

## How Historians Learn to Make Historical Judgments

(published in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2009)

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Review essay of Jonathan Gorman, *Historical Judgement: The Limits of Historiographical Choice* (Montreal; Kingston; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 258 pp., ISBN 978-0-7735-3410-0.

“The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton,” the Duke of Wellington allegedly declared after his defeat of the Napoleonic armies in 1815. This aphorism refers to the boarding school of Eton in Britain, where entire generations of military officers used to receive their education under a regime of discipline and achievement. Although the Duke's declaration is apocryphical, mentioned only in a French source of 1856, it offers an interesting perspective on the causes of the English victory at Waterloo. What it suggests is that the decisions made at the battlefield, the strategic choices of the officers, and the soldiers' heroic deeds in moments of decision cannot be understood merely as judgments made in the heat of battle, during the three-day Waterloo Campaign. It says that those decisions stemmed from character traits, patterns of behavior, and habits of judgments developed long before the armies faced each other in June 1815. The choices made in the battle against Napoleon followed naturally from dispositions and attitudes such as developed during the sport activities on Eton's playing fields (as well as at similar institutions in Britain, of course). If one seeks to understand the soldiers' behavior at Waterloo, one needs to focus, not on what these men did in the moments they confronted the French army units, but on how these soldiers had learned to think and act. In a more philosophical vocabulary: what matters most is not the act of judgment itself, but the ability to judge – an ability that had been developed and nurtured in Eton's educational ethos.

These introductory words prefigure much of what I have to say about Jonathan Gorman's recent study, *Historical Judgement*. First, I welcome the book, though not without questions and critical comments, for its attempt to offer a “historiography-friendly” philosophy of history (2).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, I will discuss how Gorman, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Queen's University Belfast, uses the history of historical writing as a source for historians' professional self-understanding. Although I agree with much of Gorman's analysis, I think other conclusions need to be drawn. Thirdly, I will argue that Gorman rightly calls attention to “the limits of historiographical choice,” but that he travels only half (or less) of the road that his book so forcefully suggests. Finally, I will sketch what I see as the remainder of that road – a road that will lead us to the playing fields of Eton, indeed.

### I

*Historical Judgement* is a philosophical study of the methods, practices, and principles that constitute the historical discipline. Dealing with such thorny issues as standards of explanatory adequacy, moral judgment in history, and the challenge of

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers in the text refer to the book under review.

the “linguistic turn” for the discipline’s self-understanding, the book tries to offer a consistent philosophy of history based on what the author calls a “pragmatic holistic empiricism” (10). Among other things, this means that historical knowledge is seen as a “web of beliefs” that changes as soon as a single belief is amended. Typically, such webs of beliefs are not created by individuals, but by communities. Accordingly, Gorman focuses not so much on individual historians but on the historical discipline, defined as a scholarly community with certain shared beliefs about its objects and methods of study. He tries to analyze these shared beliefs – the choices and “non-choices” (conventions and unchallenged presuppositions) made by the discipline – in a way that tries to respect the profession’s self-understanding. As the author states at the outset: “The philosophy of a discipline requires the historiographical recovery of that which the practitioners of the discipline conceive as characterizing of their discipline and under which they conceive themselves to be operating” (2). Consequently, Gorman’s study, though strictly philosophical in its analysis, gives lots of examples, primarily from Britain, of what historians understand their discipline to be.

This brief summary of the book suffices to indicate how much *Historical Judgement* has in common with Gorman’s previous book in the philosophy of history. Much like *Understanding History: An Introduction to Analytical Philosophy of History* (1991), the volume under review claims to offer a “practitioner-focused” examination of the historical discipline. In both of his studies, Gorman analyzes what historians typically do – what sort of choices they make, what sort of presuppositions often underlie their work – in order then to inquire at considerably more length how such choices and assumptions can be philosophically justified. Using the once-popular approach of “cliometric” history as its prime example, Gorman’s earlier book characteristically stated that it wanted to find out “whether the choice of historical approach can be objectively made, whether there *can* be a proper justification, rather than one adopted on the basis of unfounded present-day moral or political opinions.”<sup>2</sup> Although the focus on economic history, so predominant in the 1991 volume, is gone in the present work, the author’s strong interest in issues of justification has remained. In fact, one of the reasons why the concept of “choice” turns up so frequently in Gorman’s book is that many decisions made by historians seem impossible to justify otherwise than with an appeal to “contingent” choice (individually or collectively, consciously or unconsciously).

Compared to its predecessor, *Historical Judgement* is a far more difficult book – partly because of the technical philosophical matters it discusses, partly because of the audience it seems to aim at (professional philosophers working in the tradition of W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson, I assume), and partly because of the book’s rather lengthy engagements with sub- (and sometimes sub-sub-) arguments. What both volumes have in common, though, is that they devote most of their pages to philosophical positions formulated in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Despite its year of publication, *Historical Judgement* is primarily in conversation with Gorman’s tutors and colleagues in 1970s Cambridge (W. B. Gallie, Geoffrey Elton, Bernard Williams), with the philosophies of science taught at that time (Karl Popper, Carl G. Hempel), as well as with authors that came into vogue in that period (Quine and Thomas Kuhn, among others). More recent contributions to philosophy of history in general, or to the themes that Gorman brings up in particular, are largely neglected.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Gorman, *Understanding History: An Introduction to Analytical Philosophy of History* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991), 12.

Although the names of Louis Mink, Paul Ricoeur, Frank Ankersmit, Jörn Rüsen, Mark Bevir, Paul Roth, and Chris Lorenz all turn up, mostly in the footnotes, there is few engagement with the questions they have raised, let alone a serious treatment of their answers (not even in the sections on “narrative truth,” on which Ankersmit has done such important work). Hayden White figures more prominently, but merely in so far as his theory of tropes provides Gorman with a language for describing the limits of choice between alternative conceptualizations of history. Of other contemporary authors, only Michael Bentley, Richard J. Evans, and Aviezer Tucker receive some attention.

Nonetheless, as I will argue in my comments on Gorman’s individual chapters (in the four subsequent sections of this essay), there are a couple of reasons why *Historical Judgement* is an interesting and stimulating, though not unproblematic, book. It offers a practioner-focused philosophy of history, it considers the historical discipline as a rule-governed practice, and it understands these rules to be articulated in the history of historical writing.

## II

One reason why *Historical Judgement* deserves attention is the author’s plea for a philosophy of history that takes seriously the practice of historical studies. In Chapter 2 (actually the book’s first chapter, after a fifteen-page summary of the argument that makes up Chapter 1), Gorman observes that philosophers of history have often been inclined to impose epistemological or explanatory models on the historical discipline, frequently without much worry about the discrepancies between these models and the discipline in its current average state. Not all of these philosophers went so far as to state, as David H. Fischer once did, that such discrepancies show the possibilities for improvement that historical studies still have,<sup>3</sup> but a certain “intellectual imperialism” (18), stimulated by the epistemic ideals of the natural or social sciences, though feared and loathed by many “practicing” historians, has certainly existed. Since Gorman is interested in a philosophy of “real existing” historical studies, he argues, first, that philosophers should treat historical works as their “primary sources,” much in the same way that historians use archival documents as their sources. Also, they ought not automatically to assume that a philosophy of history should be centered on historical epistemology. “Historiography as a discipline is also understood to include historians themselves (whether as individuals or as a community), in addition to their writings, methods, criticism and the like” (19). In other words, the discipline may encompass much more than its attempts to warrant historical knowledge – even though that is how the discipline has traditionally justified its academic existence. If a philosophy of history wants to be “historiography-friendly” (2), it needs to pay close attention to what historians actually do.

This sympathetic proposal – sympathetic because it urges philosophers of history to specify what sort of historiography they are reflecting upon – reminds one of the “empirical philosophy of history” that Raymond Martin (not mentioned by Gorman) advocates in his *The Past Within Us: An Empirical Approach to Philosophy of History* (1989). Like Gorman, Martin wants to assign priority “to an examination of historical studies themselves and to reflection on what is in fact the case,” instead of

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<sup>3</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

to what is possible in principle.<sup>4</sup> Like Gorman, Martin believes that such a “philosophy of history from the bottom up” can help prevent a Fischer-sort of intellectual imperialism. But the differences are as notable as the similarities. Whereas Martin focuses primarily on “explanatory competition” – that is, on an analysis of how and on what grounds “historians argue that one interpretation is better than its competitors”<sup>5</sup> – Gorman believes such a restriction to be unwarranted. He argues that the prevalence of “explanation” and “causation” in the pages of, say, *History and Theory*, tells as much about the issues philosophers are interested in as it does about the historical discipline. Offering instead a deliberately unspecific job-description, Gorman expects philosophy of history “to crystallize puzzlement into questions, into finding out what the questions ought to be” (23). Second, whereas Martin believes that philosophers of history need to analyze historical studies (especially debates, controversies, and other forms of critical interaction) in order to find out what sort of criteria historians use in evaluating each other’s work,<sup>6</sup> Gorman takes the view that philosophers of history should rely on the self-understanding of the historical discipline. “[T]he philosophy of a discipline is in the first instance the historiographical recovery of the rules or principles or model in terms of which the practitioners of the discipline conceive themselves to be operating” (7). Given that these historians, in their day-to-day work, may use other criteria for defining or evaluating historical studies than they explicitly articulate, this difference between Martin and Gorman is not without consequences. In Martin’s case, it is the philosopher of history who, after a careful analysis of the discipline’s output, decides what constitutes historical studies. In Gorman’s case, historians themselves define their profession.

Why does Gorman take this position? It is not because the author, in a sympathetic nod towards the guild of “practicing” historians, wants to give these scholars a say in what their discipline is about. Rather, he presents a long and difficult philosophical argument for giving the discipline’s self-understanding so much weight. In its shortest possible form – in Gorman’s chapter, it takes almost fifty pages – this argument proceeds in six steps.

(1) Before we can talk philosophically about the historical discipline, we need to “model” it. (What exactly a model is, more than “a linguistic entity that says something ‘true’ about the matter being modelled” [27], remains unclear, but one may safely assume, I believe, that Gorman is thinking of a Weberian ideal-type.)

(2) We have such models, for example in Popper’s and Hempel’s nomological-deductive approaches. But there may be (real or imaginary) alternatives to these models. How can we choose among these options? That is to say, how can we philosophically justify our choice of a particular model? (In passing, Gorman observes that Hempel never offered such a justification of his nomological-deductive model.)

(3) Our choice is complicated by the fact that a model, by its very nature, is simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive. A description of the historical discipline necessarily presupposes a definition of that same discipline – you need to know what

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Martin, *The Past Within Us: An Empirical Approach to Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Martin offers examples of this type of research in two articles on the historiography of the American Revolution: “The Essential Difference Between History and Science,” *History and Theory* 36 (1997), 1-14; “Progress in Historical Studies,” *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 14-39.

to include and what not – but such a definition, unintentionally perhaps but unavoidably, also has a normative dimension.

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

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

(6) Since the “historical facts” that philosophers of history want to study thus consist of rule-governed practices with an intrinsic prescriptive character, Hume’s is/ought-distinction also fails to apply if philosophers of history justify the choice of their model with an appeal to their “historical facts.” That is to say, if philosophers of history, like Kuhn, don’t use their own standards “to determine who counts as being a scientist, but *that of the practitioners of the discipline*” (58), the justification for their model cannot be challenged on Humean grounds. Obviously, the standards used within the historical discipline may be contingent (they have been *chosen*, as Gorman prefers to say) and change over time, but they nonetheless offer a criterion for what counts as historical scholarship at a given time and place in history.

If this is an accurate synopsis of Gorman’s long trains of argument, three questions arise. First, although Gorman, near the end of his chapter, follows Kuhn in criticizing the empiricist underpinnings of Hume’s is/ought-distinction, one wonders why the author spends so many pages on this empiricist tradition in the first place. Has the is/ought-distinction not been rejected by many twentieth-century thinkers, especially in the continental tradition? What motivates the choice of Popper, Kuhn, and Hempel as Gorman’s primary conversation partners? Would it not have been equally justified, and perhaps more interesting, to reflect on the relation between philosophy of history and its object of study from the perspective of, say, Gadamerian hermeneutics?<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, isn’t there an element of circularity in Gorman’s argument that philosophers of history need historians to tell them who count as historians? The author agrees that “it would be circular to impose a philosophical theory of justification in writing historiography, when expecting that theory to be itself supported by the historical ‘facts’” (58). But if one adopts the standards used within the discipline, one “commits no circularity of argument in doing so” (58). This is supposed to be the case because not the outside observer, but “future scientists” decide about inclusion of previous scientists in the discipline (58). This, I will argue

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<sup>7</sup> A nice survey of how the is/ought-distinction has been criticized from the days of David Hume to the present is provided in Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

in the next section, is an important insight for anyone studying the history of a discipline. Inclusion in the history of a discipline is characteristically a matter of “hindsight decision” (58). Still, the question is who are these historians deciding about their discipline’s past, that is, the historians informing philosophers of history who count as historians? Unless one decides pragmatically, as Martin does, that historians are those employed by history departments, or those publishing in academic history journals, circularity seems difficult to avoid.

Thirdly, Gorman admits that historians may not agree on the nature of their discipline. He notes there is a variety of historical schools (58) and that, by consequence, the “discipline’s self-understood model may in principle be pluralist in form” (59). This can imply two things: (a) that philosophers of history have to identify patterns in this plurality or some “broad sense” in which historians “share the issues about which they are disagreeing” (2); or (b) that philosophers of history have to take sides, which means that their analysis of the historical discipline is only valid for a specific part of the discipline at a specific time and place in history. Since historians not merely quarrel about trivialities, but have mutually exclusive views on what their discipline is supposed to do, option (b) seems more realistic than (a).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, differences between historians are likely to multiply if we increase the time-span of our analysis. Many cliometricians in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, insisted on a radical break with traditional, source-oriented historiography. Although “[t]he very belligerence with which the revolutionaries advertised their novelties,”<sup>9</sup> especially in the United States, was not in itself a proof of divergence, their orientation toward economic theory nonetheless distinguished the cliometricians’ understanding of what historians do, or should do, from the views held by the early *Annales*-historians, or the Prussian Historical School, or those philologically-educated history professors, in nineteenth-century Germany, who devoted their entire careers to the editing of medieval sources.

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

### III

But Gorman does not believe these self-images to vary so dramatically. In Chapter 3, he presents historians of historiography (historians writing the history of their own discipline) as equivalents of the “future scientists” who decide about the inclusion of “previous scientists” in their discipline. Also, in spite of the reservations expressed in the previous section, he expects these historiographers to offer a relatively monolithic “model” of the discipline. “We will not succeed in our task of recovering the character of historiography *as a discipline* if the outcome of our work were merely a list of different views on the part of different historians. We seek views sufficiently shared to amount to a *consensus* on the character of the discipline...” (76). Indeed, historiographers often seem to offer such a consensus, not because historians past and present reveal so much agreement, but because, as I will argue in a moment, histories

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Robert William Fogel and G. R. Elton, *Which Road to the Past? Two Views of History* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1983), not to mention deep disagreements on a larger geographical scale (European versus Chinese historical thinking, for example).

<sup>9</sup> Donald N. McCloskey, *Econometric History* (Houndsmills: Macmillan Education, 1987), 13.

of historical writing are often Whiggish genealogies of the Western discipline in its current state.

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

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

So here we have the pattern in the discipline’s self-understanding that philosophers of history, in the spirit of option (a) above, might want to find. Obviously, this pattern stands or falls with the accuracy of the histories of historiography consulted for this project. If these studies merely project their authors’ own understanding of the discipline back upon Herodotus or Ranke, the pattern may inform us about positions held in the present, but tells us little about the discipline in its past incarnations.

Surprisingly, Gorman argues that the historiographers he consults – Herbert Butterfield, E. H. Carr, R. G. Collingwood, and a few others – do precisely this: they don’t study the history of their discipline in the same way that historians treat other topics. There is some ambiguity in Gorman’s chapter on what this special treatment of the discipline’s past consists of. In Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), Gorman notes the almost complete absence of references to past historians. “Perhaps paradoxically, we thus find Butterfield telling us something about the nature of historiography without engaging in historiography to do so” (101). If Gorman claims that the discipline’s self-understanding is often “unhistorical” – “historians characteristically do not appeal to the historiography of their own subject in order to express its characteristics” (68) – this could therefore imply that historians typically don’t “go very far back when they seek to understand their own discipline” (103). But this would be unjustified and incorrect. It would be unjustified because the conclusion is a generalization based on a single example; it would be incorrect because there are too many introductions to “the craft of history” that define the borders of the discipline with historical examples – e.g., with Herodotus and Thucydides (“They

tried to get the *facts* straight”) on the right and Oswald Spengler (a “metahistorian” who “produced two almost unreadable volumes”) on the wrong side.<sup>10</sup>

So what “unhistorical” means is probably not that the past is absent from the discipline’s self-understanding, but that the past (from ancient Greek historians and medieval chroniclers all the way to the “scientific history” associated with Ranke) is not understood in “characteristically historical” terms, that is, not placed in its proper “historical context” (102, 125). This is what Gorman suggests when he notes that E. H. Carr portrayed past historians “in the light of his own view of what historiography is” (122) and that Marc Bloch interpreted their work in a “most unhistorical fashion” (129). “One often hears the quotation ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’. But it is not; for historians of historiography, it is largely the *same* country” (120). Does this imply that Carr and Bloch failed as serious students of the discipline’s past? Or does Gorman suggest that Carr and Bloch deliberately preferred other than historical modes of interpretation? Did they, perhaps, engage in an act of philosophical analysis and identify the timeless pattern that we encountered in option (a) above? If I understand Gorman correctly, this is the gist of Chapter 3: historians of historiography articulate the discipline’s self-understanding in terms of universally shared concerns (over issues such as truth and moral commitment, to which Gorman’s remaining chapters are devoted).

Philosophically, this is not without difficulties. One might wonder, for example, why Gorman relies so heavily on historians of historical thought, given that their specialized knowledge is likely to make their views on the nature of the discipline quite unrepresentative. For example, all specialists know that Ranke was by no means the positivist fact-fetishist that he has the reputation to have been. For half a century already, Ranke scholars have been emphasizing how much the “father of critical history” was indebted to Lutheran piety and an idealist metaphysics inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the old stereotype often still prevails among historians with other areas of specialization.<sup>12</sup> Who, then, offers the most representative view: the Ranke specialist or the average historian? Also, what do shared universal concerns mean once we realize that historians have often expelled each other from their self-defined disciplines, not because of disagreement on the *questions* to be asked, but because of different *answers* to those questions (cf. 98)? Does Gorman expect all histories of historiography – including Chinese, Japanese, and Indian versions – to agree on the discipline’s shared concerns? And what justifies his preference for mid-twentieth-century British and French studies over “global” or “postcolonial” historiographies produced in our own time?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert C. Williams, *The Historian’s Toolbox: A Student’s Guide to the Theory and Craft of History*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY; London: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 12, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Hinrich’s *Ranke und die Geschichtstheologie der Goethezeit* (Göttingen; Frankfurt; Berlin: Musterschmidt, 1954) was one of the first studies to emphasize the religious metaphysics underlying Ranke’s historiography. See also M. A. Fitzsimons, “Ranke: History as Worship,” *The Review of Politics* 42 (1980), 533-555 and Wolfgang Hardtwig, “Geschichtsreligion – Wissenschaft als Arbeit – Objektivität: der Historismus in neuer Sicht,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991), 1-32.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dorothy Ross, “On the Misunderstanding of Ranke and the Origins of the Historical Profession in America,” in *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 154-169 and Georg G. Iggers’s older article, “The Image of Ranke in American and German Historical Thought,” *History and Theory* 2 (1962), 17-40.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang (with Supriya Mukherjee), *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008); Markus Völkel, *Geschichtsschreibung: eine Einführung in globaler Perspektive* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2006), Daniel Woolf, “Historiography,” in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz, 6 vols. (New York: Scribner,

However, if not a philosophy of history, but an anthropology of the discipline in its contemporary Western state is the focus of our interest,<sup>14</sup> Gorman's third chapter hints at a fascinating insight. If present-day historians treat past historians in the light of their own views – e.g., if Herodotus is said to meet Collingwood's criteria for what counts as scientific history (113) – then could this be interpreted as an act of canon creation, just in the way that American positivists such as Herbert Baxter Adams created an intellectual ancestry when they named Ranke a honorary member of the American Historical Association in 1885?<sup>15</sup> If historiographical studies tell historians “who are to count as their historian predecessors” (99), then do we encounter here a “memory culture,” which provides collective identity through disciplinary memory? Does the historical discipline, occasionally or usually, display a tendency to create “invented traditions” and mythic genealogies (which usually include a “scientific” Ranke, but often exclude the *artes historicae* and eighteenth-century Bible criticism)? Is there, in short, a sense in which historians justify their present-day beliefs and practices through a “retrospective choice of ancestorship”?<sup>16</sup>

These questions are not entirely new. Some years ago already, Mark Phillips (also not mentioned by Gorman) argued that the “history of historical thought has largely been written as a handmaiden to one particular philosophical position.” Taking Collingwood's *The Idea of History* as his example – a long-time classic in graduate historiography courses, of course – Phillips observed that this book, instead of carefully historicizing past historians, often merely judged them on whether or not they fitted within Collingwood's “canon of proper historical practice.” “If the subject had been any aspect of the history of thought other than historiography itself, Collingwood would have pressed himself to make the imaginative effort his own historicism requires (...). But the subject here it not Aristotle's ethics or Hobbes's politics; it is historical knowledge, and on this score Collingwood has a prior commitment to a particular position that renders him incapable of extending his sympathies to those who construct a relationship to the past in other terms.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, neither Phillips nor Gorman explains why this is the case.<sup>18</sup> My hypothesis is that the history of historical writing, such as presented in *The Idea of History*, primarily serves to initiate newcomers into the discipline. This is not uncommon: every professional practice – be it historical writing or psychological counseling or firefighting – requires a repertoire of exemplary figures signifying what can and what cannot be properly said. Every discipline needs examples that teach what to do and what to avoid, what to strive after and what to keep away from. If a

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2005), 1: xxxv-lxxxviii; or the essays collected in *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Q. Edward Wang and Georg G. Iggers (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002) and *Across Cultural Borders: Historiography in Global Perspective*, ed. Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedikt Stuchtey (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Jo Tollebeek argues for such an “anthropological” approach in his recent *Frederique & Zonen: een antropologie van de moderne geschiedwetenschap* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 26.

<sup>16</sup> This formulation is indebted to Hayden V. White, “What Is a Historical System?” in *Biology, History, and Natural Philosophy*, ed. Allen D. Breck and Wolfgang Yourgrau (New York; London: Plenum Press, 1972), 233-242.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Salber Phillips, “Distance and Historical Representation,” *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004), 133, 137.

<sup>18</sup> In *Historical Judgement*, the closest thing to an explanation is Gorman's speculation that historians have hesitated to contextualize their predecessors, “as if locating historians in some historical context would introduce the very relativism many of them wished to keep at bay” (130). Phillips merely speaks of “dogmatism” (137).

professional practice is a “coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity,” as Alasdair MacIntyre famously said,<sup>19</sup> then the standards of excellence as well as the ways in which such standards can be implemented must be embodied by concrete examples. Therefore, in so far as the history of historical writing is a function of the discipline’s self-understanding, it cannot be written in the same way historians treat other topics: it must be a “disciplinary history” (as distinguished from a “history of the discipline”)<sup>20</sup> that justifies the choices and non-choices that present-day historians make.

#### IV

What does all this imply for what the book’s subtitle calls “the limits of historiographical choice”? In his (short) fourth chapter, Gorman deals with “postmodern” historical thought, which he believes to deny the existence such limits, thereby giving historians an unrestrained freedom in representing the past. As so many critics of “postmodernism,” Gorman depicts the phenomenon in such dark colors that one wonders how many historians or philosophers of history – apart from Keith Jenkins, who provides most of the quotations Gorman offers – actually share the postmodern view “that we can believe what we like” or “that there is *unlimited choice in factual description*” (135). Nonetheless, Gorman develops an interesting argument. For whereas the specter of postmodernism is usually exorcised with an appeal to “historical methods” and “truth-finding procedures,” Gorman agrees with his opponents that, in theory, historians indeed *can* choose what they accept as appropriate themes and questions, that they *can* choose their methods and approaches, and that their “metahistorical” positions, as Hayden White would put it, *can* be a matter of choice, too. However, Gorman does not believe that, in the context of everyday practice, historians are confronted with alternatives that force them to *make* such choices.

This is best illustrated in the sections on Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” Gorman shares much of Quine’s “pragmatic holistic empiricism” (10), especially in so far as he conceptualizes our knowledge of the world, not in terms of single statements or individual beliefs, but in terms of “webs of beliefs,” shared by groups of people, in which single statements refer to, depend on, and mutually support each other. Single statements can be revised only if we simultaneously change all other statements in our “web” that logically depend on it, and if we are prepared to meet the costs of this correction by giving up some of our other beliefs. As Quine said, “Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system.”<sup>21</sup> Gorman agrees with this, but rejects a third claim that he understands Quine’s classic essay to make: the claim that we always *can* make sufficient adjustments elsewhere in our system (146). In order to change our beliefs, there need to be alternatives to our present beliefs – not merely hypothetical alternatives, but real “historical or sociological or psychological” options from which

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<sup>19</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), 187.

<sup>20</sup> I borrow these terms from Anthony Grafton, “The Footnote From de Thou to Ranke,” *History and Theory* 33 (1994), 61.

<sup>21</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 43.

we can choose (153). If such alternatives are not available, there is no choice and thus no change. Therefore, Gorman concludes, “Unlimited adjustment to the web of beliefs is in practice not available. Quine is wrong to imply that we can always meet the costs of adjustment” (153).

Whether, for Quine, infinite adjustment was indeed not only a logical, but also an empirical possibility, is a question I will not try to answer. Consequently, whether Gorman really disagrees with Quine, or merely highlights the practical limits to what Quine believed to be possible in theory, is an issue I will not attempt to resolve.<sup>22</sup> Far more interesting is that here a consequence of Gorman’s “historiography-friendly” approach becomes visible. If historians do not have any real-existing alternatives to, say, the cognitive values of empirical observation and critical reflection, one may well acknowledge, with Hayden White, that the prevalence of such values in the historical discipline is, among other things, a matter of “aesthetic or moral” preference, but one may not proceed to conclude, as White did, that, “as a consequence, we are indentured to a *choice* among contending interpretative strategies.”<sup>23</sup> While Gorman and White agree that, ultimately, it is a matter of contingency what sort of cognitive values the historical discipline adopts, the two draw radical different conclusions from this. Whereas White, at least in *Metahistory*, urges historians to get rid of disciplinary conventions, Gorman wants to understand how such conventions work. Whereas White encourages individuals to develop their own, individual historical vision, Gorman’s holistic empiricism has a strong collectivist dimension, especially in so far as it emphasizes that human beings live, and desire to live, in a shared world, with a shared language and shared meanings (161). Finally, whereas White’s philosophy of history is a philosophy of how we can, or should, relate to the past,<sup>24</sup> Gorman’s, like Martin’s, is a philosophy of how the Western historical discipline currently operates.

Thus, Gorman’s response to the “postmodern challenge” is that disciplinary conventions – variable, contingent, and context-bound as they may be – pose limits on the choices historians can make. Yet this is still a formal argument. How do such traditions *actually* limit the historian’s choice? What sorts of “current agreements,” or “non-choices,” *do* exist in our present-day discipline? And how are these reflected in the history of historical writing?

## V

Gorman’s final chapter provides some answers to these questions. The first section, on narrative truth, is a response to Leon Goldstein’s claim that historical writing is not a two-stage process (research and writing, respectively), but a single argumentative operation in which the achievement of “a range of atomic factual sentences” and the selection of “a particular set of those sentences, organized in some unified way” (172) can impossibly be separated. For Goldstein, statements in a historical account are not the raw ingredients of narratives, but indispensable parts of a coherent argument and therefore “intimately intertwined in their genesis and function” (168). Analyzing this position in some depth, Gorman observes that Goldstein does allow for an additional

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<sup>22</sup> For some critical comments on Gorman’s interpretation of Quine, I refer the interested reader to Paul A. Roth, review of *Historical Judgement* by Jonathan Gorman, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, available online at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=13886> (accessed December 20, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), xii.

<sup>24</sup> I explain this in full detail in my “Masks of Meaning: Existentialist Humanism in Hayden White’s Philosophy of History” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Groningen, 2006).

stage of “account synthesis,” though without attributing any epistemological value to the “superstructure” of historical writing (176).

This, of course, raises the classic question of the epistemological status of historical narratives, which Gorman, in a subsequent section, manages to consider without a single reference to White, Ricoeur, Ankersmit, or Lorenz. I find this disappointing, especially because the convincing power of Gorman’s answer – “The relevant holistic character of each account is (...) more than the sum of its parts” (180) – is limited by the author’s unproblematic use of the by now strongly contested word “truth.” After all, it is one thing to say that a historian’s synthesis matters epistemologically, that the selection and organization of statements is determined by what is “relevant” for the historian’s purposes, or that historians typically describe historical reality, not by means of single statements, but through “groups of statements” that articulate their “webs of beliefs” about the past. But it is another, quite problematic thing to introduce the language of “group-truths” (181), not only because it is unclear which theory of truth (correspondence theory, coherence theory, pragmatic theory, etc.) is invoked here, but also because other philosophers of history have forcefully argued that most, if not all, of these theories are unable to account for what happens at the level of selection and synthesis.<sup>25</sup> Neither does the author explain why he favors “truth” over, say, criteria such as those suggested by Mark Bevir (accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, fruitfulness, openness).<sup>26</sup> And, although Gorman’s reflections follow consistently from his holistic empiricism, what does it practically mean to say that historians’ choices are limited by “truth”?

The final sections, on White and the historian’s moral responsibility, try to be slightly more specific about the limits within which historical judgment takes place. In White, Gorman discerns the rudiments of “a theory appropriate to historiographical practice that enables historians to judge relevance and to place causal and other modes of piecemeal explanation in an account-structuring context” (196). Some perceptive observations on the Kantian dimension of White’s thought aside, Gorman’s interpretation comes down to saying that the modes of historical thought that White outlines in *Metahistory* correspond to “professionally sanctioned strategies” or “rules of the profession” (197), which are “beyond *our* present choice” (201). Likewise, whether historians are allowed to make some form of moral judgment depends on “the presuppositions of the historian’s holistic web of beliefs” (209), which are shaped and regulated by the professional tradition in which historians operate. What historians count as moral issues depends on the traditions to which they belong, and whether they may morally judge the past is a moral question that such traditions help them to answer (211). The limits of historical judgment thus turn out to be conventional. “The only constraints on our decisions are moral and social” (211).

But is that specific enough? Doesn’t Gorman’s study suggest the possibility of a more exact answer?

## VI

A more elaborated and refined understanding of the conventions within which historical judgment takes place requires, I think, a slightly different research question. Instead of asking what sort of judgments historians make, or what room they have for making such judgments, we may want to examine how historians *learn* to make

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<sup>25</sup> E.g., F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague; Boston; London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983) and subsequent publications.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Bevir, “Objectivity in History,” *History and Theory* 33 (1994), 328.

historical judgments. The most attractive elements of Gorman's book – the reflection on what historians actually do, the holistic empiricist approach, the attempt to understand the historical discipline as a rule-governed practice, and the attention paid to histories of historical writing, understood as articulations of the discipline's self-understanding – all fall into their proper place if we focus on how historians are *trained* according to conventions that tell them what to choose, how to decide, when to judge, what to avoid, and who to follow. A profound and subtle understanding of historical judgment requires not only an analysis of judgments made by historians, but also a study of the historian's *abilities* to make such judgments – a study of skills and attitudes developed in professional practices and, initially, through educational experiences. Here, eventually, the playing fields of Eton will enter into my argument.

First, I think we need to study the historical discipline, not as an embodiment of timeless historiographical concerns, but as a time- and place-specific community fascinated by certain questions, inspired by certain examples, driven by certain values, rooted in certain traditions, aiming at certain goals, requiring certain forms of professional behavior, and using certain methodological tools. Conceptualized as a practice in MacIntyre's sense of the word,<sup>27</sup> the historical discipline is much more than a community of scholars that may (or may not) reach intersubjective agreement on what counts as proper historical methods or acceptable interpretations of the past. It also nurtures cognitive values – defined as values determining “which statements are worthy of being considered knowledge” or from what sources such knowledge may emerge – and moral values such as honesty, integrity, and fairness.<sup>28</sup> It encourages a scholarly ethos that cherishes epistemic virtues such as “truthfulness” (in Bernard Williams's definition), while condemning epistemic vices such as anachronism or “temporal provincialism.”<sup>29</sup> Typically, it tends to illustrate these modes of good and bad professional behavior with examples drawn from what present-day historians recognize as the history of their discipline.

Secondly, therefore, the historical discipline may be seen, among other things, as an “invented tradition,” in the sense that its members articulate their professional self-understanding by reference to the past.<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, this is to say that, through books such as Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, the discipline creates a disciplinary past that justifies its current-day practices with Whiggish genealogies. For this reason, the discipline can be said to have its own “memory cultures,” in which “fathers of history” such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Ranke (or Sima Qian, Fu Sinian, and Chen Yinke in China) are commemorated as founders of a tradition. On the other hand, the fact that such traditions are invented and constructed – a fact that Gorman insufficiently acknowledges – should not obscure that these traditions function as “real” traditions. They serve as providers of “absolute presuppositions” and offer a “background of agreement” (consisting of what Gorman calls historiographical non-choices) that historians usually accept and respect rather than

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<sup>27</sup> See above, note 19.

<sup>28</sup> Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 36-39; Thomas L. Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric versus Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*,” in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 145-173.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002); Aviezer Tucker, “Temporal Provincialism: Anachronism, Retrospection and Evidence,” *Scientia Poetica* 10 (2006), 299-317.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14.

challenge.<sup>31</sup> It is for this reason, in particular, that Gorman's focus on the collective dimension of the discipline deserves full support.

Thirdly, if the discipline's assumptions, methods, values, virtues, and examples can anywhere be seen at work, it is in the initiation of newcomers into the discipline. Books and lectures used in academic history curricula are excellent sources for the "professionally sanctioned strategies by which meaning is conferred on history" (197). Often reprinted volumes such as Ernst Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* or the *Introduction aux études historiques* by Charles Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos not only show the methodological ideals of European historians around 1900 – this is how Gorman reads them (126ff) – but also offer fascinating insights into the virtues that students were supposed to practice and the vices they were warned about.<sup>32</sup> Introductory textbooks and graduate seminars were, and still are, genres or institutions that most explicitly define what counts as "proper practice" and that dismiss alternatives – see the Spengler example quoted above – as "speculative" or "unhistorical." Moreover, if one wants to study a particular case of historical judgment, or the ways in which some particular historians did their work, or the limits for historiographical choice that existed in a particular situation, one is unlikely able to explain these situations without taking into consideration the professional traditions within which the historians involved had been trained.

Thus, if we take Collingwood as an example of a master historian who was both wise and prudent in his judgments and reflective on what happened in the practices of judgment, we may do well not to read him as representing a universal mode of historical studies, but as a member of a twentieth-century, British historical discipline, rooted in an Idealist tradition while committed to values of critical empirical research. If we find Collingwood explaining that history can be no science if there is "nothing autonomous, nothing creative, about it,"<sup>33</sup> we encounter professional border delineations that are not merely "moral and social" constraints, as Gorman puts it, but conventions, created and maintained for specific professional reasons, taught to history students, spelled out in graduate textbooks, and applied by book reviewers. If we want to understand how Collingwood judged the past, or how he conceived of historical judgment, we need to study the academic contexts in which his ideas about history were formed – at Oxford, where Collingwood read Greats, but maybe even at that famous boarding school in Warwickshire where Collingwood was initiated into the practices of critical reading and writing. If habits of judgment are established by education, as the Duke of Wellington assumed, then the battle for historical judgment, too, was won on the playing fields of Eton.

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<sup>31</sup> In this part of my argument, I am indebted to Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie: mit Nachweis der wichtigsten Quellen und Hilfsmittel zum Studium der Geschichte*, 3rd/4th ed. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1903); Ch. V. Langlois and Ch. Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1905). Cf. Rolf Torstendahl, "Fact, Truth, and Text: The Quest for a Firm Basis of Historical Knowledge Around 1900," *History and Theory* 42 (2003), 305-331.

<sup>33</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. Jan van der Dussen, rev. ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 264.