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SELF-IMAGES OF THE HISTORICAL PROFESSION:
IDEALIZED PRACTICES AND MYTHS OF ORIGIN

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ABSTRACT

What do self-images of historians, past and present, tell us about historical studies? Whereas Jonathan Gorman, in his recent study *Historical Judgement*, takes such self-images to define what counts as historiography, I argue that such a view pays insufficient attention to the variety in self-images that can be found among historians from Herodotus in Greece or Sima Qian in China up until the present. In fact, these images are too diverse and ever-changing to define unambiguously what counts as historical studies. For this reason, I suggest that self-images of historians are better treated as sources of their historiographical ideals. They reflect what historians, at a given time and place, consider as crucial to their work, what kind of models they admire, and how they try to justify or to legitimize their views on historical studies. In other words, I suggest that self-images of historians must be contextualized in much the same way as historians contextualize the self-images of eighteenth-century dynasties or nineteenth-century nation-states. They must be treated, not as markers of some universal notion of historical studies, but as time and place specific articulations of how historians conceive of their work.

Imagine a group of historians who are being asked to describe their profession¹. Imagine also that the group includes both younger and older, male and female, as well as Western and non-Western historians. How likely is this group to agree on what counts as historical studies? “The study of history is the most fitting nourishment to promote the strength of the expanding intellect of youth”, says the cracking voice of a grey-bearded man who looks like the oldest member of the group². When he has finished speaking, a female historian steps forward to declare enthusiastically: “Historians always are looking for new or previously unused manuscripts and new kinds of data that will cast light on our shared past”³. All right, mumbles an Indian voice, but historians worthy of their name are more than just fact-finders: “The historical discipline is premised on an invitation to debate

¹ On April 13, 2010, I read this paper at the European Social Science History Conference in Ghent. Eugen Zelenák, Davide Bondi, and Jonathan Gorman quote and comment upon it elsewhere in this issue. For this reason, I have made virtually no changes in preparing the text for publication. Apart from revising the introduction, I have only added some lengthy footnotes, partly in response to some perceptive questions raised by Bondi, partly also in response to Gorman’s rejoinder, published elsewhere in this issue. I am grateful for Gorman’s detailed reply, even though, in my assessment, it only reinforces my criticism of his position.

² G. C. Hebbe, *An Universal History, in a Series of Letters; Being a Complete and Impartial Narrative of the Most Remarkable Events of All Nations, From the Earliest Period to the Present Time, Forming a Complete History of the World* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1848), vol. 1, 9.

³ R. Napier, *Kansas and the West: New Perspectives* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 1.

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through research”⁴. Which in turn solicits the ironic commentary of someone who seems deeply worried about the ideological underpinnings of his profession: “History is perhaps the conservative discipline par excellence. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, most historians have affected a kind of willful methodological naiveté”⁵. And so it goes on, back and forth, in argument without end. Although the self-images these historians articulate are not necessarily incompatible, in the sense of being mutually exclusive, they focus on rather different aspects of their profession, thereby depicting their work in such divergent ways that one wonders whether, if pressed, these historians would be ready to accept each other as full colleagues.

What to make of these historians’ self-images? What can we, philosophers and historians of historiography, learn from the self-images or self-understanding of the historical discipline such as expressed in remarks like the ones just quoted? Oddly enough, this question has not received much attention so far⁶. Whereas historians have long learned to treat such self-images as ‘we British are a chosen people’ as expressions of nationalism, or as markers of ideological power, they do not often consider the possibility that their own self-images, or the self-understanding of their own historical discipline, may serve equally ideological functions. More in general, whereas historians eagerly contextualize (or ‘historicize’) the self-images of, say, eighteenth-century dynasties, nineteenth-century nation states, and twentieth-century totalitarian movements, they do not usually bring an equal amount of contextual sensitiveness to the self-images of their fellow-historians, past and present⁷. Only in recent years, due to an emerging interest in (academic) practices sustaining historiographical research⁸, the self-perceptions of historians have begun to receive scholarly attention⁹.

Yet, before arguing that such historiographical self-images ought to be treated in just the same way as the ‘chosen people’ rhetoric of British nationalists, that is, as idealized self-perceptions and myths of origin, let us consider an argument

⁴ P. Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

⁵ H. White, “The Burden of History”, *History and Theory*, 5 (1966): 111-134, 112.

⁶ See, however, K. Flasch, “Das Selbstverständnis des historischen Wissens”, in *Naturwissenschaft, Geisteswissenschaft, Kulturwissenschaft: Einheit, Gegensatz, Komplementarität?* ed. O.G. Oexle (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1998), 61-77. Flasch’s essay, which I discovered only after having finished mine, treats the historian’s self-images in much the same way as I do in this article.

⁷ H. Paul, “Introduction: Fathers of History”, *Storia della Storiografia*, 59-60 (2011), 224-230.

⁸ See, e.g., J. Tollebeek, *Fredericq & Zonen: een antropologie van de moderne geschiedwetenschap* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008); Henning Trüper, “Topography of a Method: François Louis Ganshof and the Writing of History” (European University Institute, Ph.D. thesis, 2008); D. Saxer, “Die Schärfung des Quellenblicks: die geschichtswissenschaftliche Forschungspraxis in Wien und Zürich (1840-1914)” (University of Zurich, Ph.D. thesis, 2005).

⁹ Besides Flasch’s article, mentioned in note 6, see Bonnie G. Smith’s influential study, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998) or J. D. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also the forum section on “fathers of history” in *Storia della Storiografia*, 59-60 (2011).

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recently put forward by the Irish philosopher of history, Jonathan Gorman. If philosophers of history wonder what ‘historical studies’ are (how to define the study of history, or where to draw the boundaries between those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’), they have to listen to historians themselves, argues Gorman in his book *Historical Judgement*. For Gorman, the historians’ professional self-image, or, more precisely, the self-understanding of the historical discipline such as articulated by historians of historiography, defines what counts as ‘historical studies’. This is an interesting argument, if only because, as I said earlier, the self-images produced by the historical discipline have received only sporadic attention from philosophers and historians of historical studies. At the same time, it is clear from the outset that Gorman’s treatment of these self-images is less contextually sensitive than the approach I would like to suggest. According to Gorman, self-images are not only sources of idealized self-perception and myths that serve to legitimize certain scholarly practices; they are also markers of what the study of history ‘essentially’ is.

In this paper, I will assess the relative merits of Gorman’s proposal. Can we, philosophers and historians of historiography, take the discipline’s professional self-understandings as defining the profession, as Gorman suggests? Or do they tell us something else about the practice of historical studies? My answer is twofold. First, I argue that *philosophers* of history, in defining what counts as historical studies, cannot rely on such disciplinary self-understandings. I thus take issue with Gorman’s proposal, mainly because, in my assessment, it fails to acknowledge that such self-images vary from culture to culture, from time to time, and from one sub-discipline to the other. This does not imply, however, that the historians’ self-understandings are irrelevant. In the last part of this paper, I argue that *historians* of historiography may interpret them as expressions of historiographical ideals cherished by historians at a certain time and place. Their self-images show us how they conceived of historical studies, how they taught others to become good historians, what sort of models or examples they admired, and how they positioned themselves in historical trajectories that often served as myths of origin, that is, as master narratives legitimizing their preferred view of historical studies¹⁰.

I.

Why do philosophers of history have to follow the self-understanding of the historical discipline in defining what counts as historical studies? Or, put differently, why does Gorman argue that “the philosophy of a discipline is in the first instance the historiographical recovery of the rules or principles or model in terms of which the practitioners of the discipline conceive themselves to be

¹⁰ Much of what follows draws heavily on my review of Gorman’s book, published as H. Paul, “How Historians Learn to Make Historical Judgments”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 3 (2009): 90-108. I am grateful to Brill Academic Publishers for their permission to reuse this material here.

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operating” (7)¹¹? It is not merely because the author wants to avoid the “intellectual imperialism” (18) that comes so often with models imposed by philosophers of history upon the historical discipline. Neither is it, I believe, because Gorman, in a sympathetic nod towards the guild of ‘practicing’ historians, encourages these historians to participate in theoretical reflection on their work. Rather, he presents a philosophical argument for giving the discipline’s self-understanding so much weight. In its shortest possible form – in Gorman’s book, it takes almost fifty pages – this argument proceeds in six steps.

(1) Before we can talk philosophically about the historical discipline, we need to ‘model’ it.

(2) We have such models, for example in Karl Popper’s and Carl Hempel’s nomological-deductive approaches. But there may be (real or imaginary) alternatives to these models. How can we choose among these options?

(3) Our choice is complicated by the fact that a model, by its very nature, is simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive. A description of the historical discipline necessarily presupposes a definition of that same discipline – you need to know what to include and what not – but such a definition, unintentionally perhaps but unavoidably, also has a normative dimension.

(4) On classic empiricist premises, the choice for a descriptive model is not too difficult: the best model is simply the one that best corresponds to the facts that it pretends to describe. Factual accuracy is the criterion we use in this case. However, on the same empiricist premises, there are no criteria for prescriptive models other than personal taste or preference: “we can literally choose what we *like*” (48). How, then, can we justify our choice of a model, given that all models have prescriptive elements?

(5) From Thomas Kuhn, Gorman derives the insight that scholarly disciplines use their own descriptive/prescriptive models to establish who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’. Academic disciplines are ‘rule-governed institutions’ (54), in which newcomers have to conform to the patterns established by previous generations: “this is what scientists do; so do whatever scientists do” (56). In Gorman’s interpretation, both premise and conclusion in this recommendation have descriptive and prescriptive elements. Thus, when newcomers are advised to follow the example of their older peers, something different than a leap from description to prescription takes place. “There is then no obvious reason of principle why the historical facts should not justify the prescriptive conclusion” (56).

(6) Since the “historical facts” that philosophers of history want to study thus consist of rule-governed practices with an intrinsic prescriptive character, Hume’s is/ought-distinction also fails to apply if philosophers of history justify the choice of their model with an appeal to their “historical facts”. That is to say, if philosophers of history, like Kuhn, don’t use their own standards “to determine who counts as being a scientist, but *that of the practitioners of the discipline*” (58),

¹¹ Page numbers in parentheses refer to J. Gorman, *Historical Judgement: The Limits of Historiographical Choice* (Montreal- Kingston-Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008).

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the justification for their model cannot be challenged on Humean grounds. Obviously, the standards used within the historical discipline may be contingent (they have been *chosen*, as Gorman prefers to say) and change over time, but they nonetheless offer a criterion for what counts as historical scholarship at a given time and place in history.

II.

If this is an accurate synopsis of Gorman's long argument, at least two questions arise. First, isn't there an element of circularity in Gorman's argument that philosophers of history need historians to tell them who count as historians? The author agrees that "it would be circular to impose a philosophical theory of justification in writing historiography, when expecting that theory to be itself supported by the historical 'facts'" (58). But if one adopts the standards used within the discipline, one "commits no circularity of argument in doing so" (58). This is supposed to be the case because not the outside observer, but 'future scientists' decide about inclusion of previous scientists in the discipline (58). True as this may be, it simply moves the problem to another level. For who are these 'future historians' deciding about their discipline's past, that is, the historians informing philosophers of history who count as historians? Unless one decides pragmatically that historians are those employed by history departments, or those publishing in academic history journals, circularity seems difficult to avoid¹².

¹² In his rejoinder, Gorman misses the point, first of all, by mixing up two senses of the word 'pragmatic'. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word may (1) refer to a philosophical movement represented by such thinkers as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, but also (2) denote a "dealing with matters in accordance with practical rather than theoretical considerations or general principles; aiming at what is achievable rather than ideal". As the context should make clear, I think, I am using 'pragmatic' in the latter, everyday sense when I speak about the pragmatic decision to classify as historians those who operate within infrastructures that are recognized by their contemporaries as 'historical'. Consequently, in response to my charge of 'circularity', Gorman fails to address the issue at stake when he explains that pragmatism in Peirce's sense of the word (or, more precisely, 'holist pragmatism' in Gorman's own sense of the word) does not accept the Cartesian assumption "that one should make no claim without justification". The point, however, is that Gorman's proposal to grant 'historians' the right to define who counts as 'historians' not only poses a theoretical question (doesn't this presuppose a prior definition of 'historians'?), but also a very practical one: on whose door are we going to knock? We may assume that such historians as Keith Windschuttle, author of *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (New York: Free Press, 1997), are unwilling to accept colleagues inspired by Michael Foucault or Hayden White as 'real' historians. On the other hand, certain Edward Said-inspired post-colonial historians are not unlikely to portray Leopold von Ranke as a racist nationalist rather than as a 'true' historian. So who are we going to trust? I should like to think that Gorman does not want the 'future scientists' he appoints as arbiters in these matters to exclude as 'non-historians' all those who do not fit within their own preferred categories. To my regret, however, Gorman does not provide any protection against it. Hence my suggestion not to rely on 'future scientists', but to accept as historians all those who are recognized as such by their contemporaries. More specifically, in order to find out who are classified as historians at a certain time and place, we may want to look, for example, at infrastructures associated

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Secondly, Gorman admits that historians may not agree on the nature of their discipline. He notes there is a variety of historical schools (58) and that, by consequence, the “discipline’s self-understood model may in principle be pluralist in form” (59). This can imply two things: either that philosophers of history have to identify patterns in this plurality or some ‘broad sense’ in which historians “share the issues about which they are disagreeing”, or that philosophers of history have to take sides, which means that their analysis of the historical discipline is only valid for a specific part of the discipline at a specific time and place in history. Since historians not merely quarrel about trivialities, but have mutually exclusive views on what their discipline is supposed to do, the second option seems more realistic than the first¹³. Moreover, differences between historians are likely to multiply if we increase the time-span of our analysis. Many cliometricians in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, insisted on a radical break with traditional, source-oriented historiography. Although “[t]he very belligerence with which the revolutionaries advertised their novelties”¹⁴, especially in the United States, was not in itself a proof of divergence, their orientation toward economic theory nonetheless distinguished the cliometricians’ understanding of what historians do, or should do, from the views held by the early *Annales*-historians, or the Prussian Historical School, or those philologically-educated history professors, in nineteenth-century Germany, who devoted their entire careers to the editing of medieval sources.

In short, laudable as it is to show “more respect for historiography” (3), it is unclear so far why one would prefer Gorman’s fascination for the discipline’s self-understanding over a pragmatic, infrastructural definition of historical scholarship, especially because historians’ self-understanding is so variable and unstable.

III.

Gorman, however, does not believe these self-images to vary so dramatically. In Chapter 3, he presents historians of historiography (historians writing the history of their own discipline) as equivalents of the ‘future scientists’ who decide about the inclusion of ‘previous scientists’ in their discipline. Also, in spite of the reservations I expressed earlier, he expects these historiographers to offer a relatively monolithic ‘model’ of the discipline. “We will not succeed in our task of recovering the character of historiography *as a discipline* if the outcome of our work were merely a list of different views on the part of different historians. We

with the word ‘historical’. Whereas, in Western Europe, journals and history departments have been providing such infrastructures since the nineteenth century, other times and regions obviously had different infrastructures (say, recognition as ‘court historian’ or as ‘monastery’s chronicler’).

¹³ See, e.g., R. William Fogel and G. R. Elton, *Which Road to the Past? Two Views of History* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1983), not to mention deep disagreements on a larger geographical scale (European versus Chinese historical thinking, for example).

¹⁴ D. N. McCloskey, *Econometric History* (Houndsmills: Macmillan Education, 1987), 13.

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seek views sufficiently shared to amount to a *consensus* on the character of the discipline” (76). Indeed, historiographers often seem to offer such a consensus, not because historians past and present reveal so much agreement, but because, as I will argue in a moment, histories of historical writing are often Whiggish genealogies of the Western discipline in its current state.

Since historians always have to choose which questions to ask, what count as answers to these questions, and how to arrive at such answers, the history of historical writing can be written as a ‘historiography of historians’ choices’ (87). Characteristic of the historical discipline, however, is that its members often agree on certain choices – for example, on the priority of ‘critical cognitive values’ (examination of evidence) over ‘traditional cognitive values’ (reliance on authoritative works such as the Bible) (92). Such agreements function like R. G. Collingwood’s ‘absolute presuppositions’: they are contingent, to be sure, yet fundamental and ‘absolute for a time’, because they are not actively doubted or contrasted with serious alternatives (94). Gorman also calls them ‘non-choices’ or “*limits of choice in the historical judgements made by historians*” (95). The best example of such a non-choice is that historians, despite their disagreements, seem to agree on which issues are worth disagreeing about (98). Based on a consultation of some histories of historical writing, Gorman concludes that historians from ancient times to the present have defined their work around a number of unchanging parameters:

Historians from Herodotus to the present have characteristically worried and disagreed about interrelated issues: the nature and justification of historical truth and the role of historiographical truth-telling, the acceptability and grounds of moral judgement in historiography, the historiographical synthesis of facts (including analytical and substantive theories of historical explanation), and historians’ role or function in society (120).

So here we have the pattern in the discipline’s self-understanding that philosophers of history may be looking for. Obviously, this pattern stands or falls with the accuracy of the histories of historiography consulted for this project. If these studies merely project their authors’ own understanding of the discipline back upon Herodotus or Leopold von Ranke, the pattern may inform us about positions held in the present, but tells us little about the discipline in its past incarnations.

Surprisingly, Gorman argues that the historiographers he consults – Herbert Butterfield, E. H. Carr, Collingwood, and a few others – do precisely this: they don’t study the history of their discipline in the same way that historians treat other topics. Gorman claims that the discipline’s self-understanding is often *unhistorical*, in the sense that past historians are not understood from their proper *historical context* (102, 125). Thus, in Gorman’s analysis, Carr portrays past historians “in the light of his own view of what historiography is” (122) and Marc Bloch interprets their work in a “most unhistorical fashion” (129). “One often hears the quotation ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’. But it is not; for historians of historiography, it is largely the *same* country” (120).

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But why, then, does Gorman want philosophers of history to rely on such unhistorical representations of the historical discipline? What do they gain from identifying a number of *questions* historians have typically asked, given that these historians have often expelled each other from their self-defined disciplines because of the different *answers* they gave to those questions? And does Gorman really expect all histories of historiography – including Chinese, Japanese, and Indian versions – to agree on the discipline’s shared concerns? If not, what, then, justifies his preference for mid-twentieth-century British and French historiographies over ‘global’ or ‘postcolonial’ historiographical studies produced in our own time¹⁵?

As long as these questions are not satisfactorily answered, I am not convinced by Gorman’s proposal. For as, I hope, my reflections so far have made clear, the self-images of the historical discipline are too diverse and ever-changing to define unambiguously what counts as historical studies¹⁶. Also, as Eugen Zelenák

¹⁵ Recent examples include G.G. Iggers and Q. E. Wang (with S. Mukherjee), *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008); M. Völkel, *Geschichtsschreibung: eine Einführung in globaler Perspektive* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2006), D. Woolf, “Historiography”, in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. M. Cline Horowitz (New York: Scribner, 2005), vol. 1, xxxv-lxxxviii; or the essays collected in *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Q. E. Wang and G. G. Iggers (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002) and *Across Cultural Borders: Historiography in Global Perspective*, ed. E. Fuchs and B. Stuchtey (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

¹⁶ In his reply to this article, Gorman claims that it “is not a part of pragmatic philosophy to seek unambiguous definitions”. However, just a few lines earlier, he claims that “historians have characteristically shared certain very general things despite the many other matters about which they disagree”. If Gorman understands those “very general things” to include what, in *Historical Judgement*, he calls “the nature and justification of historical truth and the role of historiographical truth-telling, the acceptability and grounds of moral judgement in historiography, the historiographical synthesis of facts (including analytical and substantive theories of historical explanation), and historians’ role or function in society” (120), he offers an unambiguous definition nonetheless. Yet, assuming that his list of criteria is not intended to serve as such a universally applicable definition of historical studies, what else should we make of it? When Gorman replies that this list is the outcome of a time and place bound process of negotiations, I am afraid he only confirms my fears. For what urged me to raise a number of critical questions, especially in the previous paragraph, is my wish to prevent Gorman from unquestioningly accepting the ‘disciplinary histories’ through which historians (just like other scholars) so often justify their methods, approaches, and practices. Also, I do not want him to come up with such a disciplinary history himself. Yet, by claiming that historians, among other things, are preoccupied with “the nature and justification of historical truth”, Gorman already comes close to offering such a disciplinary history. As for this specific criterion, one wonders, for example, whether it allows Gorman to confer the title of historian to such figures as Dimitrie Cantemir, the learned prince of Moldavia, Ibn Khaldun, the North African polymath, or Sima Qian, the famous prefect of the ‘grand scribes’ of the Han Dynasty. My concern is more general, though. I am afraid that Gorman’s emphasis on the ‘pragmatics’ of drawing boundaries between those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’ allows him, in principle, to excommunicate any undesired ‘other’. For if historians are free to choose, or to negotiate, whom to include and whom to leave out, on what grounds then can Gorman possibly object against Whiggish genealogies of current-day practice or preference? If Cantemir, Ibn Khaldun, and Sima Qian can be excluded as ‘non-historians’, so then can Ottoman court historians, early-modern church historians, or everyone prior to the days of Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Leopold von Ranke. In fact, along these lines, the history of historical writing can be shortened, both temporally and geographically, so as to

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wonders: even if historians, past and present, would reach agreement on a ‘model’ of historical studies, what would privilege those historians’ ‘inside’ view from the philosophers’ ‘outside’ perspective¹⁷?

IV.

Yet, all this should not tempt us to turn away from the discipline’s self-images. For even though these self-images cannot tell *philosophers* of history what historians do, *historians* of historical studies, I believe, do well to learn from Gorman’s book how important these self-images are for understanding processes of socialization, value acquisition, and identity development within the historical discipline. Or, in less technical terms: I believe these self-images are expressions of historiographical ideals that help structuring the discipline, educating newcomers, and excluding those historians who, for various reasons, do not conform to the prevalent self-images of the discipline. Especially Gorman’s observation that these self-images sometimes result in rather unhistorical portrayals of the disciplinary past is an insight that historians of historical studies may want to develop further.

This observation, by the way, is not entirely new. Some years ago, Mark Salber Phillips (not mentioned in Gorman’s book) already argued that the “history of historical thought has largely been written as a handmaiden to one particular philosophical position”. Taking Collingwood’s *The Idea of History* as his example, Phillips observed that this book, instead of carefully historicizing past historians, often merely judged them on whether or not they fitted within Collingwood’s “canon of proper historical practice”.

If the subject had been any aspect of the history of thought other than historiography itself, Collingwood would have pressed himself to make the imaginative effort his own historicism requires [...]. But the subject here it not Aristotle’s ethics or Hobbes’s politics; it is historical knowledge, and on this score Collingwood has a prior commitment to a particular position that renders him incapable of extending his sympathies to those who construct a relationship to the past in other terms¹⁸.

include only those historians who most approximate a current Western ideal of historical scholarship. What a surprise, then, to observe that those historians “characteristically worried and disagreed about interrelated issues”!

¹⁷ Zelenák’s contribution can be found elsewhere in this issue. Much sharper criticism has been leveled against Gorman’s book by J. Zammito, “Discipline, Philosophy, and History”, *History and Theory*, 49 (2010): 289-303 and P. A. Roth, in a review published in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (August 12, 2008), online at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=13886> (last retrieved on April 12, 2010).

¹⁸ M.S. Phillips, “Distance and Historical Representation”, *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (2004): 123-141, 133, 137. Charles Péguy, the noted French poet and essayist, made a similar point as early as 1913: “Historians don’t want to write a history of historians. They are quite happy to plunge endlessly into limitless historical detail. But they themselves don’t want to be counted as part of the limitless historical detail. They don’t want to be part of the historical order. It’s as if doctors didn’t want to fall ill and die”. Quoted in P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. P. Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1.

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Unfortunately, neither Phillips nor Gorman tries to explain this incapability, or, more generally, the reluctance of many historians to historicize the history of historical studies¹⁹.

If I were to venture a hypothesis, I would say that Collingwood's history of historical writing presents a canon of identification figures which embody the methods, values, and approaches practiced by present-day historians. This is not uncommon: every professional practice – be it historical writing or psychological counseling or firefighting – requires a repertoire of exemplary figures signifying what can and what cannot be properly said. Every discipline needs examples that teach what to do and what to avoid, what to strive after and what to keep away from. If a professional practice is a “coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity”, as Alasdair MacIntyre famously said²⁰, then the standards of excellence as well as the ways in which such standards can be implemented must be embodied by concrete examples. Therefore, in so far as the history of historical writing is a function of the discipline's self-understanding, it cannot be written in the same way historians treat other topics: it has to conform to the choices and non-choices that present-day historians make.

Obviously, not only in Collingwood's case, this easily results in anachronistic and teleological accounts of the disciplinary past. If Herodotus, Thucydides, and Ranke are presented as ‘models’ of what Collingwood values in historical studies, then the history of historiography becomes, indeed, an exercise in disciplinary genealogy. It produces ‘disciplinary histories’, offering what Stefan Collini calls “an account of the alleged historical development of an enterprise the identity of which is defined by the concerns of the current practitioners of a particular scientific field”²¹. Typically, Herodotus and Thucydides become ‘precursors’ or ‘forerunners’, who are said to have made ‘contributions’ to practices, ideas, or problems “regarded as currently constitutive of our discipline”²². Disciplinary

¹⁹ In *Historical Judgement*, the closest thing to an explanation is Gorman's speculation that historians have hesitated to contextualize their predecessors, “as if locating historians in some historical context would introduce the very relativism many of them wished to keep at bay” (130). Phillips merely speaks of ‘dogmatism’ (137).

²⁰ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), 187.

²¹ S. Collini, “‘Discipline History’ and ‘Intellectual History’: Reflections on the Historiography of the Social Sciences in Britain and France”, *Revue de Synthèse* 109, (1988): 387-399, 388. See also S. Collini, D. Winch, and J. Burrow, *The Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4-5; F. Samelson, “History, Origin Myth, and Ideology: The ‘Discovery’ of Social Psychology by Auguste Comte”, in *Dialectics and Ideology in Psychology*, ed. K. S. Larsen (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986), 14-29; and C. Condren, S. Gaukroger, and I. Hunter, “Introduction”, in *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: the Nature of a Contested Identity*, ed. C. Condren, S. Gaukroger, and I. Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-2.

²² R. A. Jones, “On Understanding a Sociological Classic”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 83 (1977): 279-319, 284-285.

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histories are thus an equivalent to what Butterfield called Whig history: they are “retroactively constructed histories of the continuous and cumulative development” of a scholarly discipline²³.

Why do historians, who often have the reputation of trying to understand the past in its own terms, produce such patently unhistorical accounts of their disciplinary past? As Wolf Lepenies and Peter Weingart argue,

Histories of disciplines are being written and rewritten, to extend the present (or what is to become the future) as far as possible back into the past, thereby constructing an image of continuity, consistency, and determinacy. In battles for supremacy in a field, in times of uncertainty of orientation, or in conflicts over the truth claims of contradicting schools of thought a history of the discipline serves to rearrange the relative impact of past achievements, the proper evaluation of founding fathers and disciplines, heroic discoveries and consequential mistakes. Histories thus serve to legitimate new paradigms and to delegitimize old ones. A different periodization, the mentioning of some, hitherto less known, and the ignoring of others, hitherto highly respected scholars will change the impact of a discipline’s history, it will restructure the memory of the past and, by way of socializing, structure the future²⁴.

Lepenies and Weingart also suggest that disciplinary histories can have a socializing function, especially in so far as they appear in student textbooks²⁵. And, of course, they can have a host of additional functions, which become most visible if one pays close attention to the producers and audiences of such disciplinary histories²⁶.

Thus, if historiographical studies tell historians “who are to count as their historian predecessors” (99), as Gorman argues, these predecessors are selected in the light of present-day priorities. When Herbert Baxter Adams and his fellow-American positivists named Ranke a honorary member of the American Historical Association in 1885, or when German historical sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s preferred Max Weber over Ranke as their father figure, they justified their own beliefs and practices through what one may call a “retrospective choice of ancestorship”²⁷. They offered a selective canon of founding fathers with the purpose of legitimizing their own approaches to the study of the past. As sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner put it:

While it may make no difference to the substance of a science concerning who, in fact, its ‘founding father’ was, nonetheless, shared professional *beliefs* concerning this may be significant for a discipline’s professional organization and its practitioners’ self-images. A ‘founding father’ is a professional symbol [...]. Where there are conflicts, by later generations, concerning who their ‘founding father’ was, we

²³ W. Lepenies and P. Weingart, “Introduction”, in *Functions and Uses of Disciplinary Histories*, ed. L. Graham, W. Lepenies, and P. Weingart (Dordrecht; Boston; Lancaster: D. Reidel, 1983), xvi.

²⁴ Lepenies and Weingart, “Introduction”, xvii.

²⁵ Lepenies and Weingart, “Introduction”, xvi.

²⁶ Lepenies and Weingart, “Introduction”, xix-xx. See also P. G. Abir-Am, “How Scientists View Their Heroes: Some Remarks on the Mechanism of Myth Construction”, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 15 (1982): 281-315 and my comments in “Introduction: Fathers of History”.

²⁷ This formulation is indebted to H. White, “What Is a Historical System?” in *Biology, History, and Natural Philosophy*, ed. A. D. Breck and W. Yourgrau (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1972), 233-242.

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suspect that this may be a serious question essentially reflecting a dispute over the character of the profession²⁸.

Following Gouldner, I should like to call such genealogies and founding fathers ‘mythic’. This is not to be understood in a pejorative sense, but as a technical classification of that sort of narratives that provides purpose and identity by explaining how a present-day phenomenon has evolved from its (imaginary) origins²⁹. Mythic genealogies of the historical discipline are disciplinary histories that tell historians in a Whiggish manner “who are to count as their historian predecessors” (99) and, accordingly, what sort of work they themselves have to produce if they want to be counted as true historians, too.

V.

What, then, finally, can historians of historical studies do with such self-images of the historical discipline? Let me offer three suggestions.

First, historians of historical studies may study the historical discipline, not as an embodiment of timeless historiographical concerns, but as a time and place specific community fascinated by certain questions, inspired by certain examples, driven by certain values, rooted in certain traditions, aiming at certain goals, requiring certain forms of professional behavior, and using certain methodological tools. Conceptualized as a practice in MacIntyre’s sense of the word, the historical discipline is much more than a community of scholars that may (or may not) reach intersubjective agreement on what counts as proper historical methods or acceptable interpretations of the past. It also nurtures cognitive values – defined as values determining “which statements are worthy of being considered knowledge” or from what sources such knowledge may emerge – and moral values such as honesty, integrity, and fairness³⁰. It encourages a scholarly ethos that cherishes epistemic virtues such as ‘truthfulness’ and ‘objectivity’, while condemning epistemic vices such as anachronism or ‘temporal provincialism’³¹. Typically, it

²⁸ A. W. Gouldner, “Introduction”, in E. Durkheim, *Socialism and Saint-Simon*, trans. C. Sattler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), ix n. 5. For examples of such quarrels over disciplinary father figures, see S. Berger, “‘Fathers’ and Their Fate in Modern European National Historiographies” and H. Paul, “Fathers of History: Metamorphoses of a Metaphor”, both in *Storia della Storiografia*, 59-60 (2011), 231-250 and 251-267.

²⁹ H. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. R. M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

³⁰ A. Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 36-39; T. L. Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric versus Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*”, in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, MA and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 145-173.

³¹ H. Paul, “Performing History: How Historical Scholarship is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues”, *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), in press; H. Paul, “The Epistemic Virtues of Historical Scholarship; or, the Moral Dimensions of a Scholarly Character”, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 91 (2008): 371-387; A. Tucker, “Temporal Provincialism: Anachronism, Retrospection and Evidence”, *Scientia Poetica*, 10 (2006): 299-317.

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tends to illustrate these modes of good and bad professional behavior with examples drawn from what present-day historians recognize as the history of their discipline. Thus, self-images of the historical discipline, presented in the form of disciplinary histories, are sources of information, not (*pace* Gorman) about what historical studies actually are, but about the goals, methods, attitudes, and values that historians at a particular moment in time and place regard as essential to their work³².

Second, if Gouldner is right in suggesting that disciplinary histories change, or father figures are replaced, when practitioners of a certain discipline have diverging views on how their field should develop (which topics ought to be studied, which methods are to be used, etc.), then historians of historical studies may study how, in which ways, and to what extent changing self-images serve to legitimize changing disciplinary practices. This implies they have to examine the producers, the audiences, and the reception of disciplinary histories, such as offered in Collingwood's *The Idea of History*. To what extent was Collingwood's portrayal of the historical discipline shared by others? How influential was his mythic genealogy of the discipline? How representative was his selection of father figures? And, subsequently, what happened to this historical canon? Why is it no longer shared, for example by those historians advocating a 'global' or 'cross-cultural' history of historical studies³³? How are these changing historiographical narratives related to (real or potential) changes in the disciplinary practice?

Finally, as I argued earlier, self-images have a socializing function in so far as they embody the standards of what counts as good performance in historical studies. Students and other newcomers in the disciplinary practice learn to incorporate these standards by example. Their textbooks tell them which examples to follow (e.g., Herodotus and Thucydides, who, according to a recent specimen of the genre, "tried to get the *facts* straight") and which ones to avoid (e.g., Oswald Spengler, a "metahistorian" who "produced two almost unreadable volumes")³⁴. Of course, such an appropriation of disciplinary standards is never a matter of mere passive acceptance: newcomers often interpret, adapt, or even change the standards of a discipline. For this reason, the standards of good performance, such as expressed in the discipline's self-images, are not etched in stone: they are the

³² Does this imply historians of historiography have to *correct* the self-images produced by their fellow-historians (a question Davide Bondi posed to me in preparing his contribution to this issue)? I am inclined to say: yes and no. On a first-order level (how do we historians conceive of ourselves?), no correction is intended. Historians of historiography are not in a position to provide 'better' or 'more accurate' self-images of the historical discipline than their fellow-historians. Correction only takes place on a second-order level (what is the nature of those self-images?). In so far, then, as historians of historiography treat self-images of the historical discipline as idealized practices and myths of origin, rather than as markers of what historical studies essentially are, they are not telling their fellow-historians how better to conceive of their discipline, but rather investigating the nature and functions of self-images produced by the historical discipline.

³³ See the literature mentioned in note 15.

³⁴ These examples are borrowed from R. C. Williams, *The Historian's Toolbox: A Student's Guide to the Theory and Craft of History*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY; London: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 12, 22.

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outcome of ‘negotiations’, or the result of interaction between insiders and newcomers³⁵. Accordingly, there is perhaps no better setting for studying (changing) disciplinary self-images than the context of professional history education. If, as I said earlier, self-images do not define real historical studies, but articulate historiographical ideals cherished at a certain time and place, such ideals are likely to be most explicitly worded in contexts of professional socialization³⁶.

In sum I treat their self-images as sources of what they considered important, what they defined as the essence of their work, and how they sought to legitimize or to promote such views. Rather than treating the rather diverse group of historians evoked in my opening paragraph as members of a single uniform profession, or singling out those group members whose ideas or preferences seem most similar to mine, I suggest we pay attention to each of their voices, listen how they make their point, and try to understand why they, each in their specific historical situation, practiced history the way they did.

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³⁵ See A. E. Austin and M. McDaniels, “Preparing the Professorate for the Future: Graduate Student Socialization for Faculty Roles”, in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 21, ed. J. C. Smart (Dordrecht: Springer 2006), 397-456.

³⁶ One may wonder to what extent this is true, not only in an age of discipline-formation, but also in the present, in which some believe the historical discipline to crumble apart. Can there be professional socialization without a discipline in the sense of a (widely) shared commitment to goals of historical inquiry and means through which to work towards those goals? Do such shared commitments still exist? “As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist”, writes Peter Novick, referring to American academia in the early 1980s. “The profession was as described in the last verse of the Book of Judges. In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes”. (P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 628.) Although this is not the place to respond in any degree of detail to Novick’s sweeping generalization, I agree with those critics who argue that Novick tends to overestimate the consensus of earlier generations as much as he underestimates the tacit but effective consensus that underlies the (admittedly heterogeneous) discipline in its present-day form. See, e.g., Eileen Ka-May Cheng, “Exceptional History? The Origins of Historiography in the United States,” *History and Theory*, 47 (2008), 200-228 and Judith Lichtenberg, “The Will to Truth: A Reply to Novick,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 560 (1998), 43-54. Accordingly, although processes of socialization into professional practices now take different forms than they did fifty or hundred years ago, there is no reason to think that such processes no longer take place. Graduate education is still a matter of professional socialization.