Welcome Note from the Editor-in-Chief: The Task of Philosophy of History

The Journal of the Philosophy of History concerns itself with a series of philosophical questions: questions concerning the nature of historical knowledge and its justification, the semantics of the language we use to represent the past, the metaphysics of our existence in time, and questions that have to do with the ethics, value, and politics of history-writing.1 Such questions can be addressed from within the different branches and traditions of philosophy, and from within the historical discipline itself. This means that a variety of approaches and concerns can find their way into this journal.

In his final editorial in this journal, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen remarks that the awareness of general philosophical discussions is sometimes lacking in the philosophy of history. The reverse arguably is true as well. Philosophers and philosophers of history sometimes operate in two disconnected worlds – this journal to the contrary. Take as example The End of Progress, by Amy Allen, which is concerned with the problem of moral progress in Critical Theory.2 The questions of whether there is moral progress in history, how to conceive of it, and whether it can support perspectives on present and future politics obviously are central to the philosophy of history. But Allen’s important work has, to my knowledge, never been discussed in that field, and she herself seems hardly aware of how discussions in contemporary philosophy of history are connected to her concerns. Another example is Terry Pinkard’s excellent book on Hegel’s philosophy of history, Does History Make Sense?3 The book (and the whole Hegel revival in Anglophone philosophy of the last three decades, for that matter) appears to have been ignored by philosophers of history. Nor does Pinkard relate his concerns to those in contemporary philosophy of history.

These are just two examples, but they do make evident the need for a journal that stimulates interaction between philosophy and philosophy of history.

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which JPH does. I hope that in the future we will see more contributions in the pages of this journal highlighting the relevance of such areas of concern as German Idealism and Critical Theory.

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In his “Welcome Note” as editor-in-chief five years ago, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen emphasized that we should not, in this journal, define the task of the philosophy of history in advance. Rather, the path that we take should follow from what our contributors put forward.\(^4\) JPH testifies to the diversity of the issues that the philosophy of history addresses. I fully agree with Jouni-Matti that this is how it should be. But his words made me wonder how I, the new editor-in-chief, regard the formal task of the philosophy of history. It seems fitting to address this issue, at least briefly, in my Welcome Note to the readers of this journal. As I pondered this question, I ended up not with an answer of my own but with answers provided by two of my intellectual heroes. Answering a question by re-collecting previous answers to the question is always a useful first step to take.

A concise determination of the formal task of philosophy of history is found in an essay by Frank Ankersmit – the founding editor-in-chief of JPH – on Arthur Danto.\(^5\) But first I take a brief look at what Danto had to say about the matter in his 1965 classic, *Analytical Philosophy of History*. Both views, arguably, underlie this journal’s *raison d’être*.

Danto starts his book with a general definition of what philosophy of history is: “philosophy applied to the special conceptual problems which arise out of the practice of history as well as out of substantive [speculative] philosophy of history.”\(^6\) He concludes the first chapter of his book with the statement that the task of the philosophy of history is to identify the limits of our knowledge of the past. This task he derives from the general task that he attributes to philosophy, namely, to identify limits. Danto then proceeds with the proven philosophical method of opposing skeptical doctrines. My concern here is with his positive argument.

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Danto is interested in temporal language, that is, in a class of statements the truth-value of which depends on the moment of its utterance. Consider the following two statements in their present, past and future tenses:

1.1. The war begins/began/will begin
1.2. John is/was/will be planting a rose

To determine the truth-values of these statements, we need to take the following into account (next to knowing the meaning of the words used and the grammatical rules followed). Both statements in their different tenses refer to an event: respectively the beginning of the war and the planting of a rose. In their present tense, the time of the event referred to and the moment of its utterance coincide. In their past tense, the time of the event referred to comes before the time of the utterance. In their future tense the possible (future) event referred to is to take place after the utterance of the statement. So, there are different temporal relations between the events referred to and the moment in which the statements are uttered. Such relations need to be taken into account to determine the truth-values of these statements. If I utter the statement “John is planting a rose”, then its truth-value depends on whether John is actually planting a rose at that very moment.

The first step in the argument is the observation that history is not concerned with events that might take place in the future. This marks one limit of historical knowledge. In the case of historical knowledge, the temporal position of the historian uttering her statement is later in time than the time of the event referred to. The question as to whether there is a history of the present – where the time of the utterance and the time of the event referred to coincide – is something that I leave open for the moment.

Now consider the following statements, each, again, in their present, past and future tenses.

2.1. The Thirty Years War begins/began/will begin
2.2. John is/was/will be planting a prize-winning rose

To determine the truth-values of these statements, we again need to take into account the time of the events referred to and the time of the utterances of these statements. There is no difference in this regard between the statements of class 1 and 2 in their past and future tenses. However, in their present tense, and this is different from what we see in the statements of class 1, the time of the event referred to and the moment of its utterance do not coincide. This is remarkable. Why is that? First, we should note that in the case of statements
of class 2, there is not one event referred to, but actually two: respectively, the beginning and the end of the war (for only in 1648 did it make sense to claim that in 1618 a Thirty Years War begins); and the planting of a rose and the winning of a rose competition (only after having won a prize is it true to talk about planting a prize-winning rose). This is important for the next observation. Although these statements are linguistically presented in the present tense, they are semantically statements in the past tense (and the whole problem with substantive philosophy of history is this confusion of linguistics and semantics: substantive philosophy puts, in a future tense, statements that are semantically past tense statements).

To determine the truth-value of statements of class 2, both events have to have occurred. Danto calls this class of statements narrative sentences. Such sentences are typically found in narratives in which they indicate the significance of an event, such as the start of a large-scale event like the Thirty Years’ War. For an event to be significant in a historical sense, not only does the time of the utterance have to be later than the time of the event referred to, but there also needs to be an event later in time to which it can be connected. In Danto's words: “The main fact to keep in mind ... is that the events co-ordinated are temporally distant from one another, that they are respectively past and future to each other, though both past to the historian.” This is how it should be, according to Danto. Events must be past, since only later events allow us to determine the significance of earlier events. Now we also understand why there is no history of the present. Such history would be incapable of identifying the significance of the event it relates. Danto concludes that the limit of historical knowledge is marked by our ignorance of the future.

In defining the task of philosophy of history in his reading of Danto, Ankersmit emphasizes that the semantics of time discussed by Danto involves a change from the perspective of the witness of an event (and her contemporaries) to the perspective of the historian. The formal task of the philosophy of history, it follows, is to focus on the change of perspective that determines what can be said from the perspective of witnesses and other contemporaries of an event and what can only be said from the perspective of the historian. (Incidentally, this points to another kind of limit: the limits of rational explanation and of

7 Danto, Narration, 15.
8 Danto, Narration, 16.
Verstehen in history.) This point relates to many of the topics traditionally discussed by philosophers of history, such as the interpretation and explanation of actions and events; the semantics of our temporal language; verification, realism and antirealism about the past; and the question as to whether there is a continuity between the past and the historian’s narrative. All these issues agree with the agenda of JPH: to address the question as to how the philosophy of history may inform questions in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind and action, and the philosophy of science and vice versa.10

There is a deeper issue at stake according to Ankersmit. The moment in which the contemporaneous perspective transitions to the retrospective perspective is where the origin of historical consciousness is to be located. This is the moment in which our beliefs, which first defined what the world was like to us, become visible to us as beliefs about the world. Ankersmit quotes Danto, who states that a “period"

is a period solely from the perspective of the historian, who sees it from without; for those who lived in the period it would be just the way life was lived. And asked, afterwards what it was like to have lived then, they may answer from the outside, from the historian’s perspective. From the inside there is no answer to be given; it was simply the way things were. So when the members of a period can give an answer in terms satisfactory to the historian, the period will have exposed its outward surface and in a sense be over, as a period.11

The implication, according to Ankersmit, is a Hegelian one, in that truth in history is not found in the past itself, but is a truth ex post facto.12 Such is the tragedy of our human existence, he concludes. We only truly know what we are when we realize what we are no longer.

Again, a series of questions that philosophers of history (may) ponder come to the fore. To be sure, not all questions that are relevant to the philosophy of history can be inferred from the task of the philosophy of history as presented here. As said, this task is a diverse one, and I agree with Jouni-Matti that it is up to those who submit their manuscripts to JPH to determine what the relevant questions are. The only thing that I do expect from prospective authors – and

this is what the mission statement of JPH in its first issue ended with – is “to write clearly and lucidly, and to be familiar with the relevant contemporary philosophical literature.”

I am very grateful for the confidence Jouni-Matti gave me by asking me to take over as editor-in-chief. Frank Ankersmit, too, let me know that he is always ready to give assistance and advice. Jouni-Matti continues to serve JPH as a member of its advisory board. Giuseppina D’Oro, Allan Megill and Marek Tamm agreed to stay on as members of the editorial board. Eugen Zeleňák remains on board as review editor. I am fortunate to have these excellent editors at my side. We are very happy that Verónica Tozzi Thompson has agreed to join the editorial board. Herman Paul stepped down from the editorial board and has become a member of the advisory board. I am also grateful that Georg Gangl continues to inform our readers about the journal on Twitter and Facebook and that Andrew Pattison and his students of English philology at the University of Oulu continue to copy-edit the manuscripts of the journal.

The Journal of the Philosophy of History is a double-blind peer reviewed journal. We use the Editorial Manager system to handle the submission and reviewing process. If you have a suggestion for a special issue or for a forum, you can contact me or any of the other editors by email. We are more than happy to discuss proposals for special issues and for forum discussions.

This journal’s editors hope to stimulate debate in the philosophy of history: in the articles submitted and published; through review-articles; through responses by authors to papers discussing their work; and by means of forums on specific topics, with short(er) papers. I invite all those interested in the philosophy of history to submit their best work to Journal of the Philosophy of History.

Chiel van den Akker
Editor-in-Chief
Amsterdam, March 2022