

Distance and Self-Distanciation:  
Intellectual Virtue and Historical Method Around 1900

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Abstract

What did “historical distance” mean to historians in the Rankean tradition? Although historical distance is often equated with temporal distance, an analysis of Ernst Bernheim’s *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* reveals that for German historians around 1900, distance did not primarily refer to a passage of time that would enable scholars to study remote pasts from retrospective points of view. If Bernheim’s manual presents historical distance as a prerequisite for historical interpretation, the metaphor rather conveys a need for self-distanciation. Self-distanciation is not a Romantic desire to “extinguish” oneself, but a virtuous attempt to put one’s own ideas and intuitions about the working of the world between brackets in the study of people who might have understood the world in different terms. Although Bernheim did not explicitly talk about virtue, the article shows that his *Lehrbuch* nonetheless considers self-distanciation a matter of virtuous behavior, targeted at an aim that may not be fully realizable, but ought to be pursued with all possible vigour. For Bernheim, then, distance requires epistemological virtue, which in turn calls for intellectual character, or what Bernheim’s generation considered scholarly selfhood (*wissenschaftliche Persönlichkeit*). Not a mapping of time onto space, but a strenuous effort to mold “scholarly characters,” truly able to recognize the otherness of the past, appears to be characteristic of Bernheim’s view of historical distance.

*Keywords:* Historical Distance, Self-Distanciation, Objectivity, Epistemic Virtues, Positivism, Ernst Bernheim (1850-1942), Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886)

One of the most fascinating *dramatis personae* in contemporary philosophy of history is the so-called “naive historian.” Dressed in old-fashioned attire, this charmingly clumsy figure invariably enters the stage with an amazed expression on his face, sincerely surprised by the laughter that his appearance evokes. “Is there anything wrong,” he mumbles in his beard, “with my time-honored craft, with my life-long dedication to the truth, or with the circumspection I honestly try to practice in all of my research and writing?” Another burst of laughter then erupts from the opposite end of the stage. “Ah! What a hopelessly naive practitioner! What a Rankean empiricist!” The younger fellows – close-cropped hair, designer spectacle frames – slap each other on the shoulders and grab for some well-thumbed philosophy books, as if they are to start yet another exposition on the not so tragic death of truth and objectivity in the age of postmodern enlightenment. But when they notice the incomprehension mirrored in the man’s wide staring eyes, they slowly turn their backs to him, clucking and shaking their heads about “the persistent lack of intellectual prowess in the historical profession.”

From a rhetorical point of view, it is entirely understandable why the “naive historian,” also known as the “working historian” or “historical practitioner,” is such a frequently invoked character in contemporary historical theory. Any revolutionary needs an enemy to fight against. Any philosopher of history arguing for revision of existing views of historical representation needs an opponent to attack – if not a real one, then (even better perhaps) a straw-man clothed in old-fashioned garb. As long as this straw-man remains an ideal type, invoked for the sake of argument, I am the last to complain about the naive historian’s densely booked performance schedule. Things get more complicated, though, when this fictional character somehow gets mixed up with really existing scholars – for example, when “naive” becomes synonymous with “Rankean” and “philosophically uninformed” another word for “committed to traditional methods of historical research.” At least since Hayden White, who as early as 1959 ridiculed Ranke as a “poor soul” who had “ruined his sight attempting to ‘tell how it really happened,’”<sup>1</sup> there has been a tendency among philosophers of history to contrast their own enlightened insights with a tradition of naïveté epitomized by

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden V. White, “Translator’s Introduction : On History and Historicisms,” in Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, trans. Hayden V. White (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), xxiv. On Ranke as White’s *bête noire*, see Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 59-62.

Ranke and his followers.<sup>2</sup> Confronted with such stereotypical images of late nineteenth-century historical practice, historians of historiography cannot help but raise the question: Does this give an accurate picture of historical scholarship as conducted by Ranke and his school?

If this theme issue reexamines the metaphor of historical distance, there is an undeniable temptation to engage in similar stereotyping and to ascribe to what is loosely called the Rankean tradition a “naive” faith in the possibility for historians to gain understanding through an increase in temporal distance or, negatively, the necessity to refrain from historical study when sufficient hindsight is not yet available. Hadn’t Friedrich Schleiermacher, the early nineteenth-century theorist of hermeneutics, famously declared himself unable to lecture on post-1648 history?<sup>3</sup> Weren’t German-trained historians until well into the twentieth century overwhelmingly skeptical about the possibility of studying anything less than at least half a century old (as Erwin Panofsky once said: “we normally require from sixty to eighty years”)?<sup>4</sup> Although such attitudes certainly existed, it is not evident to what extent these were inherited from a tradition exemplified by Ranke and his students. In the absence of relevant studies, it is even less warranted to assume that we know in advance what Ranke, Georg Waitz, or Julius Weizsäcker understood the distance metaphor to mean. What had these men in mind when they encouraged their students to achieve *historische Distanz*? Before assuming *a priori* that their reflections on distance did not rise above the naiveties that we readily attribute to their generation,

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<sup>2</sup> Random examples include Alun Munslow, *The New History* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2003), 50-53; Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 106-110; John R. Hall, “The Time of History and the History of Times,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980), 113.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Geschichte der christlichen Kirche: aus Schleiermachers handschriftlichem Nachlasse und nachgeschriebenen Vorlesungen*, ed. E. Bonnell (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1840), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Erwin Panofsky, “The History of Art,” in Franz L. Neumann *et al.*, *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 91. Echoes of this view can still be heard among historians, also on the American side of the Atlantic. James T. Patterson, for example, speaks about “an informal ‘twenty-year rule’ that leaves study of the most recent past to journalists, sociologists, and political scientists.” James T. Patterson, “Americans and the Writing of Twentieth-Century United States History,” in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, ed. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 190.

we may want to raise the historiographical question what distance meant to those late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century German historians.

In this paper, I will try to answer that question by analyzing a view of distance that hardly any German historian around 1900 could fail to encounter. I will examine a view canonized in perhaps the most widely ever used manual of historical scholarship, Ernst Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode*. Bernheim, an admirer of Ranke, was a student of Waitz and Weizsäcker and professor of medieval history and "auxiliary sciences" at the University of Greifswald, in Western Pomerania, from 1883 to 1921. His manual appeared in 1889 and quickly acquired classic status. It went through a number of printings, had its title expanded into *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie*, was translated into several languages, and served as a basic methodological handbook to historians as geographically dispersed as Yao Congwu in China, Lauritz Weibull in Sweden, and Walter B. L. Bose in Argentina. For historians around 1900, Bernheim's *Lehrbuch* was indeed nothing less than a "quasi-canonical work."<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly for a historian without much philosophical background, Bernheim offers what Horst Walter Blanke calls a *praxisbezogener Historik*, or a practice-oriented philosophy of history.<sup>6</sup> Most of his views on historical distance are

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<sup>5</sup> Knut Langewand, *Historik im Historismus: Geschichtsphilosophie und historische Methode bei Ernst Bernheim* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 88, 89, 98; Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China Through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 95-9; Karl-Michael Chilcott, "Zur Geschichtsauffassung von Ernst Bernheim," in *Historiographieggeschichte als Methodologiegeschichte: zum 80. Geburtstag von Ernst Engelberg*, ed. Herbert Hörz (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1991), 157; Horst Walter Blanke, *Historiographieggeschichte als Historik* (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991), 245. Cf. H. G. Good, "Historical Research in Education," *Educational Research Bulletin* 9 (1930), 7: "All who study historical method are indebted to this work, as well those who do not consult it as those who do, for it has influenced, directly or indirectly, all writers on the subject." Peter Novick might be right, though, that among American historians, the heavy German tome "was probably more cited than read." Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Horst Walter Blanke, "Ernst Bernheims Lehrbuch der historischen Methode: drei Argumentationsebenen einer praxisbezogenen Historik," in *125 Jahre Historisches Seminar/Sektion Geschichtswissenschaft der Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald 1988* (Greifswald: Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität, 1990), 33-44. Precisely because of its *praxisbezogene* character, Bernheim's book has not seldom been portrayed as philosophically inferior to Johann Gustav Droysen's *Grundriß*

not even spelled out explicitly and must therefore be distilled from his practical recommendations. Yet, as soon as these views are reconstructed, it becomes apparent that Bernheim was not among those equating historical distance with mere temporal remoteness. Indebted to positivist views of scholarly asceticism, his *Lehrbuch* rather offers a dramatic account of how near-impossible it is to put an overwhelming past at a distance. For Bernheim, distance is not simply supplied by the passage of time, but something to be achieved through an extraordinary exertion of intellect and will. If historians are truly to recognize the otherness of the past, they have to practice an ascetic virtue best described as self-distanciation. They have to gain maximum distance from their own understanding of reality, so as to allow the past in its foreignness to appear before their eyes. Whether such positivist asceticism is “naive” or not is a question I will not attempt to settle here. I do want to show, however, that historical distance in the Rankean tradition, as represented by Bernheim, referred to scholarly determination rather than to the passing of time, to the acquisition of a virtuous intellectual character rather than to benefits of hindsight.

- I -

Bernheim’s virtue-oriented theory of distance can be reconstructed in seven steps. The first three of these steps, I should say at the outset, are rather broad and were widely shared among historians in nineteenth-century Europe. They must be mentioned briefly, however, as the scenery in front of which the drama that I referred to is played out in steps number four to seven.

First of all, then, like so many other thinkers before Friedrich Nietzsche or Johann Jakob Bachofen, Bernheim sees past, present, and future as connected by a great chain of unbroken development. All that happens on earth is related through chains of cause and effect (29).<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the adventures and accomplishments of

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*der Historik*. See, e.g., Hans Schleier, “Ranke in the Manuals on Historical Methods of Droysen, Lorenz, and Bernheim,” in *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 120; Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Einmal Göttingen-Bielefeld einfach: auch eine Geschichte der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft,” *Rechtshistorisches Journal* 11 (1992), 59.

<sup>7</sup> Page numbers in parentheses refer to Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie: mit Nachweis der wichtigsten Quellen und Hilfsmittel zum Studium der*

cultures past and present cannot be separated from each other (43). Late nineteenth-century Greifswald, sixteenth-century Constantinople, and pre-Roman Gaul all participate in the same “historical development.” Referring to what he calls the “unity of humankind” (27), Bernheim goes so far as to suggest that history is best treated as the “single, united development of humankind” (16). While this line of thought has not incorrectly been traced back to Johann Gottfried Herder,<sup>8</sup> the author himself points out that this “metaphysical” belief rests on Christian assumptions (52). For Bernheim – a Jew converted to Protestantism<sup>9</sup> – it is the Christian understanding of history as a single process from Creation to Judgment Day that makes it possible to conceive of humankind as a collectivity developing over time (28, 63).

However, for Bernheim, development is not only a religious assumption, but also a key term in the historian’s job description. “History is the scholarship of human *development*” (7). In a brief and rather teleological historiographical survey, he explains that historians prior to the nineteenth century often gathered impressive masses of data, but were unable to integrate them in a single historical narrative, because they had not yet learned to apply the “concept of development” (7) to the study of the past. Only in the days of Leopold von Ranke had the “genetic” approach gained firm ground (26, 31).<sup>10</sup> “In this way, it is the concept of development that provides our scholarship with intrinsic coherence. That is to say, it turns it into real scholarship” (10).

At this first stage, there is nothing in Bernheim’s prose indicating an awareness of ruptures and breaks – not to mention traumas and sublime historical experiences – that might challenge his rustic image of organic development. Whereas Bachofen, to invoke a rather different type of historian, already in the 1850s bemoaned the “immense abyss” that, in his perception, separated “the new from the old” (modern Europe from ancient Greece) and eloquently lamented the “thread of

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*Geschichte*, 3rd/4th ed. (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1903). All translations are mine. The differences between the various editions of Bernheim’s book are discussed in Hans Schleier, “Ernst Bernheims Historik in seinem ‘Lehrbuch der historischen Methode,’” in *Das lange 19. Jahrhundert: Personen, Ereignisse, Ideen, Umwälzungen: Ernst Engelberg zum 90. Geburtstag*, ed. Wolfgang Küttler, vol. 2 (Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 1999), 281-283.

<sup>8</sup> Chilcott, “Geschichtsauffassung,” 155.

<sup>9</sup> Schleier, “Ernst Bernheims Historik,” 276.

<sup>10</sup> For Ranke’s role in Bernheim’s *Lehrbuch*, see Schleier, “Ranke in the Manuals,” 119.

tradition” that “was cut long ago.”<sup>11</sup> Bernheim, half a century later, would rather have said that the tradition might have changed almost unrecognizably, but was still the same tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, however, Bernheim argues with equal force that each moment in this grand development, each person or event in the great chain of history, must be understood from its own frame of reference. Acknowledging the “continuous change in all human relations” (30) that even a cursory study of history reveals, historians have to avoid at all costs the projection of present-day assumptions upon the past. A medievalist by training and profession, specialized in the Concordat of Worms,<sup>13</sup> Bernheim worked in a field that had long been plagued by what he called “monstrous anachronisms” (30). Especially in the history of law, he complained, there had been no lack of intrusions from modern legal theory on medieval legislative practices (614-615). Such anachronisms, however, are “a grave offense against any methodical interpretation” (556). For historians trying to combine step one and two, the challenge, therefore, is to understand “the individual in its genetic relationships” (vii). Their goal, so Bernheim explains in good historicist fashion, must be to grasp “the individual object as a moment in development” (9). Characteristically, Bernheim thus seeks to balance unity and manifoldness, process and moment, or development and individuality. Such an interplay between *Entwicklung* and *Individualität* has often been considered a defining mark of the historicist tradition on which Bernheim drew.<sup>14</sup>

Now, the theme of “historical distance” comes in at step three, in response, one might imagine, to a question raised by a historian who diligently tries to decipher a Merovingian charter and wonders, somewhat impatiently, what all this talk about individuality and development implies for the interpretation of his (most likely not her) early medieval source. What does it take to avoid anachronisms, in this case?

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 153-154.

<sup>12</sup> Bernheim briefly mentions Bachofen, but only for his matriarchal view of cultural evolution (672).

<sup>13</sup> Ernst Bernheim, *Lothar III und das Wormser Concordat* (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1874); idem, *Zur Geschichte des Wormser Konkordates* (Göttingen: Robert Peppmüller, 1878).

<sup>14</sup> The *locus classicus* is, of course, Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, ed. Carl Hinrichs (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1959), 5. The word “historicism” does not appear in Bernheim’s book, however.

Bernheim's answer is straightforward: In order to open themselves to the otherness of the Merovingian past, historians should distance themselves from their biases. They should realize that those long-haired kings (*reges criniti*), as the Merovingian rulers were sometimes called by contemporaries,<sup>15</sup> not only maintained distinctive styles of hairstyle, but also felt, thought, experienced, and sensed quite differently than most German *Bildungsbürgers* around 1900 (703). Proper acknowledgment of the foreignness of the past therefore requires nothing less than an act of self-distanciation on the historian's part. If we want to understand how people thought and felt in the past, "we have to eliminate our own ways of observation, imagination, and desire, which we are naturally inclined to presuppose" (703).

What does such an "elimination" imply? Bernheim was certainly not haunted by a Romantic desire to "extinguish" himself (as Ranke famously put it).<sup>16</sup> Neither did he want the historian to become a disembodied mind, a "man without religion, without fatherland, without family" (707), or a stoic observer of human joy and sorrow. As "a man of healthy flesh and blood," the (male) historian cannot but be touched by what happened in history (707). Such emotions or opinions do not need to be denied. Bernheim's point is only that a good historian will try to consider his own understanding of how the world works, his own ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving, as a "*source of error*, which he strives with all his energy to eliminate as much as possible" (708). For example, a historian unable to dissociate himself from his own intuitions about honor and shame is likely to perceive Henry IV's penance at Canossa, in 1077, as an "outrageous indignity" done to the German emperor (613). This would be anachronistic, however: within the codes of that time, Pope Gregory VII was the man who lost face.<sup>17</sup>

This example shows, I think, that Bernheim does not make the naive claim that historians have to abandon their own modes of thought or perception. How could they

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<sup>15</sup> J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History* (London: Methuen, 1962).

<sup>16</sup> Leopold Ranke, *Englische Geschichte vornehmlich im sechszehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1859-1868), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Obviously, the matter was more complex than this. See Jürgen Vogel's illuminating study, *Gregor VII. und Heinrich IV. nach Canossa: Zeugnisse ihres Selbstverständnisses* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983).



ever interpret the past if they did so?<sup>18</sup> Bernheim's point is rather that people in the past thought, perceived, and felt differently than people in the present and that such "differences of times" (610) have to be acknowledged. The non-identity of past and present requires an act of self-distanciation, in the sense that historians must do what they can to overcome their prejudices, biases, and pre-conceived ideas about what is natural or normal in the world of human affairs. In other words, Bernheim's crucial point is not that historians need to achieve distance between past and present. His point is that, in order to acknowledge the already existing distance between past and present, historians must dissociate themselves from their own beliefs about how people typically behave. The historian's professional "I," one might say, has to be dissociated from his or her personal "I." Distance, then, is not a mapping of "time on to space" (to quote Adam Phillips),<sup>19</sup> but an overcoming of intellectual provincialism.

- II -

The theory gets a dose of drama when, in a fourth step, it raises the question to what extent historians, fallible human beings as they are, can ever live up to the demands just formulated. Do human beings really possess the capacity to transcend their own beliefs and imagine themselves in the position of others to the point of forgetting their own opinions and views? At this point, Bernheim leaves the company of his more optimistic contemporaries. Contemplating the limitations of the historian's imaginative faculties and the restraints of human nature more generally, Bernheim begins to sound like a Lutheran Pietist preacher who reminds his audience of the omnipresence of sin. In almost Biblical language, he writes "that we are naturally inclined [*von Natur geneigt*] to attribute our own subjective experience, imagination, and will to fellow human beings in the present and the past and to interpret . . . their comings and goings accordingly" (702-703). Although, in general, "all things human are imperfect" (698), human beings encounter their imperfections in particular when they try to open themselves to people in other cultures, past or present. For how

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<sup>18</sup> Bernheim admits that it is impossible for historians to "deny" their conditions of life or points of view (373).

<sup>19</sup> Adam Phillips, "Close-Ups," *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004), 144.

difficult is it even to imagine that people think, feel, believe, and experience the world differently than we are accustomed to!

For this has not merely to do with exterior impressions and customs [*äußere Eindrücke und Gewohnheiten*], but with views, feelings, and convictions that a human being imbibes with his mother's milk and that are strengthened and developed under influence of the social world around him during the course of his entire life (704).

In other words, when human beings have to contemplate the possibility that the world can be experienced differently than they themselves are naturally inclined to do, they are asked to do what is almost impossible, namely to question some of their most self-evident assumptions. Bernheim himself has no illusions about this. Often, he sighs, students must be reminded even of such simple things as that Charlemagne did not speak New High German and that his breakfast did not include coffee (636). How much harder, then, is it to overcome our natural inclination to project our feelings or ideas onto people in the past (610). "Here, the barriers to knowledge influenced by our disposition [*die erkenntniswidrigen Einflüsse unserer Anlage*] are especially strong and manifold and, consequently, hard to eliminate" (699). Indeed, describing the act of self-distanciation as "the most difficult performance" (703) of the historian, Bernheim may well have agreed with the wisdom of Proverbs: "He that ruleth his spirit [is better] than he that taketh a city" (16,32; KJV).

All this, Bernheim adds in a fifth step, is even more difficult when historians deal with themes that have a direct bearing upon their own *Sitz im Leben*. It is one thing, for a Protestant historian, to study the ancient Egyptians, but quite another to investigate Martin Luther's confrontation with Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms. Similarly, in the history of Prussia, there is more at stake for a German historian than for a French or Italian colleague (706).

A far-removed, in itself closed subject-matter, such as the history of Antiquity, makes it easier for us to abandon our individual point of view than a subject from the present or the most recent past, just as it is easier with a foreign topic than with a national one, and so forth (717).

Note that Bernheim says nothing about the passage of time. He does not advise against the study of the near present or require that half a century or more have passed before historians start their research. Given Bernheim's concept of development, as explained in step one, and his explicit denial that the historian's subject-matter comes to an end as the present draws near (37), it seems the Greifswald historian would not have doubted the possibility or legitimacy of contemporary history (*Zeitgeschichte*), the sub-discipline that came into vogue not long after Bernheim's death in 1942.<sup>20</sup> For what, on his view, frustrates the historian's attempt to open him- or herself to the otherness of the past is not a lack of temporal distance between subject and object, but the psychological difficulty of dissociating oneself from deeply held beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

What, then, can historians do? Since Bernheim dwells at length on historical methods, one might expect him to present a methodological solution to his psychological problem. Is his *Lehrbuch*, after all, not a vivid illustration of a typically late nineteenth-century belief in the efficacy of methods in scholarship (e.g., 56, 58)?<sup>22</sup> Occasionally, indeed, Bernheim speaks about "means of methodological control" (716) or "means of control and correction" (717). Yet, he hardly elaborates on this, presumably because he knows that methods alone will not suffice. His real answer – step six out of seven – is that much depends on the historian's disposition or qualities of character. Understanding foreign cultures is "more or less a matter of talent" (604). "Whoever does not possess it may become anything, but not a historian" (604). This talent usually depends on character traits. A man with strong opinions or an inclination towards subjective identification, for example, may be suited to become a politician or party member. But for a historian, "a moderate temperament" is of more avail (717). Indeed, for Bernheim, "it is not entirely incorrect to say that neither is a real historian suited to be a party man nor can a good party man be a historian, for the qualities essential to the one profession do not serve the other" (717).

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<sup>20</sup> Astrid M. Eckert, "The Transnational Beginnings of West German *Zeitgeschichte* in the 1950s," *Central European History* 40 (2007), 63-87.

<sup>21</sup> One might argue, as did Schleiermacher (*Geschichte der christlichen Kirche*, 37), that this difficulty increases as the temporal distance between oneself and one's object of study decreases. Bernheim would have recognized, however, that this rule is contradicted by many exceptions.

<sup>22</sup> On the rhetoric of "method" among nineteenth-century historians, see Stevin Shapin, "Science and the Modern World," in *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Edward J. Hackett *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 435.

If good history writing is a matter of character or personality traits, what, then, can the historian do to avoid anachronisms or to open himself to the otherness of the past? *Gnothi seauton*, is the first part of Bernheim's answer. Know yourself, examine whether you are an "idealist" or a "realist" by disposition, and try to figure out how that leads you to overemphasize or underestimate certain motives in other people, past or present (710-711). It may be helpful to inform your audiences about such inclinations (708, 739). But far more important – this is the second part of Bernheim's answer – is it to "consciously and deliberately restrain and correct this inclination in both directions" (710). Character traits must not only be identified, but also corrected. Our natural impulse to imagine the other as oneself must be repressed. We must be trained to suppress our intuitions and to practice "not a small amount of self-restraint" (719). In an almost Puritan manner, it seems, the historian's "I" must be molded into a scholarly self, or into a scientific personality. Good historical scholarship requires a strongly disciplined character.

What does it take to become, or acquire, such a scholarly self? Not unlike Max Weber and many other contemporaries, Bernheim finds the solution in the human will.<sup>23</sup> In the end, he tells his readers, it all depends on "the sincere deep will to be truthful" (708), on "the will to forgo one's individuality as far as is required" (710), or on a "will directed by the insight" into the necessity of self-control (710). "And the harder this task appears, the more seriously and energetically it must commenced with both will and insight" (611). Bernheim's Puritan scholar thus appears to have a Pelagian touch, in so far as the degree to which he successfully exercises the virtue of self-distanciation depends on the strength of his will-power.<sup>24</sup> This final step in Bernheim's argument reveals what I would call the moral imperative implied in his understanding of distance. Self-dissociation in the name of historical distance is an ideal of virtue. This virtue is an epistemological one in the sense that it is supposed to increase the historian's knowledge of the past. But in disciplining the historian's character and in transforming his or her "I" into a "scientific personality," this epistemological virtue also has deep moral implications. It establishes standards of competence, conduct, and self-regulation and tells historians, not only what sort of

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<sup>23</sup> Harvey Goldman, *Max Weber and Thomas Mann: Calling and the Shaping of the Self* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Bernheim devotes several (carefully nuanced) passages to the classic problem of the "freedom of will" (e.g., 626-627, 686-687).

persons they need to be – at least within the academic realm – but also that their will must be guided by this ideal of virtue.

- III -

What does this tell us about notions of historical distance around 1900? Perhaps the most striking observation to be made is that, for Bernheim, historical distance is not something achieved by the passing of time, but a demand placed upon the historian. Distance has to be created through the exertion of intellectual virtue. Even though Bernheim seldom uses the word “virtue” (*Tugend*),<sup>25</sup> the concept plays a pivotal role in his understanding of historical distance. This is not only apparent from the sort of practical recommendations the *Lehrbuch* frequently makes (avoid the vices of imbalance, one-sidedness, bias, and willful partiality; aim at the virtues of carefulness, precision, and so forth), but also, more importantly, from Bernheim’s answer to the question how historians can ever reach a sufficient degree of self-distanciation. For in spite of his insistence on rigorous self-control, Bernheim frankly acknowledges that self-distanciation is “the most difficult performance” for historians to achieve. Interestingly, he negotiates this tension between ideal and reality in a classic Aristotelian manner by presenting self-distanciation as a virtue aspiring towards an unattainable but desirable ideal. Like, for example, justice or righteousness, self-distanciation is likely to be never fully realized in human life. Yet, these virtues ought to be practiced as well as one can.<sup>26</sup> Time and again, therefore, Bernheim argues that self-distanciation “is only possible to a certain degree” (716). Self-distanciation should be practiced “with all energy,” but only “as much as is possible” (708) and “to the extent” we are able to (703). Self-distanciation is therefore a matter of degree, not of either/or.

Let me add that much the same goes for what Bernheim calls “objectivity.” The “noble dream” of objectivity has often been ridiculed – not least by the angry young men invoked in my opening paragraph – because nobody anymore believes that objectivity, in the sense of impartiality, can ever be realized. But neither did

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<sup>25</sup> In his *Lehrbuch*, *Tugend* appears only twice (32, 463), and in both cases not as something required of the historian, but as a moral attribute of persons in the past.

<sup>26</sup> For a superb account of the virtues in Aristotle’s ethics, see Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle’s Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Bernheim. Employing a vocabulary of degree and extent, his *Lehrbuch* explains that the adjective “objective” applies to those historians who do “whatever is possible” to open themselves to the otherness of the past, whereas “subjective” refers to historians who insufficiently try to do so (698, 702). Consequently, Bernheim prefers to speak about “an attainable degree of objectivity,” rather than about “absolute objectivity” (698). For this reason, it is somewhat misleading to state, as one scholar does, that “[a]gainst the skeptics of a new epoch, [Bernheim] affirmed unchanged his belief in the basic recognizability of objective historical reality with the help of increasingly more perfect historical methods.”<sup>27</sup> As we have seen, for Bernheim, “objective” is an attribute, not of the past, but of the historian’s work. Moreover, objectivity is not a *fait accompli* which can be taken for granted, but a virtue which is never practiced hard enough.<sup>28</sup>

However, even if it is simplistic to see in Bernheim the epitome of a “still largely unbroken scientific optimism,”<sup>29</sup> few modern readers will fail to notice that his Puritan type of psychology is strikingly undisturbed by the “masters of suspicion” who began to transform Europe’s intellectual climate around the turn of the century. Sigmund Freud, whose *Traumdeutung* appeared in 1900, is not mentioned in the *Lehrbuch*, although Bernheim does refer to psychiatry and psychopathology (604). He briefly discusses illusion and hysteria (605), but only as “psychic disorders” that historians may attribute to such unfortunate historical figures as King Ludwig II of

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<sup>27</sup> Schleier, “Ranke in the Manuals,” 121.

<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the categories of degree and extent may help solve a problem formulated by Rolf Torstendahl in his insightful article on methodology textbooks around 1900. Torstendahl observes “a certain ambiguity” in Bernheim’s stance on the problem how “firm” the knowledge is that historians can acquire. On the one hand, says Torstendahl, Bernheim assures his readers that certainty (*Gewißheit*) is possible, but on the other, “Bernheim gives room – it would seem to be ample room – for probabilities and possibilities in the historian’s practice.” This apparent contradiction leads Torstendahl to speculate that, for Bernheim, the possibility of certain knowledge “seems to be more a conjurer’s prayer than a real conviction” (Rolf Torstendahl, “Fact, Truth, and Text: The Quest for a Firm Basis for Historical Knowledge Around 1900,” *History and Theory* 42 [2003], 320, 321). The paradox is dissolved, however, if certainty (*Gewißheit*), probabilities (*Wahrscheinlichkeiten*), and possibilities (*Möglichkeiten*) are positioned on a sliding scale. I understand Bernheim to say that, although historians seek to achieve certainty, they often fail to “reach” that lofty goal, so that they “need to be satisfied with *probabilities* or, in many cases, even with *possibilities*” (177, 178).

<sup>29</sup> Schleier, “Ranke in the Manuals,” 121.

Bavaria (604). There is not the slightest mention of complex emotional states that may prevent historians themselves from obeying the imperative of rational self-control. There is no sense of trauma, or awareness of the possibility to “have, at once, too much and too little distance” from the past.<sup>30</sup> More in particular, Bernheim’s ideal of self-distanciation seems to presuppose a Victorian *cordon sanitaire* “between conscious reflection and unconscious desire” that few post-Freudians would be prepared to accept.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of his life and times, however, Bernheim’s ideal of heroic self-discipline is hardly a surprise. The Greifswald historian has been described as an imperturbable, goal-oriented personality, committed to live what he believed.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in his efforts for educational reform, inspired by a Pestalozzian type of pedagogy, Bernheim seemed to think of students as motivated by a similar desire. He always insisted on the development and fostering of students’ critical skills and abilities as the prime goal of all education. From their first days in class, students should learn to practice the virtues of accuracy, carefulness, thoroughness, and self-distanciation.<sup>33</sup> Bernheim’s *Lehrbuch* therefore not only reflects ideals of intellectual

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<sup>30</sup> Phillips, “Close-Ups,” 143. This paradox of “too much and too little” lies at the heart of what Frank Ankersmit calls “the sublime dissociation of the past.” F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 340-350.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Taylor, “Introduction: How Far, How Near: Distance and Proximity in the Historical Imagination,” *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004), 118.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Herbert Schönebaum, “Karl Lamprecht und Ernst Bernheim,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 43 (1961), 238; Henri Baudet, “Ernst Bernheims ‘Unvollendete’: een zwanenzang,” in *De lectuur van het verleden: opstellen over de geschiedenis van de geschiedschrijving aangeboden aan Reginald de Schryver*, eds. Jo Tollebeek, Georgi Verbeeck, and Tom Verschaffel (Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 1998), 330.

<sup>33</sup> Ernst Bernheim, *Das akademische Studium der Geschichtswissenschaft: mit Beispielen von Anfängerübungen und einem Studienplan* (Greifswald: Bruncken & Co., 1909), 8-23; Irene Blechle, “Entdecker” der Hochschulpädagogik: die Universitätsreformer Ernst Bernheim (1850-1942) und Hans Schmidkunz (1863-1934) (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2002), 87-89, 138, 198-199; Andreas Gestrich, “Ist vielleicht der Universitätsunterricht selber verbesserungsbedürftig?” Ernst Bernheim und die Diskussion um die Reform des universitären Geschichtsunterrichts um 1900,” in *Vorlesung, Seminar, Repetitorium: universitäre geschichtswissenschaftliche Lehre im historischen Vergleich*, ed. Gabriele Lingelbach (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2006), 129-153. I have not yet been able to consult Mircea Ogrin’s (forthcoming) intellectual biography of Bernheim.

virtue and historical method in German historical scholarship around 1900, but also a pedagogical desire to mold the characters of a young generation.

Viewed on a broader canvas, Bernheim appears committed to conveying the importance of scholarly selfhood, or *wissenschaftliche Persönlichkeit*, viewed through a quasi-positivist lens. Although his book presents itself as a manual of method, the ethos of virtue that permeates its pages indicates that the author did not believe historical scholarship to depend on methodological rigor alone. His insistence on intellectual virtues and the (ascetic) character traits required for the exercise of such virtues reveals that Bernheim expected the historian to acquire a specific sense of scholarly selfhood. Self-distanciation can only, to a humanly possible extent, be realized by a *wissenschaftliche Persönlichkeit*.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, even if Bernheim's *Lehrbuch* is imbued with language of self-denial, the author believed a well-trained personality to be indispensable for the proper exercise of these virtues. In other words, the historian's "I" has not to be extinguished, but must be cultivated so as to transcend its own limitations. Such a view of self-discipline has not incorrectly been described as a hallmark of "the rhetoric of positivism."<sup>35</sup>

More generally, the equation of intellectual virtue with self-discipline is a typical feature of a "culture of objectivity" prevalent throughout late nineteenth-century Europe. The virtues Bernheim considers pivotal to the historian's academic self were widely shared among scholars in both the sciences and the humanities.<sup>36</sup> In the decades around 1900, generations of academics were socialized into an ethos of "painstaking care and exactitude, infinite patience, unflagging perseverance, preternatural sensory acuity, and an insatiable appetite for work." In libraries and laboratories alike, they struggled, or were supposed to struggle, against the

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<sup>34</sup> A theme issue of *Science in Context* 16, no. 1/2 (2003), edited by Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum, offers a fine overview of what was regarded as constituting scientific personhood in a variety of temporal, geographical, and disciplinary contexts. See also *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity*, eds. Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger, and Ian Hunter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and a subsequent theme issue of *Intellectual History Review* 18, no. 3 (2008), edited by Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger, and Ian Hunter.

<sup>35</sup> Philippe Carrard, "Disciplining Clio: The Rhetoric of Positivism," *Clio* 24 (1995), 189-204.

<sup>36</sup> I discuss some other, late nineteenth-century versions of this idea in Herman Paul, "The Scholarly Self: Ideals of Intellectual Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Leiden," in *The Making of the Humanities*, ed. Rens Bod *et al.*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming) and idem, "Een Leids historisch ethos? De epistemische deugden van Fruin en Acquoy," *Leidschrift* 25 (2010), 95-114.



“temptations and frailties of flesh and spirit,” not seldom “at high psychological cost.”<sup>37</sup> As Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison nicely put it: “Seventeenth-century epistemology aspired to the viewpoints of angels; nineteenth-century objectivity aspired to the self-discipline of saints.”<sup>38</sup> If anything, Bernheim’s ideal of self-distanciation reflects such a saint-like ethos of virtue.

- IV -

How much Bernheim, the historian and pedagogue portrayed in the previous pages, resembles the fictional character named “naive historian” that we encountered in the opening paragraph of this essay depends on one’s philosophical and psychological assumptions. When Bernheim, not unlike his French counterparts, Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos,<sup>39</sup> conceptualized the historian’s professional behavior in terms of vices and virtues, he did so in positivist fashion and in an unmistakably pre-Freudian psychological discourse, in which the non-rational, in whatever manifestation, was willfully denied a right to exist. Such presuppositions are unlikely to be endorsed by any contemporary advocate of virtue epistemology. Although many virtue epistemologists would agree with Bernheim that historical interpretation requires a cultivated intellectual character,<sup>40</sup> few would be prepared to reduce the complex web of relationships that connect historians to their objects of study to an epistemic bond governed by human reason alone. Moreover, although some analogies might be discerned between the notion of scholarly selfhood that we saw reflected in Bernheim’s call for self-discipline and the “virtue epistemology for

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<sup>37</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” *Representations* 40 (1992), 83; Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 77.

<sup>38</sup> Daston and Galison, “Image of Objectivity,” 83.

<sup>39</sup> Ch.-V. Langlois and Ch. Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1898).

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007); Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

historians” that I recently advocated in the pages of this journal,<sup>41</sup> my proposal to conceive of historical interpretation in terms of intellectual virtue proceeds from a view of selfhood that is considerably less robust and less exclusively reliant on reason and will-power than Bernheim’s.<sup>42</sup>

However, the point of invoking the figure of the “naive historian” at the outset of this paper was not to solicit applications for the role of this despised character. The point was rather to challenge the simplistic manner in which philosophers of history often identify a straw-man version of theoretical naïveté with historical scholarship as practiced in the decades around 1900, in what is loosely called the Rankean tradition. On closer inspection, Ranke and his followers appear not always to conform to the stereotypical images associated with them.<sup>43</sup> In a similar attempt at historiographical revision, the preceding pages have shown that the *historische Distanz* advocated in Bernheim’s influential manual does not refer to a passage of time that allows historians to study remote pasts from retrospective points of view. Historical distance is rather a state of mind that historians have to acquire in strenuous exercise of ascetic intellectual virtues. They have to distance themselves, not from the past, but from their biased beliefs about the past. On Bernheim’s view, then, distance is a matter of self-distanciation, and self-distanciation a hallmark of *wissenschaftliche Persönlichkeit*. Rather than a mapping of time onto space, historical distance, for Bernheim, is the outcome of a titanic psychological struggle to open oneself to the otherness of the past.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Herman Paul, “Performing History: How Historical Scholarship is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues,” *History and Theory* 50 (2011), 1-19.

<sup>42</sup> I cannot expand on this here, but refer to Paul, *Hayden White*, 151-152.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Dorothy Ross, “On the Misunderstanding of Ranke and the Origins of the Historical Profession in America,” in *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, eds. Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990) 154-169; Ulrich Muhlack, “Leopold Ranke, seine Geschichtsschreibung und seine Briefe: zur Einführung in die neue Ausgabe der Ranke-Korrespondenz,” in *Leopold von Ranke Briefwechsel*, eds. Ulrich Muhlack and Oliver Ramonat, vol. 1 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007), 3-49.

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