In a Parallel World: An Introduction to Frank Ankersmit’s Philosophy of History

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Abstract

This article proposes to identify the conceptual structure guiding Frank Ankersmit’s philosophy of history. We argue that philosophical analysis of history consists in Ankersmit’s approach of three different levels: 1) the level of the past itself which is the subject of ontology, 2) the level of description of the past that is studied by epistemology, and 3) the level of representation of the past which should be analysed primarily by means of aesthetics. In other words, the realm of history is constituted of three aspects: 1) historical experience, 2) historical research, and 3) historical representation. During his whole academic career, Ankersmit has been interested in the first and the third aspects and has tried deliberately to avoid any serious engagement in epistemology (historical research). Ankersmit’s philosophy of history is built on a few fundamental dichotomies that can be considered as a kind of axioms of his thinking: 1) the distinction between historical research and historical writing, and 2) the distinction between description and historical representation. The article offers a critical discussion of Ankersmit’s two different approaches to the philosophy of history: cognitivist philosophy of history (analysis of historical representation) and existentialist philosophy of history (analysis of historical experience), and concludes by a short overview of the impact and significance of his historical-philosophical work and of his idea of the uniqueness of history.
Keywords

Frank Ankersmit – historical representation – historical experience – holism – historicism – individuals – Leibniz

1 Introduction

Many would agree that Frank Ankersmit is the most original, important and prolific philosopher of history working today. Yet, one might immediately add, he is also the most controversial: his *oeuvre* has spawned intense discussions and fierce exchanges over many decades.¹ It might therefore come as a surprise that Ankersmit’s philosophy of history² has never been submitted to a collective scrutiny by his colleagues, or that there is no single special issue or edited volume dedicated to his work either in English or in Dutch. Hans Kellner’s memorable allegory of an imaginary committee discussing policy concerning a certain matter might help us to understand this curious situation:

One senior member of the committee, however, highly respected and active, seems to operate outside the consensus of the group. Although his persuasive powers are formidable and his interventions frequent and brilliantly argued, he seems to be working in a parallel world. His comments describe quite a different matter from the familiar one the committee considers. Admired for his knowledge and the extraordinary

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² It is important to keep in mind that next to his philosophy of history, Ankersmit has elaborated also his stance in political philosophy. See especially, F. R. Ankersmit, *Political Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) and *Aesthetic Politics. Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Although these two projects are closely related, especially the notions of historical and political representations, this special issue will focus only on Ankersmit’s work in the field of the philosophy of history.
erudition of his comments, he remains a bit apart, and a bit frustrated at the discussions. Occasionally he will mutter, “but time has nothing to do with history,” “truth has no place in this discussion,” or “where language is, experience is not,” but the group moves on over the same ground. To engage with his ideas, to follow his suggestions, would entail a nearly total revision of their project, a redefinition of their mission, a trek into unknown territory, a new identity.

“This describes to some extent,” Kellner concludes, “the place of Frank Ankersmit in the world of historical theory.” Needless to say, this remark that Ankersmit is “working in a parallel world” does not mean that his work has not been discussed in scholarly journals, on the contrary, next to late Hayden White, he is probably one of the most debated historical theorists of our times. But this special issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*,

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celebrating, among others, Ankersmit’s work as the founding editor-in-chief of the journal (2007–2017), seems to be the very first attempt to offer a collective and comprehensive analysis of his contribution to the philosophy of history.

Frank Ankersmit (born in 1945), the emeritus professor of intellectual history and philosophy of history at Groningen University, has been in the business of the philosophy of history for almost half a century. He has published more than twenty books and a few hundred articles, written originally in Dutch and in English, and translated into many other languages, including Chinese, Russian and Spanish. Ankersmit has always believed in the special mission of history and of the philosophy of history, that “there is in historical writing a lesson of the greatest importance for all of philosophy” and that “the philosophy of history is not merely the philosophy of an individual discipline, like the philosophy of biology or economics. No, the philosophy of history may now proudly parade itself as the real counterpart of the mathematically-grounded sciences – with the implication that both, if taken together, offer us all the ingredients of the sum of reliable knowledge we can possibly have of the world in which we live.”

Ankersmit anchors his philosophy of history in two connected intellectual traditions – historicism and Leibnizian philosophy. Historicism, “the alpha and the omega of all wisdom in our discipline,” is in Ankersmit’s mind “a perfect theory of history” and on many occasions he presents his work simply as “an attempt to translate the historicist theory of historical representation into a more contemporary philosophical idiom.”


However, one could still mention the important conference “The Transfiguration of the Present: Reflections on Historical Distance” organized on 28–29 January 2010 in Groningen to mark the retirement of Ankersmit from his professorship; some of the papers of the conference were later published in History and Theory, 50 (4), 2011.


Frank Ankersmit, “Representation in Retrospect”, in Marcel Arbeit and Ian Christie (eds.), Where is History Today? New Ways of Representing the Past (Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc, 2015), 185.


that historicism is the only genuine historical theory that has been developed by historians about history: “Historians discovered it, developed it and applied it, and they were extremely successful with it – so, at the end, one might suspect that it contains more than a kernel of truth.”\(^\text{12}\) Historicists claim that the nature of a thing lies in its history and therefore, Ankersmit maintains, no historian nor philosopher of history can avoid subscribing to historicism.

Historicism, as pointed out by Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Cassirer, owes much to Leibniz and his “Monadology,” another major source of inspiration for Ankersmit. Already in *Narrative Logic* (1983), one of his main ambitions was to “demonstrate the resemblance between Leibniz’s logic and the histori[ci]st philosophy of history.”\(^\text{13}\) Since then he has repeatedly argued that “Leibnizian monadology is the kind of metaphysics ideally suited to the world of history and of historical writing”\(^\text{14}\) and tried to elaborate his own Leibnizian philosophy of history.\(^\text{15}\) According to Ankersmit, historical narratives are “windowless” like monads, insofar as there is no direct interaction between them. Both monads and historical narratives are defined by the perspective they have on the world. “And both are holist in a double sense: (1) their whole is their identity, and (2) they are the components of either a narrativist or monadological universe.”\(^\text{16}\)
2 Architectonics of Ankersmit’s Philosophy of History

Philosophical analysis of history, according to Ankersmit, can be divided between three levels: 1) the level of the past itself which is the subject of ontology, 2) the level of description of the past that is studied by epistemology, and 3) the level of representation of the past which should be analysed primarily by means of aesthetics. To put it differently, the realm of history is constituted in Ankersmit’s approach by three conceptually distinctive, although practically melded aspects: 1) historical experience, 2) historical research, and 3) historical representation. During all his academic career, Ankersmit has been interested in the first and the third aspects, in other words, in ontology (historical experience) and in aesthetics (historical representation), trying deliberately to avoid any serious engagement in epistemology (historical research). Resistance to epistemology, incited by the early work of Richard Rorty, is the basso continuo of Ankersmit’s writings; one of his main ambitions has been to turn epistemological questions of history into aesthetic and ontological (existential) questions.

Ankersmit’s philosophy of history is built on a few fundamental dichotomies that can be considered as kind of axioms of his thinking. First, the clear distinction between historical research and historical writing. This has been the leitmotiv of Ankersmit’s work since the very beginning and it has been constantly defended till nowadays. Thus, for instance, in a recent interview: “my main move has always been to distinguish between 1) historical research (in German Geschichtsforschung) and 2) historical writing (in German Geschichtsschreibung). Historical research concentrates on the establishment of historical facts, whereas historical writing addresses the problem of how best to account for the past on the basis of generally accepted facts.”

In Ankersmit’s account, the main problem of the philosophy of history is that it doesn’t pay enough attention to the philosophy of Geschichtsschreibung. Already in his Narrative Logic Ankersmit argues: “Nearly all current philosophy of history is concerned with the philosophical problems of historical research (‘what are historical facts?’, ‘how can facts be explained?’; ‘how do values influence the accounts given of historical facts?’) and we cannot fail to be

impressed by the work done in this field. (...) Nevertheless, it is regrettable that the narrative writing of history has been neglected. This has been the first major motivation for the writing of this book.”20 And in the same vein in 2012: “This distinction between historical research and historical writing – though always quite self-evident to historians when pondering the practice of their discipline – has lost all its popularity with historical theorists.”21 Ankersmit is convinced that historical writing presents us with a variant of rationality unknown to the sciences and that if we are interested in contributing to contemporary philosophical thought, it is the history writing and not historical research we should focus on: “This is not meant to downplay the significance of historical research – again, far from it! Without historical research no historical writing. My only claim is that from a philosophical point of view historical research is of less interest than historical writing. The real philosophical gunpowder is in historical writing.”22

This first fundamental distinction is followed by another one, between description and historical representation: “[my] point of departure is the claim that we should strictly distinguish between description and representation.”23 While historical research results in descriptions of isolated states of affairs in the past, historical writing is about integrating the results of historical research in the historical text or representation as a whole. Ankersmit argues that there is a logical difference between these two aspects of historians’ work. In a description one can always distinguish a part that refers and a part attributing a certain property to the object referred to. Yet no such distinction can be made in the case of a representation.24 In individual descriptive statements, reference is made to past events, while a representation, as a synthesis of descriptive sentences, “is about” a part of a specific past reality.25 Whilst in the case of descriptions we can judge their truth value, this is not possible in the case of representations which are self-referential and recursive. Thus, unlike

21 Ankersmit, Meaning, Truth, and Reference, 60.
25 Ankersmit, Historical Representation, 48.
descriptions, representations fall outside the scope of epistemology because “epistemology relates words to things, whereas representation relates things to things.” It doesn’t come as a surprise, therefore, that for Ankersmit, “[t]he main shortcoming of (most) contemporary philosophy of history is that it takes description – instead of representation – as its model in its attempts to deal with the problem of historical writing.”

Ankersmit’s historical-philosophical work can be divided between two main topics: historical representation and historical experience. To use his own terms, one can also say that Ankersmit has been practicing two different approaches to the philosophy of history during his scholarly career: cognitivist philosophy of history and existentialist philosophy of history. In the first case, the question is about how we represent the past, in the second case, the question is about how do we relate to the past.

3 Historical Representation Shaped by Individualistic Holism

Ankersmit’s views on historical representation are determined by the distinction made above between description and representation. For him, historical representation is something very different from description but, at the same time, its uniqueness might be grasped only by contrasting and distinguishing it from description. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that Ankersmit does not reject description, however, it must be given its proper role and it must be realized also that the most interesting and important issues of historical writing open up at the level that transcends this plain mode of dealing with reality.

Ankersmit makes his crucial points regarding the relation between description and representation consistently in all of his works starting with Narrative Logic. According to Ankersmit, we need to bear in mind that historical works consist of singular descriptive statements and these have two different functions: “a) they describe the past, and b) by means of these statements an ‘image’ or ‘picture’ of the past (...) is constructed.” When it comes to describing, there is not much to add to what one gets from philosophically informed but fairly intuitive and common understanding of statements such as “Arthur

26 Ankersmit, Historical Representation, 11–12.
27 Ankersmit, Historical Representation, 11.
28 As he puts it: “the historiographical value of a piece of history is determined less by the facts disclosed in it than by the narrative interpretation of such facts.” Ankersmit, Narrative Logic, 1.
29 Ankersmit, Narrative Logic, 204, see also 101, 209.
Danto participated in the discussion about historical explanation in 1960s. Such statements usually consist of singular terms (in this case “Arthur Danto”) referring to concrete individuals and parts specifying further information about individuals, i.e., expressing properties of individuals or locating them within relations. If one follows in the footsteps of (one group of) philosophers of language, one may obtain a good grasp of what is going on at this level. Yet Ankersmit believes that philosophy of history has a special role to play when it comes to the more complex and unique level of whole historical texts. At this level, he speaks about statements constructing “images,” “pictures” and “points of view,” or in his more recent works he prefers to speak about the level of historical representation. Hence, whole historical texts, although consisting of descriptive statements, do not describe past reality. Their function is to represent the past in the sense that is very special and should not be understood in terms of correspondence framework. In *Historical Representation* Ankersmit states that historical representation is about the past, but again, one should be careful not to understand aboutness or being about in a naïve way. “Though both descriptions and representations stand in a relationship with reality, a description will be said to refer to reality (...), whereas a representation (as a whole) will be said to be about reality.” The latter relation “is essentially unstable and unfixed because it is differently defined by the descriptions contained by the text of each representation” due to which it “gives us the ‘logical space’ within which historical thinking and historical discussion are possible.” We must understand aboutness as a more complicated structure, so to say, reaching out to the past and to the historical text at the same time. In his latest book on the topic, Ankersmit makes an interesting move in his account by emphasizing that historical representation is not a two-place but a three-place operator: “representation (1) offers us the presented, or aspect (2) of a represented reality (3), much in the way that we may draw someone’s attention to certain features of a thing. Though these features are reducible neither to that thing itself nor to its properties. (...) [A]spects or presenteds are less than things and more than properties.” This further underlines his commitment to uniqueness of historical representation stretching somehow in-between the text and the world.

Although Ankersmit’s account of historical representation is sometimes linked to radical detachment of historical works from reality and to certain

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30 Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 209 and 216.
31 Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 41.
32 Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 41.
33 Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, 73.
postmodern tendencies, one should be careful not to misconstrue his views. Ankersmit is far from creating a concrete wall between the historical text and the past reality. He does not see the texts historians construct as being isolated from the past nor to be somehow floating around in an imaginary universe. Historical works do contain statements describing past events, therefore, any kind of complete erasure of the link between the past and the historical work is unimaginable. On the other hand, Ankersmit’s crucial point is that description is not all there is to historical enterprise. Thus, according to Ankersmit, there seem to be two perspicuous orientations significant for understanding history: from descriptive statements towards transcending historical representations and from historical representations towards their anchoring statements. These orientations are unified in his peculiar type of holism that takes historical works to be special wholes. These wholes are both very robust because they allow historians to present complex points of view, narrative substances (terminology used in his Narrative Logic) or historical representations (terminology used in his more recent works) and extremely fragile because a tiny change within a whole may result in the construction of a different point of view, narrative substance or historical representation. Ankersmit’s holism combines these orientations and aspects into an original proposal balancing in between constructivist and realist tendencies, sometimes inspiring and sometimes challenging authors from one or the other camp, and, in the end, avoiding any simple classification.

Now, let us take a step back and look at the issue of historical representation from a fresh perspective. In July 2013, the newly established International Network for Theory of History (INTH) organized its inaugural conference in Ghent with the title “The Future of the Theory and Philosophy of History.” This was the first and it seems the biggest and the most controversial INTH conference so far, with several heated discussions, intellectual skirmishes and emotional outbursts. It was as if some kind of tension was in the air and needed

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to manifest itself in some way or other. Another noticeable thing was that Frank Ankersmit and his views were often used as a point of reference and during some of the sessions it looked like almost everybody wanted to comment on, refer to, advocate or distance themselves from some of his claims. This was how his significance in the field was neatly revealed. Moreover, the organizers invited him to give the opening plenary talk of the conference. Thus, on 10 July 2013 Frank Ankersmit presented at Ghent University his paper “History as the Science of the Individual,” later that year published in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, which forcefully puts to the fore Ankersmit’s use of Leibniz and historicism in making sense of history and, moreover, nicely summarizes many of his key points about historical representation.

In the paper, Ankersmit distinguishes two types of individuals. Weak individuals are common objects characterized in terms of universals, externally; these individuals are usually the objects of natural sciences. Strong individuals, on the other hand, are very different. In fact, for Ankersmit, only these objects are *individuals through and through*:

> The idea here is that it is part of the meaning of being an individual to be indivisible. That is to say, you cannot remove from an individual one or more of its properties without it ceasing to be the individual that it is. It follows that the individual defines itself, or, put differently, that its principle of individuation is internal, and not external to it.

Here, Ankersmit takes inspiration from Leibniz and argues that this Leibnizian understanding of individuality is essentially useful for history: “Recall Leibniz’s belief that the principle of indivisibility gives us the primary meaning of individuality. (...) It follows that all of an individual’s properties are essential to it in the sense of determining its identity. (...) All of an individual’s properties are contained in the individual’s complete concept and can therefore be analytically derived from it.” One is reminded of Ankersmit’s points about self-referential character of narrative substances and analyticity of statements about them as these insights were formulated in *Narrative Logic*, occasionally in a technical

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This was and still is, of course, a controversial point which is easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. But, in fact, if approached with a pinch of charity, it nicely fits within Ankersmit’s Leibnizian holistic account of historical representation (narrative substance).

As mentioned earlier, Ankersmit subscribes to a historicist understanding of history. He believes that history is the science of the individual, as historicists claimed; however, he employs special Leibnizian strong indivisible individuals (substances or monads) to illuminate the nature of historical representation. Historical representations are individuated by all of the statements they contain. Remove from, or add one statement to a HR [historical representation], and you’ll have a different HR. Each statement can and must be read in two ways: 1) as expressing a truth about the past and 2) as being part of a recursive or self-referential definition of the HR of which it is part. At that second level we rediscover, therefore, Leibniz’s doctrine of the complete concept and all that goes with it. Especially the claim that individuals – hence, HR’s, too – are individuals through and through, that they define themselves wholly internally, are free from any external influence and, therefore, as Leibniz put it, “windowless.”

This Ankersmit’s Leibnizian understanding of historical representation is at the core of his view about the uniqueness of history. Historical representations are specific wholes and at the same time strong indivisible individuals. Ankersmit’s individualistic holism, therefore, presents us with historical works having specific status and philosophy of history having important center of interest which can be illuminated neither by traditional nor by more sophisticated observations springing from philosophy of science or philosophy of language. For Ankersmit, these strong individual wholes are so peculiar that only a diligent exploration untainted by observations drawn from other areas (such as the idea of theory-ladenness, the correspondence framework, etc.) may be of some help. Modus operandi at the level of historical representation, at the level of historical writing, at the level of colligatory wholes, at the level of narrative substances, at the level of strong individuals (such as Hellenism, the

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39 “Just as a word cannot but consist of the letters of which it is formed, a Ns [narrative substance] can only contain the statements that it does actually contain. The thesis that all statements expressing the properties of Nss are analytical is, perhaps, the most fundamental theorem in narrative logic.” Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 137, see also 134–139.


Renaissance, the Rise of the Bourgeoisie, the Enlightenment, the Interbellum, the Cold War) does not obey the routine of plain description nor anything we are familiar with from other disciplines. Moreover, it seems this specificity is so elusive that according to Ankersmit it cannot be disciplined by traditional epistemological considerations:

the so familiar world/language juxtaposition will thus have to be dropped for strong individuals. For that juxtaposition belongs to the regime of the weak individual, necessarily depending on words, concepts, theories and language for the individuation of weak individuals. Strong individuals, however, can stand on their own feet and need only their properties, whatever these may be, for being the individual that they are. Strong individuals introduce us to a regime neither depending on, nor presupposing, nor being the result of the so familiar and reassuring polarization between reality and language.42

Hence, his sui generis account of historical representation shaped by individualistic holism also challenges a more general philosophical and epistemically popular dualistic framework. Historical representations are difficult to be clearly associated with just one side of the world/language opposition. Historical representation presents us with “the indeterminacy in the relationship between language and reality” and helps us realize that “the use of language [in historical writing] is not restricted to our speaking about reality but that it sometimes also surreptitiously and unnoticeably resorts to a speaking about this speaking about reality.”43

4 Varieties of Historical Experience

Ankersmit has acknowledged that he came to the notion of historical experience by means of historical representation.44 After an extended exploration of historical narratives since 1970s, in the early 1990s he decided to turn his attention also to this aspect of the historical realm that makes historical representation possible: “What makes us aware of the past at all, what should happen, or what must have happened to a nation or a collectivity to become fascinated

43 Ankersmit, Historical Representation, 48, 73–74.
44 F. R. Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), XVII.
by the problem of its past? However, the deeper reason behind this new interest was in Ankersmit’s own words “a feeling that contemporary philosophy is in a kind of impasse in the sense that it tends completely to rule out direct contact with reality.” Ankersmit’s idea is to find out whether we can uphold the possibility of contact with the world which is not mediated by language. His aim is to work out “a non-, pre- or translinguistic approach to history,” to break through the walls of “the prisonhouse of language.” The notion of historical experience will require us, Ankersmit asserts, to rethink the relationship between language and experience.

Already in his *History and Tropology*, in 1994, while comparing the postmodern and historicist philosophy of history, Ankersmit concluded that “we may wonder whether the postmodernist theory of historical writing (...) still leaves room for the authenticity of historical experience. That is, for an authentic experience of the past in which the past can still assert its independence from historical writing.” In the introduction of his *Sublime Historical Experience*, Ankersmit asks even more radically: “Can we rescue the past itself from how we speak about it? More specifically, can the historian enter into a real, authentic, and ‘experiential’ relationship to the past – that is, into a relationship that is not contaminated by historiographical tradition, disciplinary presuppositions, and linguistic structures (...)?”

We are probably not mistaken to see some autobiographical apprehensions behind these questions. *Sublime Historical Experience* is without any doubt Ankersmit’s most personal book, it contains many autobiographical vignettes from his childhood boredom to his love of eighteenth-century art and ornamentation, but also more generally, it is derived not only from readings and reflections, but also from the author’s own historical experiences or sensations. The book is furthermore an attempt to move beyond Enlightenment rationalism and turn to Romanticist sensationalism. “The intellectual bureaucracy

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45 Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, xv.
50 Ankersmit, *History and Tropology*, 194.
of ‘theory’ will in this book,” Ankersmit writes in the beginning of *Sublime Historical Experience*,

be replaced by the “Romanticism” of an approach to the past involving all of the historian’s personality and not just (or even merely primarily) the formalism of his or her cognitive faculties. More specifically this book is a rehabilitation of the romanticist’s world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past. How we *feel* about the past is no less important than what we *know* about it.53

Ankersmit places his study of historical experience under the sign of Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), the famous Dutch cultural historian and “the only theorist of historical writing to take seriously the notion of historical experience.”54 Herman Paul and Adriaan Van Veldhuizen have aptly pointed out the parallel between Ankersmit’s attempt to revive Meinecke-style historicism in his *Narrative Logic* and his efforts to renew Huizinga’s idea of “historical sensation” in his *Sublime Historical Experience*. Both enterprises can be considered as “attempts at reformulating an early twentieth-century idea in late twentieth-century categories.”55 Ankersmit proceeds from the axiom that language and experience are opposed to each other, that experience is a pre- or nonlinguistic phenomenon: “either there is experience and then there is no language; or there is language and then there is no experience.”56 This attempt to move beyond language in order to grasp the authentic experience of the past has ignited a fierce debate among philosophers of history and is probably still the most controversial aspect of Ankersmit’s *oeuvre*. But it is important to emphasize that his work on historical experience has never meant turning his back to the study of language and historical representation. These two, historical experience and historical representation, as mentioned before, are complementary, not exclusive undertakings, or in Ankersmit’s own explanation: “experience unites aesthetics and the philosophy of history, while language will unite the philosophy of language and the reflection on historical representation.”57

55 Paul and Van Veldhuizen, “A Retrieval of Historicism,” 44.
Ankersmit distinguishes between three types of historical experience. First, there is **objective historical experience**, which comprises all experiences people have had in the past. Ankersmit does not address this type of historical experience in his writings, but refers to the work of cultural historians and other who have explored this domain over the last few decades. Secondly, there is the **subjective or individual historical experience**, first identified by Huizinga (he calls it “historical sensation”). It can be described as an individual “encounter” with a particular piece of the past (material or immaterial), it is a sudden, wordless and revelatory experience – “a moment of truth”⁵⁸ – that can be translated into a vision that supports historical representation. Ankersmit concedes that this subjective historical experience “will remain by its very nature a rare and exceptional phenomenon in historical practice,” adding that “many historians will not even recognize it as a legitimate part of their relationship with the past; admittedly, most historical writing is not informed by it and therefore cannot be clarified in terms of historical experience.”⁵⁹ Therefore, as Anton Froeyman has rightly pointed out, the subjective historical experience “is an elitist notion, limited to the elite of practicing (professional) historians.”⁶⁰ And thirdly, there is the **sublime or collective historical experience**, the most original contribution of Ankersmit to the study of historical experience. He proceeds from the position that in the beginning, there is the primeval unity of past and present – an eternal or indiscriminate present. But then, at some very unique moments, “the world falls apart into a past and a present, both making their entrance at one and the same time and excluding each other for ever in the future.”⁶¹ Ankersmit’s favorite example is the French Revolution, which created the division between the modern world and the *ancien régime*. The sublime historical experience consists therefore in the combination of losing the old world and realizing the birth of the new one. What is important here is that this revolves around matters of identity; sublime historical experience concerns not just a certain piece of the past (like in the case of subjective historical identity) but the identity shifts of the entire civilization. Sublime historical experience is therefore very close to the concept of collective historical trauma. “The basic form of historical experience,” Ankersmit explains himself, “is, therefore, basically, an experience of loss since you lose that part of this

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⁶¹ Ankersmit, “Representation in Retrospect,” 192.
indiscriminate present that has now become your past.”\textsuperscript{62} Or elsewhere even more explicitly: “history as a reality of its own can only come into being as a result of traumatic collective experience.”\textsuperscript{63}

In its original form, sublime historical experience is “ineffable”: “As soon as you succeed in speaking about it, it has ceased to exist and been transformed into something fundamentally different.”\textsuperscript{64} However, sublime historical experience gives us the very idea of the past that can then be described and represented by historians. In other words, the writing of history is the consequence of the sublime historical experience, a kind of “trauma therapy” to overcome the past that we have lost. Or in Jonathan Menezes’ felicitous wording: “History or representation \textit{comes in} when the past or the (dramatic) historical experience \textit{goes out}.”\textsuperscript{65} Hence, this is the critical juncture of Ankersmit’s two main research topics: historical representation and historical experience. He admits that the ties between these two “are both strong and weak”:

They are strong since a collectivist or holistic sublime experience of the past lies at the root of all historical representation. (…) But these ties are also weak in that the relationship between historical experience and historical representation will play only a very marginal role once the discipline of historical writing has come into being.\textsuperscript{66}

Anton Froeyman has captured this paradoxical relation probably even better: “So, although the two factors of the equation need each other (without historical experience, there would be no historical writing, and without historical writing, we would never become conscious of the existence of historical experience), there is very little mutual influence: (sublime) historical experience is one thing, and historical representation is quite another.”\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Ankersmit} F. R. Ankersmit, “Trauma and Suffering: A Forgotten Source of Western Historical Consciousness,” in Jörn Rüsen (ed.), \textit{Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate} (New York: Berghahn), 76.
\bibitem{Menezes} Menezes, “Aftermaths of the dawn of experience,” 47.
\bibitem{AnkersmitRunia} Ankersmit, \textit{Meaning, Truth, and Reference}, 189.
\bibitem{Froeyman} Froeyman, “Never the Twain Shall Meet?,” 166–167. See also Froeyman, “Frank Ankersmit and Eelco Runia,” 397: “When Ankersmit talks about historical experience, he is talking about the past as it constitutes us. When he talks about historical representation, he is referring to historical reality as we constitute it (…). Historical representation is the endpoint of historical enquiry, and historical experience its beginning.”
\end{thebibliography}
While reading Ankersmit’s works, sooner or later, one necessarily arrives at a point when one’s views are challenged by some of Ankersmit’s intriguing distinctions, surprising presuppositions, ingenious arguments or unique conclusions. Even though he occasionally draws inspiration from relatively popular sources, such as the works of Arthur Danto or Louis Mink, he often surprises his colleagues by reviving views which are out of fashion or largely ignored in the field. Of course, there will always be an expert on historicism, Leibniz, Rorty, Goodman or Quine, who will present a different reading of the given stimulus. Nevertheless, Ankersmit will still amaze the reader with how cogently and resourcefully he employs his interpretation of the given position or author for his own purpose.

When it comes to his impact on philosophy of history, it is fair to repeat that currently Ankersmit is the most influential living philosopher of history. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that there is an Ankersmitian philosophical school, still, there is a remarkable group of authors who have had the chance and privilege to study and/or collaborate with him, to exchange their views with him, or to visit him in Groningen, or who have been inspired by one of his many works. Some of these authors have decided to engage in critical debate with him, others chose to rethink and develop his interesting points or simply humbly draw on his ideas. Two recent books by Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen and Chiel van den Akker are good cases in point: Ankersmit’s views play crucial role in their approach to history and even if these works follow their own independent routes, fruitful influence is undeniable.

Frank Ankersmit has occasionally called himself a “philosopher of representation.” This fitting label nicely captures the primary importance of this topic for his writings. There is probably no other active philosopher of history who has devoted so much energy to the exploration of the notion of historical representation. In addition, in his later work, the topic of historical experience and a detailed dissection of how we relate to the past has played a conspicuous role. What is interesting is that these two so distinct topics often attract
rather different audiences and that Ankersmit has been one of the very few authors who were able to stir and even determine intellectual discussions within such seemingly remote and mutually isolated discourses. For some of his readers the link between the topics of historical representation and experience remains puzzling.\footnote{Although there exist interesting accounts about how to understand Ankersmit’s existential or experiential side and how interaction between experience and representation might be possible. See, for instance, Froeyman, “Never the Twain Shall Meet?,” Froeyman, “Frank Ankersmit and Eelco Runia,” Simon, “Experience as the Invisible Drive of Historical Writing,” Simon, “The Expression of Historical Experience”; and Menezes, “Aftermaths of the Dawn of Experience.”} And yet, one is bound to esteem Ankersmit’s courage to ignore clear-cut labels and boundaries as well as his resolution to contribute to the two allegedly “incommensurable” conversations and to enrich both cognitivist and existentialist philosophy of history.

What is more, since Ankersmit defends a very peculiar account of historical representation, he brings an original insight to the discussion about the nature of historical works. His distinction between description and historical representation and subsequent examination of the peculiarity of representation moves to the forefront of theoretical agenda the semantics of historical work.\footnote{See especially, Ankersmit, Historical Representation, 17–68; Ankersmit, “Representation and Reference,” and Ankersmit, Meaning, Truth, and Reference.} In all of his works, Ankersmit remains an archetypal philosopher of history drawing on philosophical debates, notions, or traditions, employing argumentative and analytical approach, and, occasionally even utilizing semantical and logical instruments to clarify his conclusions. This may appear as a banal observation, but, in fact, in an era of ever-expanding historical theory, there are not so many authors following the best tradition of critical philosophy. Moreover, one should not forget his pivotal role in the founding of a new journal in 2007, Journal of the Philosophy of History, focusing on and encouraging research in philosophy of history.

In the end, Ankersmit’s specific notion of historical representation is a decisive instrument in his argument for the uniqueness of history. As he repeatedly points out “the sciences and the writing of history are entirely different disciplines, and (…) anyone trying to argue away these differences is inexorably on the wrong track.”\footnote{Ankersmit, “Representation in Retrospect,” 185.} Rightly, then, Ankersmit has been one of the most prominent, if not the most vocal defender of the uniqueness of history in the last decades. Making use of historicism and Leibniz, he has been a firm advocate of history understood as a sui generis enterprise, history as separate from social and other sciences. Already in his Narrative Logic, he openly rejects “all
attempts to transform history into a social science” and he has not changed his view since. In one of his recent interviews he claims: “in all of my career as a philosopher of history I never came across an analysis by a philosopher of science making sense of historical writing as understood here. So here history has an autonomy of its own if compared with the sciences.” His commitment to the uniqueness of history seems to motivate his whole work. The resolution with which he defends the distinctiveness of history is almost unparalleled when it comes to contemporary discussions within critical philosophy of history. Even from the perspective of the last hundred years or so, Ankersmit has a special place among the philosophers advocating autonomy of history, such as Collingwood, Mink or Goldstein. It is certainly not a common thing to defend this kind of autonomy, especially in a climate dominated by the influences coming either from philosophy of science or from literary theory. During his long career, Ankersmit resisted both the “unity of science” movement and the fashionable literary turn and he has vigorously tried to convince his readers about the special place of history in our culture. Hence, as Paul and Van Veldhuizen aptly argue, his position should be contextualized within the historicist tradition, a tradition so sensitive to the individuality of history. In a nutshell, Ankersmit’s work celebrates the importance and uniqueness of history: “We should never try to penetrate the secrets of the past, of historical writing, and of the relationship of the two by an appeal to the practice and theory of other disciplines.”

Having in mind the significance of his views for contemporary philosophy of history, we invited six authors (Jacques Bos, Daniel Fairbrother, Martin Jay, Hans Kellner, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, and Chiel van den Akker), a mix of more experienced and younger scholars, to reflect on some of the most prominent aspects and inspirations of Ankersmit’s philosophy of history. First of all, we are very grateful for their ingenious contributions and we hope that these papers will enrich the thinking of readers interested in Ankersmit’s work. During the whole process, we benefited from the help and advice of a number of referees and the editor-in-chief of the Journal of the Philosophy of History. Finally, we would like to thank Frank Ankersmit for supporting the project and responding to the six papers. Although this special issue cannot cover all the dimensions of his rich work, we hope that it will be a helpful point of reference for further scholarship on Ankersmit’s philosophy.

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75 Paul and Van Veldhuizen, “A Retrieval of Historicism.”
76 Ankersmit, “Representation in Retrospect,” 195.
77 We would like to thank Daniel Fairbrother, Jonathan Menezes and Herman Paul for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.