

Author Meets Critics about Richard Evans, **Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History**



Concerning *Altered Pasts*: Reflections of an Early Modern Historian

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Abstract

This essay provides an extended commentary on Richard Evans' book *Altered Pasts* from the perspective of a historian of a much earlier period, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The essay considers much of the literature discussed by Evans, explores the “scope” and “range” of counterfactual arguments, and offers suggestions as to how and when legitimate counterfactual historical thinking itself came into being. The essay also argues that the problems inherent in counterfactual history lie less in the logic of their arguments than in the use that is made of them: specifically that a device useful, heuristically, in evaluating the impact of certain factors (or their absence) on events has been stretched by some historians beyond the weight it will bear. In the final section, the relation between fictional and nonfictional counterfactuals is explored.

Keywords

counterfactuals – history – determinism – contingency – Enlightenment – providence – fiction

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To make sense out of the past, historians do fantasize about their subject.¹

JOHN C. MURRIN

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Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we school-children studied as “History,” harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic.²

PHILIP ROTH, *The Plot against America*

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In his brief but incisive study, Professor Sir Richard Evans has provided a thorough discussion of the problems inherent in historical counterfactuals. Like many professional historians, he remains a skeptic as to both their utility and their inherent intellectual value; he observes that the flow of recent work on the subject by academic and popular historians rests on an agenda, not always very well hidden, of conservatism and rightward-leaning desire for an ‘alternate’ past that could have led to a more desirable (from that perspective) present.

Like Prof. Evans, I come to this topic with a good deal of skepticism toward the ‘allohistorical’ as the varieties of counterfactual or alternative history are sometimes collectively called. Indeed, my commentary on his book will be less a critique of Evans (since I find myself in agreement with the majority of what he has to say) than an attempt to elucidate a few points that I think merit further consideration. There are one or two trivial errors of fact or misstatements in *Altered Pasts*: I don’t think, for instance, that Ranke can accurately be described as a ‘disciple’ of Sir Walter Scott.³ And there are points with which,

1 John C. Murrin, ‘The French Indian War, the American Revolution, and the Counter-factual Hypothesis: Reflections on Lawrence Henry Gipson and John Shy’, *Reviews in American History* 1 (1973): 307–18.

2 Philip Roth, *The Plot against America* (New York: Vintage books, 2005), pp. 113–14.

3 To the contrary, though Ranke admitted to having his interest in history awakened by Scott’s fiction, he saw a good part of his mission in life as combatting the type of past-representation

were this a book review and not a commentary, I would quibble: I do not, for instance, think the book accurately represents Hayden White's argument in *Metahistory*, and it seems to muddle White's 'precognitive' tropes with narrative structures (tragedy, comedy etc.) that spring from these.⁴ But none of these to my mind affect the basic thrust of Evans' argument nor undermine the logic he brings to his own critique of the essay collections by Niall Ferguson, Andrew Roberts, and several others, and of the genre (if such it can be called) as a whole.⁵

In this essay I would like to explore several different themes raised in *Altered Pasts*, take them in slightly different directions, and venture some connections between them. First, I will outline what seem to me the most fundamental weaknesses of historical counterfactualism; I use different terminology but do not depart greatly in substance from Evans' own views (though he may feel

he found in both Scott and in earlier historians: Brent O. Peterson, *History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the Nineteenth-Century Nation* (Detroit, 2005), 41.

- 4 Nor does White write about 'Victorian' historians such as Macaulay. White's focus is entirely on continental writers from Hegel to Croce.
- 5 Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, 1997); Andrew Roberts, ed. *What Might have Been: Leading Historians on Twelve 'What ifs' of History* (London, 2004). Other works criticized by Evans include Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker, eds., *Unmaking the West: 'What if' Scenarios that Re-write World History* (Ann Arbor, 2006). World War II has been an especially popular topic here and in the world of counterfactual fiction, almost to the point of forming a sub-genre on its own: see the several essay collections edited by Robert Cowley beginning with *What If? The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine what Might have Been* (New York, 1999) and Dennis E. Showalter and Harold Deutsch, eds., *If the Allies had Fallen: Sixty Alternate Scenarios of World War II* (London, 2010). Evans lists many others, but these are representative. In addition to these, I have consulted several works that, like Evans, discuss either the merits of or the cultural drivers behind counterfactual history, including: Jeremy Black, *What If? Counterfactualism and the Problem of History* (London, 2008); Alexander Demandt, *History that Never Happened*, trans. C.D. Thomson (Jefferson, NC, 1993); Ross Hassig, 'Counterfactuals and Revisionism in Historical Explanation', *Anthropological Theory*, 1 (2001), 57–72; Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, OH, 2001) and Elana Gomel, *Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal Imagination* (New York, 2010), both of which deal principally with counterfactuals in fiction; Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1991) departs from the focus on individuals and their actions to examine counterfactuals in the context of broader social or political phenomena (for instance the impact of Plague on early modern fertility rates). Evans does not address a significant, but distinctive, form of counterfactual exercise undertaken in the history and philosophy of science, for instance Peter Bowler's recent *Darwin Deleted* (Chicago, 2013). For a review of counterfactuals in this context see Ian Hesketh, 'Counterfactuals and History: Contingency and Convergence in Histories of Science and Life', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 58 (2016) 41–48.

differently). In the second section I historicize the historical counterfactual and argue that in itself it is a contingent product of modern metaphysics and physics, and of post-Enlightenment modes of thought that differ in some fundamental ways from those of earlier ages. In the third section, I argue for a particular use of the historical counterfactual that may be legitimate and which in fact occurs silently any time a historian thinks about causes and effects; this became both possible and legitimate owing to the intellectual changes sketched in the immediately preceding section. Finally, I briefly address the relation of fiction to history in the realm of counterfactuals, their common origins, and some critical differences (ideological among them) that give the former a 'free pass' not accorded to the latter.

1 The Range and Scope of Counterfactuals

Few would dispute that counterfactual thinking is now part of everyday life. As I spent a late December morning in my study preparing to write this commentary, I even wondered aloud to my wife what we would have been doing with the day had I not acceded to Aviezer Tucker's invitation to contribute. Such thoughts are not limited to the present or future, or even to the trivially quotidian but are an essential part of human self-consciousness and sense of identity. Kierkegaard famously observed that though life must be lived forward it can only be understood retrospectively. Who among us has not played the 'shivery game' of pondering the impact of small decisions or seemingly trivial events on the rest of our lives.⁶ The dance we almost didn't go to where we met our life's partner; the decision to take or refuse a particular job offer; the youthful choice to attend this university over that one; or (fatally) the flight one missed that subsequently crashed: these are the decisions that in significant measure govern the course and length of our existence.⁷

So far as *historical* (as opposed to autobiographical) counterfactual thinking is concerned,⁸ Johannes Bulhof's 1999 essay in *History and Theory* suggests that

6 'Sometimes I play a kind of shivery game in which I think about how different my life would be if I had made other choices. One thing leads to an unforeseeable other.' Susan M. Gelles, 'Single, and Surrounded by a Wall of Men', *New York Times* 31 Dec. 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/fashion/single-and-surrounded-by-a-wall-of-men.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&r=0>. Accessed 3 January 2016.

7 Roberts indeed uses precisely these examples, including a real case of a doomed plane missed, in his introduction to *What Might have Been*, p. 1.

8 Arguably the only difference between the two is the direct and unmediated knowledge of events, allowing for distortions of memory.

it cannot be simply dismissed out of hand since by implication any historical utterance that carries with it the notion that x caused y (one sort, though not the only sort, of utterance that historians make), or more precisely that x was both a necessary and sufficient condition for y to occur, implicitly carries with it the *possibility* that had x not occurred then y would not have followed.⁹ A virtue of Professor Evans's book is that it takes the arguments of philosophers of history such as Bulhof and Aviezer Tucker (a fellow critic) seriously – indeed, defers to them with greater respect than the historians and literary types who have produced 'serious' and more light-hearted versions of alternate history. Nor does Evans dismiss counterfactuals out of hand but carefully disentangles the weaknesses in many of the works published since Niall Ferguson's paradigmatic collection, *Virtual History*, appeared in 1997.

The problem with historical counterfactuals seems to me to reside less in their inherent logical structure (if x , then y ; if not- x , then perhaps y but perhaps not) than in what I will call respectively the *range* and the *scope* of the argument. Evans addresses both of these issues, though by other names. By *range*, I mean simply the temporal extension of the counterfactual beyond the immediately proximate. If I had not dropped the egg on the floor, then it would not have broken and made a mess seems unarguable. If I had not dropped the egg on the floor I would not have gone to the grocery store and been involved in a parking lot collision seems much more tendentious (I might have walked; or picked a different store; or simply cooked something else). Only retroactively does the mind construct a chain of intermediary events that seem to lead from a single occurrence to an ultimate result.¹⁰

Prof. Evans takes no issue with 'broken egg' types of counterfactual (especially the first version which relies on a physical law of nature – drop an egg on a hard floor from a few feet up and it will nearly certainly – and predictably, *pace* Hume – break). And counterfactuals may indeed be perfectly acceptable and natural forms of thinking in daily life – my above example, though it potentially involves and has implications for other actors than myself, is of a highly limited, autobiographical sort.¹¹ Evans' issue is not the *validity* of

9 Johannes Bulhof, 'What If? Modality and its History', *History and Theory*, 38 (1999), 145–68.

10 It need not be an undesirable outcome. It might be that the egg-breaking occasioned me to go to the convenience store and buy a winning lottery ticket.

11 Autobiographical counterfactuals operate primarily as negatives: one knows (with a high degree of likelihood, though not formal certainty) that if one had not done X then a whole series of subsequent events would not have occurred. What *would have happened* instead is virtually unknown (except in the case of an immediately fatal choice). If I had not, for instance, applied for and then accepted a mid-level administrative post at one of my former universities two decades ago, then I would not have met my wife, nor (I am fairly certain) now be the head of my current institution – a whole series of intervening moves

counterfactuals but rather their utility for the historian. He draws frequently on Aviezer Tucker's incisive review of Ferguson's *Virtual History* to point out that the elaborate historical counterfactuals of recent years rely on a *ceteris paribus* assumption that is almost always either impossible to prove or unlikely to have occurred. The longer the causal chain, the thinner and weaker are the connections from link to link; the greater the number of steps away from the original event, the less likely are things to have followed the course that they actually did. The problem is no different if one is arguing not a different course of events from the same cause, but the non-essential nature of that event in producing the actual outcome. To argue that an event was of less significance than usually assumed, but that things would have turned out the same, is to construct an equally frail chain. It is also, as Evans notes, to make assumptions about the world and specific actors that make it, and them, other than they actually were. And, finally, the claim of counterfactualists that they are combatting determinism by restoring the role of contingency and chance is internally self-defeating since the mere act of predicting a different outcome makes an assumption that things *are* determined: if not path a, then necessarily (though usually hedged as 'likely' or 'probably') path b.¹²

In addition to the *range* of a counterfactual, there is the second dimension of *scope*. Unlike the range, this has nothing to do with the number of intervening steps or the expanse of time (from the two seconds the egg takes to fall at an imputed acceleration rate of 32 feet per second, to a distance of several decades or even centuries). Rather, it pertains to the breadth of impact on different actors – if you like, the historical butterfly effect. My egg-dropping has no effect on anyone but me, who has to clean it up (or perhaps my spouse, who is not unused to repairing my poor efforts at housework). Its scope is therefore quite limited. But the instant that one ventures outside this contained environment to involve other actors, the ice, to change the metaphor, starts to crack under our boots. My decision to go to the grocery store because of the missing egg does not, of its own, necessitate that I will get in a fender-bender, nor that

and promotions in between would either not have occurred or unfolded differently. But the key, and vague, term is 'differently': I do *not* know, with any shred of likelihood, what would have happened to me instead.

- 12 I shall not address the parallel point that counterfactual historians place disproportionate weight on the 'great man' and do not adequately account for social, cultural and economic contexts. While this is an accurate assessment of much counterfactual history, I think it rather penalizes horses for being horses: an essential point of most counterfactualists is precisely that individual decisions of human actors do make a difference. And as Evans himself concedes, social and economic historians (for instance Braudel) can be just as deterministic.

the shop clerk will hand me the precise lottery ticket that will end in a winning number. Thus in history: if Pompey, not Caesar, had been triumphant at Pharsalus (or Antony rather than Octavian at Actium, or Marius rather than Sulla decades earlier – pick the oppositional pair of your choice), then to say that the Roman republic would not have fallen is to diminish or eliminate the actions of all other contemporary and subsequent actors and their decisions, which may (or may not) have led to the establishment of a principate at an earlier or later date – or not at all.

It is significant that unlike counterfactual novels which are able to sketch a world with mixed historical and imaginary characters, and with fewer restraints (for reasons I explore below) than face the historian, alternate history dwells exclusively in the form of the essay. The works that Prof. Evans addresses are, by and large, essay collections, not single-author books. Why are there no full-length counterfactual histories (the history of science perhaps excepted)? Because to extend the device of a counterfactual history beyond 20 to 30 pages of speculation is to exhaust the connection between facts and realities and to force the historian to extend the thought experiment in scope, and perhaps also in range, beyond a point at which even the bravest of them will be comfortable. If a counterfactual essay on different outcomes of World War II were to be expanded into an entire book, it would virtually instantaneously turn into a novel, since even if the author stuck to real characters, the interactions between them would all have to be entirely imaginative.

I return to the relations between history and fiction in my final section but want first to ask the question: How is it that we have come to think of the historical past counterfactually?

2 Origins of Historical Counterfactuals *in* History

Evans' book begins with a useful survey of the history of historical counterfactuals.¹³ The usual suspects appear: Livy wondering about Alexander and Rome; Pascal's *Pensée* no 162 concerning the shape of Cleopatra's nose and its implications for post-Julian Rome (really a reflection on love rather than on counterfactuals),¹⁴ and Gibbon's tongue-in-cheek speculation about the

13 This largely follows the chronology outlined in Hellekson, *The Alternate History*, 13–31.

14 Josiah Ober, 'Not by a Nose: the Triumph of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, 31 BC' in Robert Cowley, *What If? 2: Eminent Historians Imagine what Might have Been* (New York, 2001), 23–49 discounts the nose but sets up a counterfactual victory for Antony at Actium dependent on a more significant prior event, his Parthian campaign of 36 BC.

consequences for an Oxford curriculum of a Muslim victory over Charles Martel a millennium earlier. These are occasional utterances in the history of historical thinking and writing, and only in the past century and a half has Anglo-American literature and history begun to produce counterfactual scenarios in greater number, and followed to their apparently logical conclusions. One cannot but smile at some of the Victorian and early twentieth-century examples that Evans adduces, though it is not these but the more serious efforts of the works published in the wake of Ferguson (many though not all by academic historians) that provide his principal target.

However, as Professor Evans would surely agree, any historical phenomenon, including attitudes to history and the role of human behavior in it, is subject to contextualization and change over time. I should like to draw here on my own background as a historian of early modern historical writing and thinking to point out that not all of these pre-modern examples are the same, and that the intellectual environment which produced each of them is quite different. In particular, there occurred a decisive modification in historical thinking during the seventeenth century which was necessary before true counterfactual historical speculation became possible. I suggest that this is not simply a point of antiquarian detail but is actually important to our understanding of modern counterfactuals in a couple of ways. First, as already stated, as historians we ought to historicize the phenomena we discuss in as many ways as are helpful, even at the meta-level of the current subject. Second, and more significantly, I believe that the history of counterfactual thinking reveals a formal difference between *possible* counterfactuals and *impossible* counterfactuals. Note that I do not say here 'plausible' and 'less plausible' – I am asserting a difference of kind, not degree.¹⁵

Bulhof (161) uses the example of a football game where the results of the final play are determinative: a final-play field goal wins the game by a point or loses it by 2 if it fails. 'But in history' says Bulhof, 'time never runs out'. Bulhof bases this assumption on a post-Enlightenment, post-Scientific Revolution understanding of the ways in which the universe works, of its age and future extent,

15 On possibility and plausibility as determinants in the viability and utility of a counterfactual see Demandt, *History that Never Happened*, 45–47. This again is a discussion of these by degree. I am arguing the opposite: that the early modern mind could not contemplate, let alone think through, possibilities that were a priori *impossible*, except under the guise of fantasy. The 'impossibility' is thus non-probabilistic and hence distinguishable from that, for instance, accorded by Braudel and many historical demographers to macro-level phenomena such as a potential difference in early modern mortality and fertility rates: see Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds*, 39.

and of the capacity of free will operating within that universe to alter events. In the pre-Enlightenment era there precisely *was* an assumed end of time, a *telos* known to God and calculable by the many enthusiastic chronologers (not all of them charlatans as the number included both Napier and Newton) according to mathematical and even astronomical principles. Anthony Grafton's brilliant work on Joseph Scaliger demonstrates the extent and power of this type of thinking, which was not limited to a millenarian fringe.¹⁶ In a mental environment within which scriptural authority determined the fundamental parameters of the thinkable and unthinkable or heretical, history, the world, or the City of Man, did have a beginning and a presumed, if not knowable, end.

I raise this point to highlight the profundity of the differences between the pre-modern and modern mental universes so far as not merely the mechanics but also the metaphysics of the possible are concerned. The response might be made that the finitude or infinitude of the world and time has no bearing on the outcomes that occur within it. Perhaps not directly. However, and more seriously, in the pre-modern era, historical thinking accorded very little space to what might be called external historical contingency, in short the possibility that things might have occurred otherwise owing to accident, luck, or even different human choices. This was, precisely, a deterministic world where literally everything from the outcome of wars and rebellions to Hamlet's 'special providence in the fall of a sparrow' was foreknown by God.¹⁷ Free will existed – or else sin and wrongdoing would have had no meaning – but only from a human perspective. God, operating from a Boethian *nunc stans* (or eternal now), knows what choices all humans will make, from the trivial, to the historical to the salvific. What human actors perceived as free choices were in fact predestined from all time since history moved according to divine will, the apparently trivial and mundane melody supported and governed by a divine *cantus firmus*, to use the language of early polyphony. Thus, regardless of what immense consequences would have followed from such a decision, Pilate simply could not have chosen to free Jesus because such a choice would have – from a pre-modern perspective – violated the divinely determined order of both sacred and secular history.¹⁸

16 Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: a Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* 2 vols (Oxford, 1983–93), esp. vol. 2.

17 As pointed out by Black, *What If?*, 39–40 who I believe underrates the force of this constraint.

18 Carlos M.N. Eire, 'Pontius Pilate Spares Jesus: Christianity without the Crucifixion' in Cowley, *What If?* 2, 48–67; idem, 'The Quest for a Counterfactual Jesus: Imagining the

Diaries and autobiographies, which become more commonplace in the seventeenth century, record deaths and near escapes of their authors and family members; they routinely acknowledge God's hand. And so, on the 'macroscopic' level does much historical writing of the period. Thus Bulhof's subsequent assertion (p. 164) – that no one would think a proper denial of a counterfactual is that it couldn't possibly have occurred – is flawed. This may well be true in a post-Enlightenment world, but it was not always thus. It was, in fact, quite possible to make such an argument four or five centuries ago, though no historian to my knowledge saw the necessity of doing so since the very idea that the alternative should even be seriously argued did not arise. Bishop Bossuet's *Discourse of Universal History* is a latish though not final attempt to assert a strongly providential and deterministic world view at the very moment it was falling into decline – an effort to put the malevolent genie of secularism and a random, mechanical universe back in its bottle. In short, what appear to be counterfactual utterances by historians in the pre-modern era are not really such but rather *jeux d'esprit* – perhaps plausible in an imagined different universe, but not possible within the one that historians (and the pasts that they described) actually existed.¹⁹

The transition in thinking about the course of the past which rendered genuine counterfactual thinking possible (and thus necessitated answers to potential counterfactuals *other than* 'it could not have happened otherwise', per Bulhof) occurred in the West at stages from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.²⁰ In the Anglo-American tradition which is the focus of *Altered Pasts*,

West without the Cross', in Tetlock, Lebow and Parker, eds, *Unmaking the West*, 119–42. cf. Demandt, *History that Never Happened*, 90–94 on the same scenario.

- 19 This is not necessarily a linear development, however. Sir Walter Raleigh's reconsideration in his *History of the World* (1614) Book v, ch. 1 (1628 edn. pp. 261–2) of Livy's rumination on the question of the outcome of a hypothetical struggle between Rome and Alexander the Great differs not simply in outcome (Raleigh put his money on Alexander while Livy speculated (*Histories* IX.16 check ref) that the might of even early fourth-century Rome could have defeated the Macedonians) but in type. For Raleigh, among the most providentialist of early seventeenth-century English historians, events could not have unfolded other than they did and no such confrontation could really have occurred; for Livy, in a polytheistic world in which anthropomorphized gods make random and often capricious decisions in real time, it might well have – *Tyche* and *Fortuna* have an impact beyond that which orthodox protestants were prepared to admit.
- 20 Though there is no space to do so here, it would be interesting to compare the non-Western experience (as is briefly done by Black, *What If?*, 33–40, who points out that counterfactual questions figured in civil service examinations through much of the imperial period). Chinese official historiography from the Tang through the Qing took a very

the providentialist stream of thought is implicit in much late medieval chronicling but became enhanced under the influence of protestant historians such as Johannes Sleidan; most British (that is English and Scottish) historical writing from this period carried over to the early American colonies and can be seen in the even more highly providentialist, and specifically Calvinist, content and tone of colonial historians from Edward Winslow to Cotton Mather wherein human behavior is largely predetermined *sub specie aeternitatis* but retains a didactic and normative function whereby evil (freely chosen but divinely ordained) is punished and good (sometimes) rewarded, and human success is owed to God's guidance and the deliverance of his chosen from harm.²¹

But this type of thinking was also being eroded in various ways. The famous mid-seventeenth century debate between Thomas Hobbes and Bishop John Bramhall on freedom and necessity included, for instance, a reflection on scriptural 'histories of men that did one thing when if they would they might have done another.' While it left unresolved the ancient conflict between free will and determinism, it illustrates the emergence of thinking about history and human activity that allowed for legitimate free choice which, logically, meant that events could unfold (and by extension, could have in the past unfolded) in other ways than they did.²² One might adduce 'secularism' or 'the scientific revolution' as causes of this change, though apart from being rather general influences of the vague 'forces were at work' sort, I think that they were instead parallel outcomes of more fundamental changes in the capacity and willingness of the educated to observe events up close rather than at second hand.

different perspective on the connection between earthly outcomes and the influence of non-earthly factors (the stars, the Mandate of Heaven, the Dao, etc) which made it retain what Masayuki Sato calls a 'normative' focus long after European historians had taken a 'cognitive' turn. Sato, 'Cognitive historiography and normative historiography', in J. Rüsen (ed.) *Western Historical Thinking: an Intercultural Debate* (New York, 2002), 128–41; idem, 'The Archetype of History in the Confucian Ecumene', *History and Theory* 46 (2002), 218–32 and other essays on Chinese historical thought in that issue.

- 21 This was thus an early version of what philosophers sometimes call, following William James, 'soft determinism', but one that differs from its Enlightenment formulation (by, for instance, Kant) in two ways: first, in so far as God, rather than Newtonian physical laws is the determinative force; and second, because it assumes a much higher degree of fixity to future events (in a sense making it a 'less soft' determinism).
- 22 Hobbes, often seen as the 'modern', was the proponent of a strict determinism, but one based less on divine omnipotence than on a materialist and monistic metaphysics which did not exempt the human soul – or will – from natural influences. Vere Chappell, ed., *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity* (Cambridge, 1999), 19; Nicholas D. Jackson, *Hobbes, Bramhall and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity* (Cambridge, 2007).

In 'natural philosophy' and 'natural history', the forerunners of what we now call natural science, this is often called Baconian empiricism (though Francis Bacon himself, as a historian of the reign of King Henry VII, was not an especially good practitioner of his own axioms). In the world of historical writing and thinking, the advent of evidence-based research – the 'greater and more detail' which Oakeshott asserted to be of the essence of historical explanation – was critical and led to some essential insights,²³ beginning in the early sixteenth century with the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini's awakening to something later articulated by Ranke (though he was no more a disciple of Guicciardini than of Scott): that circumstances and periods are unique and that the future is not predictable on the basis of the past.²⁴ Confrontation with original sources, unmediated by the interpretation of previous historians, produced other insights in time. A few narrative historians (notably Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, a proto-deist modulating the extreme skepticism of the 'pyrrhonists') began to speak, for instance about a past that was 'probable', in the early modern sense of 'subject to proof', rather than certain.²⁵ Others such as the renegade Venetian priest, Paolo Sarpi, wrote histories that recounted relatively recent events with detailed, Thucydidean portrayals of historical actors, their decisions, and their consequences.²⁶ Even a politician and historian such as Guicciardini's contemporary Machiavelli, though convinced (unlike his fellow Florentine) of the similitude of events and actions throughout time on which the classical-humanist didactic theory of history was based, was prepared to accord Fortune an impact (under God), and the successful prince the capacity to know when to strive against it.

The impact of philology and antiquarianism was even more profound. Legal scholars such as John Selden, using a deeply source-based approach derived from a century of French humanism, put the history of certain long-standing civil and ecclesiastical institutions under a searching scrutiny and traced

23 Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (1933; repr. 1995), 143.

24 Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections of a Renaissance Statesman (Ricordi)*, trans. M. Domandi (Gloucester, MA, 1970), 69; Ranke on Guicciardini in Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, ed. and trans. R. Wines (New York, 1981), 82.

25 On Herbert's approach to historiography, contingency and historical doubt see D.R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England* (Toronto, 1990), 133–39. On probability and factuality in the seventeenth century there is a vast literature: see in particular Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1983); eadem, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY, 2000).

26 Paolo Sarpi, *Historie of the Council of Trent*, tr. N. Brent (London, 1620); David Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983).

their stage-by-stage development – by way of demonstrating that they were humanly, not divinely, mandated. A ‘thickening’ of the evidentiary basis for certain occurrences or phenomena led in one direction to a revaluation of certain historical figures and events (Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* being the most famous, but not sole, example; Voltaire would provide others). More importantly in the current context, it generated more genuine speculation about alterations in circumstance that might have occurred. Or, to put it another way, what appeared to most historians previously as a course of events set in stone because of an omnipotent and omniscient God (the originating, final and often efficient or proximate cause of events) became more explicable in strictly human terms. Comprehension of the complexity of human psychology and motivation (and thus man-made proximate causes), and also of the impact of nature, weather, landscape and so on upon worldly events, began to loosen and eventually break the shackles of providentialism (even if a Newtonian, mathematically-expressed determinism of physical laws was soon to take its place, allowing the early nineteenth-century philosopher Pierre-Simon Laplace to hypothesize his all-knowing entity or ‘demon’).

All of this occurred well before, and rendered possible, Isaac D’Israeli’s 1835 essay ‘Of a History of Events Which Have not Happened’ and its substitution of accident for providence, or Louis Geoffroy’s imagining of Napoleonic triumph over the world (Evans pp. 3–4).²⁷ Pascal’s quip on Cleopatra’s nose is significant not simply because it is the most famous early modern example of such thinking, but because it stands right on the cusp of a change of perspective from the ‘it couldn’t have happened any other way’ mode of thinking to one which holds that ‘it could have happened otherwise – so let us carefully consider what the different outcomes might have been’. This was a necessary and, perhaps, even a sufficient condition of genuine historical counterfactual thinking (that is, thinking about events in the past, often the remote past, and how a different decision or occurrence at point *a* might lead to a quite different world by point *z*). Virtually all the critiques that Prof. Evans applies to counterfactualists (exempting the late Robert Fogel, whom he considers to

27 This is not, emphatically, to assert that providence, God, etc. was henceforth denied a role – even Ranke believed fervently in a divine plan. But other forces, more internal to ‘History’ (which as Koselleck famously notes first became identified with the past, as opposed to writing about the past, during the *Sattelzeit* beginning around 1750) also began to intrude. Scottish stadialists such as Adam Ferguson and Henry Home, Lord Kames focused on economic, technological and social conditions as would, eventually, Marx. American Manifest Destiny and Nazi views of the destined supremacy of the Aryan race are further variants.

have been conducting a statistical exercise based on a set of inter-related real variables, rather than a true counterfactual) derive from a modernist view of the mechanics of human interaction in which God, providence, fate etc are maximally arms-length game-makers and minimally Dawkins-like delusions.

3 The Heuristic Value of Counterfactuals

The preceding excursus into the origins of counterfactual thinking – and specifically of the possibility of conceiving that events *could* possibly have gone in a different direction than they actually did (which I assert was to most minds pre-1700 a logical impossibility, much like atheism or the 5 billion year age of the earth) is of direct relevance to this section of my essay, wherein I would like to attempt a reconciliation of Bulhof's limited defense of counterfactual thinking with Evans' skepticism. Bulhof's argument is essentially that any thought about the influence of a particular event or decision on history carries with it (even if it is not explicitly articulated as such) the possibility that it might not have had such an influence, that other events or factors would have intruded to produce the same result, or that things would have gone in an entirely different direction. This is an argument based primarily on the modal structure of language, that is to say a sentence structured as 'if... then' implies an equal and opposite 'if not... then perhaps otherwise'. But that again addresses the general case of common human thought (such as those autobiographical ruminations discussed at the outset of this essay) rather than the specific question posed by both Evans and Bulhof, whether such ruminations are useful to the historian.

I would like to make a comparable argument to Bulhof's but via a rather different route: namely, that in historical thinking counterfactuals can and in practice do serve a *heuristic* function,²⁸ allowing one to test, mentally, the notion that event or decision *a* was the determinative cause of events *b, c, d...* Heuristic thinking has long been accepted in the philosophy and history of science as having provided an effective means of generating legitimate, verifiable insights. One need not argue that history *is* a 'science', much less that it generates laws or even predictive power, in order to find commonalities

28 This is rather similar to Demandt's (*History that Never Happened*, 62) notion of 'fantasy' as a tool of the historian for framing hypotheses or filling in gaps, on which he cites no less august authorities than Theodor Mommsen and Werner Heisenberg.

between the ways in which historians form and test hypotheses or evaluate arguments based on evidence, and the methods of the natural sciences.²⁹

On this argument, a counterfactual is something like a scaffolding surrounding the building or rebuilding of an edifice, rather than the edifice itself. Like the scaffolding, it should disappear when the building is complete. And for the most part it does, in academic historical writing. This is precisely why most scholarly history does not include explicit counterfactuals, beyond the odd throwaway sentence of the ‘one can only wonder what would have happened if ...’ variety. I suggest that most historians who make assertions of a causal nature have in fact erected and then removed their own heuristic scaffolding of counterfactuals in the process of constructing their final argument (‘hidden’, like the modal claims in Bulhof’s analysis, p. 159). Since – in our post-Enlightenment world – it is no longer acceptable simply to say that ‘it could not have happened otherwise’, then if one is at all to evaluate causes, the logical outcome is that one must consider *why* it could not have occurred in different ways (or conversely, why if *x* did not happen things still would have turned out the same).³⁰ To give examples: if one is asserting (to use one of Bulhof’s prime illustrations) that Union General George McClellan’s failure to attack Robert E. Lee a day earlier at Antietam than he actually did saved the Confederate army from destruction and prolonged the American Civil War, then one must – if one is being responsible and not simply repeating someone else’s similar assertion – also mentally work through the possibilities that McClellan’s decision, whatever its motive, might *not* have had that effect, or that a different decision might have led to an outcome similar to what actually happened. Doing so, to change the metaphor, does not necessarily leave the historian, as Oakeshott opined, ‘becalmed outside the current of historical thought’,³¹ so long as the historian remembers to rejoin that current.

Let us return to go to Richard Evans’ own period which, he notes, looms large both in counterfactual history and in counterfactual novels such as those by Philip K. Dick, Robert Harris, Len Deighton, C.J. Sansom (to name four of

29 In asserting that historical thinking can be likewise I am also in no way making a Hempelian claim for covering laws or reverting to a late 19th century notion of history as a science. Although as Martin Bunzl points out, at the most obvious level, ‘as we act, we act as physical agents and are hence subject to physical laws’, those laws govern the performance of an action rather than cause it. M. Bunzl, ‘Counterfactual History: a User’s Guide’, *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 845–858, at p. 850.

30 Philip E. Tetlock and Geoffrey Parker, ‘Counterfactual Thought Experiments: Why We Can’t Live without Them and How We Must Learn to Live with Them’, in Tetlock, Lebow and Parker, eds, *Unmaking the West*, 14–44.

31 Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 128.

the best) and, less convincingly, in very many others.³² Evaluating the impact of different human decisions on either side, whether large, strategic ones such as the non-invasion of England in 1940 (or a tactical decision that preceded it, not to attack the receding British Expeditionary Force with sufficient numbers or speed to wipe out Britain's army as well as its equipment), requires the mental exercise of thinking through the impact of such decisions on subsequent events and weighing them against other factors. That is surely what we all do, and not merely in the world of political or great man history but in the realms of history of ideas, economic history, or social history. Indeed, any conclusion that does not at least work through and dismiss the possibility of alternate outcomes, or the likelihood of the same outcome if a key event changed, is trying to build the tower without the scaffolding; worse, it is at risk of slipping into that determinism which Ferguson and other counterfactualists argue against. There are many different ways to do so – one does not always have to, as Collingwood thought, get into the 'inside' of the historical actor's head, but I cannot see a way in which some such exercise can be avoided and still make the claim to be weighing evidence objectively rather than repeating someone else's narrative and parroting their explanation.

How does this 'scaffolding' function differ from the kind of counterfactual exercise that Prof. Evans discusses and largely succeeds in discrediting? It seems that in most of these instances, the scaffolding has become confused with, and set out for public ribbon-cutting in lieu of, the building. And unlike the building, it is rickety, temporary and built on dubious foundations; it was meant to come down, not stay up. And in some cases – recall the above-discussed problems of range and scope – their would-be architect-contractors not only fail to remove the scaffolding (that is they fail to return their discussions back to the world of real history and leave silent any musings on alternatives), but also recklessly insist on erecting their structures ever higher in range, and often wider in scope, into even more tendentious speculations fanning out over decades or centuries. And we all know what happens to Babel-like towers.

4 Fictional Counterfactuals and Conservative 'Wish-fulfilment'

Fictional historical counterfactuals (if that is not redundant) seem to me to live in a different sphere than those undertaken by historians but they spring from the same origins. Like the autobiography, the novel as an extended prose

32 Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962); Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (1994); Len Deighton, *SS-GB* (1978); C.J. Sansom, *Dominion* (2012).

fiction – a version of history populated by imagined as opposed to real characters – emerged in Europe roughly contemporaneously with the advent of substantive counterfactual historical thought.³³ The fierce eighteenth-century dual for readership supremacy between ‘history’ and ‘novel’ resolved in a *modus vivendi* of sorts: a nineteenth-century marriage in the form of the historical novel from Scott and Cooper to Trollope and Tolstoy. Counterfactual narrative fiction and counterfactual history are the twin modernist spawn of this coupling.³⁴

Obviously, counterfactual novels and historian-authored counterfactual essays are both, in the strict sense, fictional since they either represent or speculate upon sequences of events that did not actually happen. But the historian who does so is bound by the sorts of rules that deliberately restrain imagination – in essence there are delimiting parameters of the game such as the editors of the various volumes like *Virtual History* set up for their contributors (that they are often ignored or worked around is not relevant here). There must be a striving after plausibility, an avoidance of the *deus ex machina* (a nuclear bomb in American hands as early as 1942), an effort to model the counter-past according to the *ceteris paribus* rule and an avoidance of ‘silly’ questions (‘Would the history of the world have been different if Napoleon had been hit by a meteorite’).³⁵ Ferguson argued for the constraint of evidence – specifically documented evidence that a given alternative course was actually considered.³⁶ Historical novelists, especially the better ones such as Hilary Mantel, insert fictional events and, of course, dialogue, but try more or less to stick to known facts. Mantel, one of the few novelists dealing with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries whom I can tolerate reading or watching televised, nearly always gets it right. Her characters may speak fictional dialogue (as, of course, did the real characters in much classical and humanist historiography), but they are generally where they are supposed to be at a particular time and behave as their real-life counterparts could have. Gratuitous liberties with established facts are not taken. This is true, as John Murrin

33 There are earlier examples such as the fifteenth-century Valencian fiction *Tirant lo Blanc* (cited by Evans, p. 2) which, I would argue, are possible in the mindset of the period only because they are explicitly imaginary; they have less in common with the modern counterfactual historical novel than they do with their antecedents in Arthurian romance.

34 For a treatment of, and attempt at taxonomy in, counterfactual fiction, see Hellekson, *The Alternate History*.

35 Quoted from Black, *What If?*, 191.

36 Ferguson, *Virtual History*, 87; but see the counterargument of ethnographer Ross Hassig, ‘Counterfactuals and Revisionism’, 70, note 2.

pointed out forty-three years ago, of the greatest historical novelists, including those whose central figures are not (as in Mantel) historical but fictional, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Leo Tolstoy, who arguably had an easier time of it since their efforts at historical veracity required less biographical precision than Mantel had to establish for Thomas Cromwell (and that on very limited surviving information).³⁷ But – here is the point – unlike the case for the counterfactual historian, there is no formal obligation on the novelist (or film-maker unless they are making a documentary), to do anything of the kind, and indeed those that take the most extreme license with the facts, so much so that they ironically declare their awareness of so doing, may be less offensive to those familiar with what actually happened than those that cling to the cloak of factuality but shrug it off when it proves inconvenient or simply don't do their homework.³⁸ Perhaps in history as in religion, the pagan outside the fold is less noxious than the heretic within.

By coincidence, I happen to have read much of the 'if the Nazis had won the war' literature to which Prof Evans makes reference in his book. It is indeed the most popular form of such writing, for reasons that Evans describes aptly – the horrors of the war continue to loom large in our generation's memory (even if, as Gavriel Rosenfeld suggests in a recent book, Hitler and Nazism are being 'normalized');³⁹ and the relative proximity of events and overwhelming quantity of empirical evidence allow more intelligent speculation about what might have happened differently. Evans captures very well the changes in mood and tone of works dealing with the war and the Holocaust; the former has intermittently been the subject of lighter-hearted treatments (recall the comedies of the 1960s such as *Hogan's Heroes*, and even the more darkly comic moments of a film such as *Stalag 17*).⁴⁰

37 Murrin, 'What If?', 307.

38 This explains why many historians of early modern England, myself included, find the 1998 film *Elizabeth* deeply dreadful but applaud the imagination of *Shakespeare in Love* from the same year. The latter makes no pretense at being a 'biopic'.

39 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, 2015); see also Rosenfeld's earlier book, discussed by Evans, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge, 2005). This discusses more extensively the phenomenon of counterfactual speculation with respect to Hitler and Nazism and its history, which interestingly even precedes (pp. 35–37) the outbreak of World War II.

40 The Holocaust itself in contrast has almost always been treated with seriousness and gravity (almost – I cannot bring myself to rewatch the absurd attempt at comedy of the Roberto Benigni film *Life is Beautiful*; a more recent effort, Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious*

One of the first things that strikes one about these fictional counterfactuals is that the conservative ideological association that Evans ascribes to such exercises (whether about World War II or any other period) on the 'historical' side of the fence ceases to be a reliable attribute in the realm of fiction. To take the wartime examples only: C.J. Sansom, whose *Dominion* is distinctive in thinking through carefully some likely and less likely alternatives (for him, the point of rupture or divergence occurs when Lord Halifax, not Winston Churchill, succeeds Chamberlain in 1940 and pursues an ignominious peace;⁴¹ he deems the successful invasion of Britain via Operation Sea Lion to be much less plausible, in contrast to the version of counter-history in Len Deighton's *SS-GB*), is an avowed leftist. And none would call Stephen Fry, actor, novelist, gay rights activist, and supporter of Palestinian causes, a conservative. Nor do such works inevitably involve what Evans describes as 'wishful thinking'. They are not always entirely apocalyptic or at least dystopian (some end up with a 'happy' resolution – a different road to the same positive outcome which actually occurred). But they are also devoid of wistful rumination on a lost alternative past – or even an alternative-to-the-alternative past. Interestingly, Fry's take on the 'what if someone other than Hitler had taken charge of the Nazis' question, in *Making History* (1996), which he plays out via a time-travel exercise, has its protagonist accidentally engineer a world that is even worse than the original, something that also occurs in the liberal American novelist Stephen King's similarly time-traveling novel *11/22/63*, whose hero attempts to undo the Kennedy assassination, with disastrous consequences that are remediable through the device of a 'reset' function.⁴²

Basterds, dodges this bullet by largely avoiding the camps and in essence creating a parallel universe in which Hitler is killed and good triumphs).

41 As also outlined in Andrew Roberts, 'Prime Minister Halifax: Great Britain makes Peace with Germany, 1940', in Cowley, *What If? 2*, 279–90, which takes things in a different direction (one less dramatically different from what in fact happened) than Sansom's fictional version.

42 Time travel books and movies succumb to the same logical problems as do 'serious' counterfactual exercises: they assume that removing one element from the picture (usually their version of the 'great man or woman') will change the outcome because other conditions will remain the same. We forgive them because they generally involve primarily imagined characters and can be placed into not merely an alternative timeline but an alternative, fictional universe.

Conclusion

I hope that the above has demonstrated both considerable agreement with the thrust of *Altered Pasts* but also some other ways of viewing both the problem of counterfactuals and the relation of modern efforts in that regard to their remote antecedents – and why they are different in some important respects from those antecedents. From the transition to logico-empirical thinking about history that began in the Renaissance, and matured in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century there derived a) the capacity to think of possible alternative pasts that could actually have occurred in a real, historical world outside the writer's imagination; b) an evidence-based approach to scholarship and narrative that both opened historians' eyes to contingency and provided the means of testing, heuristically, the relative impact of events on consequent events; and c) the parallel development of history and prose fiction along lines that – unlike real parallels – did eventually cross and re-cross, producing historical novels, counterfactual histories, and – though governed by different rules – their offspring, the counterfactual novel and film. I close with a question which may seem mischievous but which itself is another scaffolding: had the intellectual changes of the early modern era not taken place as they did, is it possible that none of these genres, or historical counterfactuals would have emerged?