

History as Philosophical Category and as Personal and Societal Experience in D.Carr's Historical Experience: Essays on the Phenomenology of History

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Introduction

David Carr has written extensively on the philosophy of history throughout his career, from a Husserlian phenomenological approach. Carr's new book, *Historical Experience: Essays on the Phenomenology of History* published in 2021 by Routledge, explores the emergence and evolution of the philosophy of history and the ways in which people as individuals and as members of community experience history. This work attends both to the mundane perception of history by the general public and to high-level philosophical investigations into the meaning of history explored notably by Hegel. This publication seems even more relevant in 2022 as, worldwide, we have all been experiencing historical changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine, the full impact of both we have yet to fully understand. Therefore, Carr's call to understand *how* we experience history and why history matters to us is as important as ever.

At the same time, this book is one that is not easy to review because of its composition. It is an eclectic collection of articles written on different occasions between 2006 and 2021. Twelve chapters are loosely united under three parts: "Historicity, narrative, and time", "Teleology and history", and "Embodiment and experience". The chapters range from an analysis of Hegel's notorious *Geist* to an analysis of people's perception of their personal experiences of the past and their connection to the memory. At the same time, there is one theme that is repeated throughout the book even if with different depths and elaborations, namely the teleology of and in history. Carr raises three interconnected questions in relation to historical teleology. Firstly, the origins of teleology in Hegel's *Lectures on Philosophy of History* and its development in the 19th century. Secondly, the longevity of the teleological approach and its criticism by the 20th century philosophers. Thirdly, the understanding of teleology as essential to human experience and identity, and even as a precondition to make sense of history as such. In this review, I will discuss these three aspects of historical teleology that permeate Carr's work. Nevertheless, despite the structure that is presented in this review, these questions are not laid out in the book in the same order, but rather spread throughout the text and explored on many different occasions and in many different ways.

Teleology of History in Philosophy and Everyday Life

With the formal split of the history and the philosophy of history at the second half of the 19th century, philosophers took up the task of finding the meaning of history. On the side of history proper, much effort was made by Leopold von Ranke to justify the scientific status of history, similar to the study of physics, which dominated science that time. He tried to create a methodology that was capable of producing scientific knowledge that is “non-partisan, objective, and based strictly on documentary evidence” (Carr, 2021, p.101). Historians would write history proper whereas philosophers of history would look for the ultimate purpose of history:

That is, like history it [philosophy of history] wants to tell us the truth about the historical process; it just wants to tell us about history as a whole, rather than just some part of it; and it wants to tell us something about its ultimate meaning, not just the facts of what happens. (Carr, 2021, p. 101).

G. W. F. Hegel was a central figure of the newly established separate discipline of the philosophy of history whose aim was to make sense of the historical development as a whole. He wanted to answer the question of whether history had a direction and meaning. It was through this exploration that he introduced his notion of *Geist*, or the Spirit that governs history and leads the world to the full realization of freedom as the ultimate goal of history.

Geist and freedom became cornerstones of Hegel’s understanding of history. Since reason rules the world, world history can be seen as a reasonable affair (Carr, 2021, p. 102). Spirit (*Geist*) is the embodiment of reason, “whose nature is to be conscious and self-conscious, and whose actualization is to be autonomous and self-sufficient, that is, to be free” (102). The actualization of Spirit is a historical process but the reason achieves its end through the ends of people who are not aware of the reason. Thus, history is a self-realization of freedom of the Spirit, that is hidden from people and from itself (Carr, 2021, p. 103). Through people, the World Spirit completes the history in “a self-comprehending totality” (Carr, 2021, p. 103). According to Hegel, Germanic and Christian people are, accidentally, the ones who are realizing freedom because it was they who established that every human is free by mere fact of being a human being (Carr, 2021, p. 103). Thus, the realization of freedom is the true meaning of history for Hegel and European civilization is the one leading this process.

This Eurocentric view has had profound effects on historical writing and the understanding of historical development. European historical development was seen as a standard benchmark against which other regions and civilizations were compared. However, the horrors unleashed by the two world wars with mass killings, genocides and forced labour in concentration camps showed the weak ground that these epistemological foundations were standing upon. Faced with this situation, many philosophers of the second half of the 20th century raised their critical voices against teleology in history. Karl Löwith and Michel Foucault were amongst the most vocal critics that Davis Carr discusses. In his book *Meaning in History*, published in 1949, Löwith expresses deep scepticism about the nature of historical scientific (as in German word *Wissenschaft* with

its strong connotation to empirical experimental science) knowledge. For Löwith, history with its teleological structure is the “secularization” of Christianity (Carr, 2021, p. 80). Judeo-Christian tradition provides a clear teleological structure with the beginning with the creation of the world, the middle, and the end with the imminent second coming of Messiah. This structure penetrated modern Western historical consciousness. As a result, despite claims about its scientific validity, history in its modern scholarly form is only a secularized version of the very same theological worldview. Hegel’s workings of Geist or Marx’s class struggle are essentially narratives that mimic Christian historical views with linear time line and development culminating in some final end. It can be called the kingdom of God, absolute freedom, or communist revolution. For Löwith, there is no evidence that history has a goal or any outcomes, therefore, historians’ claims about scientificity of the discipline are not substantiated. (Carr, 2021, p. 18).

Despite deep and substantial critique, teleology still captures people’s imagination and the idea seems attractive to many. Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* of 1993, works of public intellectuals such as Niall Ferguson and Steven Pinker who promote the idea of supremacy of the Western way of life, capitalism and liberal democracy can easily attest to that tendency. Carr asks why teleology is so persistent in our thinking about history. His answer is rooted in his phenomenological approach as he brings in the idea that people are historical beings and they are inherently in the need of historical consciousness. In other words, Carr argues that the teleological approach to history is inherent and essential for our understanding of history as a sense-making activity.

From a phenomenological perspective, there is a human need for a Bible-like narrative with the beginning, the middle and the end. Our sense of history as a form of narrative creates a meaning for us and fulfills our desire for wholeness and closure. Thus, history whether personal or societal needs to have an orientation towards some goals and we perceive ourselves as part of this unfolding telos, thus we bring the meaning of history for and in our life. Carr notes: “It is perhaps a natural tendency to project onto history as a whole the teleological structure we know in our individual and social lives.” (Carr, 2021, p. 95). Following Kant, Carr asserts that teleological view of history is the only way to look at history and make sense of it:

Perhaps our sense of history calls for the kind of wholeness and closure that the classical philosophies of history sought to provide. We want history as a whole to “make sense”—that is, we want it to form a large-scale narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Given the temporality of our experience and action, both singular and collective, it seems a natural illusion that we view the past as a series of steps preparing the way for the present. Or alternatively, in a more Marxist perspective, the present is experienced as a decisive turning point or crisis in relation to an immanent goal, calling for immediate action. In either case, history has a direction, an orientation toward some temporal fulfillment, one in which we are important participants. (Carr, 2021, p. 96)

According to Dilthey, Carr continues, history is essential to subjectivity, that is “just as subjectivity is essentially temporal, intentional, embodied, intersubjective, and world-constituting, so it is also essentially historical” (Carr, 2021, p. 151). But there is

something special about this particular quality of a subject, Carr adds. As history is a collective memory of society, historical subjectivity is a collective subjectivity and the experience of history can be individual, but often is collective. How can we speak then about the experience of history as a communal experience? To explore this possibility, Carr introduces an important concept of we-intentionality. Heavily drawing on Husserl's work, he argues that "in good phenomenological language, the we-subject is constituted by the individuals who make it up (Carr, 2021, p. 120)." Even if we-relation, unlike face-to-face interaction, provides different experience of relations (Carr, 2021, p. 118) it still is possible to speak about collective intentionality of we-subject since members share the same experiences. For example, people gather together to mourn, protect, or celebrate. During such social events that spur emotions, we-subject is felt acutely. Since this experience cannot be reduced to the experience of each individual, but is only possible within a group of people, we can talk about the we-subject that experiences the event. This experience is only possible as a collective experience and if this is real for participants (we-subject), it can be explored phenomenologically. When soldiers march and fight together, when people dance together or hold religious ceremonies, their experience is the experience of we-subject (Carr, 2021, p. 125-126). More importantly according to Carr, history is essential to the very existence of the we-subject because the sense of the past gives us the sense of belonging to a certain community, shapes our sense of who we are as members of different groups and institutions. This is the lived history that gives us "our first and abiding awareness of the past" (Carr, 2021, p. 164) and creates the possibility of the we-subject. Moreover, history allows us to experience "time that extends back before my birth and can continue even after my death (Carr, 2021, p. 160)". That is why, we are historical beings and our experience of history is shaped both by I-subject and we-subject.

This view of history creates a different signification of history for humanity. Carr seems to be relatively encouraging about the role and importance of history for society and individuals. But he places its value not in supposedly scientific nature of the discipline but in its ability to create purpose and meaning for people. Since to talk about history also means to talk about memory and aging, history becomes a part of our personal story and identity. Experience is ever changing as our memories about the past undergo transformation based on that experience and in different age periods, we would have different memories about the past based on the experience we have had. That means that the interpretation of our past and the importance of different events will also change. Therefore, "Aging is thus not just an accumulation of years but an advancing and changing point of view." (Carr, 2021, p. 44) Historical narrative then becomes a changing perspective on one's life (Carr, 2021, p. 45) that we create about the past and present. Thus, the narratives we tell to ourselves and eventually to others become a way to make sense of our life and this making sense naturally changes depending on the stage of life of which we are making sense. History, then, can be seen as a sense-making activity not only on the individual but also the societal level:

In action, we envisage the future, consult the past, and arrange the present as the passage between the two. What we encounter in the present has the significance as obstacle or instrument to our objectives. In fact, we can see a close kinship between the beginning- middle-end structure of narrative and the means-end structure of action. In both cases, "end" is not merely temporal but also

teleological, and the same can be said for the related concepts of middle and means. The beginning of an action is the situation perceived by the agent, a divergence between what is the case and what is to be done. This divergence constitutes a problem or predicament which is overcome or resolved by the achievement of the end (Carr, 2021, p. 104).

This retrospective view makes people narrate their stories; they become narrators. Then, Carr continues, we can look at the teleological structure of the philosophy of history as a practical embodiment of this structure (Carr, 2021, p. 105), as a way to make sense of the past and think about future possibilities. That would mean to understand philosophers of history as, not so much predicting the future, but working to bring it about, to make sense of history as a whole project. Their work would not be descriptive but redescriptive because they need to redescribe the events of the past in accordance with their understanding of the evolution of history similarly to how people change the story of their lives as the years go on. Therefore, such philosophies of history must have the elements of narrative as they develop their grand theories of history.

Carr gives by way of example Kant's hopes for progress. These hopes do not imply that there is necessarily progress in historical development. Kant makes a point not about where history is going but rather where it should be going (Carr, 2021, p. 106). In a similar fashion, Marx's analysis does not need to be understood as a deterministic unfolding of history, but rather as a "blueprint of the social forces that must be understood if concrete steps are to be taken toward the realization of a desired outcome" (Carr, 2021, p. 107). In other words, Marx outlines what is wrong and what needs to be done to make it better. Turning to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Carr points out that Spirit can be understood as we-subject and this is essential for a narrative structure. If so understood, Hegel can be seen as urging history to move in a certain direction rather than describing historical development; that is, "he is organizing the past in order to make a case for a particular future, that of the realization of human freedom" (Carr, 2021, p. 110). Carr concludes:

Seen as a practical narrative, rather than as a speculative science, it exemplifies certain features of the way we view history in light of narrative and time. First, we look at ourselves as parts of larger-scale communities, and at the limit, these communities can expand to encompass humanity as a whole. Though the idea of the "human community" has repeatedly proved to be wildly impractical as a motivating force for collective action, it still offers a possible background for human endeavor. Second, we see the problems of the present as the culmination of a process that points us in a certain direction. Part of human historicity is that we see ourselves and our present situation as the dramatic turning point between past and future, and we arrange the past in such a way as to make a certain future meaningful if not inevitable. In this sense, narrative is not only the meta-physics of everyday life, as Danto said, but also the metaphysics of social and historical life. In this sense, because of what Kant might have called a transcendental and unavoidable illusion, we are always at the end, or at least very near the end, of history (Carr, 2021, p. 111).

Conclusion

Carr's *Historical Experience: Essays on the Phenomenology of History* is an intriguing book that develops an account of the history of the philosophy of history and the importance of history in the modern day. By showing how we experience history as individuals and as a part of professional community of historians necessarily, Carr demonstrates that history is crucial for our sense-making of the world because it defines and conditions how we understand the past, the present, and the future. As we-subject, we experience history and we cannot be human beings without history, memory, and experiences of the past. He amply shows that the importance of history lies not as much in epistemology but exactly in our experience of life and as we-subject we experience history and make sense of it and of ourselves. Therefore, the role of historians to "articulate the collective memory, to raise it from the level of tacit assumptions, even practices and attitudes, to that of an explicit account" (Carr, 2021, p. 165). History is a societal enterprise where all people participate. This point also brings in more positive evaluation of much belittled and criticized notion of teleology. Despite its rather controversial legacy, teleology does not have to be seen as only negative and distractive. Carr shows that teleology as a way to promote better conditions for people, as a form of narrative to provide material for individual and collective sense-making can be fruitful for our understanding of history and its role in society.

It seems, however, that there is some contradiction in the ways in which Carr talks about historicity and its importance in society. On the one hand, he recognizes that there are different regimes of historicity and the one discussed extensively in the book—with its strong teleological linear progression—is one among many others, such as circular ones that other cultures have had or currently have. In circular historicity, events are perceived as being repeated in cycle and there is no end or rupture, but continuation. On the other hand, when Carr talks about the importance of teleology, he implies that the linear progressivist teleology borne out Christian tradition is the one essential to human kind. Therefore, this kind of teleology is historically contingent and is not essential to humanity. In effect, Carr creates a universal regime of historicity while claiming this regime being historically contingent.

Philosophers' works have had a profound impact on the ways in which historians study history and historians supply actual "empirical" material for philosophers. It is somewhat surprising then that there are almost no references to works of historians who analyze, criticize and propose new ways of doing history without this narrowly understood concept of teleology. Indeed, it can be argued that the very similar problems of teleology occupied professional historians at least from the 1930s as Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* (published first in 1931) can attest to (Butterfield, 1981). Not only did these debates intensify after the end of the Second World War, but historians did attempt to write history differently following this reflection. A range of Western and non-Western historians have produced revisionist accounts of history that differ significantly from traditional historical narratives. One can name Natalie Zemon Davis (Davis, 2011), Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Subrahmanyam, 2007), Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty, 2012), Jack Goldstone (Goldstone, 2002), Canadian historian

Coll-Peter Thrush (Thrush, 2016) among many others. Analysis of the influence or lack thereof of such works, their connections with (or disconnections from) the philosophy of history would help to bring this work from the vacuum of pure philosophical reasoning to the realities on the ground. Even though Carr recognizes that the philosophy of history still operates with actual historical events and people (Carr, 2021, p 105), and professional historians are the ones who provide this very knowledge, he does not bring their works in his writings.

Carr is well versed in the development of Western continental philosophy as well as in the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl and its embeddedness in the historical context of Husserl's time. If in part 1 and 2 can be seen as extensive and critical reflections on the philosophy of history, part 3 is focused on how people as individuals and as a collective (we-subject) experience history and how history is a meaning-creating activity essential for the subjective experience. His efforts to establish the possibility of 'we-subject' are creative and provide a fresh insight into the very possibility of such a subject. Carr explains in length what 'we-subject' might mean (or what M. van Manen [2014] calls the Eidetic reduction, or what-ness). Carr writes that understanding what 'we-subject' is "a matter of describing and understanding the social experience of those involved" (Carr, 2021, p 120). Carr shows how concrete experiences of individuals become a common and entangled narrative of 'we-subject' that is a precondition for the very possibility to experience history as such since we-subject allows us extend our temporality beyond individual lives and connect with the past and possible future (Carr, 2021, p. 164). Thus, the exploration of we-subject and its importance for the experience of history provides rich even if short phenomenological analysis of the ways in which people experience history as I- and we-subjects.

This book is of interest to a wide audience. People interested in the philosophy of history will find a fascinating account of its development and its critical history. For phenomenologists, this book offers an intriguing exploration of societal and personal experience of history and extensive analysis of the very possibility of we-subject as a subject that is actually experiencing history. For professional historians, despite above mentioned limitations, Carr offers a critical reflection on the nature of professional history, its meaning and purpose as well as rehabilitation of much criticized teleological tendencies in Western historical writings. The general public, in turn, will find interesting discussions about the importance of personal history and the construction of an identity and research on interjections between personal and public history.

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