

History, Metahistory, and Autology

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Response to essay by Levisohn

Jon Levisohn sets forth a big philosophical question in the introduction of his essay, namely, what is truth? And he immediately adds an educational problem of comparable complexity, namely, what do schools have to teach? These questions are introduced in the context of a discussion of more or less recent developments in the fields of the philosophy of history and history education. Levisohn chooses to pay attention to the “narrative turn” of these fields, which took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s. That means, among other things, that he chooses to ignore more recent developments which are often associated under the labels of “post-modernism” and “constructivism.” He further narrows down the scope of his story by focusing on the writings of Hayden White, and more particularly, on White’s 1973 book *Metahistory*. In this way, Levisohn’s essay presents itself as a case study, that deals in a more or less indirect way with the big philosophical and educational questions of its introduction. For sure, Levisohn returns to these questions and also tries to provide answers. But it is questionable whether his answers are convincing, and whether they tell us something new.

In his presentation of White’s views, Levisohn uses two types of stories. At first, he presents in a fairly sympathetic manner White’s so-called “impositionalism,” that is, the idea that history is unavoidably interpretive, and that the selection of a framework for telling the story imposes criteria for the selection and the presentation of the relevant facts. Historical stories are not simply built up from correct depictions of particular facts; the facts themselves are selected by, and articulated in, the kind of story or the type of emplotment that historians want to tell. Afterwards, Levisohn puts forward three central theses, that are said to summarize the very core of White’s story about stories. The way Levisohn formulates and frames these theses immediately makes clear that he wants to tell another story. His narrative at once indicates that there is another story waiting to come on stage. Thus, it becomes easy for Levisohn to explicitly criticize his own account of White’s account of historical accounts.

Levisohn makes much of the dualism which he discerns in the work of White, namely the gap between objective facts and subjective narratives. In fact, his critique is for the most part an attempt to bridge the gap which he constructed (from the writings of White). Not only narratives are value-laden, but also facts or sense data. Narratives may determine the selection of facts, but facts may also determine the selection of narratives. To this, he adds the remark that narratives are themselves always embedded in a world of narratives, and that the meanings they convey depend on this horizon of other possibilities; just as facts only speak by means of the stories in which they are embedded. The “better story about stories,” that Levisohn tells, and the acclaimed “happy ending” of his own story of his own story of White’s story of history, are constructed by using a simple narrative trick, namely, asserting *and* denying the distinct character of facts and interpretations.

The impression which dominates after reading and reconstructing Levisohn's argument is ambiguous. His story is well-constructed, but it also soon becomes clear (at least, for those who are not neophytes in these matters) that Levisohn largely ignores other discussions in the field of epistemology and philosophy of science, which are relevant to his questions and problems. There are powerful arguments, for example, stemming mainly from Wittgenstein, to the conclusion that there is no fact language (as it may be called) independent of and prior to narrative language, but that insofar as the first exists at all it is "parasitic upon" the latter. There are Thomas Kuhn's well-known analyses of scientific paradigms, of the "immunity" of these paradigms to contradictory evidence, and of the non-rational commitments that are part of these paradigms and that structure scientific approaches. With regard to analyzing the rules that structure particular types of discourse, one misses references to the work of Michel Foucault and of a number of other French writers.¹ There is obviously no question of going into detail here. But the impression which dominates after reading Levisohn's argument is that he could have furthered his argument by taking into account these and other related writings. To avoid misunderstandings, one should not refer to these renowned authors for the sake of name-dropping, but because they have addressed the questions which Levisohn raises in his essay.

The last section of the essay is devoted to a discussion of history education. The essay thus seems to have a fairly logical structure. It first aims at the clarification of philosophical problems, and once that has been achieved, it draws the consequences from the new philosophical foundations for the practice of instruction. But it is impossible to avoid a feeling of profound anticlimax on concluding the essay, for far from registering the "better story about stories" promised, in essence it sets out simply some features of a fairly standard, middle-of-the road, more or less progressive position. Teachers should facilitate students' learning, they should assess where students are, where they need to go, and how they can get there. Students are not blank slates; past experiences determine how they will make sense of new information. In the final paragraph of this essay, Levisohn underlines that we should want our students to be good and responsible storytellers. But it remains unclear which criteria he uses to determine when/which students are virtuous storytellers. In my view, no philosophy of history is needed to advance these thoughts or proposals about history in schools.

The last remarks I would like to make pertain to issues which already surfaced in my reconstruction of Levisohn's argument. They pertain to the so-called "autological" consequences of particular theories—of theories which recur within the domain of their own research objects.² Historicism, for example, is itself a historical concept. Anyone who develops theories about "the" self develops theories about "her" self. Anyone who puts the ideologies of others down to economic interests and social status must particularize her theory, or apply it to herself. If one asserts that all stories are based on previously established narratives, that is, rest on pre-judgments or meta-histories, then research into meta-histories must recognize itself as research about itself. It occurs, together with its own meta-history, within the domain of its own objects. A theory of this kind implies research into itself, so that research cannot separate itself from its object. And this means that it must watch

for itself, or at least be circumspect: it cannot assert anything about its object that it is not prepared to accept as a statement about itself. The theory sees itself and other things as in a mirror, and this may provide an occasion to revise its self-estimation. Whatever is attained for stories or narratives, it must also prove its worth in the philosophy of history, however unpleasant (that is, relativizing) the result of the self-comparison may turn out to be.

Levisohn sees this phenomenon of self-encounter, I think, although he fails to reflect on the autological consequences of his line of argument. He presents his story as a story with a happy ending, as a better story than the previous ones in philosophy of history. The title of his essay is "Stories about Stories about History," and not, for example, "Facts about Stories about History" or "Stories about Facts about Stories about History." Levisohn both seems to suggest that his story is just another story *and* that it is the better one. This, it seems to me, results in a form of self-exemption; only the other stories are value-laden, ideological, or poetic acts. Levisohn does not see the significance of his own remarks about stories in general for the way he can write his own story. This is a consequence of the subject/object, or narrative/fact scheme of knowledge, which he employs. In my view, autological reflections in the field of epistemology make it necessary to examine the merits of a constructivist epistemology, which takes into account that knowledge is an emergent reality that cannot be reduced to features already present in the object or in the subject. But that would be another history.

1. Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du Discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology: Stating the Obvious* (London: MacMillan, 1982); Dominique Maingueneau, *Initiation aux Méthodes de l'Analyse du Discours* (Paris: Hachette, 1976); Dominique Maingueneau, *Genèses du Discours* (Brussels: Mardaga, 1984); and Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Du Sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). I deliberately selected "older" writings, because Levisohn chooses to focus on developments which took place in the 1970s.

2. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986), 135-61; Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), 1128-49; Raf Vanderstraeten, "Observing Systems: A Cybernetic Perspective on System/Environment Relations," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 31, no. 3 (2001), 297-311.