

VU Research Portal

Frank Ankersmit and Hayden White on the politics of historical representation

Van Den Akker, Chiel

published in

Journal of the Philosophy of History
2018

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1163/18722636-12341405](https://doi.org/10.1163/18722636-12341405)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Van Den Akker, C. (2018). Frank Ankersmit and Hayden White on the politics of historical representation. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 12(3), 410-431. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18722636-12341405>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl



BRILL

Frank Ankersmit and Hayden White on the Politics of Historical Representation

Chiel van den Akker

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

c.m.vanden.akker@vu.nl

Abstract

We do not learn from the past nor from possible analogies between the past and the present. Rather we learn from *representations* of the past and the insights they offer, for those insights allow us to adopt the political and moral values that we need to plan a future course of action. It follows, so Frank Ankersmit argues, that *aesthetics* in its sense as a general theory of representation precedes *ethics*. This essay is concerned with this bold and important thesis. It will do so in the context of the politics of historical representation and the fact–value and subjectivity–objectivity distinctions. The subject was also dear to the heart of Ankersmit’s late American colleague Hayden White. Ankersmit is concerned with how historical representations *support* a future course of action. White, by contrast, was (also) concerned with how historical representations *limit* a future course of action since they cannot serve as a basis for utopian politics.

Keywords

Frank Ankersmit – Hayden White – historical representation – values – subjectivity – the sublime – utopianism – aesthetics

• • •

No such discipline as “philosophical anthropology” is required as a preface to politics, but only history and sociology.¹

RICHARD RORTY

1 Richard Rorty, “The priority of democracy to philosophy,” reprinted in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 175–196, at 181.

•••

The best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological.²

HAYDEN WHITE

••
•

1 In Praise of Subjectivity

In his essay “In Praise of Subjectivity,” Frank Ankersmit defends the claim that history writing “is what we had best rely upon when we wish to decide what moral and political standards we had best adopt.”³ This is not only advice to the scholars reading his work, but also advice to the politicians and policy makers in whom we put our trust; for surely, when politicians and policy makers make decisions or make plans for them, we would wish that they had at least some rudimentary knowledge of what historians have said about the past, for such knowledge would no doubt help them to decide what future course of action to take and for what reasons. At least all historians ought to agree that this is an important function of history as a discipline: their work helps politicians and policy makers to determine what to do in the present and the future. This was already acknowledged in antiquity. The Athenian historian and former general Thucydides declared that his history of the Peloponnesian War was of value because it was an aid to interpret the future.⁴ In his view, man is driven by honor, fear, and self-interest, and that determines, in accordance with the varying circumstances, the course of events, both in the past and in the future.⁵ It is hard to deny, the antiquarians aside, that history is of interest precisely because it enables us to reflect on ourselves and the society we happen to live in, and on how we think this society should be improved upon.

I do not draw a distinction between political and moral values (and neither does Ankersmit), but simply use the phrase as a shorthand for those values that call for actualization in the political domain. Think for example of values such as the equality between men and women or the liberty of expression.

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

3 Frank Ankersmit, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” in Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 75–103, at 98.

4 Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.

5 See e.g. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.75–76; II.65; III.45 & III.82.

Such values may inform us about someone's political orientation (e.g. liberalism, conservatism, or radicalism), but this need not be the case.

Ankersmit not only claims that politicians and others should read historical narratives to base their political and moral values on but he also claims that our values will most likely be "intimately tied up with the vicissitudes of the historical process itself."⁶ This claim I accept too, for if not from the past, where would our political and moral compasses come from? To be sure, other answers have been given to the question of where our values come from, but history writing does show that the values we *have* are historically conditioned. All our values stem from the past, including the political and moral ones, and we depend on historians to inform us about this past if we are to become self-conscious of the *historicity* of our current values and norms.

It may appear that such a historicist view on values is at odds with the Kantian idea that the values that guide us in our moral dilemmas must be universally valid.⁷ But this is not necessarily so. The point is that the values we have and commit ourselves to are values we *believe* to be universally valid. The beliefs we have, morally or otherwise, are beliefs we hold to be true, and what we hold to be true we hold to be true absolutely. So Kant may at $t-1$ present and hold his famous categorical imperative to be universally valid and I may at $t-2$ agree with that, but only at $t-1$ could Kant have come up with his imperative and hold it to be universally valid and only at $t-2$ am I in the position to agree with it and hold it to be universally valid. So even though we *know* that values are historically conditioned, the values we now *have* are values we cannot but *take* to be universally valid. This allows us to identify past injustices on the one hand, and shows our inevitable ignorance of the future on the other. We cannot know what it is like to have the values of the future, for if we could, we would no longer be able to believe in and commit ourselves to the values we presently have: the future would have already caught up with us and have become present.

Ankersmit's second claim does not give us a choice when it comes to our values: we simply have certain values at particular moments in time at particular locations, and we have those values because that is where history has brought us. We simply cannot live in other times than we do. Yet, the first claim suggests

6 Ankersmit, "In Praise of Subjectivity," 76.

7 This was an important and heavily debated issue at the beginning of the twentieth century which is referred to as the "crisis of historicism." It is widely discussed in the literature. An introduction to the issue is offered by Ankersmit in his "The Necessity of Historicism," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 4 (2010), 226–240, at 229–230. I am not sure if he (or anybody else) would agree with the suggestion I offer on how values can be both historically conditioned and universally valid.

that we *do* have a choice when it comes to adopting values. It claims that we had best rely upon knowledge of the past if we are to adopt values to inform a future course of action. The values we may adopt are to benefit present day and future political action. But how are we to decide which values to adopt? Here Ankersmit comes with an original and surprising answer. According to him, ideally, several rival narratives on more or less the same historical phenomena are to be studied and compared. The narrative that turns out to have the widest scope, subsuming the most of past reality, and is the most hazardous in its proposal as to how the past should be viewed, is the narrative that we should base our moral and political standards on, for that narrative will be preferred to its rivals and attract the most adherents.⁸

I take it that a wide scope is not to be identified with a long period: the *durée* is not decisive when it comes to determining the scope of a representation, and neither is the geographical space covered. Scope is not synonymous with scale. To give a somewhat extreme example, it may well be that Natalie Zemon Davis's 1983 account of the sixteenth-century peasant Martin Guerre, his imposter Arnaud du Tilh, and his wife Bertrande de Rols in her *The Return of Martin Guerre*, has a wider scope than Jared Diamond's 1997 account on the huge disparities that separate the peoples of this world in his *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years*, in that it provides a broader understanding of the ways we humans live our lives and allows us to adopt a broader range of political and moral values.⁹ Davis in her book is concerned with marriage, religious beliefs, the inheritance of goods, family

8 Ankersmit, "In Praise of Subjectivity," 96–97. According to Ankersmit, "scope" is an aesthetic criterion. However, a criterion such as scope maximization, but also criteria such as coherence, simplicity, consistency, and precision with which we evaluate historical representations, may equally well be classified as cognitive virtues or epistemic virtues or values. I do not think that this point is of much importance in that regardless the "correct" classification, the evaluation criteria are part of the norms that define the historical discipline as a profession. I return to this below. Ankersmit first introduced the criterion of scope to determine the relative merit of historical representations in his *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 201–205.

9 Recently, Jo Guldi and David Armitage made a plea for the return of the *longue durée* in their *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), a concept that they borrow from Fernand Braudel. According to these authors, it would help history writing to become relevant again. This relevance is precisely the relevance discussed in this essay: history writing is to support a future course of political action (*Manifesto*, 21–37). Guldi and Armitage associate the *longue durée* with the extension of the historian's time scales (8), with long-term visions of the past (20), and the big picture (21). In the end they realize that the *longue durée* as a recommendation to historians in order that their work becomes relevant again is at best only half the story (see in particular 57 and 119), and so they argue for the "marriage of micro-historical and macro-historical" understandings of the past (120). They

ties, migration, and, of course, imposture. Bertrande de Rols is the heroine of the story, who on the one hand guards her honor and virtue, but on the other, despite being God-fearing, goes along in the deceit because she wants to maintain her social position in the village and to keep her possessions, and also wants her son to inherit. Only marriage offers Bertrande the social and economic security she so much desires. This is how Davis proposes we should view this sixteenth-century episode and how her representation allows us to adopt certain political and moral values. Her historical insight, basically, makes us aware of the need to amend social and economic inequalities between men and women.

As said, the narrative that has the widest scope and is the most hazardous in its proposal as to in what light the past ought to be seen is the narrative that will be the most successful and on which we should base our political and moral values. Ankersmit has, however, no empirical evidence to back up the claim that this is how we in fact decide what values to adopt. But we may accept the claim that the moral and political values that we *do* adopt from historical narratives have to do with our vision of or insight into society, with respect to how it is organized and ruled, what type of behavior is to be encouraged and what not, what problems it is confronted with, and how we should make our society better. This is how the criterion of scope, which is also a visual metaphor, is appropriate in this context: all visions and views have a scope, and normally we favor broad and clear visions over narrow and blurry ones.

Now we may understand why we should rely upon history writing when we want to decide what values we had best adopt. History writing – not the past! – is according to Ankersmit

the experimental garden where we may try out different political and moral values and where the overarching aesthetic criteria of representational success will allow us to assess their respective merits and shortcomings.¹⁰

So we do not learn from the past itself nor do we learn from possible analogies between the past and the present, as is often thought; we learn from our view on the past and the moral and political values this view commits us to.

conclude (119): “As Lynn Hunt rightly notes, ‘A global, mega-long-term history is not the only story to be told,’ but such long-term histories do need to be articulated with the fruits of more precise and local histories and vice versa: ‘The scale of the study depends on the question to be answered.’” I believe that “scope” is a better concept for what it is that they argue for than the concepts “*longue durée*” and “scale.”

10 Ankersmit, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” 99.

History and present and future politics meet at the level of *historical insight*, and this insight has to do with “a new way of looking at what we have been familiar with all along.”¹¹ It is the vision of or insights into past societies that allows us to adopt certain morals and values. It follows, and this is Ankersmit’s important and bold thesis, that *aesthetics* in its sense as a general theory of representation and concerned with such things as scope, hazardousness, and representational success, precedes *ethics* (the conception of what conduct is to be recommended and what conduct is to be rejected and the reasons for it).¹² (We should note that Ankersmit’s understanding of aesthetics as a general theory of representation¹³ is not self-evident. Others would say that aesthetics is the theory of taste, or opt for yet another definition. Nevertheless, this leaves his claim that historical representation precedes ethics intact, and that is our concern here. To know what moral values to adopt, and thus to know what conduct to recommend and what to reject, we should study representations of the past.)

Ankersmit further supports his thesis thus: each representation, he holds, proposes its own unique set of rules on how to relate the representation to the represented, and historical debate precisely is concerned with how these rules bring the represented into view. There are, in other words, no translation or projection rules that enable historians to translate or project the past into a representation.¹⁴ If historical representations *were* the result of a

11 Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 16.

12 Ankersmit, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” 99. Given this thesis it is obvious that Ankersmit’s work on political representation is not something he does besides his work on historical representation. Politics *and* political theory should build their foundation on historical representation rather than on ethics. This is the central claim of both Ankersmit’s *Aesthetic Politics* (see especially the introduction) and his *Political Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), (see especially chapter 6), and why Machiavelli is the hero of both these books.

13 Ankersmit, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” 90. Arthur Danto for one uses the same definition of aesthetics as Ankersmit as he states: “By aesthetics, I shall mean: the way things show themselves, together with the reasons for preferring one way of showing itself to another.” Danto, “The Future of Aesthetics,” in Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Tony O’Connor (eds.), *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 103–116, at 103.

14 Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics*, xiv and 41 and Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 76. Louis Mink put the point thus: “When it comes to the narrative treatment of an ensemble of relationships, we credit the imagination or the sensibility or the insight of the individual historian. This must be so, since there are no *rules* for the construction of a narrative as there are for the analysis and interpretation of evidence.” Louis Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument,” [1978] *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 182–203, at 199.

predetermined set of rules, they would *not* be proposals but mirror images of the past. Aesthetics, in Ankersmit's view, is concerned with the question how a representation succeeds in representing the past and how that is of interest to us *rather than with the (epistemological) question how what is represented relates to reality*.¹⁵ These are two rather different questions that should not be conflated. In terms of aesthetics, Davis's account is of interest to us in how it succeeds in representing the events associated with the return of Guerre, namely as De Rols's struggle to retain her social and economic status. Our epistemological interests have to do with how she represents married life, religious strife, and beliefs as motivation for action, family ties, the working of the court, the peasant community, and so on, given the available evidence and methods to study them at hand.

Since we learn from the historian's view on the past, it follows that the subjectivity of the historian as it comes to the fore in his view is something to appraise, nurture, and aspire to. If and why this is so will be the central question in this essay, the topic of which is the politics of historical representation. The foregoing already suggested that it has to do with both the fact–value distinction and the subjectivity–objectivity distinction in relation to history as a disciplinary profession.¹⁶ The question is how this is so. If we can figure out how the politics of historical representation is related to these two distinctions, we may be in the position to accept Ankersmit's claim that the subjectivity of the historian is something positive that historians and other scholars writing about the past should aspire to.

In the remainder of this essay I will not only focus on Ankersmit's views but also on the views of his American colleague Hayden White, who also discussed the topic of the politics of representation.¹⁷ As we will see, the paths they take

15 The point is even more evident when we talk about artistic representations. Take for example Picasso's *Guernica*, which proposes its own unique set of rules to represent the bombing of Guernica. Precisely that is what makes the painting of interest to us as an artistic representation. The question whether the *Guernica* is a correct, true, or accurate representation of the bombing ignores the aesthetics of the representation and is quite inappropriate.

16 Both distinctions have a reputable history in philosophical thought. Hilary Putnam gives a crash course on the fact–value distinction in modern philosophy in the first chapter of his *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003 [2002]).

17 One could argue that this is *the* topic that White discusses. Throughout his career, White emphasized that historical writing entails choices that have political implications. Herman Paul recently convincingly argued that White's work on historical theory has always been morally motivated. See his *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2011). Two essays of White address the topic of the politics of

are very different and only cross incidentally. Ankersmit accepts history writing as it is, but he urges historians to be subjective and propose a view on the past with as wide a scope as possible. In the essay that I will discuss, White rejects history writing as it is, if not fully, then at least to a certain extent, and he appears to urge historians to become something else.

2 Objectivity and Subjectivity of the Historical Profession

Ankersmit's argument in his "In Praise of Subjectivity" is that history writing presents us with a continuity of fact and value, that is, a continuity of the "is" and the "ought."¹⁸ He writes:

A historical representation [narrative] of the past may contain only true statements about the past, yet these statements may have been selected and arranged by the historian in such a way that they strongly suggest a certain (political) course of action. For example, nineteenth-century nationalist historical writing may occasionally have been wholly unobjectionable from a purely factual point of view, and yet have functioned in contemporary political discussion as a historical justification of expansionist purposes. In this way historical representation truly presents us with the much sought-after *trait d'union* between the "is" and the "ought." We begin with merely a set of true statements and move then, automatically and naturally, toward an answer to the question of how to act in the future.

Ankersmit does not deny that in types of situation we dissociate the "is" from the "ought," but

as soon as we have to do with the unicity and the concreteness of individual historical contexts, this continuity between fact and norm

representation directly: White, "The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," from 1973, printed in *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. and introduction R. Doran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 136–152; and White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982), 113–137. I will mostly discuss the latter essay.

18 The identification is debatable in that the problems that the fact–value distinction gives rise to may not be identical to the problems that the is–ought distinction gives rise to. In this and Ankersmit's essay we do not encounter such problems.

immediately takes over, and the distinction between the “is” and the “ought” then is an artificial and unrealistic a priori construction.¹⁹

The example of nationalist history writing may lead us astray, for why, one wonders, would one adopt nationalist moral and political standards and values in order to justify expansionist purposes? Are we not better off without those standards? The example may demonstrate that fact and value are intimately linked in history writing and that one naturally moves from what “is” (the past as represented by historians) to “what ought to be done” in terms of the political action to be undertaken, but it cannot be used, at least not without further argumentation, to demonstrate that we had best turn to history writing when we want to decide what values to adopt. The example, so we may argue, not only shows why we *should* dissociate fact and value in the case of history writing, but it also makes it perfectly clear why we should *not* use history writing to determine what to do in the present and the future.

We may admit that nationalist history writing was in vogue in the nineteenth century precisely because it was able to legitimate both the state and the church and the future course of action they intended, but should we not agree with Leopold von Ranke, who, although he was a staunch supporter of the Prussian government, believed that history ought to be an autonomous academic discipline, independent from law and theology, and therefore, that historical knowledge ought to be attained regardless of the agenda of state and church?²⁰ Few would dispute this claim, and Ankersmit would neither. There is a second question I want to raise here: Is Ankersmit’s claim that historical representation “is what we had best rely upon when we wish to decide what moral and political standards we had best adopt” suggestive of a return to a function of history that was discredited by Ranke? This is what I have in mind. In the introduction to his *Geschichten der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, first published in 1824, Ranke famously wrote:

History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the benefit of the future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume: it seeks only to show how it actually happened [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*].²¹

19 Ankersmit, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” 94.

20 Felix Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990), 20–23.

21 Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, ed. and trans. Roger Wines, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981), 58.

Such is the task of the historian. The historian should not be influenced by his political and moral values. He should, as Ranke famously put it elsewhere, suppress himself and let the facts speak for themselves.²² Historians are to be impartial and they should not judge the past. Partisanship and moral prejudice have no place in the discipline of history.

These references to Ranke are clichés, the purpose of which is to make clear that the intimate link between fact and value in history writing that Ankersmit argues for is far from self-evident, and is, as *topos*, part of the development of the discipline itself. To be sure, Ranke is not a theorist of objective history writing. The discipline of history as it developed in the nineteenth century is, however, usually associated with this Rankean sense of objectivity and the realism that is associated with it. (Ranke also is not a realist, but the Rankean sense of objectivity is commonly associated with realism.) This is to say that the recommendation to show the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* and not let one's political and moral preferences distort one's view on the past is an ideal of objectivity that results from the intersubjective standards of doing historical research, that is, from the norms of the profession in which the historian is trained and which authorize his membership to that profession.²³ These norms point towards the argument that the distinction between fact and value "is at the very least hopelessly fuzzy because factual statements themselves, and the practices of scientific inquiry upon which we rely to decide what is and what is not a fact, presuppose values."²⁴ These values or norms of "doing history" tell us how history as a discipline ought to be done, and they have to do with what philosophers of science and history call epistemic values such as precision, accuracy, coherence, and broad scope, and with the specific virtues, duties, desires, and skills that are associated with these values and that define

22 Ranke, *A History of England Principally in the Seventeenth Century, Volume 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875), 467.

23 A too-often made error is to think that an accurate representation is a representation of reality as it is, or, in the case of history, a representation of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. We should think about establishing facts and accurate representation in terms of *norms* of behavior that are associated with the historical profession. See Richard Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism," in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 63–83 and my discussion of it in the context of historical theory in *Beweren en Tonen. Waarheid, Taal en het Verleden* (Nijmegen, 2009), 103–117.

24 Hilary Putnam, "Fact and value," in Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1981]), 127–149, at 128. The humanities, I take it, too establish facts according to scientific standards, that is, according to the norms that define the profession.

the profession,²⁵ such as the skill to transcribe sixteenth-century handwriting, the virtues to search for all relevant pieces of evidence in archives with patience and perseverance, the duty to be unbiased, and the desire to impress readers with a stunning and vigorous historical thesis. Morals do enter the historical profession – historians are not supposed to lie for example and have to be honest – but the *ethics* of doing history does not constitute the discipline of history: the norms of “doing history” do.

I started this digression on the disciplinary norms of history with the question whether Ankersmit’s claim that historical representation “is what we had best rely upon when we wish to decide what moral and political standards we had best adopt” was suggestive of a return to the function of history that was discredited by Ranke. The answer to this question is: no, it is not. Ranke would not disagree with Ankersmit’s claim; on the contrary, for how would one be able to decide on present and future politics without knowledge of the state and how it came into being and developed over time?²⁶ Ranke did not object to the new role that the historian acquired in his day as a voice to be heard in public life. Historians are, after all, experts on social life and the way it functions.²⁷ In his 1836 inaugural address he wrote:

Therefore it is the task of history to discern the nature of the state from the sequence of earlier occurrences and bring to an understanding that which politics, after successive understanding and the gaining of insight, further develops and brings to fulfillment.²⁸

As we said, it would be a good thing if politicians had historical knowledge, and the way a historian views the past is no doubt related to his or her political and moral values and interests. One simply cannot be interested in history and have no interest at all in the society one lives in. What Ranke does reject

25 And with that, the scholarly personae of historians, as Herman Paul would add. See his “What Is a Scholarly Persona? Ten Theses on Virtues, Skills, and Desires,” *History and Theory*, 53 (2014), 348–371.

26 This is the theme of Ranke’s 1836 inaugural address.

27 Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture?*, 9.

28 Ranke, *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 24 (Leipzig 1872), 288–289. “Demnach ist es die Aufgabe der Historie, das Wesen des Staates aus der Reihe der früheren Begebenheiten darzutun und dasselbe zum Verständnis zu bringen, die der Politik aber, nach erfolgtem Verständnis und gewonnener Erkenntnis es weiterzuentwickeln und zu vollenden.” The inaugural address is also translated in English in Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, Georg Iggers, ed. and introduction (Routledge: London and New York, 2011), 75–82, for the passage quoted in a somewhat different translation, see p. 80. The view of Ranke was shared by fellow historicists such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Gustav Droysen.

in his *Geschichten der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker* is the idea of studying the past as an instrument of political education.²⁹ Such study, which is known as *exemplar history* and the dominant form of history before 1800, turns the past into a reservoir of examples of moral behavior which one should either imitate or avoid.³⁰ Here the “is” of the past is identical with the “ought” of political action. This pre-historicist way of doing history is not something that Ankersmit (or Ranke) is arguing for. He, as we saw, argues for the continuity from the “is” as represented by a historian to the “ought” of current political action. I might add that Ankersmit has always declared himself to be a historicist. His emphasis on the particularity of historical contexts in the passage I quoted, which serves as a starting point for his theorizing of the relation between history writing and the political and moral values we have, and his claim that our moral values are historically conditioned, are unmistakably proof of that.³¹ His agreement with Ranke on the relevance of history to politics is further proof of that.

29 This is also what for example Von Humboldt and Hegel rejected for the same historicist reason. The latter wrote: “Wenn auch zu sagen ist, daß Beispiele des Guten das Gemüt erheben und beim moralischen Unterricht der Kinder, um ihnen das Vortreffliche eindringlich zu machen, anzuwenden wären, so sind doch die Schicksale der Völker und Staaten, deren Interessen, Zustände und Verwicklungen ein andres Feld. Man verweist Regenten, Staatsmänner, Völker vornehmlich an die Belehrung durch die Erfahrung der Geschichte. Was die Erfahrung aber und die Geschichte lehren, ist dieses, daß Völker und Regierungen niemals etwas aus der Geschichte gelernt und nach Lehren, die aus derselben zu ziehen gewesen waren, gehandelt haben. Jede Zeit hat so eigentümliche Umstände, ist ein so individueller Zustand, daß in ihm aus ihm selbst entschieden werden muß und allein entschieden werden kann.” Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1961), 45.

30 On pre-historicist philosophy of history, see George Nadel, “Philosophy of History before Historicism,” *History and Theory*, 3 (1964), 291–315. With the rejection of exemplar history, its associated view of history as “life’s teacher” (*historia magistra vitae*) too resolves. The latter is the topic of Reinhard Koselleck’s “*Historia Magistra Vitae. Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont neuzeitlich bewegter Geschichte*,” in *Natur und Geschichte, Karl Löwith zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Braun and M. Riedel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1967), 196–219. Nadel concludes that by deposing exemplar history, history as a professional study of the past started to study history “for its own sake.” Nadel, “Philosophy of History before Historicism,” 315. This is how the famous quote of Ranke from his *Geschichten der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker* perhaps may be interpreted (and Nadel too quotes that passage), but Ranke’s inaugural clearly expresses Ranke’s firm belief that history is to support politics. For Ranke, as for fellow historicists such as Von Humboldt and Droysen, the politician was a *praktische Historiker*. The old *topos* of history as “life’s teacher” was thus transformed.

31 His most explicit statement of his historicism is Ankersmit, “Historicism: An Attempt at Synthesis,” *History and Theory*, 34 (1995), 143–161, and Ankersmit, “The Necessity of Historicism.”

We can, in other words, both embrace the professionalization of history as a discipline in the nineteenth century, which is often and for good reasons associated with Rankean objectivity, and embrace the idea that when we decide on any future course of political action, we better be acquainted with history. Moreover, both appear to strengthen one another: the more objective and scientific history as a profession is, the better politicians and other policy makers are equipped to decide on what political and moral standards to adopt to plan a future course of action. But if this is so, the subjectivity of the historian is not, as Ankersmit thinks, something to be appraised and aspire to. It thus appears that we have reached an impasse here: either the *objectivity* of the historical discipline or the *subjectivity* of the historian better supports the adoption of a future course of political action.

Before we try to get out of this impasse, we should consider another example of what Ankersmit has in mind, and forget about the example of nineteenth-century nationalist history writing with which we started this section. We cannot but agree, I think, with Ankersmit that the suppression of personal political and moral values, and thus strive for objectivity in the Rankean sense, is not self-evidently something to pursue. According to Ankersmit, authors such as Isaiah Berlin and Carl Friedrich “were so obviously inspired by a devotion to liberal democracy and by an uncompromising rejection of totalitarianism” that we cannot but realize that “subjectivity is not in the least under all circumstances a fatal shortcoming of historical writing.”³² Or think of the work of the feminist historian Joan Scott, who declared that the motive for her work is “avowedly political: to point out and change inequalities between women and men.”³³ These are evident examples of the subjectivity of the historian of which it can be said that they did not negatively influence their work. On the contrary.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that here the relation between history writing and political and moral values is construed differently from the example of nationalist history writing with which we started this section and from how we presented Ankersmit’s position in the first section of this essay. In the examples given it is the case that, as Ankersmit puts it elsewhere, “*the best political ideals and values are those that inspire and permeate the most convincing historical writing.*”³⁴ If, however, historical representation precedes ethics and

32 Ankersmit, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” 100.

33 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History. Revised Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 3.

34 Ankersmit, *Political Representation*, 3, his emphasis. This is the accompanying volume to his *Historical Representation*.

historical representation is beneficial to politics (and political theory) because it allows us to make the decision what future course of action to take, he should have formulated the statement in reverse and have stated that *the most convincing historical writing is the one that inspires and permeates the best political ideals and values*.³⁵ These statements need not conflict. Yet it is important to keep them apart. Regardless of what we *now* think are the “proper” values for historians to have (e.g. regarding the equality between men and women), it is always possible to adopt values from historical representations, as the example of nineteenth-century nationalist history writing demonstrates. This is Ankersmit’s more important claim. I might add that it does not follow that history writing is continuous with life as it *was* lived in the *past*.³⁶ It follows that history writing is continuous with life as it *ought* to be lived in the *future*. When Ankersmit argues for the continuity between fact and value in the context of history writing, he argues for the continuity between what “is” and has been *as it is represented* in history writing and “what ought to be done” in the present and future.

Perhaps our conclusion should simply be this: what makes the past an object of interest to us, and why we have history to begin with, has to do with the kind of people we are and the moral and political values we have, the kind of society we live in, and how we think this society should be improved upon. This does not, however, help us overcome the impasse we reached: If history as a discipline is to serve the adoption of a future course of political action, should it be objective as a discipline, as the Rankeans argue, or should the historian be subjective, as Ankersmit argues?

3 History and Value

To overcome our impasse, we should distinguish between

- 1) political and moral values of people in the past,
- 2) political and moral values of historians,
- 3) norms that define the historical profession, and
- 4) political and moral values of us: the members of contemporary societies. This level overlaps with level 2 in that obviously historians are members of society too.

35 This is also what Ankersmit appears to have in mind in his *Political Representation*, even though he writes it in reverse.

36 As David Carr would argue. See David Carr, “Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity,” *History and Theory*, 25 (1986), 117–131.

These are the four levels on which values operate in the context of history writing:

- 1) The political and moral values held in the past constitute the “is” of the “is–ought” distinction inasmuch as those values are the object of historical inquiry. Political and moral values in the past are, to the historian, historical facts to be studied and represented.³⁷
- 2) The political and moral values of the historian are, according to the Rankean ideal of objectivity, to be suppressed or even “erased.” This is a norm on level 3. Ankersmit, by contrast, claims that the subjectivity of the historian is something positive and something to aspire to. This led to our impasse: either the discipline’s objectivity or the historian’s subjectivity supports a future course of action.

The political and moral values of the historian are to be distinguished from

- 3) the intersubjective norms of the historical profession which, among other things, come into play in the establishment of (1) the values held in the past itself. These norms are *not* restrictive towards level 2 in that they allow, in principle, all political and moral values. It is not that the norms of doing history force historians to be either conservative, reactionary, liberal, socialist, or radical. The point of the Rankean ideal of objectivity is to be impartial and not have political and moral values color the historian’s account. However, *some* political and moral values *are* incompatible with the norms of the historical profession – think of the values associated with Holocaust denial. But this is not because the norms of the profession are restrictive towards the historian’s political and moral values. It is because those values depend on a violation of the intersubjective norms of the profession such as precision and consistency. One cannot be a historian according to the standards of the profession *and* deny that the Holocaust took place. Finally there are
- 4) political and moral values we and politicians adopt on the basis of accounts of the past, and these constitute the “ought” of the “is–ought” distinction.

37 Discerning values in the past entails situating past behavior in a context of beliefs, motifs, attitudes, desires, and reasons for action. These are facts to the historian. This already makes evident that a fact is not what logical positivists thought a fact was: something that is confirmed by a sense impression. All prediction, they argued, is deduction of future sense-impression from a theory. The analytic–synthetic distinction relies on this understanding of fact, and since that distinction turned out to be without solid ground, as Quine famously argued, the fact–value opposition loses its support in that distinction as well. See Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, 30.

Our impasse was this: either the objectivity of the historical discipline or the subjectivity of the historian better supports the (4) adoption of a future course of political action. The subjectivity of the historian has to do with (2) the political and moral values of the historian and this contradicts the (3) Rankean disciplinary norm of objectivity. How to get out of this impasse? Crucial is Ankersmit's central claim that the political and moral values we have, and thus also the political and moral values that the historian has, do not *precede* our views on the past. It is the other way around: the historian's view on the past ought to determine what political and moral values we, including historians, had best adopt. Aesthetics precedes ethics, as Ankersmit has it. It is not that political values and norms *should* inspire history writing, although this might well be the case (as the Rankeans fear). Rather, history writing should inspire the adoption of political values and norms. Therefore, the problem is not that the values of the *individual* historian influence the historian's account as the Rankeans fear. His account at the same time determines his values, or, more precisely, the account first makes evident what those values *are*.

The impasse we reached earlier on turns out to be no impasse at all. The impasse that history as a discipline should either be objective as the Rankeans maintain or that the historians should be subjective as Ankersmit claims, incorrectly assumes that the political and moral values of the historian determines his or her account, which is why, as the Rankeans hold, those values should be suppressed if the account is to be objective. If, however, as Ankersmit claims, the political and moral values of the historian are derived from accounts of the past rather than the other way around, the Rankean fear does not arise.

4 The Politics of History as a Discipline

We now know that the politics of representation has not so much to do with (2) the political and moral values of the individual historian, nor with (1) the political and moral values in the past; it rather has to do with (3) what the discipline is like and (4) how it benefits politicians and their supporters by enabling them to decide what future course of action to take. The historian may even suppress his own political and moral outlook, as a good Rankean scholar, but still suggest a future course of action. The most important lesson is that history as a discipline is beneficial to politicians and policy makers in that we learn from the historian's view on the past and the moral and political values this view commits us to instead of learning from the past itself or the possible analogies between the past and the present.

As said, the politics of representation has to do with the nature of history as a discipline and how this discipline benefits the adoption of a future course

of action. This is also suggested by White in his 1982 essay "The Politics of Historical Interpretation." White puts it thus:

The politics of interpretation ... has to do with the kind of *authority* the interpreter [e.g. the historian] claims vis-à-vis the established political authorities of his society, on the one side, and vis-à-vis other interpreters in his own field of study or investigation, on the other, as the basis of whatever *rights* he conceives himself to possess and whatever *duties* he feels obliged to discharge as a *professional* seeker of truth.³⁸

Now, what White calls the politics of historical interpretation is what Ankersmit refers to as the politics of representation – and we have found good reasons why we should use that latter term. The more interesting difference is this: in Ankersmit's view, the politics of representation has to do with representations that have us adopt certain political and moral values. It thus is concerned with representational *success*, hence the emphasis on widening the scope of representations. White situates the politics of representation in a Rankean manner on the level of the profession and what defines it. He points out that the politics of representation has to do with the 3) norms that define the discipline of history, that is, with what makes a person a historian with rights, duties, and authority as a seeker of truth, and how this discipline supports 4) a particular future course of political action. White too wishes that in political and social matters, politicians would be "guided by the kind of realism to which a disciplined historical knowledge conduces."³⁹ There is, however, a catch in his view, and it is worth quoting White at length:

But on the level of interpretative theory [i.e. the theory of history], where the matter under contention is the politics inherent in alternative conceptions of what [the] historical discipline itself consists of, one cannot seek to resolve differences of opinion by an appeal either to political values or to some criterion of what a properly disciplined historical knowledge consists of. For it is political values and what constitutes historical discipline that are at issue. The problem, however, does not lie with [substantive] philosophy of history,⁴⁰ which is at least *openly* political, but rather lies with a conception of historical studies that purports to be above politics [i.e. Rankean objectivity and realism] and at the same

38 White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," 113.

39 White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," 119.

40 Think of the grand theories of Hegel and Marx.

time rules out as “unrealistic” any political program or thought in the least tinged with utopianism. And it does so, moreover, by so disciplining historical consciousness as to make realism effectively identical with anti-utopianism.⁴¹

The catch is this. The politics of representation, as a relation between history as a discipline and the future course of action, betrays a deeper problem, namely, that the (existing) norms that define the historical profession *exclude* utopian thinking, according to White.⁴² This has, I think, at least four important consequences, given that White’s diagnosis is correct:

First, the continuum of the “is” and the “ought” that Ankersmit claims for history writing is handicapped in White’s view by the norms that define the profession in that it forces the historian, and with that his readers, to be anti-utopian.

Second, the idea that history as a discipline is important to society in that politicians and policy makers should have knowledge of the past in order to plan a future course of action, is not as evident as we thought it was. Not (only) because we learn from the historian’s representations rather than from the past, as Ankersmit taught us, but because as a discipline, history stands in the way of the visionary politics that we associate with utopias.

Third, the suggestion we made earlier that the more objective and scientific history as a discipline is, the better it serves politics, is at best true if the historian does *not* want that utopian visions are adopted from his narrative.

Fourth, we now see where Ankersmit’s and White’s paths cross. The discipline of history *supports* a future course of action in Ankersmit’s view, and he urges historians to present a view on the past with as wide a scope as possible, whereas the discipline of history *limits* a future course of action in White’s view inasmuch as it makes a visionary politics impossible. It is not that they disagree on the relation between historical representation and politics. In the essay discussed here but also elsewhere White too emphasizes that history as a discipline ought to support present day and future politics.⁴³ The point here

41 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 119–120.

42 And according to Friedrich Nietzsche before him. See Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen. Zweites Stück. Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (Köln: Könnemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 1994), §6.

43 “The contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as ‘an end in itself,’ but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time.” White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory*, 5 (1966), 111–134, at 125.

is that White makes us aware of the limitations inherent in that relation while Ankersmit elaborates on the nature of that relation.

These are conclusions that we can draw. But why is the adoption of a utopian vision, of a visionary politics, excluded by history as a discipline? White observes that “everyone recognizes that the way one makes sense of history is important in determining what politics one will credit as realistic, practicable, and socially responsible.”⁴⁴ But he also observes that the professional discipline is blind to “the sublimity of the historical process and to the visionary politics which it authorizes.”⁴⁵ This then, is the kernel of White’s essay:

insofar as historical events and processes become understandable, as conservatives maintain, or explainable, as radicals believe them to be, they can never serve as a basis for a visionary politics more concerned to endow social life with meaning than with beauty.... It seems to me that the kind of politics that is based on a vision of a perfected society can compel devotion to it only by virtue of the contrast it offers to a past that is understood in the way that [Friedrich von] Schiller conceived it, that is to say, as a “spectacle” of “confusion,” “uncertainty,” and “moral anarchy.”⁴⁶

The sublimity of the historical process takes White back to the moment that history became a profession in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century discipline of history, he maintains, exorcised “the notion of the sublime from any apprehension of the historical process.”⁴⁷ “The sublimity of the spectacle of history,” White writes, “had to be transcended if it was to serve as an object of knowledge and deprived of the terror it induced.”⁴⁸ And this was

44 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 129.

45 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 130. Nine years earlier, White stated that “we appear unable to grant that a *world-transforming* vision can appropriately be brought to the study of history.” White, “The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History,” 141.

46 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 128.

47 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 125.

48 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 126. The sublime also figures prominently in the work of Ankersmit. A crucial difference between his view and that of White is that Ankersmit associates the *historical* sublime with a profound sense of loss that accompanied the defining historical events in the West, such as the destruction of the Renaissance and the *Ancien Régime*. See Frank Ankersmit, “The Sublime Dissociation of the Past: Or How to Be(come) What One Is No Longer,” *History and Theory*, 40 (2001), 295–323; and Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 181–182. Ankersmit holds that “the sublimity of the past announces itself in the emergence of historical awareness (and, subsequently, of the discipline of the writing of history), whereas its role is only quite marginal – though not wholly zero – when our relationship to the past is forced within the matrix of the writing

achieved by subordinating the sublime to aesthetics (in its sense as the theory of taste) and to rationality. White therefore laments the professionalization of the discipline, its Rankean ideal of objectivity and the realism it presupposes. If we accept Rankean objectivity and realism, and think that all historians need to do is to interpret and explain past events, then there is no room for a visionary politics, for utopian visions, and also not, I might add, for dystopian ones. Professional history is a way of domesticating the past, insofar as it understands and explains the past and willingly refrains from displaying its sublimity.⁴⁹ In the historical profession, there is no room for the “spectacle’ of ‘confusion,’ ‘uncertainty,’ and ‘moral anarchy.’” White concludes that a visionary politics is only possible on the assumption that one *cannot* make sense of history.⁵⁰ This statement, if properly understood, is concerned with sublime events, for only sublime events are defined by their meaninglessness and hence defy interpretation and the imposition of meaning. Precisely that is why they astonish or terrify, or do both at one and the same time.

It appears that White wants to undo the discipline of history as it is, since he appears to regret how it has developed. Ankersmit, by contrast, starts from history as it has developed, and from there he argues that the subjectivity of the historian is something positive and something to aspire to, urging them to broaden the scope of their proposals on how the past should be viewed. White appears to present the historian with a choice: be a professional historian *and* your work will be anti-utopian, hindering a visionary politics, or be something else. Does White present a solution to this dilemma?⁵¹ Not in the essay from which I quoted.⁵²

of history.” Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth*, 174. Interestingly, the suggestion that the discipline of history smothers the historical sublime agrees with White’s view. However, we should distinguish the historical sublime from the sublime itself. Not all sublime events are to be associated with a sense of profound loss. Another difference is that White opposes the sublime and aesthetics whereas Ankersmit does not. This has to do with the broad sense of aesthetics that is present in Ankersmit’s work, in which aesthetics is the general theory of representation, whereas for White aesthetics is the theory of taste.

49 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 128.

50 White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 129.

51 If we think that White’s dilemma is not our dilemma, and think that it is not problematic that history as a discipline does not allow utopian visions, then obviously, no solution is needed.

52 Most close to a (albeit unconvincing) solution is at the end of his essay where he pleads for “a conception of the historical record as being not a window through which the past ‘as it really was’ can be apprehended but rather a wall that must be broken through if the ‘terror of history’ is to be directly confronted and the fear it induces repelled.” White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 137. Perhaps it can be argued that White’s recourse to *intransitive writing* in some of his later works, a term he borrows from the French literary

I want to come to a close, and do justice to both the views of White and Ankersmit, whose paths, as we saw, only crossed incidentally in their work on the politics of historical representation. Five conclusions can be drawn, some of which open up new vistas for further consideration.

5 Conclusions

1. Our first conclusion is that the politics of historical representation is concerned with the question how history as a discipline *supports* and *limits* the adoption of political and moral values and the future course of action associated with those values.

2. Historical representation supports a future course of action in that it presents a continuity between the “is” and the “ought,” between the past as represented and a future course of action adopted from that representation. This is Ankersmit’s view. Historical representations support a future course of political action because of the insight they offer, and the wider their scope, the more successful they will be. Praising the subjectivity of the historian therefore comes down to urging historians to propose a view on the past with as wide a scope as possible. How we view the past determines what political and moral values we adopt and the best historical representation is the one inspiring the best political and moral values. This also underlines the common wisdom that our interest in history writing is motivated by our interest in the society in which we live.

3. Historical representation limits a future course of action inasmuch as past sublime events are made understandable and explainable, for that cannot serve as a basis for a visionary politics since such understanding and explanation exorcise the sublimity of events. This is the view of White. Making events understandable or explainable is what we may call the Apollonian impulse in history writing, to borrow a term from Nietzsche. It creates a gap between the past and its representation, between reality and our knowledge of it, thereby making it something distant but manageable, i.e., something that can be understood and explained. Here, we may say, historical representations *stand for* the absent past they represent.

critic Roland Barthes and which is writing in a mode that resists the understanding and explanation of the events recounted, is White’s solution to the dilemma of his own making. See White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in Saul Friedländer (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37–53.

4. To undo or at least limit this limitation, and hence serve as a basis for visionary politics, the historian's focus should also be on the sublimity of the past, on those moments in the past that astonish and terrify us. Here we find the Dionysian impulse in history writing, and the meaninglessness of the past of which White spoke. Sublime events restrain themselves from becoming meaningful, both to witnesses of the events and to us. The astonishment and terror induced by the sublime event is to be *made present* in the work of the historian as a spectacle of confusion, moral anarchy, and uncertainty, rather than understood or explained. Here, we may say, historical representation makes the absent horrific past present.

5. The distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian impulse of history writing thus corresponds to two senses of representation:⁵³ the Apollonian impulse is associated with understanding and explanation, the Dionysian impulse with the sublime. Each is to be given its due.

53 In his study of the birth of tragedy and art, Nietzsche related the Dionysian impulse in art to "being present again" and the Apollonian impulse in art to "standing in the place of something else." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, §10.