What Could It Mean for Historians to Maintain a Dialogue With the Past?

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Abstract

When historians claim to maintain a "dialogue with the past," this metaphor is usually interpreted in epistemological terms. Although this is not necessarily wrong, the present article presents a broader reading of the metaphor by arguing that the imperative to engage in "dialogue with the past" can be understood as an ethical claim to scholarly integrity. This argument proceeds from the assumption that historians are usually engaged in multiple "relations with the past" as well as in multiple relations with present-day instances, varying from colleagues and readers to publishers and university administrators. These different relations, in turn, can be seen at least in part as corresponding to a range of different I-positions, some of which tend more towards the monologic than towards the dialogic. Maintaining a dialogue with the past, then, means that the I-position of what this article calls an "inquisitive listener," characterized by dialogic virtues such as curiosity, imagination, openness, attentiveness, and humility, is cultivated and, if necessary, protected against other, more dominant I-positions, such as the "ground-breaking scholar" and the "best-selling author." In sum, this article reinterprets the metaphor of a dialogue with the past to such effect that historians are encouraged to critical self-reflection: how dominant or recessive are their respective I-positions and to what extent should they, for integrity's sake, be challenged or supported?

Introduction

What do historians or philosophers of history have in mind when speaking about a "dialogue with the past"? More specifically, what kind of attitudes, dispositions, and sensibilities do they seek to promote in using such a conversational metaphor? When, in 1961, Edward Hallett Carr described the historian's work in terms of "a continuous process of interaction

between the historian and his facts" and as "an unending dialogue between the present and the past,"[1] his target was a naïve kind of empiricism, the essence of which he saw captured in the slogan that "facts speak for themselves." Although Carr left no doubt about the importance of meticulous archival research, one of the main messages of his George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures in Cambridge was that historical facts are not so much "found" as "constructed" from a particular, contemporary point of view. "The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."[2] So, for Carr, the metaphor of dialogue expressed that historical research is a two-way traffic, or a conversation in which historians do not just passively register, but actively select, interpret, and evaluate.

If Carr emphasized the historian's contribution to the conversation between past and present, another British historian in the 1960s, Geoffrey Rudolph Elton, used the same metaphor to opposite effect. In *The Practice of History* (1967), a series of lectures generally read as a thinly veiled "anti-Carr,"[3] Elton highlighted not the historian's interpretative work, but rather the limits set on this endeavor by the constraints of historical source material. If the "writing and reconstruction of history amount to a dialogue between the historian and his materials," wrote Elton, in the gender-specific language customary in his generation, then the sources put severe restraints on how the historian interprets the past. While the historian "supplies the intelligence and the organizing ability," there is no doubt that "he can interpret and organize only within the limits set by his evidence. And those are the limits created by a true and independent past."[4]

Each in their own way, then, Carr and Elton employed the "dialogue with the past" metaphor in a restricted epistemological manner. It was *epistemological* in the sense that both authors saw the interaction between historians and their sources as contributing to the acquisition of such epistemic goods as knowledge and understanding of the past. And it was *restricted* to the extent that Carr and Elton both focused on the interaction between historians and their sources, thereby ignoring the role of other instances that arguably also contribute to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, such as familiarity with secondary literature and the sound judgment of peers and critics. This, to be sure, is not intended as a criticism of

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[1] Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, January-March 1961* (London: Macmillan & Co.; New York: St Martin's Press, 1961), p. 24.

[2] Ibid., p. 5.

[3] Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892-1982* (London; New York: Verso, 1999), p. 204.

[4] G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney: Sydney University Press; London: Methuen & Co., 1967), p. 93.

either Carr or Elton, but as an observation on the context that, in 1960s Britain, helped determine the range of meanings associated with the "dialogue with the past" metaphor. In a time when the epistemological status of "historical facts" ranked high on the agenda of those interested in "the difficult, treacherous and unfamiliar field of philosophy of history," one should not be surprised to find the metaphor employed in relation to precisely this issue.[5]

The question then is what the metaphor of a "dialogue with the past" can possibly mean in the context of contemporary reflection on historical thought. In the half a century that has passed since Carr and Elton, philosophers of history have done much to make historians aware of what I shall call the "multi-dimensionality" of their engagement with the past. Following such thinkers as Hayden White, Jörn Rüsen, and Mark Day, one might argue, as I will do in what follows, that the relations that historians maintain with the past are invariably entwined with other relations, such as those with peers, readers, and reviewers. Once historians are seen as "entangled in histories"[6] and as "enmeshed" in multi-layered exchanges with multiple instances, the image of a two-way traffic road between historian and source material is perhaps better replaced by that of a spaghetti junction, that is, an intersection with traffic coming from all directions. What sense would it make, in such a complicated situation, to speak about a "dialogue with the past"?

My answer is that, in the context of contemporary philosophy of history, the metaphor is best interpreted as a call to scholarly integrity, that is, as a reminder that the historian's dialogue with the past is not to be drowned out by other, powerful voices that vie for the historian's attention. This is not to argue, as Elton did in 1967, that historians should focus exclusively on their epistemic relation with the past. Such an advise would ignore the multi-dimensionality that I argue is characteristic of all historical thought (sections 1 and 2). Yet, it is to argue that historians occupy a range of different "I-positions," some of which tend more towards the monologic than towards the dialogic (sections 3 and 4). Maintaining a dialogue with the past, then, means that the I-position of what I call an "inquisitive listener," characterized by epistemic virtues such as curiosity, imagination, openness, attentiveness, and humility, is cultivated and, if necessary, protected against other, more dominant I-positions, such as the "ground-breaking scholar" and the "best-selling author" (section 5). This article, in other words, reinterprets the metaphor of a dialogue with the past to such effect that historians no longer find themselves on a two-way street, but rather drive on complex

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[5] Isaiah Berlin (1961), as quoted in Haslam, *Vices of Integrity* (see above, n. 3), p. 200.

[6] The allusion is to Wilhelm Schnapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt: zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* (Hamburg: Richard Meiner Verlag, 1953).

intersections with so many junctions and slip-roads that even the most experienced among them need an occasional reminder of what their destination is and how that goal is to be reached.

1. Multiple Relations

As in so many other cases, Hayden White provides a convenient point of departure. Although his *Metahistory* (1973) was not precisely intended as a contribution to the Carr-Elton debate – neither of the two historians was even mentioned in the book – it posed a direct challenge to the epistemological focus that was characteristic, not only of Carr and Elton, but of almost all English-language philosophy of history in the 1960s. Even if no one expressly denied that historical thought had aesthetic, moral, and political dimensions, these aspects were typically regarded as subordinate to the epistemic dimension around which all proper historical scholarship was assumed to revolve. If moral values, for instance, were mentioned at all, this typically happened under the rubric of "historical objectivity" and, usually, in an explicit attempt to rescue objectivity from what was labeled as "historical skepticism" (William Walsh) or "historical relativism" (William Dray).[7] When White dared to put the historian's arguments, story-lines, and ideological commitments on one and the same level of analysis, thereby suggesting that all three are equally important ingredients of historical thought, this marked a decisive break with the epistemologically oriented tradition represented by Walsh and Dray, among others.

Metahistory was perhaps a bit too provocative to effectively convey the message that historians pursue various (moral, aesthetic, epistemic) goals at once. A great majority of responses to the book focused on White's thesis that "the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological."[8] Although critics were quite wrong to emphasize the "aesthetic" at the cost

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[7] W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), pp. 94-117; William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 21-40. While, in *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1952), Patrick Gardiner ignored almost all non-epistemic dimensions of history, W. B. Gallie, by contrast, devoted some pages to moral lessons to be learned from the past. See his *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), pp. 132-139.

[8] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. xii.

of the "moral," as they often did,[9] they perceived correctly that White had little patience with what he condescendingly described as "the Popper/Hempel/Dray/Donagan/Mandelbaum/Gallie, etc., etc., controversy"[10] – that is, the extended debate on historical explanation elicited by Carl G. Hempel's covering law model, which in the 1960s raged in the pages of, especially, *History and Theory*.[11] Yet, even though White himself did little to further debate on historical explanation or, more generally, on epistemic dimensions of historical thought, it is worth noting that the conceptual framework outlined in *Metahistory* – the famous "quadruple tetrad" of tropes, plots, arguments, and ideologies – granted a proper place to "explanation by formal, explicit, or discursive argument."[12] Even if White himself showed little interest in epistemic issues, his model of historiographical styles was subtle enough to accommodate Hempel's covering law model and Dray's model of rational explanation as contributions to a legitimate and even indispensable dimension of historical thought.

A more carefully argued step in the direction of such a multi-dimensional model was offered by Jörn Rüsen, who distinguished between no less than five aspects of historical thinking: (1) a semantic strategy of symbolization, (2) a cognitive strategy of producing historical knowledge, (3) an aesthetic strategy of historical representation, (4) a rhetorical strategy of offering historical orientation, and (5) a political strategy of collective memory. Rüsen emphasized that "each of these five factors is necessary, and all of them together are sufficient in constituting historical thinking as a rationally elaborated form of historical memory."[13] Whereas White's model was directed against a narrow, epistemologically focused philosophy of history, Rüsen's aim was to overcome unhelpful dichotomies between "history" and "memory" or between "modern" and "postmodern" historical thought.[14] Although Rüsen emphasized the cognitive aspect more than White did, the two agreed on the need to see historical thought as a complex interplay of multiple modes of dealing with the past.

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[9] As I argue in Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge; Oxford: Polity Press, 2011).

[10] Hayden V. White, review of *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* by Morton White, *The Journal of Modern History*, 38 (1966), 422.

[11] Richard T. Vann, "Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and *History and Theory*, 1960-1975," in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), p. 48.

[12] White, *Metahistory* (see above, n. 8), p. 11.

[13] Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), p. 132.

[14] Ibid., p. 135. See also, more recently, Jörn Rüsen, *Historik: Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Cologne; Weimar; Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2013), pp. 66-85.

It was Mark Day who, in a 2008 article, reformulated this insight in terms of "relations with the past." Not unlike Rüsen, Day tried to pay due consideration to all possible relations, while his principal aim resembled White's in so far as he sought to challenge an exclusively epistemological conception of historical thought. In Day's own words: "The argument is premised on the philosophical relevance of the epistemic relations already noted, and turns upon showing that further relations are built upon, underlie, or are otherwise entangled with historiographical epistemology."[15] For Day, these further relations include (1) an evaluative relation (praise and criticism of past actions and works on moral or intellectual grounds), (2) a preservative relation ("preserving knowledge that has previously been acquired"), (3) a dialogic relation ("the historian can be questioned by the past"), (4) a material relation ("the historian is a product of the past"), and (5) a set of various practical relations with the past ("which privilege the historian as *actor*").[16] Although this is not a particularly rigid topology – one might argue that the material relation overlaps with the preservative one, and that both epistemic and practical relations can be dialogical in nature, so that dialogue between past and present is better seen as a possible feature of relations than as a separate relation – it serves Day's purpose of drawing attention to both the multi-dimensionality of historical thought and the inescapable entanglement of those dimensions. Knowledge and power, for instance, do not operate independently from each other, but are acquired through and with each other.

At closer scrutiny, White, Rüsen, and Day leave some questions unanswered. One of these is how relations to the past or dimensions of historical thought can be conceptually separated from each other. What distinguishes an epistemic relation from a political relation, or a moral dimension from an aesthetic dimension? A possible answer is that their respective aims – the goals they pursue – can serve as demarcation criteria. Whereas the epistemic relation revolves around epistemic aims (knowledge, understanding) and the political relation aims at political goals (decision-making, exercise of power), so the moral relation is oriented towards moral goods (goodness, justice), just as the aesthetic one pursues aesthetic goals (beauty, pleasure). These teleological categories transform Day's model into a typology of aims that historians pursue in their studies.[17] Regardless whether one accepts this teleological twist to the model, it is clear that, according to White, Rüsen, and Day, historians maintain more than an epistemic relation to the past: they find themselves drawn to the past in a number of overlapping and interconnected ways. If historians seek to maintain a dialogue

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[15] Mark Day, "Our Relations with the Past," *Philosophia*, 36 (2008), 418.

[16] Ibid., 419, 420, 421, 422.

[17] Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, forthcoming), chapter 3.

with the past, they can be sure that various conversations are going on at one and the same time.

2. Multiple Instances, Multiple Demands

While this shows that historians are entangled in a web of relations to the past, it would be wrong to assume that the past is the only instance with which historians enter into dialogue.[18] Elton was only one among many who characterized historical scholarship as "an unending double dialogue – a dialogue between the scholar and his sources, and a dialogue between scholars."[19] This second dialogue, if it deserves to be called such, usually becomes most manifest in the footnotes of an article or monograph. By mentioning, citing, criticizing, or, not seldom, ignoring the work of other scholars, these footnotes disclose in what kind of scholarly conversations historians position themselves and how they seek to influence the direction of those conversations. More in particular, they reveal how historians evaluate each other's work, if only by showing what they consider worth mentioning or criticizing. As Anthony Grafton remarks: "To the inexpert, footnotes look like deep root systems, solid and fixed; to the connoisseur, however, they reveal themselves as anthills, swarming with constructive and combative activity."[20] So, in addition to relations to the past, historians maintain relations with colleagues and peers, not only in their teaching and wider professional activities, but also in their research and writing.

Additionally, there is the wider category of both professional and non-professional readers, for whom historians write and on whom they depend to get an interpretation accepted, to establish a research paradigm, or to acquire a solid reputation. There are the publishers, who intermediate between authors and readers, for instance by providing the genre templates that authors are supposed to follow if they intend to reach an audience. (Historical research on the relation between historians and publishing houses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveals time and again how important it was, and still is, for historians to maintain good relations with those who have the power to put their words into print – or to

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[18] For the question what exactly constitutes "the past" under discussion here, see ibid., chapter 2.

[19] G. R. Elton, "The Historian's Social Function," in Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974-1992), 3:423.

[20] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 9.

deny them access to the public domain.)[21] Closely aligned with these publishing houses are peer reviewers whom historians cannot afford to ignore, given that their verdicts determine to a considerable extent the chances that historians have to see their work appear in print. And finally, not to mention more, there are the funding agencies that play an increasingly influential role in shaping research policy programs. Elton's "double dialogue," then, is in fact a quadruple, quintuple, or even sextuple dialogue – if, again, it is a dialogue at all. There are quite a few instances that help determine what historians do in their research and writing.

And this is not all. If the historian's relation with the past is a multi-dimensional one, so, too, are his or her relations with, for example, peer reviewers, students, and university administrators. Just as there are material, aesthetic, moral, political, and epistemic relations to the past, so there are multiple dimensions to a historian's relation with, say, the reader. While author and reader maintain an epistemic relation in so far as the former seeks to convey knowledge and understanding to the latter, they simultaneously maintain moral, political, and economic relations (if only because the author presents the reader with a view of how the world works, while the reader's purchase of the book is likely to increase the author's royalty account). There is, in short, a multi-dimensionality to all the relations that historians maintain.

Interestingly, the demands that these various relations make on the historian are not always identical or even compatible. What fellow-historians regard as an urgent, unsolved problem that deserves detailed treatment in monographic form is not necessarily what publishers want to have on their lists. Likewise, what readers prefer to hear may be different from what peer reviewers define as solid scholarship, just as students usually make different demands on their professors than do grant agencies or conference organizers. Accordingly, it is no surprise that historians, just like other human beings, sometimes complain about tensions between the expectations they are supposed to fulfill. Meeting the high demands of a student population armed with the powerful weapon of "rate your professor" websites is something quite different from getting an article published in a high-ranked history journal or persuading a publisher to accept the book-version of a PhD dissertation.[22] So, if the instances

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[21] Leslie Howsam, *Past Into Print: The Publishing of History in Britain, 1850-1950* (London: British Library; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Olaf Blaschke, *Verleger machen Geschichte: Buchhandel und Historiker seit 1945 im deutschen-britischen Vergleich* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010).

[22] Eloquent descriptions of such tensions are offered by Theodore S. Hamerow, *Reflections on History and Historians* (Madison, WI; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 69 and Edward Berkowitz, "The Death of Jane Addams," in *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society*, ed. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn (New York; London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 227-228.

with which historians have to reckon are like voices whispering advise in the historian's ear, these voices may actually be recommending rather different types of conduct.

3. Multiple I-Positions

One final level of complexity that must be added to the model that begins to emerge is that this web of relations allows the historian to occupy a range of different positions. Take, by way of example, the historian's epistemic relation with the reader. It may seem as if, in this context, the historian occupies an expert position vis-à-vis the reader, and as if this asymmetry makes the historian invulnerable to criticism from the reader. Yet, as Henry Adams once suggested, quite the opposite may actually be the case. For the historian knows that to write is to expose oneself and that, accordingly, the privilege of appearing in print is a burden for those realizing how much they do not know. As Adams put it, back in 1895: "Conscious of the pitfalls that surround him, the writer of history can only wait in silent hope that no one will read him, – at least with too much attention."[23] Likewise, historians can be bold as lions when teaching their favorite class, but meek as lambs when students in that same class fill out their course evaluation forms. So, apparently, the relations that historians maintain with readers and students not only revolve around different goals, but also allow for a variety of positions vis-à-vis those readers and students.

At first sight, these positions come close to what Dominick LaCapra calls "subject-positions," that is, socially constructed and historically contingent positions from which individuals relate to the past. This notion of subject-positions allows LaCapra to explain why an Auschwitz survivor and a historian specialized in World War II not only write different kinds of prose, characterized by different voices, but also do so with different attitudes vis-à-vis the past under discussion. The positions from which these individuals engage with the past are shaped by their biographical experiences, but also, no less decisively, by how they respond to these experiences. LaCapra therefore insists that subject-positions must not be confused with full identities (even though such equations may occur in cases of trauma). For a subject position is always a "partial, problematic identity," which as such is "intricately bound up with the other subject-positions any social individual occupies."[24] LaCapra's examples of subject-positions – historian, critical reader, public intellectual, victim, perpetrator – nonetheless suggest that these subject-positions almost neatly correspond to role-identities.

[23] Henry Adams, "Count Edward de Crillon," *The American Historical Review*, 1 (1895), 52.

[24] Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 12.

Indeed, even though LaCapra regrets the reduction of the subject-position of the "historian" to that of the "researcher," thereby excluding the subject-positions of the critical reader and the public intellectual, he suggests that such a reduction is precisely what has taken place in the name of "professionalization."[25] Following LaCapra, then, the subject-position of the historian can be defined as a point of intersection between the various relations to the past, or as the focus of a "set of engagements that mediate our relations to the past."[26]

When so defined, however, the notion of subject-positions is too broad for our purposes. If we seek to capture the more subtle positions of a historian fully mastering her topic, yet struggling to find a narrative voice, or those of a colleague who speaks self-confidently at a conference, while fearing the feedback of his students, we need the more refined vocabulary provided by, for example, Hubert Hermans, a psychologist known as the founder of the so-called dialogical self theory. Within LaCapra's subject-positions, Hermans further distinguishes between "I-positions," that is, between "different and even contradictory positions in the self." These I-positions include self-positions ("I as ambitious," "I as anxious"), but also other-positions that make their impact felt ("my father as an optimist," "my beloved children," "my irritating colleagues").[27] The difference between these self- and other-positions can be small, given that the dividing line between an internal "self" and external "others" cannot always neatly be drawn. Indeed, what the composite concept of a "dialogical self" in Hermans's dialogical self theory seeks to convey is precisely that the self, to the extent that it consists of socially mediated I-positions, cannot be thought as encapsulated in itself. "It would be a misunderstanding to conceive the self as an essence in itself and its extensions as secondary or 'added' characteristics. In contrast, the dialogical self is formed and constituted by its extensions."[28]

If we apply this to our case, two consequences follow. One is that the conflicting demands of peer reviewers, grant agencies, students, and university administrators become

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[25] As LaCapra slightly more cautiously states: "One significant question is whether the professionalization of history has tended to confine the historian to one dominant subject-position – that of a relatively restricted conception of professional historian, notably in the context of a research paradigm – in a manner that obscures or excludes the role of other subject-positions, for example, critical reader and public intellectual." Dominick LaCapra, "History, Language, and Reading: Waiting for Crillon," *The American Historical Review*, 100 (1995), 805 n. 16.

[26] Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 14.

[27] Hubert J. M. Hermans and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and Counter-Positioning in a Globalizing Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 9.

[28] Ibid., p. 6.

not so much a clash of expectations, or a matter of Scyllas and Charibdises between which historians have to navigate their way, but rather an exchange within the self. To the extent that historians internalize the expectations held of them, they negotiate not with external parties, but with the I-positions of the "dedicated lecturer with plenty of time for his students," the "erudite researcher who has read all relevant literature," and the "self-confident grant-applicant with her innovative ideas" that exist within themselves. A second, even more important consequence of applying Hermans's theory is that historians never occupy a single position. They always negotiate between different I-positions, even within one and the same relation they maintain with the past, as illustrated by the intricate balance that historians often have to find between the "meticulous researcher" and the "time-efficient library visitor," or between the "author who has read all relevant source material" and the "scholar who raises interesting questions." Which of these I-positions come to dominate the historian's self depends, of course, on various factors (although it seems safe to say that not the least important of these factors is the extent to which they help satisfy desires that historians, consciously or unconsciously, regard as important – be it desire for knowledge and understanding or desire for name and fame).[29] The crucial point, however, is that historians always mediate, negotiate, or arbitrate between different I-positions.

So, the ideal-typical model that begins to emerge is a multi-dimensional one in no less than three respects. The model developed so far depicts historians as embedded in (1) a network populated by different instances, with each of which they maintain (2) multiple relations (moral, aesthetic, and/or epistemic, as the case may be) and within each of which they mediate between (3) different I-positions. Clearly this model eschews simplistic generalizations about the historian's position vis-à-vis the past. Yet, it does not emphasize this complexity for its own sake; it does so, among other things, in order to explain what it could mean for historians to maintain a dialogue with the past. It is to this metaphor of dialogue that we now have to turn.

4. Non-Dialogic Relations

Could one argue, in the light of what has been said so far, that historians are simultaneously engaged in various dialogic relations? This depends on what one understands a dialogue to be.

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[29] Herman Paul, "What Is a Scholarly Persona? Ten Theses on Virtues, Skills, and Desires," *History and Theory*, 53 (2014), 348-371.

Take, again, Elton's passage on the historian's double dialogue, quoted in section 2 above. The passage continues with a disconcerting observation:

> History being an unending double dialogue – a dialogue between the scholar and his sources, and a dialogue between scholars – and historians being men of passion, it follows that to the innocent eye of the by-stander historical debate looks like the battles of theologians: as though the disputants were defending rival certainties where in reality they are advancing various hypothetical interpretations from whose collisions better knowledge and clearer understanding may (and usually do) emerge.[30]

Although Elton speaks about a double dialogue, the question is whether historians really engage in dialogue if they defend their views aggressively against competing ones, without wondering if there is anything to learn from someone else's questions, criticisms, or alternative approaches. If exchanges between historians look like the trench wars evoked in Elton's quotation, as no one can deny they sometimes do, then aren't they better described as competitions than as dialogues?

Unless one stretches the word "dialogue" beyond recognizable limits, a dialogue stems from "a desire to be taught."[31] Accordingly, it distinguishes itself from other forms of exchange by an attempt to learn. As David Tracy states: "A conversation is a rare phenomenon, even for Socrates. It is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go."[32] In somewhat greater detail, Hubert Hermans argues that a dialogue worth its name is a learning experience that

> *innovates* the self; it has a certain *bandwidth* referring to the range of positions allowed to enter the dialogue; it acknowledges the unavoidable role of *misunderstandings*; it develops in a *dialogical space*; it recognizes and incorporates the *alterity* not only of the other person but also of other positions in the self; it recognizes the importance of societal *power* differences as reflected in the relative

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[30] Elton, "Historian's Social Function" (see above, n. 19), p. 423.

[31] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 210.

[32] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 18.

dominance of positions in the self; it recognizes the existence of different "*speech genres*" and their role in misunderstanding and deception; it can be deepened by the participation in a broader *field of awareness*; and it profits from "*speaking silence*."[33]

Judging by this standard, not all relations distinguished above are dialogic relations. They *can* be dialogic, when historians do not insist on being right and open themselves in Gadamerian spirit ("the other might be right") to the wisdom of their peers, or when grant agencies abandon the logic of their market models in order to listen carefully to what scholars really have to say. There is no reason, however, to assume that these relations *are* by definition dialogic. In reality, they may tend to the monologic more than to the dialogic. Historians who impose their views upon the past, for instance, or peer reviewers who have their judgment ready before they have carefully read a manuscript engage in one-way interaction, that is, in communication that silences the past and the author, respectively. Monologues are "closed," in the sense of unreceptive to feedback, whereas dialogues are "open," since their aim is mutual enrichment. That is why monologues typically take the form of statements, whereas dialogues are characterized by questioning. As Tracy says: "We learn to play the game of conversation when we allow questioning to take over. We learn when we allow the question to impose its logic, its demands, and ultimately its own rhythm upon us."[34]

Should one wish all relations distinguished above to be dialogic relations? Clearly not: some closure is necessary in order to take a stance, to formulate a hypothesis, or even to write a sentence. Someone trying to keep all relations open engages in pathological behavior. In order to get something done, there has to be a limit to listening and questioning. Choices have to be made; positions have to be taken.[35] Arguably, however, some relations are easier to close than others. Some relations are more vulnerable to violent closure, just as some I-

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[33] Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory* (see above, n. 27), pp. 10-11.

[34] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (see above, n. 32), p. 18.

[35] Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory* (see above, n. 27), p. 64. Interestingly, Paul Ricoeur's comparison between the judge and the historian focuses precisely on these elements of "opening" and "closing," even though Ricoeur does not distinguish between I-positions within the historian or the judge. According to Ricoeur, the judge "has to pass judgment – this is the function of the judge. Judges must come to a conclusion. They must decide." Historians, by contrast, only make provisional judgments, which in turn are discussed and revised within the scholarly community. "This openness to rewriting," concludes Ricoeur, "marks the difference between a provisional historical judgment and a definitive judicial judgment." Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 320.

positions are more fragile and therefore, perhaps, in greater need of protection than others. So the question is: which relations must by all means remain dialogic? Which relations must be kept "open" as long as possible?

5. A Call for Dialogue

It is in this context, I suggest, that the metaphor of a "dialogue with the past" receives its most potent, contemporary meaning. I interpret the claim that historians should engage in a "dialogue with the past" as asserting that historians, in the midst of all the instances with which they have to reckon, should take care that their relations with the past are not prematurely closed, so as to become monologic instead of dialogic. This warning stems from the suspicion that the historian's relations with the past are relatively vulnerable ones, in the sense that the past can easily be silenced when historians prioritize such I-positions as the "innovative researcher," the "ground-breaking scholar," or the "best-selling author" over the "inquisitive listener." If the inquisitive listener, characterized by such epistemic virtues as curiosity, imagination, openness, attentiveness, and humility, is subordinated to other I-positions, then the historian's relation with the past threatens to become a monologue. Then the past runs a risk of being silenced, because knowledge and understanding are engaged in competition with such non-epistemic goods as "originality," "impact," and "success."[36] So, the metaphor of a dialogue with the past conveys that the I-position of the inquisitive listener must be cultivated, not for its own sake, but for the sake of such epistemic goods as knowledge and understanding of the past.

Admittedly, the metaphor does not explicitly state that historians should care first and foremost about their *epistemic* relation with the past. Arguably, however, this epistemic relation is a necessary condition for any dialogue with the past, given our definition of what constitutes a dialogue (openness, listening, questioning). If no attempt is made to understand the past, moral, aesthetic, or political dialogues with the past are impossible. This is why I interpret the demand for a dialogue with the past as a call to historians not to subordinate their listening and questioning to originality, impact, or success. The metaphor is, in short, an

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[36] A large-scale survey conducted among American academics in 1969 and 1972 revealed that, at that time, 46 percent of academic historians considered research grants as detrimental to true scholarship, because they perceived such grants as having a corrupting influence on both the institutions and the scholars that receive them. Their concern was, in other words, that the fame that comes with grants stimulates other I-positions than those conducive to dialogic exchange with the past. Everett Carll Ladd, Jr. and Seymour Martin Lipset, *The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 360.

ethical call for scholarly integrity, if integrity means that a sufficient amount of attention is being paid to the relation that qualifies the branch of scholarship under discussion – which in the case of historical scholarship is the epistemic relation to the past.[37]

"Sufficient attention" differs from "exclusive attention" in that it allows for what section 1 called the multi-dimensionality of a historian's engagement with the past as well as what section 2 called a web of relations with instances of various kinds. Maintaining a dialogue with the past does not mean that one has to stop all conversation with those other instances, or that one has to suppress all non-epistemic relations – both of which would be impossible. To the contrary, the admonition "don't forget to listen to the past" presupposes that these other (non-epistemic, non-past-oriented) relations are invariably present. In fact, the warning even presupposes that those relations are so powerful that they easily drown out the historian's dialogue with the past. It frankly acknowledges, in Stuart Hall's formulating, that "[w]ithin us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continually being shifted about."[38] It adds, however, in a normative key, that scholarly integrity is at risk if exchanges other than a dialogue with the past come to dominate the historian's work.[39]

In Hermans's vocabulary, this does not mean that such I-positions as the "time-efficient researcher" and the "innovate author" must be suppressed. It does mean, however, that, from an ethical point of view, the "inquisitive listener" must serve as a "promoter position," that is, as an I-position inviting imitation and stimulating emulation. As Hermans puts it:

> Typically, significant others – real, remembered, anticipated or imaginary – who play
> a role in one's self temporarily or for a longer period, serve as promoter positions.

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[37] As I argue in Paul, *Key Themes in Historical Theory* (see above, n. 17), chapter 11. On somewhat different grounds, Allan Megill also identifies the historian's epistemic responsibility vis-à-vis the past as a key feature of professional historical studies: Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 17-40.

[38] Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 598.

[39] How such dominance can be recognized, that is, at what point, normatively speaking, non-epistemic and non-past-oriented relations begin to exert too strong an influence on historical scholarship is for the historical discipline to establish. "Sufficient attention" to the epistemic relation to the past is therefore not an absolute, but a relative standard: it is the discipline that must define what counts as sufficient attention and, hence, as scholarly integrity.

Significant others, like one's father, mother, other family members or teachers, may exert their long-lasting influence as promoters of one's development (or as anti-promoters, in case they function as an impediment to one's development). But also inspiring figures in the arts, science, politics, literature, film or music may serve as promoter sources that have the potential of facilitating the development of existing I-positions and generating new ones.[40]

Applied to our case, this means that maintaining a dialogue with the past, the pressure of other demands and expectations notwithstanding, requires the development of an I-position – the position of an "inquisitive listener" – which, in turn, requires concretely embodied examples of what it takes to be an "inquisitive listener" in matters of historical scholarship. The concept of I-positions thereby allows us to add flesh and blood to the bones of the ethical claim that, for integrity's sake, a historian's "dialogue with the past" must never be subordinated to other relations, such as a quest for originality, creativity, or professional prestige. While it is unclear what "subordination" means in the abstract, the I-position of an inquisitive listener to the past is usually molded after the concrete examples of historians who are recognized (perhaps even posthumously remembered) for excelling in curiosity, imagination, openness, attentiveness, and humility. The I-position needed for maintaining a dialogue with the past is therefore not as abstract as the imperative "do not silence the past." The I-position of an inquisitive listener consists of epistemic virtues that, in turn, are embodied by real-life examples.

Obviously, such examples should not be misunderstood as models to be imitated. Professional performance is never a matter of slavish imitation. Nonetheless, concrete examples – contemporary examples, most likely, but perhaps also, in some cases, past historians whose life and work still capture the imagination of present-day scholars – are indispensable aids for historians wondering how to transform the I-position of an inquisitive listener into a promoter position. For if it is true, as I have argued above, that historians are typically embedded in webs of relations that, each in their own way, exert powerful influence on historical studies, then historians cannot decide at will to devote special attention to such a fragile I-position, to protect it against the aggressiveness of others, or even to adopt it as a promoter position. Assuming that an act of will suffices for historians to resist the power exerted by such culturally sanctioned I-positions as the "time-efficient researcher" and the

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[40] Hubert J. M. Hermans and Thorsten Gieser, "Introductory Chapter: History, Main Tenets and Core Concepts of Dialogical Self Theory," in *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory*, ed. Hubert J. M. Hermans and Thorsten Gieser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 17.

"successful grant applicant" would amount to what I have elsewhere identified as a classic humanistic fallacy.[41]

Flesh-and-blood examples of inquisitive listening are needed, therefore, to enlarge the historian's imagination, to illustrate in concrete detail how virtues such as curiosity, openness, attentiveness, and humility work out in practice, and to suggest, however tentatively, that the intellectual satisfaction that comes from engaging in dialogue with the past surpasses the fulfillment promised by other relations.[42] By illustrating that it is worthwhile to maintain some sort of dialogic relation to the past amidst other relations, each with their own competing demands, these examples encourage historians to reflect on their relations, on the priorities they assign to their various I-positions, and on the opportunities they have for preventing their relation to the past to become a simple monologue. So, again, while exemplary embodiments of dialogical virtues can never serve as ready-made models, they do remind historians that it is worthwhile to maintain a dialogue with the past, despite the sometimes significant pressure exerted by other I-positions.

Conclusion

Like Carr and Elton, then, I take the metaphor of a dialogue with the past as referring primarily to the historian's epistemic relation to the past. My model differs from theirs, however, in three significant respects. First of all, quite unlike Carr and Elton, I do not consider historians to be absorbed by their epistemic relation to the past. To the contrary, as I argued in sections 1 and 2, I see historians as entangled in multi-layered exchanges with multiple instances, each of which make their own demands on the historian's work. Historians not only engage in multiple relations with the past, but also maintain multi-dimensional relations with their students, colleagues, employers, and publishers. Secondly, whereas Carr and Elton, each in their own way, emphasize a single I-position within the historian's epistemic relation to the past, I see historians as occupying a range of different (sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting) I-positions. Finally, I do not interpret the metaphor of a dialogue with the past in a descriptive sense, as capturing a dimension of all historical thought, but rather in a normative sense, as a call to scholarly integrity. This call emerges out

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[41] Paul, *Hayden White* (see above, n. 9), pp. 151-152.

[42] These are some of the functions typically performed by so-called "fathers of history" (such as Sima Qian, Herodotus, Ranke, and Michelet), as I argue in Herman Paul, "Fathers of History: Metamorphoses of a Metaphor," *Storia della Storiografia*, 59/60 (2011), 251-267. Real-life examples of dialogic virtuousness can, however, also be found at closer distance, in one's own time, among mentors and colleagues, for instance.

of a concern that other I-positions than the "inquisitive listener" may suppress such dialogical virtues as curiosity, imagination, openness, attentiveness, and humility, thereby turning the historian's dialogue with the past into a monologue that "silences" the past and "closes" the conversation.

On the one hand, the model developed in the previous pages is one that incorporates the theoretical advances made by such philosophers of history as Hayden White, Jörn Rüsen, and Mark Day in the decades following Carr and Elton. On the other hand, the model responds to an academic context in which such non-epistemic goods as "originality, "impact," and "success" are sometimes so highly valued that the I-position of an inquisitive listener appears as a relatively vulnerable one, that is to say, as one that under certain circumstances is easily suppressed by more publicly visible and, perhaps, more attractive I-positions like the "innovative researcher" and the "successful grant applicant." This is why I interpret the metaphor of a dialogue with the past in ethical terms, as a call to scholarly integrity, or as a warning not to "close" one's epistemic relation to the past. More specifically, I interpret the metaphor in virtue-ethical terms as a call to practice epistemic virtues such as curiosity, imagination, openness, attentiveness, and humility – virtues without which all dialogue degenerates into monologue. What it means for historians to maintain a dialogue with the past is that they practice those dialogic virtues that are conducive to knowledge and understanding of the past.[43]