you will find yourself falling into that logical gap between the ages, of which the distinction between the Middle Ages and modernity is one paradigmatic instance.

The Limits of History does therefore not deny the possibility of knowledge about the past at all. What it denies is merely the possibility of historical metaphysics. We *can* know what happened, and we can know what people thought. Indeed, I see no reason to deny that our knowledge of the past can be perfectly adequate. But I do not believe that we can know what *really* happened or know what someone *really* thought.

You may object that there is no important difference between "what happened" and "what *really* happened." I beg to differ. In principle it is, of course, conceivable that both could mean the same. But the principle is a distraction. The point is that in fact the difference casts a peculiar spell on our profession. Since Ranke that spell has compelled historians to challenge perfectly valid statements about the past by asking, "but is that what *really* happened?" Obsessed by the deceptive clarity of that question, historians have lost the ability to distinguish the pursuit of knowledge about the past from extending the "empire of metaphysics."⁴

Adding the word *really* is therefore not a harmless semantic gesture. It signals a certain frame of mind. It governs not just one or another aspect of the historical endeavor. It embodies a whole attitude to knowledge and reality. It turns the pursuit of knowledge about the past into a branch of metaphysics. It is a dangerous word, and it must be resisted.

Let me be more specific. Do you *really* know what I am thinking? I am afraid you don't. Why not? Because there is nothing in my mind that corresponds to what you seek to know. Does that mean that I am thinking nothing? Of course not. Does it mean you cannot understand what I am thinking? Not that either. Does it mean that understanding takes the form of a fusion of horizons, in which one subject sort of merges with another (Gadamer's view)? That is Cartesian metaphysics updated to incorporate historical advances made in the 19th century. What, then, does it mean? That thoughts do not consist of contents of the mind (as though the mind were a container) and that understanding consists neither of empathy nor of definitions. (Wittgenstein thought it consisted of the mastery of a certain technique.) The ques-

tion "what is he *really* thinking?" is a disguised attempt at definition. So is the question "what *really* happened?" Both questions confuse the search for knowledge with metaphysics. Historians who ask those questions deny themselves the possibility of answering them.

Megill points out that in my view "historians *always* 'turn the reality they seek to grasp into a shadow of itself.'" He is right. That is precisely what I claim; but only if by *historians* you mean people who seek to know what *really* happened. Such people, so far from seeking knowledge, are practicing metaphysics. It is an ancient habit. But even ancient habits can be changed. Perhaps one day historians will drop their metaphysical imaginations.

Megill also suggests that history is no longer dangerous. I disagree. True, history no longer threatens to overturn established forms of governance, as he and I believe it did in early modern Europe. But that does not mean that history has been defanged. It merely means that the danger has changed. The danger is that history leads us into a hall of mirrors in which left is right and right is wrong such that we can neither assert our liberty nor defend it from tyranny. Heidegger is a good case in point.⁵ The liberty that history made possible when it asserted individual responsibility against the authority of universal forms of governance has long since been transmuted into its opposite. Today, history wields individual responsibility as though it were a hammer with which to crush dissent, or else denies the possibility of truth as though truth were an evil weed to be eradicated from the mind.

What, then, is the alternative? My answer is that no alternative is needed. There already is a sense in which history is as good as it has always been or needs to be. That is the sense historians make so long as they can keep within the limits of their craft, posing questions about the past, and answering them to the best of their ability, without running off course into the rough of metaphysical debate about the nature of reality and the possibility of knowledge. The answers are no better and no worse than those that arise in any quest for understanding. In that sense history needs no improvement. All that is needed is to distinguish history from metaphysics.

Those are the reasons why I must differ from Spiegel on some important points. "In my view," she insists, "Fasolt's neglect of these affinities [with poststructuralist histori-

ans] limits the force of his argument." I think she misunderstood the argument. She believes that I share with poststructuralist historians "the same rejection of history's claims to objectivity, the same belief in the inability to stabilize meaning or grasp authentic authorial intentions, the same suspicion of claims to authority on the part of states, and the same interrogation of the roots of the modern self." I disagree. They look the same. But the resemblance is superficial. Poststructuralist historians reject not only history's claim to objectivity; they reject the possibility and even the desirability of making true statements about the past. They view "the past as text," to quote the title of Spiegel's book.⁶ They believe that the language in which we speak about reality allows us to make no contact with reality at all. From their perspective, we live in a house of mirrors. From my perspective, the mirror is of our own design. We are completely free to step outside. As Wittgenstein put it in a famous image: "What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (*Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 309).

Spiegel therefore sometimes misreads my meaning. She disagrees with my conviction that "medieval history is impossible to fold into plain history without abolishing the conditions to which historians owe their existence." In her eyes "this is tantamount to arguing that medieval historians lack the autonomy, agency, and full liberty of modernity and would strike any medievalist as nonsensical." I hope it would strike them as nonsensical, because of course it is. But it is not what I believe. I believe that the distinction between medieval and modern history is one of several illusions that historical metaphysicians glimpse in the mirror they make out of the evidence. *If* you practice history in the name of the Cartesian subject, *then* medieval history is impossible to fold into modern history, destined forever to remain its "other." But who says you have to practice history that way? On Spiegel's understanding I believe that "the world of Bartolus's thought ... is lost to us forever, and in understanding Conring we implicitly take his side, which is, in the end, ours, for we are heirs to the disenchantment of the world that makes Bartolus so alien." I do in fact believe that world is lost to us forever, but only because it never existed; lost to us *because* we take the side of metaphysics, Conring's side. But nothing forces us to take his side. Speaking as someone who was himself trained as an "atavistic

medievalist" (Spiegel's phrase), I rather like to think that medievalists have on the whole a better chance than modernists to extricate themselves from metaphysics because their subject matter, for obvious historical reasons, makes them suspicious of the Cartesian *cogito*. That seems to me to be one of the reasons why medieval historians, from Bloch and Haskins to R. I. Moore, Caroline Bynum, and not least Spiegel herself, have made some of the most fruitful innovations in the pursuit of knowledge about the past.

Again, on Spiegel's understanding I believe that Conring's rejection of the *New Discourse* "was not a denial of truth, but a disavowal of responsibility for the *New Discourse*, one that produces, we are told, a fatal uncertainty in us about what Conring 'really' thought." That is to put the cart before the horse. It is the uncertainty that makes the disavowal possible, not the disavowal that produces the uncertainty. The uncertainty arises because there is no object corresponding to the phrase "what Conring 'really' thought." The disavowal of responsibility is possible because you cannot hold someone responsible for something that does not exist. The uncertainty and the irresponsibility are not due to the peculiar circumstances of Conring's case. Those circumstances merely help to make them visible. The same uncertainty and the same potential for irresponsibility arise wherever responsibility is tied to the need for certainty about "real" thought.

Let me conclude by offering a reason why

Megill still finds it difficult to say what I want my readers to think. The reason is that there is nothing I want them to think. No wonder he finds it difficult to say. I have no wish to impose my wants on readers. I would prefer to hear from them what they are thinking on their own (and very grateful for the willingness of Spiegel and Megill to share their thoughts with me). I would be bored were I to hear from them a thought that I had wanted them to think (assuming that a thought that is on someone's mind because of someone else's wish could still be called a thought). But there is definitely something that I do not want them to think, namely, that historians ought to produce adequate representations of the past. Sooner or later historians who try to shoulder that task will find themselves forced to choose between carrying a crushing burden and saying nothing meaningful at all. I would prefer they took Montaigne's advice: "I would like everyone to write what he knows, and as much as he knows, not only in this, but in all other subjects; for a man may have some special knowledge and experience of the nature of a river or a fountain, who in other matters knows only what everybody knows. However, to circulate this little scrap of knowledge, he will undertake to write the whole of physics. From this vice spring many great abuses."⁷

⁷ Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical*

Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 1999).

² The following is based on Ernest Tugendhat, *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language*, trans P.A. Gerner (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

³ I am persuaded by Pippin's reasons for defining modernism broadly enough to view postmodernism as its most recent variant. I shall therefore not dwell on differences between structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, however important they may be in other contexts.

⁴ The phrase "empire of metaphysics" is borrowed from the title of Ian Hunter's review essay on the *Limits of History*: "The State of History and the Empire of Metaphysics," *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 289-303. Hunter takes aim at the right target, but in the heat of his pursuit he mistakes it for my considered point of view. It is, of course, the point of view that I reject.

⁵ See the assessment of Heidegger in Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, 238-243.

⁶ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁷ Michel Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," in *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, vol. 5: *The Renaissance*, eds. Eric Cochrane and Julius Kirshner, trans. Donald M. Frame (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 288.



Coming Soon to Historically Speaking

- Forum on *Liberty and Freedom* (essays by James Morone, Rogan Kersh, Brian Glenn, and Donald Yerxa with a response by David Hackett Fischer)
- Peter Paret on "Einstein and Freud's *Why War?*"
- Robert Lerner on George Kennan
- Barry Strauss on the "Return of Narrative"
- Beverley Southgate on "For the Sake of the Future"
- Jon E. Lendon on "Military Change in Greece and Rome"
- Hanna Gray on "Western Civilization and Its Discontents"
- Steven Mintz on "The Significance of Children's History"
- Thomas Kidd on "Whatever Happened to the Puritans?"