

# Truth, Objectivity and Evidence in History Writing

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## Abstract

This article aims to suggest one possible – pragmatist in a very broad sense of the term – approach to making sense of the way truth and objectivity function within the discipline of history. It argues that history doesn't need a new theory of truth; rather, it is necessary to analyse in theoretical terms how truth is understood and used in historical inquiry. This article considers truth as an epistemic term in a certain given – historiographical – use, and objectivity is understood as an epistemic virtue valued in a specific contemporary scientific community, that of professional historians.

The main argument is developed in three interrelated steps. First, the article makes the case for a pragmatic “truth pact” in history writing, arguing that the conditions of historical truth depend on the illocutionary force of historical utterance. Second, it proposes that this “truth pact” is “guaranteed” by fellow historians or, in other words: truth claims in history writing are based not on their direct relation with reality but on a disciplinary consensus as to the methods of inquiry, cognitive values and epistemic virtues. Third, it will establish a clear connection between truth and proof in history writing, arguing that the “truth pact” is grounded in a critical analysis of the available evidence.

## Keywords

truth – objectivity – evidence – consensus – pragmatism – speech act theory

Much ink has been spilt over the question of truth and objectivity in philosophy, history, and philosophy of history. Therefore the focus of the present article is avowedly very narrow, even though the stakes are as high as ever. I will not say anything about truth and objectivity in general; all that I aim at is to suggest one possible – vaguely pragmatist – approach to making sense of the

way truth and objectivity function within the discipline of history. I don't think history needs a new theory of truth; rather, it is necessary to analyse in theoretical terms how truth is understood and used in historical inquiry. Thus, the relevant question is not whether history satisfies one or another theory of truth or objectivity, but which are the conceptions of truth and objectivity practised within the discipline of history.<sup>1</sup> I am not interested in truth in any general metaphysical sense, but as an epistemic term in a certain given – historiographical – use; and I understand objectivity as an epistemic virtue valued in a specific contemporary scientific community, that of professional historians.<sup>2</sup>

Everyone about to enter into a discussion of truth will necessarily recall Richard Rorty's persistently repeated call for rejecting the concepts of truth and objectivity altogether and replacing them with such terms as, for instance, justification, conversation and solidarity: "the point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth," as Rorty put it as early as 1978.<sup>3</sup> In the context of philosophy of history, similar calls

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- 1 Here, I will immediately take the opportunity of referring to an important forerunner who was among the first to emphasise the epistemic autonomy of the discipline of history as requiring a specific internal analysis ("history is an epistemically licit discipline which deserves to be taken seriously on its own terms") – I mean Leon J. Goldstein, who has for undeservedly long been left on the margins of the contemporary discussions, even though his views have attracted ever more attention in recent years. See L. J. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976) (with the above quote on page XI), and *The What and Why of History: Philosophical Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). For discussion, see L. O'Sullivan, "Leon Goldstein and the Epistemology of Historical Knowing", *History and Theory*, 45 (2006), 204–228; P. A. Roth, "The Pasts", *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), 313–339. Among more recent (and quite different) attempts to address the epistemic autonomy of history writing, see R. Martin, *The Past Within Us: An Empirical Approach to Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); C. Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit: Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie* (Cologne: Böhlau, [1987] 1997); M. Bunzl, *Real History: Reflections on Historical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1997).
  - 2 Generally, the use and function of truth in history writing can be examined along two distinct lines: 1) by analysing, based on an empirical corpus, how historians themselves interpret historical truth in their texts and what role the concept of truth plays in their discourse, seeing that the methods of discourse analysis are probably best suited for this kind of approach; 2) by analysing, in theoretical terms, not what historians think of the truth but how they (often unwittingly) use it in their texts – what function the truth fulfills there; possibly, the tools best fit for this approach may be those borrowed from the philosophy of science, and from epistemology. The present article should be classified under the latter category.
  - 3 R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1978, p. 377. The same call occurs in various phrasing through many of Rorty's works; see, e.g.,

have been sounded repeatedly over the last decades, among others by Alun Munslow, for example: “I remain surprised not that there is a continuing debate over the definition of truth in history but that it is a matter of debate at all.”<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately the calls for rejecting the concept of truth seem to have been anything but fruitful; instead, they appear to have added fuel to the fire of debates. Thus, instead of altogether discarding the traditional concepts of truth and objectivity, it seems more consequential to try and re-inform them. Truth should not be seen as an exasperating phantasm to be delivered of, but an intriguing concept *bon à penser*. Or, as Michael Dummett recently put it: “The task of the philosopher is neither to belittle truth nor to exalt it, neither to deny it nor to defend it, but to explain why we need the concept and what it is to possess it.”<sup>5</sup>

The calls for rejecting truth have fallen on particularly barren ground amongst historians who still, quite unanimously and shamelessly, regard the pursuit of truth as a cornerstone of their professional work and don't feel the slightest inclination towards giving up debates over truth – as proven, among many others, by Carlo Ginzburg: “The debate about truth is one of the most important (in a sense, *the* most important) intellectual issues with which we are confronted.”<sup>6</sup> This observation was only recently seconded in this journal

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*Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. XIII–XVII, 173 *et al.*; *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 3–22 *et al.*; *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 21–45, 126–161; *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3–8, 19–163; *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 23–46. See also R. Rorty and P. Engel, *What's the Use of Truth*, ed. P. Savidan, trans. W. McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). One of the more interesting among Rorty's numerous critics is, in my view, D. L. Hildebrand; see his *Beyond Realism and Antirealism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), esp. pp. 87–127, but also H. Price, “Truth as Convenient Friction”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 100 (2003), 167–190.

4 A. Munslow, *The New History* (Edinburgh: Pearson, 2003), p. 86.

5 M. Dummett, *Truth and the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 116. I should add that in other respects, I don't find Dummett's late attempt at re-defining his previous theory of truth very convincing and still prefer his early antirealist arguments as formulated in “The Reality of the Past”, in his *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 358–374. For a good critical discussion of Dummett's late ideas, see M. G. Murphey, *Truth and History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), pp. 14–22.

6 C. Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof. The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 49. Needless to say, one can also find historians who believe that the issue of truth has been overestimated, most notably

by Frank Ankersmit; and I shall happily take his insight for one of the guidelines of the present article: “In fact, the question whether there is something special about truth in history is one of the most important problems in philosophy of history.”<sup>7</sup> Yet I dare say that the notions of truth and objectivity can be saved in the discipline of history only if we are prepared to revise some of our traditional conceptions of what the desirable properties of truth and objectivity involve.

### Toward a Pragmatist Philosophy of History

Placing my approach under the general rubric of “pragmatism” as I do, I nevertheless have to specify that I conceive of “pragmatism” in a very broad sense – more precisely, in two different senses at once.

On the one hand, I understand “pragmatism” in linguistic terms, that is, in my discussion I partially rely on the standpoints of pragmatic linguistics, analysing history writing in the light of the theory of speech acts. But on the other hand, I classify my reflections under pragmatist philosophy in a very general sense of the term, philosophically founding some of my reflections on the views of Peirce, James and Dewey, as well as their later followers. Thus the present article can, in a certain sense, be regarded as a small contribution towards working out a pragmatist philosophy – or theory – of history, something that I regard as an important general aim for the future.<sup>8</sup>

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by Quentin Skinner; see, for instance, his *Visions of Politics, vol. 1: Regarding the Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 52: “I am convinced, in short, that the importance of truth for the kind of historical enquiries I am considering has been much exaggerated.”

7 F. Ankersmit, “Introduction: History and Truth”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 7 (2013), 258. See also M. Day, *The Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 194: “The question of *historical* truth raises specific issues that are not relevant to the question of truth in general.”

8 Heretofore, pragmatist philosophy of history has attracted the interest of very few researchers; amongst the few important exceptions, I would like to note the works of David Hildebrand and James Kloppenberg, see D. Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Antirealism*; Id., “Pragmatic Objectivity in History, Journalism and Philosophy”, *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 27 (2011), 1–20; J. T. Kloppenberg, “Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing”, *The American Historical Review*, 94 (1989), 1011–1030; Id., “Pragmatism and the Practice of History: From Turner and Du Bois to Today”, *Metaphilosophy*, 35 (2004), 202–225; Id., “Pragmatism – An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?”, *Journal of American History*, 83 (1996), 100–138. A somewhat simplified attempt at introducing pragmatist views

Pragmatism, of course, is not a clearly delimited philosophical doctrine but a rather heterogeneous school of thought that has from the very beginning been branching off in various directions. Yet on the basis of a Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblance’, it is possible to infer a number of themes or principles that are characteristic of pragmatism in general (but not exclusively), and therefore also form the philosophical framework of the present discussion.<sup>9</sup> In the first place, pragmatism is characterised by what David Hildebrand has called “the practical starting point”:<sup>10</sup> pragmatism analyses philosophical problems and concepts in practical and experiential terms, while evading a clear separation of theory and practice. Knowledge and thinking are always seen as forms of activity – as experimental inquiry. Secondly, most pragmatists hold in common the principle of fallibilism: each belief must be supported by existing evidence, it is adopted only temporarily and can be developed, altered or altogether discarded as further evidence mounts.<sup>11</sup> Finally (although the list could certainly be continued), I would emphasise the conviction that in scientific or other inquiry, it is the community of researchers or interpreters that plays a key role in controlling and validating knowledge of a certain type. “Every new idea and theory has to be submitted to this community for confirmation

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into debates over history was made by: J. Appleby, L. Hunt, and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), esp. pp. 284–285. An interesting dialogue with pragmatism is kept going by French historian Gérard Noiriel, see his *Sur la “crise” de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2nd ed. 2005), pp. 230–258, and *Penser avec, penser contre. Itinéraire d’un historien* (Paris: Belin, 2003), pp. 209–227.

- 9 A good survey of the main concepts and authors of pragmatism is given by two recent *Companions*: J. R. Shook and J. Margolis (eds.), *A Companion to Pragmatism* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); S. Pihlström (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Pragmatism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011). But see also J.-P. Cometti, *Qu’est-ce que le pragmatisme?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).
- 10 Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Antirealism*, pp. 70–74 *et passim*. It is interesting to note that already in his talk on 26 August 1898, entitled “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results”, William James identified pragmatism with “the principle of practicalism”. See *The Writings of William James*, ed. J. J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 348.
- 11 The doctrine of fallibilism, of course, originates with Peirce and has been extensively discussed; I myself have found the articles of Joseph Margolis very beneficial; see his “Peirce’s Fallibilism”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 34 (1998), 535–569; Id., “Rethinking Peirce’s Fallibilism”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 43 (2007), 229–249. But see also E. F. Cooke, *Peirce’s Pragmatic Theory of Inquiry: Fallibilism and Indeterminacy* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).

and test”, as John Dewey explicitly expressed it in his day.<sup>12</sup> In pragmatism, the project of inquiry is always a social, not individual one.

The pragmatist slant of the present article ties in very well with some recent developments in philosophy of science, where a “practical” or “performative” turn<sup>13</sup> or post-positivism and naturalism are attracting ever more attention. These developments spring from the ground of “scientific pluralism”<sup>14</sup> and value the primacy of scientific practices before philosophical analysis. Philosophy is forgoing its “epistemic sovereignty”,<sup>15</sup> and it is being understood with increasing frequency as “continuous with (or perhaps a part of) empirical science”.<sup>16</sup> Or, in John H. Zammito’s happy phrasing as he summarised these developments: “Thus the distinctive move in recent science studies has been the shift from conceiving of science as *knowledge* to conceiving of science as *practice*.”<sup>17</sup> I do not intend to reopen here the old debate over whether history is a science or not, but will follow Collingwood in his observation that “‘science’ means any organized body of knowledge”<sup>18</sup> and that in the discipline of history, knowledge about the past is produced in a certain specific way and within a specific institutional framework, such as enables history to be seen as a

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- 12 J. Dewey, “Individualism, Old and New”, in his *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 5: 1929–1930, ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 115.
- 13 See for instance, H. Paul, “Performing History: How Historical Scholarship is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues”, *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), 1–19.
- 14 S. H. Kellert, H. E. Longino, and C. K. Waters (eds.), *Scientific Pluralism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- 15 J. Rouse, “Beyond Epistemic Sovereignty”, in P. Galison and D. J. Stump (eds.), *The Disunity of Science: Boundaries, Contexts, and Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 389–416.
- 16 J. Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 1.
- 17 J. H. Zammito, “History/Philosophy/Science: Some Lessons for Philosophy of History”, *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), 397. Zammito refers in this connection to Andrew Pickering, see A. Pickering, “From Science as Knowledge to Science as Practice”, in Id. (ed.), *Science as Practice and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 1–27. Zammito’s work has certainly been of central importance in connecting philosophy of history more closely with the latest developments in philosophy of science; see most recently, J. H. Zammito, “The ‘Last Dogma’ of Positivism: Historicist Naturalism and the Fact/Value Dichotomy”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012), 305–338; Id., “Post-positivist Realism: Regrounding Representation”, in N. Partner and S. Foot (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), pp. 401–423.
- 18 R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History: And Other Writings in Philosophy of History*, ed. W. H. Dray and W. J. van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.

science at least in the “weak” sense of the word. Thus, whenever I speak about historical inquiry or history writing in the following pages, I always understand them only in the narrow disciplinary sense – as scientific (i.e. academic) historiography practised by professional historians.<sup>19</sup>

I will develop my argument in three interrelated steps. First, I shall make the case for a pragmatic “truth pact” in history writing, arguing that the conditions of historical truth depend on the illocutionary force of historical utterance. Second, I shall propose that this “truth pact” is “guaranteed” by fellow historians or, in other words: truth claims in history writing are based not on their direct relation with reality but on a disciplinary consensus as to the methods of inquiry, cognitive values and epistemic virtues. Third, I shall make a clear connection between truth and proof in history writing, arguing that the “truth pact” is grounded in a critical analysis of the available evidence.

### “Truth Pact” in History Writing

It seems to me, following many others, that on a general level, the most fruitful way of understanding the function of truth in history and other scientific disciplines is through an analogy with the Wittgensteinian “language game”.<sup>20</sup> The meaning and function of scientific interpretations can best be assessed in their various uses, in the context of specific language games and life forms. In the recent happy wording of John Caputo: “Truth is like a winning move in a game, like checkmate in chess, but there are different rules for different genres. As there is a plurality of games, so there is a family of truths, in the lower case and the plural, with standards proper to each sphere. There is no meta-language, no one trans-historical overarching game or rule or story, no high court of Reason, but rather a multiplicity of good reasons in multiple forms of life.”<sup>21</sup> Caputo immediately goes on to qualify that the language game model must not be taken to the extreme; on the one hand, one must avoid isolating the games too much, rather emphasising the “family resemblance” between

19 Cf. A. Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); J. Rüsen, *Historik: Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013), pp. 53–96.

20 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen. Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th ed. P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 8 *et passim*.

21 J. D. Caputo, *Truth: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 222.

different games; on the other hand, rules must not be made unnecessarily rigid, valuing instead their flexibility and changeability.

It was largely Wittgenstein's recommendation – to study the meaning in the *usage* of words – that provided, in the 1950s, the grounds on which J. L. Austin built his pragmatic theory of language or, more precisely, the theory of speech acts, developed later, in the 1960s and 1970s, by John Searle.<sup>22</sup> In my opinion, it is precisely the theory of speech acts that enables us to understand with greatest adequacy the function of truth in history writing. While previously, history philosophical discussions have been dominated by semantic concepts of truth, the pragmatic dimension of truth appears more relevant in practical historical inquiry. In other words, we shouldn't be studying only what historians *say* (*write*) and how it relates to reality, but rather what they are *doing* while they say it – that is, the intention and illocutionary force of what they say. Here is not the place to go into the detail of the theory of speech acts and its various elaborations, so I will just give a short formulation of my thesis and then try and argue for it – I will claim that the most fruitful way of analysing history writing is by defining it as an assertive illocutionary act. Let's recall that in Austin's footsteps Searle distinguished five basic types of illocutionary acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives.<sup>23</sup> The typology relies on identifying what is called the illocutionary point of a speech act, since each speech act has an inner point or goal the attaining of which is a prerequisite for the act's success. In order to explain an assertive illocutionary act, Searle writes: "The point or purpose of the members of the assertive class is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition."<sup>24</sup> In other words: speakers succeed in attaining an assertive illocutionary point, when the proposition they express represents circumstances that are true within the context of the utterance.

Before continuing up this line of thought, I will allow myself a digression and introduce an analogy or conceptual figure helpful, in my view, for under-

22 J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). For a more recent discussion, see for instance D. Vanderveken and S. Kubo, "Introduction", in D. Vanderveken and S. Kubo (eds.), *Essays in Speech Act Theory* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001), pp. 1–21; D. Vanderveken, "Success, Satisfaction and Truth in the Logic of Speech Acts and Formal Semantics", in S. Davis and B. S. Gillan (eds.), *Semantics: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 710–734.

23 J. R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 12–20.

24 Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p. 12.



standing the function of truth in history writing. At the beginning of the 1970s, as the French literary scholar Philippe Lejeune began his research on the autobiographical genre, he faced a dilemma as to how an autobiography should be defined. Fairly soon he gave up the conventional semantic or syntactic criteria and turned to pragmatist theories. He decided to base his definition not on the texts but rather on their reception, or more precisely, on the interaction that takes place between an autobiographical text and its reader. From this vantage point, it was the author's implicit or explicit "pact" with the reader, his voluntary commitment to speak the truth – called by Lejeune the "autobiographical pact" – that proved to be the definitive characteristic of an autobiography.<sup>25</sup> Thus, according to Lejeune, autobiography must be defined primarily on the pragmatic level, "it is a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing; it is a historically variable *contractual effect*".<sup>26</sup> Even though Lejeune emphasises the inevitability of the "truth pact" for a text to be classified as an autobiography, this is not to say that the reader should regard everything put down by the autobiographer as strictly corresponding to reality: "What's important about the autobiography is that the referential pact be *concluded* and subsequently also *observed*; but it is not necessary for the result to bear a strict similarity to reality. The reader may find the referential pact ill observed without the text losing any of its referential value (quite the contrary);" but – Lejeune finds it necessary to add – "the same will not be the case with historical or journalistic texts."<sup>27</sup>

I believe that Lejeune's approach might turn out to be very useful in defining the nature of historiography and its relations with the category of truth.<sup>28</sup>

25 P. Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, [1975] 1996). See also P. Lejeune, "Le pacte autobiographique, vingt-cinq ans après", in his *Signes de vie. Le pacte autobiographique 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), pp. 11–30.

26 Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 45.

27 Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 37.

28 Although Lejeune's idea of a "truth pact" has been occasionally mentioned in the context of (mainly German) philosophy of history, no attempt has yet been made, as far as I'm aware of, to articulate it in a more systematic manner. See, for instance, P. Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 339; Id., "Wahrheit, historische", in S. Jordan (ed.), *Lexikon Geschichtswissenschaft: hundert Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002), p. 316; A. Epple, *Empfindsame Geschichtsschreibung. Eine Geschlechtergeschichte der Historiographie zwischen Aufklärung und Historismus* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), pp. 12–29; Id., "Historiographiegeschichte als Diskursanalyse und Analytik der Macht: eine Neubestimmung der Geschichtsschreibung unter den Bedingungen der Geschlechtergeschichte", *L'Homme. Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft*, 15 (2004), 90; Id., "Von Werwölfen und Schutzengeln: Historiographiegeschichte als Analyse

In the footsteps of Lejeune, I would argue that we should search for truth in historiography in the mutual agreement, in the “contractual effect” between the historian and his readers.<sup>29</sup> Every historian has to make a kind of “truth pact” with his addressees, asserting, more often implicitly than explicitly, that it is his intention to tell the truth. Needless to say, this commitment rarely takes such an abrupt and total form, it is rather an implicit pact of honesty or a declaration of his intention to confine himself to the truth bound to the evidence and disciplinary practices, as well as an explicit indication of the field to which this oath applies. However, it is extremely important that this “pact” be sincere and serious, not part of the game we can often witness in the case of fiction.

Returning now to Searle’s discussion of the assertive illocutionary act, we see that the pragmatic rules set out by him as prerequisites for an assertion as a type of illocutionary act are at the same time also rather well suited to function as ground rules for the historiographical “truth pact”:

1. The essential rule: the maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition.<sup>30</sup>
2. The preparatory rules: the speaker must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition.
3. The expressed proposition must not be obviously true to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of utterance.

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des historischen Apriori”, in T. Etzemöller and J. Eckel (eds.), *Neue Zugänge zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), pp. 178–180; W. Paravicini, *Die Wahrheit der Historiker* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010), pp. 1 and 30. Chris Lorenz also mentions the idea of “the pact” in a recent interview, see C. Lorenz and M. Tamm, “Who Knows Where the Time Goes”, *Rethinking History* (forthcoming), cf. Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit*, p. 407.

- 29 It might be of interest to know that I had recently the opportunity of asking Philippe Lejeune what he thought about this idea of transplanting his concept of “truth pact” from autobiography to historiography. And his response was very encouraging: “Yes, this is exactly the same thing, a kind of historical truth pact, but with one important difference: when the autobiographer promises to speak the whole truth about himself, the historian promises to speak the whole truth about the others, except maybe about himself...” See M. Tamm, “Elu kui jutustus. Intervjuu Philippe Lejeune’iga” [Life as a Narrative: An Interview with Philippe Lejeune], *Vikerkaar*, no. 1/2 (2013), p. 149.
- 30 Robert Brandom has rightly connected this principle to Frege: “What might be thought of as Frege’s fundamental *pragmatic* principle is that in *asserting* a claim, one is committing oneself to its *truth*.” See R. B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 11.

4. The sincerity rule: the speaker commits himself to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition.<sup>31</sup>

Needless to say, the above rules as such do not constitute sufficient conditions for historical truth; rather, they form the necessary grounds for an historical assertion to be considered as true. Whenever an historian makes a statement, asserts, narrates, explains, or discusses anything, he is looking for an agreement with the readers based on the recognition of a truth claim.<sup>32</sup> Thus, trying to draw some preliminary conclusions from our discussion so far, we could say that in historiography, truth is an intentional category based on a pragmatic “truth pact” between the historian and his readers.

Yet the question immediately arises, how the reader will recognise the author’s intention of truth? Here we must first recall, together with Searle, that as far as intentionality is concerned, we need to distinguish between its structural and communicative functions, as it were; in other words, only a derived, communicative intentionality is characteristic of public representations (such as history writing), meaning that intentionality does not move across minds automatically but must be communicated with conventional means, that is, by using verbal or other signals.<sup>33</sup> Each text, be it fictional or factual, must send out certain signals in order to be adequately received. While Searle thought such signals could be found only on the pragmatic level,<sup>34</sup> more recent work in narratology has proved that they can also be identified on the textual and paratextual levels.<sup>35</sup> On the textual level, each historiographical text includes

31 Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p. 62. For more details, see Searle, *Speech Acts*, pp. 54–71. Just in case, I find it necessary to add that while relying here on Searle’s theory of speech acts, I do not share his realist positions in epistemological matters; for a good critical discussion, see R. Rorty, “John Searle on Realism and Relativism”, in his *Truth and Progress*, pp. 63–83.

32 Cf. J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 308.

33 Cf. J. R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

34 Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p. 65.

35 Amongst numerous works on this topic, I have found the studies of Dorrit Cohn and Matias Martínez most useful; see D. Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); M. Martínez and M. Scheffel, “Narratology and Theory of Fiction: Remarks on a Complex Relationship”, in T. Kindt and H.-H. Müller (eds.), *What is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 221–237; C. Klein and M. Martínez, “Wirklichkeitserzählungen. Felder, Formen und Funktionen nicht-literarischen Erzählens”, in C. Klein and M. Martínez

features peculiar to itself – “marks of historicity” (*marques d'historicité*), as Krzysztof Pomian has called them.<sup>36</sup> These are textual elements allowing, on the one hand, the reader to choose the right regime of reception, while on the other they provide the extremely necessary opportunity of checking the written text later on. A prominent position amongst these “marks of historicity” is held by footnotes, whether they refer to the historian’s own evidence or to the work of other scholars. Although the primary function of the footnote is to communicate information, it also signals the author’s truth intent; it assures the reader that whatever I say, it is not my own invention, you may look it up, if you please, and you’ll arrive at the same conclusions.<sup>37</sup> Anthony Grafton, author of an interesting inquiry into the history of the footnote, justly concludes that “the culturally contingent and eminently fallible footnote offers the only guarantee we have that statements about the past derive from identifiable sources. And that is the only ground we have to trust them.”<sup>38</sup> But in addition to footnotes, a historiographical text includes other “signals of factuality”,<sup>39</sup> such as citations of evidence, bibliography, charts, tables, illustrations, etc. Nor must the paratextual signals included in historical texts be underestimated, since the intention of a historiographical text is often signalled to the reader by the author’s name, the title, cover design, book series or journal where it was published, the introductory text on the cover, and so on. At the same time, however, it must be kept in mind that recognition of a text as historiography is ultimately still something that happens *a priori*, it must precede the identification of the specific “marks” and “signals” of a historical text. It is precisely because we *presume* (by previous learning or experience) that historiographical text must have certain characteristic features that we automatically tune in on a suitable reading regime and are able to see the lack of some feature (as, for

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(eds.), *Wirklichkeitserzählungen. Felder, Formen und Funktionen nicht-literarischen Erzählens* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2009), pp. 1–13; M. Martínez and M. Scheffel, *Einführung in die Erzähltheorie*, rev. 9th ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2012).

36 K. Pomian, *Sur l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 32–34.

37 A. Prost, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), p. 268. But see also J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 225–247; P. Carrard, *Poetics of New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 149–166.

38 A. Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 233.

39 See F. Zipfe, *Fiktion, Fiktivität, Fiktionalität: Analysen zur Fiktion in der Literatur und zum Fiktionsbegriff in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2001), pp. 246–247.

example, the author's deliberate omission of footnotes) as a "minus-existence" unable, however, to undermine the system as such.<sup>40</sup>

This line of argument logically leads up to another important subject, that of the difference between factual (historiographical) and fictional text; although it is not possible nor strictly necessary to dwell on this much-argued issue in the present article. I will but observe that in order to understand history writing adequately, it is important to note the distinction between a factual and a fictional narrative. Although narrative is one of the most important cognitive instruments in the service of history writing, as has been brilliantly demonstrated by the works of Louis Mink, Arthur Danto, Hayden White, Paul Ricœur, and many others, it is not to say that history writing is absorbed by fictionality. As Chiel van der Akker recently showed, the distinction in the context of historiography between narratives claiming to be true and others that make no such claims was in fact drawn already by Mink. Akker phrases this distinction very succinctly in the context of the truth problem: "The point is not that we should focus on the content of the historical narrative if we are to discuss its truth. The point is that the difference between narratives which *purport* to be true (and can be doubted and turn out to be false) and narratives which are not supposed to be true (and therefore are not supposed to be doubted nor turn out to be false), cannot be a difference in content only, for it is at least also a difference in purpose."<sup>41</sup>

In the same spirit, contemporary pragmatist theory of fiction finds that whereas factual narratives advance claims of referential truthfulness, fictional narratives advance no such claims.<sup>42</sup> The distinction emerges perhaps most clearly in the comparison not of factual and fictional, but factual and forged narratives. A forgery presents itself to the reader on exactly the same grounds as every other factual narrative, concluding a seemingly similar "truth pact"

40 I'm here adapting the semiotician Juri Lotman's discussion of the reception of artistic text, see Ю. М. Лотман, *Структура художественного текста* (Москва: Искусство, 1970).

41 C. van den Akker, "Mink's Riddle of Narrative Truth", *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 7 (2013), 349. For a similar kind of arguments, see Chris Lorenz, "Can Histories be True? Narrativism, Positivism and the 'Metaphorical Turn'", *History and Theory*, 37 (1998), 309–329.

42 In pragmatically oriented theory of fiction, I have found the works of Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Olivier Caïra most enlightening, see J.-M. Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Id., "Quelle vérités pour quelle fictions?", *L'Homme*, 175–176 (2005), 19–36; O. Caïra, *Définir la fiction. Du roman au jeu d'échecs* (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2011). But see also L. Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 41–44.

with its readers, but as soon as the forgery is revealed, its radical difference from a genuine factual narrative becomes apparent. And the revelation does not result in a fictional, but a forged narrative – not fictional history, but false history. In this context, it is very edifying to analyse those cases where one or another author has been caught forging history – whether it consist in breaking the “truth pact” in historiography (like, for instance, David Irving) or in autobiography (like Binjamin Wilkomirski alias Bruno Dösseker).<sup>43</sup>

### Disciplinary Objectivity in History Writing

If we agree that truth, in history writing, is an intentional category based on a “truth pact” with the readers and signalled in many various ways both performatively and textually, the question next arises what is it that makes the receiver believe that truth claim. Unlike an autobiography representing what no other source but itself can represent to us, historiography is not exempt from the test of verification; the historian’s “truth pact” needs “guarantors” in order to be convincing.<sup>44</sup> While traditionally the truth of the historian’s statements has been often linked to their correspondence to historical reality,<sup>45</sup> the pragmatist viewpoint considers it impossible to check any such correspondence since it is only the historian’s claim, not a provable fact. In pragmatist terms, the historian’s truth intent is based not on its direct relation with reality but is mediated in various ways and based on a disciplinary consensus as to methods of inquiry, cognitive values and epistemic virtues. The “truth pact” is made reliable and checkable primarily by what might be called the regulative ideal of objectivity.

43 See for instance, R. Evans, *Lying about Hitler. History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); B. Eskin, *A Life in Pieces: The Making and Unmaking of Binjamin Wilkomirski* (New York and London: Norton, 2002).

44 To be accurate, the idea that the historian’s (more broadly, the scholar’s) person alone is not enough to prove the truth of his statements, was only born during the evolution of modern scientific disciplines in the nineteenth century; in pre-modern time, truth was based primarily on the author’s moral attitude and social position; see for instance, S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); J. Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), pp. 59–74.

45 The main part of the various arguments advanced for this approach can be found in: B. C. McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). (Though it’s true that McCullagh does not support the classical correspondence theory of truth but presents its so-called “weak” version, or the correlation theory of truth.)

Definitions of objectivity are, of course, at least as numerous as the various theories of truth, and the critical analysis of them is a task that surpasses the possibilities of the present article. Therefore I shall confine myself to outlining just two general principles. First, “objectivity” is by no means a self-evident or given thing, but a historically evolved concept the meaning of which has undergone several important transformations in both philosophy and science.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, however, “objectivity” is nothing monolithic or unequivocal; on the contrary, the semantic field and practical uses of the term are very broad and complex.<sup>47</sup> In view of the above, it must thus be asked whether it is at all possible to speak about objectivity in contemporary historical inquiry – and if it is, then about which objectivity? I think that the right way to approach this question was shown by Paul Ricœur as long as sixty years ago:

We expect from history a certain objectivity, an objectivity that fits it, and it is from this and no other term that we must begin. So what do we expect to see under that title? Objectivity must here be understood in its strict epistemological sense: objective is what has been elaborated, ordered and comprehended by methodical thought, and can thus be made understandable by such thought. . . . This is not to say that it should in any way be similar to objectivity in physics or biology; the levels of objectivity are as many as are methodical behaviours. We thus expect history to add its own little province to the diverse empire of objectivity.<sup>48</sup>

Thus neither historiography – nor any other scientific discipline, in fact – has any use for the idea of “absolute objectivity” that aims at the elimination of all

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46 The works of Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have been instrumental for understanding this fact; see in particular, L. Daston and P. Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), for an interesting discussion of the book, see “Book Review Forum”, *Victorian Studies*, 50 (2008), 641–677. See also S. Gaukroger, *Objectivity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). In the context of history writing, an important contribution to the study of the idea of objectivity is, of course, Peter Novick’s classical study *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

47 This idea was most clearly articulated by Allan Megill in his important article “Four Senses of Objectivity”, *Annals of Scholarship*, 8 (1991), 301–20, repr. in his *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 107–124; see also A. Megill (ed.), *Rethinking Objectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

48 P. Ricœur, “Objectivité et subjectivité en histoire”, in his *Histoire et Vérité* (Paris: Seuil [1955] 2001), pp. 27–28.

“subjective distortion”; instead, we should follow Ricœur in providing the concept of “objectivity” with a far more concrete content and link it to the established methods of inquiry and cognitive values recognised by a given scientific discipline, in our case – that of history. In other words, we should proceed from the notion of objectivity defined by Allan Megill as *disciplinary objectivity*:

Disciplinary objectivity emphasizes not universal criteria of judgement but particular, yet still authoritative, disciplinary criteria. It emphasizes not the eventual convergence of all inquirers of good will but the proximate convergence of accredited inquirers within a given field. Defined institutionally, disciplinary objectivity refers to the claim by practitioners of a particular discipline (subdiscipline, research field, etc) to have authoritative jurisdiction over its area of competence. Such claims take different forms, with different degrees of explicitness and articulation. The groundings vary from discipline to discipline, from field to field, and they change over time as well.<sup>49</sup>

The idea of disciplinary objectivity is pragmatic by nature, and corresponds pretty well to both Peirce’s and Dewey’s conceptions of objectivity. In more recent times, “pragmatic objectivity” has indeed been spoken of in the context of both media studies and philosophy of history.<sup>50</sup> Pragmatists emphasise that

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49 Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error*, pp. 117–118. Megill of course distinguishes as many as four different senses of objectivity – absolute, disciplinary, dialectical and procedural. In my treatment, these can be grouped into two main sets, if desired – on the one hand, absolute and dialectical objectivity which are reduced to the relations between subject and object, and on the other, disciplinary and procedural objectivity which focus on the relation between the subject and inquiry. Arthur Fine’s version of procedural objectivity, for instance, comes very close to disciplinary objectivity; see A. Fine, “The Viewpoint of No One in Particular”, in W. Egginton and M. Sandbothe (eds.), *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 115–129.

50 See especially S. Ward, *Pragmatic News Objectivity: Objectivity with a Human Face*, (Discussion Paper D-37, Cambridge, MA: The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1999); Id., *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press), 2004; “Truth and Objectivity”, in L. Wilkins and C. G. Christians (eds.), *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 71–83; D. L. Hildebrand, “Pragmatic Objectivity in History, Journalism and Philosophy”; Id., “From Neutral to Pragmatic Objectivity: Practical Lessons about Inquiry From Journalism”, paper read at the Pragmatism & Objectivity Workshop, Helsinki, 23 May, 2013, on-line: [www.nordprag.org/papers/Pao/Hildebrand.pdf](http://www.nordprag.org/papers/Pao/Hildebrand.pdf) (22 December 2013).



objectivity is a way of *doing* things, “to speak or think “objectively” is to inquire in an epistemically responsible way which enacts certain rules and virtues”.<sup>51</sup> From Peirce onwards, pragmatism has understood “project of inquiry” as a social, not individual phenomenon.<sup>52</sup> Objectivity is not a feature characteristic of the statements, but describes the activity of inquirers whose interpretations acquire the quality of objectivity through certain epistemic attitudes.<sup>53</sup> Pragmatically understood disciplinary objectivity relies on the idea of disciplinary consensus – it adopts the elementary consensus current in a particular discipline as its standard of objectivity. Thus, in order to use the concept of disciplinary objectivity meaningfully, we must first answer the question, what is discipline and what is consensus.

My understanding of discipline is practical and largely derives from Michel Foucault’s idea that “a discipline is defined by a domain of objects, a set of methods, a corpus of propositions considered to be true, a play of rules and definitions, of techniques and instruments”.<sup>54</sup> In other words, a discipline

51 Hildebrand, “From Neutral to Pragmatic Objectivity”, p. 6.

52 See D. L. Hildebrand, “Genuine Doubt and the Community in Peirce’s Theory of Inquiry”, *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 12 (1996), 33–43.

53 A similar position is also held by several philosophers of science who emphasise the social nature of knowledge; see especially H. E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Id., *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); M. Solomon, *Social Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). But see also S. Fuchs, “A Sociological Theory of Objectivity”, *Science Studies*, 11 (1997), 4–26; T. Willholt, “Die Objektivität der Wissenschaften als soziales Phänomen”, *Analyse & Kritik*, 2 (2009), 261–273.

54 M. Foucault, “The Order of Discourse. Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, given 2 December 1970”, in R. Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Boston, MA, and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 59. The recent growing interest in inter-, trans- and postdisciplinarity has given rise to a rich literature on “discipline” as a concept and a historical phenomenon; see for instance, I. Veit-Brause, “The Disciplining of History: Perspectives on a Configurational Analysis of its Disciplinary History”, in R. Torstendahl and I. Veit-Brause (eds.), *History-Making. The Intellectual and Social Formation of a Discipline* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets, Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1996), pp. 7–29; D. R. Kelley, “The Problem of Knowledge and the Concept of Discipline”, in Id., (eds.), *History and the Disciplines: The Reclassification of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (Kent: University of Rochester Press, 1997), pp. 13–28; J. Heilborn, “A Regime of Disciplines: Toward a Historical Sociology of Disciplinary Knowledge”, in C. Camic and H. Joas (eds.), *The Dialogical Turn: Roles for Sociology in the Postdisciplinary Age* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 23–42; J.-L. Fabiani, “A quoi sert la notion de discipline?”, in J. Boutier, J.-C. Passeron, and J. Revel (eds.), *Qu’est-ce qu’une discipline?* (Paris: Editions de l’EHESS, 2006), pp. 11–34; G. E. R. Lloyd, *Disciplines in the Making: Cross-Cultural*

constitutes a kind of “framework within which certain approaches are legitimated, certain kinds of language and argumentation accepted, certain forms of dissemination of knowledge favored, and certain kinds of standards of peer evaluation accepted as conventional – and within which others are not”.<sup>55</sup> Briefly, discipline is a socially constituted set of practices, a specifically disciplined way of producing knowledge. But it is also very important to keep in mind that a discipline is always historically and spatially situated, and submitted to changes and challenges. Appropriation of disciplinary principles is never a matter of merely passive acceptance: neophytes often interpret, adapt, or even modify the standards of a discipline.<sup>56</sup> The discipline of history in its present form has evolved mainly over the last couple of centuries as a result of three mutually interlinked processes: professionalisation, organisation, and institutionalisation.<sup>57</sup> The discipline of history certainly does not form a single homogeneous entity in the modern world; yet most professional historians working in such societies as respect the freedom of expression, share similar attitudes, habits, and values – a fact that enables us justly to operate with the concept of a “discipline of history”.

This last fact leads us to the question of how to understand and define disciplinary consensus. Because it is, in fact, quite astonishing that the socially and intellectually very heterogeneous community of professional historians should share broadly the same basic attitudes, or as Aviezer Tucker has put it: “It is surprising to note that historians of diverse interests, historical periods and contexts, creeds, nationalities, political opinions, and other collective

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*Perspectives on Elites, Learning and Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); R. C. Post, “Debating Disciplinarity”, *Cultural Inquiry*, 35 (2009), 749–770.

55 J. M. Banner, Jr., *Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 3.

56 Paul, “Performing History”, p. 3.

57 The evolution of the discipline of history is an interesting and important subject in its own rights that has been ever more carefully investigated, particularly in recent years; a few of the more noteworthy works would be, for instance: D. R. Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); G. Lingelbach, *Klio macht Karriere: Die Institutionalisierung der Geschichtswissenschaft in Frankreich und den USA in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); R. Torstendahl, “Historical Professionalism: A Changing Product of Communities within the Discipline”, *Storia della storiografia*, 56 (2009), 3–26; S. Macintyre, J. Manguerra, and A. Pók (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Vol. 4: 1800–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For an interesting cartographic survey, see I. Porciani and L. Raphael (eds.), *Atlas of Historiography: The Making of a Profession 1800–2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), esp. pp. 2–25.

identities have independently reached similar beliefs about history and have adopted many of the beliefs about history that resulted from the research of others.”<sup>58</sup> Tucker articulates three prerequisites that must be satisfied by the scientific community in order that a disciplinary consensus based on knowledge could be born: the community should be 1) uncoerced,<sup>59</sup> 2) uniquely heterogeneous and 3) sufficiently large (including hundreds of people who are geographically, institutionally, and professionally dispersed).<sup>60</sup>

On philosophical grounds, consensus as a goal or a means of finding truth has justly attracted sharp criticism.<sup>61</sup> Therefore we should avoid conceiving of consensus in the discipline of history as an aim in itself but rather see it as a common basic assumption as to how methods of inquiry, epistemic values and evidence should be used. The cornerstone that the historians’ disciplinary consensus rests on is their agreement not as to the answers given, but the questions raised and the ways in which it is *possible* to answer them. Thus, the consensus should be looked for not only in unanimity (that certainly exists on many past issues), but also in disagreement. “That historians disagree may be characteristic, and just as relevant would be where they agree to disagree, and where they agree about what they are disagreeing about”, as Jonathan Gorman has happily phrased it.<sup>62</sup> It is not without interest to note that one of the most systematic critics of the idea of consensus, Nicholas Rescher, also finds science the only field where that concept has a certain function. Very similarly to the concept of “disciplinary consensus”, Rescher speaks about a “consensus of the competent” which is able to “provide an instrumentality of *plausible estimation*, albeit only in situations where cogent – and thus more than *merely* consensual – standards are in hand.”<sup>63</sup>

58 Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past*, p. 24.

59 It is of course arguable whether it is correct to speak about uncoercion in the context of a discipline, since the etymology of the very term discipline itself points to a foundation in control and power, whether it be symbolic or institutional. Notwithstanding, I shall in the present article follow Tucker’s treatment, according to which coercion should be understood as mainly extra-disciplinary pressure. This also means that strictly speaking, it is possible to speak about scientific disciplines and disciplinary objectivity only in the framework of a democratic society, cf. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, pp. 284–285.

60 Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past*, p. 28. Cf. A. Tucker, “The Epistemic Significance of Consensus”, *Inquiry*, 46 (2003), 501–521.

61 See especially N. Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1993.

62 J. Gorman, *Historical Judgement* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), p. 98.

63 Rescher, *Pluralism*, pp. 52–53.

Disciplinary objectivity thus rests on the critical standards and cognitive values that have evolved within a discipline in order to produce knowledge. Hardly would it be possible to formalise these standards and values or to present an exhaustive list of them; however, this does not mean that there is, at present, very much disagreement as to their common core.<sup>64</sup> By way of summing up, I would only recall here Marc Bevir's three rules of objective behaviour or intellectual honesty, which very appropriately outline the minimal programme of disciplinary objectivity:

The first rule: objective behaviour requires a willingness to take criticism seriously.

The second rule: objective behaviour implies a preference for established standards of evidence and reason, backed up by a preference for challenges to these standards which themselves rest on impersonal, consistent criteria of evidence and reason.

The third rule: objective behaviour implies a preference for positive speculative theories which suggest exciting new predictions rather than negative ones which merely block criticisms of existing theories.<sup>65</sup>

64 Let's recall that Thomas Kuhn, for example, listed five standard criteria or intellectual virtues that enable us to assess the adequacy of a statement in a scientific discipline: accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness, see T. Kuhn, "Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice", in his *The Essential Tension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 322. For a discussion, see J. F. Hanna, "The Scope and Limits of Scientific Objectivity", *Philosophy of Science*, 71 (2004), 339–361. A more comprehensive discussion of intellectual virtues is offered, for instance, by R. C. Roberts and W. J. Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), esp. pp. 151–324. For a discussion of intellectual or epistemic virtues in historical research, see H. Paul, "The Epistemic Virtues of Historical Scholarship; or, the Moral Dimensions of a Scholarly Character", *Soundings*, 91 (2008), 371–387; Id., "Weak Historicism: On Hierarchies of Intellectual Virtues and Goods", *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 6 (2012), 369–388; Id., "Virtue Ethics and/or Virtue Epistemology: A Response to Anton Froeyman", *ibid.*, 432–446.

65 M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 101 (quoted in a slightly modified form). In the same spirit as Kuhn, Bevir lists six criteria for assessing objectivity: accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, fruitfulness, and openness. *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 125, 311. For a critical discussion of Bevir's approach, see A. Munslow, "Objectivity and the Writing of History", *History of European Ideas*, 28 (2002), 43–50.

### Evidence and Fallibilism in History Writing

As we repeatedly saw above, truth intent could not function in history if it were limited to just illocutionary force and disciplinary guarantee; the main prerequisite for the truth claim is its foundation on evidence. Somewhat unexpectedly, history philosophical discussions sometimes tend to forget this fact. And that is the case even when it is unanimously agreed that the historian studies not past events, but their traces,<sup>66</sup> or what is, in a generalised manner, called “historical evidence” or known by the more traditional (even though slightly misleading) term “sources”.<sup>67</sup> Thus the central problem of the philosophy of history is not the relation between history writing and reality, but between history writing and evidence.

Perhaps the first to realise the need of conceptualising the central significance of evidence in history writing was Collingwood. It is certainly not an accident that he decided to dedicate the first chapter of his last, unfinished history philosophical work, *The Principles of History* (1939), to evidence.<sup>68</sup> But the fundamental significance of evidence is clearly highlighted already in his article “The Limits of Historical Knowledge”, of 1928. It is extremely interesting that Collingwood understands history writing in a rather Wittgensteinian vein as a kind of “game” in which clear “rules” must be followed. The first and most important rule he articulates as follows: “You must not say anything, however true, for which you cannot produce evidence.” Adding: “The game is won not by the player who can reconstitute what really happened, but by the player

66 Let’s recall that already in his famous *The Historian’s Craft*, Marc Bloch said that history was “a knowledge of the past through its traces”, see M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou Métier d’historien* (Paris: Armand Colin, [1952] 2002), p. 71.

67 Concerning the metaphores of “source” and their evolution in history writing, see M. Zimmermann, “Quelle als Metaphor. Überlegungen zur Historisierung einer historiographischen Selbstverständlichkeit”, *Historische Anthropologie*, 5 (1997), 268–287; L. Kuchenbuch, “Sind mediävistische Quellen mittelalterliche Texte? Zur Verzeitlichung fachlicher Selbstverständlichkeiten”, in W. Goetz (ed.), *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters. Neue Ansätze in der mediävistischen Geschichtswissenschaft* (Bochum: Winkler, 2000), pp. 317–354; J. Morsel, “Les sources sont-elles ‘le pain de l’historien’?”, *Hypothèses*, no. 1 (2003), 271–286.

68 Collingwood, *The Principles of History*, pp. 7–38. As we know, this is also the only chapter of the manuscript included by T. M. Knox in the 1946 publication of *The Idea of History*. For a discussion, see J. van der Dussen, *History as Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Heidelberg: Springer, [1981] 2012); Id., “The Case for Historical Imagination: Defending the Human Factor and Narrative”, in Partner and Foot (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory*, pp. 41–66.

who can show that his view of what happened is the one which the evidence accessible to all players, when criticised up to the hilt, supports.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, historical knowledge is nothing but a critical analysis of all existing evidence and the conclusions drawn from it concerning historical reality. These conclusions are never final (although sometimes beyond reasonable doubt), but merely probable and subject to later revisions.<sup>70</sup> And whenever a segment of the past has gone by without leaving any trace at all, it cannot become the object of historical knowledge, even though the events that took place during it are not made non-existent by this fact.<sup>71</sup>

But still – what is historical evidence? First we must observe that potentially, anything perceivable through our senses can function as evidence in the work of the historian. But evidence is never a thing unto itself, but always evidence *in support of* (or *against*) something. In other words: it becomes historical evidence only when it is conceived of as such in the framework of a specific historical problem. Or, as Collingwood once put it: “Evidence is evidence only when some one contemplates it historically.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, the constitution of evidence is inseparable from its interpretation – evidence is not anything given to the historian but is born only in the process of interpretation. Each piece of historical evidence always contains some interpretation, and each historical interpretation must include a sufficient amount of evidence. This also means that simple evidentialism, according to which an “epistemic fact is determined entirely by the person’s evidence”, is not valid in history writing.<sup>73</sup> The collect-

69 R. G. Collingwood, “The Limits of Historical Knowledge”, in his *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. W. Debbins (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), p. 97.

70 The most important recent treatment of probability and revision in history writing is that of A. Tucker, see his *Our Knowledge of the Past* and “Historiographic Revision and Revisionism: The Evidential Difference”, in M. Kopeček (ed.), *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989* (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2008), pp. 1–15.

71 This principle can be found already in Dewey: “Where the past has left no trace or vestige of any sort that endures into the present its history is irrecoverable. Propositions about the things which can be contemporaneously observed are the ultimate data from which to infer the happenings of the past.” See J. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), p. 231.

72 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. J. van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 247. In the same spirit, Goldstein writes: “Thus, it appears that the term “evidence” is a correlative term; something is not evidence *simpliciter*, but rather evidence relative to some theory of hypothesis.” Goldstein, *The What and Why of History*, p. 9.

73 E. Conee and R. Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 1. For a discussion, see T. Dougherty (ed.), *Evidentialism and its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

ing and examining of evidence inevitably happens within the framework of specific hypotheses and theoretical positions, which is indeed the reason why historians using the same or similar evidence might arrive at more or less different conclusions.<sup>74</sup> As also the reason why no piece of evidence can ever be exhausted in historical inquiry, since it is always possible to re-interpret them in the light of new hypotheses and theories.

Practical history writing abounds with examples of how subtle the symbiosis between evidence and hypotheses, traces of the past and the inquirer's theories, really is in the historian's work. Alongside with many others, a good illustration of this is provided by Natalie Zemon Davis's book *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which presents, on the basis of comparatively patchy evidence, a very convincing and methodologically original interpretation of identity games in sixteenth-century French village community. Right in the introduction to the book, Davis acknowledges: "What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."<sup>75</sup> Commenting years later: "I had wanted my book to be an exploration of truth and doubt, to suggest analogies between a community's search for truth about identity in the sixteenth century and the historian's search for truth about the past today. We historians do our best to get evidence and give it convincing interpretation, but thorny issues usually remain and press for further inquiry."<sup>76</sup> Although the historian is guided in his work by evidence, his attitude towards them is, as a rule, critical; in a sense it is the historian's duty to ask questions of the evidence that it was never intended to answer or even what it don't speak about, at all (the so-called *argumentum ex silentio*). Ginzburg has compared evidence to a "distorted glass", adding: "Without a thorough analysis of its inherent distortions (the codes according to which it has been constructed and/or it must be perceived), a sound historical reconstruction is impossible. But this statement should be read also the other way around: a purely internal reading of

74 An interesting discussion of the use and function of evidence in "historical sciences" (sociology, history, etc.) is provided by the article: J.-C. Passeron, "La forme des preuves dans les sciences historiques", *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 39 (2001), 31–76.

75 N. Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 5. For an interesting discussion, see C. Ginzburg, "Proofs and Possibilities: Postscript to Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*", in his *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, trans. A. C. Tedeschi and J. Tedeschi (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 54–71.

76 N. Z. Davis, "The Silences of the Archives, the Renown of the Story", in S. Fellmann and M. Rahikainen (eds.), *Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2012), p. 83.

the evidence, without any reference to its referential dimension, is impossible as well.”<sup>77</sup>

The analysis of evidence, however, is not individual work in the process of historical inquiry, but is generally carried out within the disciplinary framework and in mutual relations of influence with one’s colleagues. Each conclusion drawn or interpretation made on the basis of some piece of evidence is subjected to disciplinary discussion (whether it be the formal process of peer review or the less formal debate between colleagues), and it stands as the (a) best possible version as long as a better and more convincing one is advanced. In other words, the interpretation of historical evidence is ruled over by the principle of fallibilism, according to which certain interpretations are provisionally accepted within the discipline of history as the best that can be put forth at the current state of knowledge. These interpretations undergo constant testing and are altered or discarded as more evidence or new arguments permit the advancement of new, better interpretations. Here we find again the idea of truth as a long-run fated or destined convergence in scholarly opinion that Peirce proposed: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.”<sup>78</sup> In the context of moral and political philosophy, Cheryl Misak has recently undertaken the critical elaboration of Peirce’s positions, trying in the first place to rid them of their metaphysical dimension. Misak’s principal conclusion is, in my view, perfectly adaptable for use also in the context of pragmatist philosophy of history: “Truth and objectivity are matters of what is best for the community of inquirers to believe, ‘best’ here amounting to that which best fits with the evidence and argument.”<sup>79</sup>

77 C. Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian”, in J. Chandler, A. I. Davidson and H. Harootunian (eds.), *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion Across the Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 296. See also C. Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice*, trans. A. Shugaar (London and New York: Verso, 2002), esp. pp. 12–18. For a discussion, see A. I. Davidson, “Carlo Ginzburg and the Renewal of Historiography”, in Chandler *et al.* (eds.), *Questions of Evidence*, pp. 304–320.

78 C. S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” [1878], in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), vol. 5, p. 407. Cf. Dewey, *Logic*, p. 345: “In scientific inquiry, every conclusion reached, whether of fact or conception, is held subject to determination by its fate in further inquiries.”

79 C. Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 1. See also her *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) and “Pragmatism and Deflationism”, in C. Misak (ed.), *New Pragmatists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 68–90. For a discussion, see R. Frega, “Rehabilitating



### Concluding Remarks

In the present article, I departed from the assumption that “truth”, “objectivity” and “evidence” are essential (even if contested) concepts if we wish to make sense of what the historians do. I found that the most fruitful way of conceiving of “truth” in history writing is as an intentional category in a certain type of illocutionary act which is based on a tacit “truth pact” with the readers. “Objectivity” is a regulative epistemic virtue in the modern discipline of history which guarantees plausibility and trustworthiness to the historian’s “truth pact”. Both the truth intent and disciplinary objectivity are based on the historian’s work with evidence, on their critical analysis and conceptual interpretation. Historians, that is to say, proceed inferentially and offer evidentially justified interpretations. All knowledge constructed in the discipline of history is necessarily more or less probable and fallible, it is subjected to permanent disciplinary self-correction based primarily on the accumulation of new evidence, new hypotheses and new arguments.

Although finding the discussion of truth and objectivity important to the discipline of history, I don’t think this should be the final port of destination for the philosophy of history; rather, the construction of a common understanding of truth and objectivity enables us to launch discussions of other issues that seem at least as important for the understanding and making sense of history writing. The truth intent and regulative ideal of objectivity are merely the prerequisites of academic history writing; as soon as they are satisfied, new problems of different order arise concerning the originality, thematic variations, ways of representation, stylistic devices, ideological commitments, etc. As long as we remain in the grip of an epistemic fear for the truth value of history writing, we are struggling to deal fruitfully with other questions that are, in fact, extremely important for understanding the possibilities, limitations, and essentiality of history writing.

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