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Pirates and Parrots. On the Pragmatics of Reading

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Abstract

At times we are told that our habitual way of thinking has become obsolete given the new challenge we are facing. Some of the conceptual resources at our disposal are no longer capable of addressing the challenge at hand. Therefore, they lose their appeal and are rejected. But only in contrast to these intellectual resources does the challenge appear as a challenge. So it seems that we are confronted with a paradox: we need the intellectual resources for their uselessness. For a proper understanding of this paradox and to unravel it, I will distinguish between *de dicto* and *de re* readings of philosophical texts. This distinction is borrowed from the neo-pragmatist Robert Brandom. A *de dicto* reading of a text is concerned with what its author *says*. A *de re* reading of a text is concerned with what its author *talks about*. Unpacking this distinction allows us to evaluate the *method* of engaging with our stock of conceptual resources as part of scholarly argument.

Keywords

de dicto versus *de re* reading – Brandom – inferentialism – intellectual tradition – conversation of humankind

1 Introduction

Dipesh Chakrabarty's well known essay "The Climate of History. Four Theses" challenges its readers to reconsider the long-standing distinction between human and natural history. The impending climate catastrophe, he argues, collapses this distinction. He concludes:

Humans have become geological agents very recently in human history. In that sense, we can say that it is only very recently that the distinction between human and natural histories (...) has begun to collapse. (...) A fundamental assumption of Western (and now universal) political thought has come undone in this crisis.¹

Chakrabarty develops his argument with reference to *some* authors who distinguish between human and natural history and by discussing *some* arguments of them. The most important author discussed is the Oxford philosopher Robin Collingwood. And indeed, Collingwood's distinction between the inside and outside of an event on the basis of which he distinguished between human and natural history is not as clear anymore now that we are geological agents causing the climate to change. Natural events have no inside, Collingwood argued, since they are not the result of thought-processes. Only human events have such an inside.² However, now with human induced climate change, parts of nature too have an inside. Even though climate change is unintended, it is the result of conscious action.³

The aim of this paper is not to argue against the claim that we are geological agents – this I have no quarrel with. I also agree with Chakrabarty and others that human induced climate change should affect the way we see ourselves and the sort of stories that we tell. These are important topics that need our attention. The topic of this paper is a different one. It is concerned with reading as a *method* as part of scholarly argument. Chakrabarty's argument paradoxically requires a specific set of conceptual resources – "a fundamental assumption of Western (and now universal) political thought" – for its

1 Chakrabarty "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197–222, at 207.

2 R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 213–215.

3 I might add that being unintended does not imply being unknown. We know very well what causes pollution, the loss of biodiversity, the extinction of species, deforestation, rising temperature, and so on.

uselessness. To unravel this paradox, I will distinguish between *de dicto* and *de re* readings of philosophical texts. This distinction is borrowed from the neo-pragmatist Robert Brandom.⁴ A *de dicto* reading of a text is concerned with what its author *says*. A *de re* reading of a text is concerned with what its author *talks about*. The distinction allows us to evaluate the method of engaging with the intellectual tradition – our stock of conceptual resources – as part of scholarly argument.

When I speak of writer or reader, the reader of this essay may substitute the terms respectively for speaker and interpreter. Before turning to the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* readings of texts I will make a few remarks on the *pragmatist* understanding of reading as a *method* as opposed to the *hermeneutic* understanding of reading as a *process*. An intellectual tradition, a phrase familiar to the hermeneutic scholar, is understood as a stock of conceptual resources, a phrase more to the liking of the pragmatist, which is obtained in an academic career.

2 Reading and Method

Reading is a process rather than a method or procedure, and an infinite process at that, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer,⁵ because the text's meaning is always to be discerned anew by the interpreter relative to the situation she is in. A reader always *applies* what she takes to be the text's meaning for her own purpose.⁶ Intellectual traditions, Gadamer holds, form the background of our readings (interpretations) in that they make a proper reading possible, which at the same time produces and continues the tradition, and they allow us to situate the works we read *and* ourselves in a tradition.⁷ Reading is, in short,

4 Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead. Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 94–106.

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method. Second Revised Edition* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 298.

6 For Gadamer's emphasis on application, see *Truth and Method*, 306–310. It's the central problem of hermeneutics. *Truth and Method*, 306.

7 These are familiar themes in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. An apt passage is the following: "The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 293.

partaking in *or moving to one's place in* a tradition.⁸ A tradition is chosen and actively obtained rather than being passively inherited. It passes – is handed over – from teacher to pupil to pupil's pupil through socializing processes such as education, studying essays and books, conferences, and the writing of scholarly papers. This is where Gadamer locates the *authority* of the tradition.⁹ In the process, some parts of the tradition are accepted, others modified, and yet others rejected. Each exponent of a tradition agrees upon a core set of concerns that is considered to be formative of that tradition, although the first exponent of the tradition may have utterly different beliefs than the last. But for there to be a tradition, it must be possible to conceptually link each successive exponent to the other.¹⁰

Now, the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* readings that I will draw does not itself reveal this relation to the intellectual tradition. But think of reading as part of scholarly work in terms of *selection* of parts of the text to emphasize, of their *supplementation* by the reader, and of *approximation* of what the selected and supplemented parts mean and how they relate.¹¹ Here reading, then, *is* a method. Each of the three terms (selection, supplementation, and approximation) can be elaborated upon in terms of both *de dicto* and *de*

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- 8 A well-known passage is: “*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition [Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen].*” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291. The translation as “moving to one's place in a tradition” I found in Lorenz Krüger, “Why do we study the history of philosophy?,” in Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner eds., *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 77–102, at 89.
- 9 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281. Gadamer aim was, among others, to rehabilitate authority and tradition. The German “Überlieferung,” which is translated as “tradition,” means transmission: that which is handed over. This is how the term “tradition” is understood here.
- 10 Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 206, 221. In his book Bevir offers an account of intellectual traditions that is strongly influenced by Gadamer.
- 11 These are Brandom's terms. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 111. Brandom does not specify the terms in respectively *de dicto* and *de re* readings. Gadamer elaborates about reading in his *Truth and Method* in terms of: understanding parts in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of its parts and “anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged” (291); transposing oneself “into the perspective within which he [the writer/speaker] has formed his views.” (292); fore-conception of completeness (294); being addressed by the text (298); and fusion of horizons (305). All these descriptions have to do with reading as a process rather than a method, and it makes one wonder how Gadamer came up with the title of his work. Some of the terms Gadamer uses have to do with following or reading (or seeing) a *story* rather than with following a scholarly *argument*. It is the latter I am interested in here.

re readings, as we will see. If we think of reading in terms of this method, then it becomes clear that both *de dicto* and *de re* readings in scholarly work aim to *apply* parts of the text relative to the reader's *purpose*. Such application connects the reading to the tradition: parts are selected and supplemented with parts from other authors and approximated relative to them. The reader is conscious of this connection inasmuch as she is able to temporally and conceptually align these authors, and possibly but not necessarily herself as partaking in a common project. This is what being self-conscious of the tradition(s) in which we as scholars partake, as Gadamer urges us to do, amounts to. The reason why this is important is obvious: without knowing what intellectual tradition(s) we partake in, the work we read cannot be understood as contributing to anything. As readers, just as writers, we need to move to our place in a tradition. This third mode of reading in which we are conscious of the tradition in which we partake and *specify* the intellectual tradition, which may in turn be the basis for a history of the intellectual tradition, Brandom calls a *de traditione* reading and Richard Rorty a *Geistesgeschichte*.¹² I return to it in the conclusion of this paper.

Intellectual traditions are not valuable in themselves. They need our attention inasmuch as they make reading (interpretation) possible, allow us to reflect on our work, and stimulate us to take it further and hand it over. And when the circumstances demand it, we need to break with (part of) the tradition, re-orientate ourselves on it, and come up with a new and better one.

3 De Dicto and De Re Readings

The distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* is made in different philosophical contexts. These do not concern us here. We are concerned with reading philosophical texts as part of scholarly arguments and the basic distinction we are working with is that a *de dicto* reading of a text is concerned with what its author says, whereas a *de re* reading of a text is concerned with what its author talks about. A few introductory remarks are, however, in order.

The distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* readings of utterances has to do with the ascription of beliefs and with the assessment of their correctness. Let

12 Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 107. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 299. The distinctions drawn by Brandom are reminiscent of the one's drawn by Rorty in his "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History*, 49–76. He distinguishes between historical reconstruction (*de dicto* readings), rational reconstructions (*de re* readings), and *Geistesgeschichte* (*de traditione* readings).

me give a well-known example, and one that relates to the example I started this essay with. The utterance:

All history is the history of thought.

This utterance is found at several instances in Collingwood's *The Idea of History*.¹³ What this utterance means depends, it seems, on what Collingwood meant by it. Such an approach would be a *de dicto* reading: it ascribes a belief to a person. So we may say:

Collingwood believes that "All history is the history of thought".

We may also approach the matter differently. The utterance "All history is the history of thought" is about history as a discipline, of which Collingwood says that it is the history of thought. This is a *de re* reading: it ascribes a belief about something to someone. So we may say:

Collingwood believes that all history is "the history of thought."

Now, the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions of beliefs as I have just drawn it does not seem to be of a deep interest, and hardly relevant to the topic of this essay. Few of the readers of this essay would be excited by it, I guess. A first clue as to its relevance comes to the fore when we ask ourselves whether the utterance is correct. In a *de dicto* reading, assessment of correctness proceeds *internal* to the beliefs of the speaker. In this case it depends on whether Collingwood has good evidence and reasons for his beliefs and whether they are consistent with his other beliefs. In a *de re* reading, assessment of correctness proceeds *external* to the beliefs of the speaker. It depends on whether *we* as readers can provide good evidence and reasons for or against it, consistent with the beliefs we have.

Chakrabarty gives a *de re* reading of Collingwood since he is concerned with what he can make of it. Interestingly, Chakrabarty does not so much say that Collingwood is mistaken. Rather, he suggests that in Collingwood's days the evidence and reasons he could muster did support his conclusion, but now, given human induced climate change, we can no longer support his conclusion with the evidence and reasons *we* have. Chakrabarty thus historicizes what at first appeared to be, in his reading of Collingwood, a systematic claim about the discipline of history. Whether Collingwood would accept such assessment

¹³ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, among others on p.215.

is the subject that is under discussion here. I will come back to this. First, let us formulate the distinction differently.

A *de dicto* reading is a reading of a text *in its own terms*, whereas a *de re* reading reads the text *in our terms*. It is rather obvious that the bigger the difference between the terms of the text and our terms are, the bigger the difference between these two readings are. As simple and sound as this distinction is, it might also be somewhat misleading.

First, *in its own terms* cannot mean *in its own natural language*, for the consequence would be that only Germans can read a German text in its own terms. But clearly, this is not the sort of distinction we're after. We want to distinguish *de dicto* and *de re* readings even if the text read is a translation, or when the language of the text is not the reader's native language.¹⁴ Secondly, the distinction might also suggest that only when the terms used by the text are also the terms used by the reader, a reading *in its own terms* is possible (regardless of whether the terms are translated). For how to read a text in its own terms when those terms are not yours? This too is not what we want for the distinction. We want the distinction to be able to account for the ability to read a text in its own terms, even if those terms are not ours. We want to be able to talk about reading for instance a text by Heidegger in its own terms even if those terms are not terms we would use. Third, *in our terms* is not simply a translation or interpretation of a text in its own terms. All reading is translation, that is, the application of a text's meaning, or interpretation, as hermeneutic scholars such as Gadamer have taught us. So we need to be cautious as to how to properly understand the distinction between reading in its own terms and reading in our terms, between *de dicto* and *de re* readings of texts.

Frederick Beiser defines the distinction thus. Reading a text in its own terms is reading the text in terms of the discussions and concerns of the author and evaluating it according to the author's standards and assumptions. Reading a text in our terms is reading a text in terms of our discussions and concerns and evaluating it according to our standards and assumptions.¹⁵ This already shows the relevance of the distinction. It points to two different sorts of reading and

14 This leaves untouched the fact that, for instance, the translation of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* at times presents specific problems of interpretation which the German version does not present.

15 Frederick Beiser, "Dark Days: Anglophone Scholarship Since the 1960s," in Espen Hammer ed., *German Idealism. Contemporary Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 70–90, at 72. Beiser is not the first to make such distinction. Well known is Quentin Skinner's "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969): 3–53, in which he discusses similar and related issues. A shortened and revised version is published under the same title in Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Vol. I: Regarding*

hence to two different ways of relating oneself to previous scholarship. It also points to the danger that we read a text in terms of our discussions and concerns rather than in terms of its author's. Such reading distorts the text and is usually referred to as being anachronistic. The danger is, for instance and to use an example from Beiser, that we read Kant from the point of view of John Rawls, which not only makes Kant anticipate Rawls, but also narrows Kant to what is in Rawls and to where the latter improves upon the former. Our reading, then, reveals where Rawls agrees and disagrees with Kant, and how Rawls improves on him – or not.¹⁶ In terms of the method of reading: we *select* in Kant what is relevant from the point of view of Rawls, *supplement* the selected parts of Kant with Rawls, and *approximate* what Kant means in terms of Rawls. This might be considered an *improper* reading in that the reading does the text of Kant an injustice for not interpreting it in its own terms.

In a *de dicto* reading, the questions we ask about a text are questions the answer of which we would have wanted the author to give. To find these possible answers requires knowledge about the background of the author, the genesis of the text, and knowledge of her other works. This is also why reading a text in its own terms can be called a *contextualist* or *historical reading*. Such reading, Beiser emphasizes, requires us to know “the individuality of an author in relation to the controversies and conversation of his day. And we need to know why an author made her argument in the first place.”¹⁷ A historical reading departs from what an author may have intended, since how we reconstruct these controversies and conversations may differ from how the

Method (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57–89. References are to this revised version. Rorty distinguishes between historical and rational reconstruction, in part in response to Skinner. Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy,” 49–76.

- 16 Skinner cautions that this idea of “anticipating” might turn into an historical absurdity. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding”, 63. Suggesting that Kant *intentionally* anticipated Rawls is obviously absurd, and it is improper to read in Kant only what is in Rawls and only take Rawls as the standard as to what is correct in Kant and what is not. As long as “anticipation” is meant to draw attention to historical significance in the sense emphasized by Arthur Danto in his *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), there is nothing wrong with it. See also Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding” 73–78. The point is, as Skinner’s maxim has it, “Meaning and Understanding”, 77, “that no agent can be said to have meant or achieved something which they could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what they had meant or achieved.”
- 17 Beiser, “Dark Days,” 86.

authors saw them. The way we place the author in a tradition may be different from how the author saw it.¹⁸

Beiser is critical about what he refers to as a *systematic reading*. Systematic readings are concerned with the argument itself and its solution to apparent eternal problems.¹⁹ There might be *some* eternal problems,²⁰ but hermeneutics has taught us that scholars – writers and readers – and their assumptions and concerns are historically situated. A systematic reading fails to acknowledge the historical situatedness of both writer and reader, of the contexts of the questions they ask and the answer they give, and the reasons they had for asking those questions in the first place.²¹ Beiser is critiquing the tendency in Anglophone scholarship to read the German Idealists in contemporary terms and concerns, turning them into Anglophone contemporaries. This, more often than not, distorts, according to him, what these German Idealists had to say. Beiser concludes:

We can understand a philosophical text only if we understand it internally according to its logical geography, which involves factors such as: 1) the formal structure of its argument; 2) the meanings of its central terms; 3) its hidden premises; 4) its main principles; and 5) its internal coherence or consistency.²²

Together with his emphasis on the context of a work (i.e. the controversies and conversation the author was engaged in, and the reason why she made her argument), this is Beiser's way of specifying what we call a *de dicto* reading. The passage quoted specifies what we may call an *internal de dicto* reading, whereas taking into account the context of the text may be referred to as an

18 A point stressed by Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 332.

19 Beiser, "Dark Days," 71.

20 Think of such questions as: What is knowledge? What is truth? These are, to be sure, extremely general questions, and when we would look at actual scholars posing such questions, we would soon realize (on a *de dicto* reading) that these authors each offer specific meanings – different inferential roles in Brandom's terms – of such terms as "knowledge", "truth", and "is".

21 The distinction between a historical and a systematic reading might suggest that we should distinguish between the work of intellectual historians and the work of (analytical) philosophers. This is not the suggestion Beiser aims to make, nor what the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* reading is meant to do. The point of the distinction is to determine what sort of readings there are, and where a reading might go wrong. The issue here is not why we study the history of philosophy or how to do intellectual history or the history of ideas.

22 Beiser, "Dark Days," 85.

external de dicto reading. We may add that without such de dicto reading of a text, no assessment of its contemporary relevance makes sense. After all, how to determine a text's contemporary relevance if we refuse or fail to understand it in its own terms? Still, I want to hold on to the claim that a predominantly de dicto and a predominantly de re reading support different sorts of scholarship. Depending on the *purpose* of an author, a predominantly de dicto or a predominantly de re reading is required.

A de dicto reading as a reading in its own terms means for the reader to use words that, as Brandom puts it, "in her mouth express the same content that the words the target did use or would have used express."²³ Brandom gives us a precise explication of reading scholarly texts.

The sort of understanding that is the aim of conceptual interpretation, then, is mastery of an inferential role: the ability to distinguish what follows from a claim, and what would be evidence for or against it, what one would be committing oneself to by asserting it, and what could entitle one to such commitment.²⁴

This holds both for de dicto and de re readings. Central to a de dicto reading is what the author takes to follow from a claim she makes, what reasons she can offer, and what she commits herself to by making the claim, and what she is entitled to by giving it. Such commitments and entitlements may change in a text: that is why it is important to read the text in full, to see what the final commitments are, or how later parts of a text may force you to re-establish or reconsider previous commitments of the author. Brandom's *mastery of inferential roles* agrees with what Beiser calls a *text's logical geography*. Brandom also emphasizes, like Beiser, the context of a text. The controversies and conversations an author was engaged in too are part of the inferential relations of the author's claim. Brandom:

23 Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 96. Cf. Skinner's maxim quoted in n16 above. In his discussion of Brandom, Yael Gazit notes that a de dicto reading is the equivalent of the hermeneutic task of better understanding the meaning of the author. Gazit, "Appropriation, Dialogue, and Dispute: Towards a Theory of Philosophical Engagement with the Past," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 13 (2019): 403–422, at 407. His concern with the philosopher's engagement with the past is however different from the concerns addressed here. Cf below n33.

24 Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 95. Cf. Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," 54: "Finding out what someone meant is a matter of finding out how his utterance fits into his general pattern of linguistic and other behavior." Tracing commitments and entitlements, we might say, is discerning the general pattern of linguistic behavior.

The motivating idea of *de dicto* specifications of the conceptual content as ascribed commitments is that the inferential context is to be supplied by the circumstances of *production* of the text. One engaged in this sort of interpretation is trying to specify the contents of commitments in a way that would be recognized and acknowledged *as* specifications of those contents *by* the one whose commitments they are.²⁵

Boundaries of the context maybe elastic, Brandom notes, from which it follows that the interpreter is to made clear what context with what boundaries she is appealing to.

A different question is what really follows from a claim in the eye of the reader, independent of whether the author knows it or not. This is the sort of question that is asked in a *de re* reading. What evidence for or against a claim is there according to the reader? What does accepting a claim commit and entitle the reader to? A *de re* reading specifies conceptual contents from the point of view of what the reader takes to be true.²⁶ Put differently: in a *de dicto* reading, correctness of what is said depends on the writer, whereas in a *de re* reading, correctness of what is said depends on the reader. In terms of reading as selecting and supplementing, we may say that a *de dicto* reading discusses what is selected in relation to other selected and hence supplemented parts in the work, other works, the oeuvre, or even the larger movement this oeuvre is part of. A *de re* reading's discusses what is selected in relation to the argument the reader wants to make, and it supplements what is selected with the reader's own material.

I want to add that we should not understand *de dicto* and *de re* readings as a distinction between what the author of a text *meant* by it and whether what is said is *true*. What an utterance *says* is, indeed, what it means. But what an utterance means is in terms of semantics what its truth-conditions are. It does not require the establishment or verification of its truth. To know what the truth-conditions are of some utterance is knowing what the words used mean and knowing under what circumstance the utterance is made. And the point of distinguishing between *de dicto* and *de re* readings is precisely to distinguish between different contexts: one in which the speaker (writer) holds a belief as expressed in some utterance to be true and one in which the interpreter (reader) holds the belief to be true. And understanding what a speaker means does not imply holding it to be true yourself: it implies knowing its truth-conditions. Knowing whether an utterance is true is to be distinguished from

25 Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 98.

26 Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 100–102.

knowing what an utterance means in terms of its truth-conditions.²⁷ In a *de dicto* reading, the truth-conditions and hence meaning of the utterance to be understood depend on the circumstances under which the speaker *holds* the utterance to be true and appropriate, which does not require that the interpreter holds the utterance to be true and appropriate under that circumstance. In a *de re* reading, the truth-conditions and hence meaning of the utterance to be understood depend on the circumstance under which the interpreter holds the utterance to be true and appropriate, regardless of whether speaker does so too. To be sure, this semantic distinction does not exhaust what we are to take the “meaning” of a text to be. We have already accepted the hermeneutic dictum that all reading is interpretation, and we have made remarks on reading as a process, a method, and as mastery of inferential roles.

A *de dicto* reading *constrains* the interpretation of the utterance to the context of it uttering, whereas a *de re* reading constrains the interpretation to the context of the reader. Rather than asking: What did this author mean by this assertion, that is, what where the truth-condition under which this author held the assertion to be true?; one asks in a *de re* reading: What would I mean by this assertion, and under what conditions would I hold the assertion to be true?

4 Pirates and Parrots

Let us return to our earlier example: the claim by Collingwood that “All history is the history of thought”. This is the central claim of his posthumous published book. A *de dicto* reading would read the text in its own terms and we would look for the reasons and evidence Collingwood has for this claim, what he commits himself to and what he is entitled to, given the claim he makes. A *de re* reading would be a reading of the claim in our terms. What reasons do we have for or against it? What does the claim commit and entitle us to?

It is not hard to see where a *de re* reading might derail. A *de re* reading might make us state the following. The statement “All history is the history of thought” commits Collingwood to limit history-writing to intellectual history and to leave out, among other things, natural events and circumstances such as pandemics and rivers. This because intellectual history is concerned with the history of thought, with ideas, and since pandemics and rivers do not have

27 These are familiar claims to anyone acquainted with the work of Donald Davidson. See the essays in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy,” 54–55.

minds, and hence, no thoughts, they fall out of the scope of the history of thought. On a *de re* reading, we read the utterance in terms of what it would commit and entitle *us* to, what follows from it according to us, and what reasons and evidence we can give for it. And these we then ascribe to Collingwood while reading him.

Now, this line of objection has been held against Collingwood. But it misses what Collingwood had in mind with it. A *de dicto* reading would reveal that Collingwood would say that pandemics and river *are* part of history inasmuch as both enter the human consciousness.²⁸ We may add that this *de dicto* reading makes clear that Collingwood would accept that climate change is part of history inasmuch as it enters human consciousness.²⁹ This, then, is how Chakrabarty has it wrong. He provides a mostly *de re* reading of Collingwood, focussing on what he would commit himself to given some of Collingwood's statements, rather than on what Collingwood would be committed to given his statements.

A *de dicto* reading is concerned with what a statement says. In this case with Collingwood's claim that all history is the history of thought. The correctness of this claim depends on the reasons and evidence Collingwood offers, what follows from it according to his text or his works, and what he commits himself to and is entitled to. A *de re* reading is concerned with what a statement is about. The correctness of the claim depends on the reader, on the reasons and evidence she gives, and what she commits and entitles herself to by claiming it.

There are many known mis-readings of Collingwood's work, especially of his work in philosophy of history.³⁰ A *de re* reading easily results into misinterpretation when the *de re* reading is not preceded by a *de dicto* reading.³¹ The distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* readings allows us to see where a reading goes wrong. Readings coming close to a strictly *de re* reading may simply miss the point the text discusses. In a *strictly de re* reading,

28 Louis Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic. The Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 159, 171.

29 On this issue see also Giuseppina D'Oro, "In defence of a humanistically oriented historiography: The nature/culture distinction at the time of the Anthropocene," in Jouni Matti-Kuukkanen ed., *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 216–236.

30 Mink discusses several of those mis-readings. See his *Mind, History*, 157ff. Some of these mis-readings have been repeated in the literature ever since.

31 Take the following simple example: "the historian uses (...) the height of Pennsylvanian infantrymen to infer the relationship between economy and physical health. Such inferences do not require any knowledge of past thought." Mark Day, *The Philosophy of History. An Introduction* (Continuum: London and New York, 2008), 128. Here Collingwood

something is taken from the work of some author for one's own purpose only: to support one's own claim, either by agreeing or disagreeing with what one takes from the other author. Such a strict *de re* reading can be considered a form of plundering, and such readers *pirates*, to use a term from Robert Pippin.³² A strictly *de re* reading that starts off from a text's conclusion and goes from there is simply flawed scholarship. Too many arguments start with: Author A has argued that Y, and subsequently, Y functions as premise for the author's B own argument. When the argument that led author A to reason from X to Y is not taken into consideration by author B, it might turn out that the latter's argument contradicts the reasoning from author A. Author's B argument would in that case be seriously flawed. A strictly *de dicto* reading rehearses the argument, from premise to conclusion, without adding anything to it, which makes it redundant. A *de re* reading animates the work of the reader, whereas a *de dicto* reading animates the work of the writer. A *responsible* reading, Pippin adds, is a combination of both and is as such an *interanimated exchange* between the author and the reader.³³

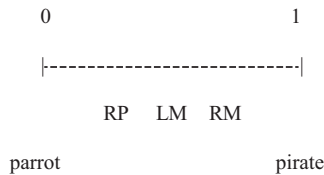
Usually, readings are a combination of *de dicto* and *de re* readings. And that is how it should be. A responsible or sound *de re* reading is guided by at least *some* arguments and insights of the author being read. And a responsible or sound *de dicto* reading is at least guided by *some* concern with its correctness and present-day relevance to the reader. So we can think of *de dicto* and *de*

is read in terms of what the interpreter (Day) thinks Collingwood is committed to, given his statement that all history is the history of thought. But this has hardly anything to do with how Collingwood meant it, since he is well aware of this sort of inferences – he is after all an archaeologist next to being a philosopher; but he would emphasize that knowing the height of Pennsylvanian infantrymen is not historical knowledge. It only becomes historical knowledge when we understand why there were infantrymen in the first place at that particular moment in time and why there were differences in economies in terms of why certain economic activities were pursued while others were not, and the answers to these questions require knowledge of the associated thought-processes.

32 Robert B. Pippin, *Interanimations. Receiving Modern German Philosophy* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2015), 3.

33 Pippin, *Interanimations*, 31. The question of “responsible reading” is raised by Pippin in his discussion of Brandom's distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* readings. Gazit makes too much of Pippin's view of Brandom's distinction. I do not think Pippin views Brandom as a pirate, as Gazit suggests (Gazit, “Appropriation, Dialogue, and Dispute,” p.411), nor do I think that Brandom leaves no room for *de dicto* readings (e.g. p.411 and p.415). Gazit interprets the interanimated exchange as a (hermeneutic) dialogue (p.412), obscuring the distinction between the hermeneutic understanding of reading as a process and the pragmatist understanding of reading as a method.

readings as a scale. And all scholarly works can be arranged on that scale. Think of a scale from 0 to 1. Then, for example, author RP is awarded an 0.3 on this scale and the authors LM and RM respectively an 0.5 and 0.8.³⁴ Being within the margins of, say, 0.1 and 0.9 is sound scholarship, whereas the fringes of the scale represent bad scholarship.



A pirate is close to 1. A scholar being close to 0 on this scale we can call a copyist or epigone. Or, to stay in the same semantic field as “pirate”, we may call this scholar a *parrot*. So pirates and parrots mark the boundaries of the pragmatics of reading.

To situate a work on the scale is not to make a value judgment, except when positioning the author close to 0 and 1 of course. The distinction between de dicto and de re readings is *not* a *normative* distinction. Author LM is not to be preferred to RP or vice versa simply because of their position on the scale. They both provide responsible readings of Collingwood. The point is that depending on the *purpose* of a book, a more de dicto or a more de re reading is required. It makes a difference whether you purport to write a historical book on Collingwood and several of his contemporaries, the context in which he developed his thoughts, who he read and so on, or whether you aim to write a book on historical explanation, inspired by Collingwood. In each case, different parts of the text are selected, supplemented, and approximated. RM for instance focusses on re-enactment and supplements it with Georg-Hendrik von

34 This is a first indication of how to position these authors and to give an idea of what I have in mind with the de dicto de re reading scale I propose here. RP refers to Rik Peters and his *History as Thought and Action. The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2013); LM refers to Louis Mink and his *Mind, History*, and RM stands for Rex Martin and his *Historical Explanation. Re-Enactment and Practical Inference* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977). The scale also allows one to write an intellectual history of some scholarly field in terms of changes in emphasis, from a more de dicto to a more de re type of reading for example. Writing about the field of the history of philosophy in “Dark days,” Beiser for instance laments the move towards more de re readings of the German Idealists. Brandom, by contrast, notes that a generation earlier de re readings were more popular in the history of philosophy whereas in his current situation, textually informed de dicto reading are more popular. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 104.

Wright's model of explanation based on practical inference. RP supplements selected parts of Collingwood with those from his Italian contemporaries and approximates his text in those terms.³⁵ Both types of books are perfectly fine pieces of scholarship that ought to be evaluated relative to their respective purposes.

5 Conclusion

A predominantly *de dicto* reading is of historical interest. This does not mean that a *de dicto* reading has no use in the present. Clearly, seeing things from the point of view of the author, knowing what her concerns were and what controversies she was involved in, and what caused her concerns in the first place, are important to us. It reminds us that our concerns and discussions too are contingent and historically conditioned, just as past concerns and discussions were. It is not that our ways of thinking and seeing things are the only ways possible and available. Nor is our way of thinking and seeing things some natural culmination of wisdom attained over the years.³⁶ So the point is not that a *de dicto* reading is of no use; the point is that a *de dicto* reading of a philosophical text is of no use *given* present day challenges to what we believe the world is like. Since the text read is unaware of the challenge, the challenge cannot be read – understood – with the text at hand. A *de dicto* reading, we maintained throughout this essay, is concerned with and thus confined to what the text says. A *de re* reading, by contrast, is concerned with what the text talks about and not confined to what it says. Rather, it is confined by what the reader can take from it: she finds something in it of value with which she agrees or disagrees. Readers are free to do with the texts they read what they like. It is up to them to select, supplement, and approximate parts of the text. A scholarly boundary is set by the fringes of the *de dicto* and the *de re* scale we discussed.

No one reading is more responsible than another for as long as one is not parroting or pirating. Readings are, we said, usually a combination of *de dicto* and *de readings*. And this is how it should be. A responsible reading is an interanimated exchange between author and reader and it depends on the purpose of the author whether a more *de dicto* or a more *de re* reading is required. A predominantly *de re* reading, however, easily misrepresent the intellectual progress that has been made. It does so when the reader takes her

35 This is a very rudimentary exposition of RP's and RM's books to be sure. But you get the idea.

36 For these points, see Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," 88–89.

own assessment as to the correctness of what has been said as the progress that is being made. Situating oneself at the end of the (self-constructed) line of a tradition in which one partakes is not necessarily problematic. Such enterprise is usually a form of self-justification of the work one is doing.³⁷ It becomes problematic when the reader only regards the selected parts of a text as anticipating the reader's own ideas or as mistaken by the reader's own light. This presents a distorted sense of the intellectual tradition. A proper or responsible reading balances *de dicto* and *de re* readings relative to the reader's purpose. It takes into account what is said in terms of the author's concerns, discussions, purposes, and assumptions. Calling upon a tradition provides the starting point for a proper *de dicto* reading. Taking the tradition further starts with a *de re* reading. Take the following simple example we used earlier. RP brings further the tradition of the historical interpretation of Collingwood. RM brings further the tradition of the philosophy of historical explanation.

Now, if we situate Chakrabarty's reading of Collingwood on the *de dicto de re* reading scale, we will have to situate him close to 1, dangerously close of being a pirate. He is, for instance, not interested in what the concept of nature is to Collingwood and rather assumes that the concept of nature is a constant one from Vico to Collingwood. It matters, of course, whether one has a mechanical, organic, evolutionary, or ecological conception of nature when one distinguishes between human and natural history. The tradition or assumption of distinguishing natural and human history is not simply given, as Chakrabarty suggests. We also saw that a *dicto* reading of Collingwood reveals that Collingwood would accept climate change to be part of human history inasmuch as it enters human consciousness. This leaves the claims of Chakrabarty intact inasmuch as we supplemented Collingwood in a way that would be acceptable to Collingwood, while it at the same time re-writes the tradition as we knew it. And this is how it should be. Rather than declaring (part of) the intellectual tradition to be dead, as Chakrabarty does – and that is the danger of *de re* readings in the light of challenges –, we should re-orientate ourselves on possible (new) conceptual and temporal connections in order to re-constitute (part of) the tradition for our purpose first, and then take it further. This resolves the paradox with which we started. When a certain tradition no longer offers the proper conceptual resources to meet the demands of some

37 In his *Tales of the Mighty Dead* Brandom provides *de re* readings of selected "mighty dead" philosophers as he reads his inferentialism in these philosophers and presents it as an outcome of the history of philosophy he constructs along with it. His *rational reconstruction*, which he sees is part of his *de traditione* reading, is what Rorty calls "self-justificatory." Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy," 55.

challenge, an effort must be made to re- think the tradition, reject parts of it, modify others, and initiate new conceptual and temporal links, in order that a new tradition is established that does meet those demands. This is the sort of reading Brandom calls a *de traditione* reading and Rorty a *Geistesgeschichte*, which is required when the conceptual resources we obtained from our predecessors have outlived their usefulness.

Putting an end to an intellectual tradition is putting an end to the conversation of humankind, as Rorty calls it, and the rational progress that has been made. I agree with Rorty:

we would like to be able to see the history of our race as a long conversational exchange. We want to be able to see it that way in order to assure ourselves that there has been rational progress in the course of recorded history – that we differ from our ancestors on grounds our ancestors could be led to accept.³⁸

To know what our ancestors would accept requires first a *de dicto* reading. Such reading then may be supplemented by our concerns in such a way that the parts selected for supplementation – and this is based on a *de re* reading – and the supplementations are such that our ancestors might be led to accept them. Progress in the conversation of humankind here means being able to provide better answers not only in our eyes, but also in the eyes of our ancestors, answers they could be led to accept.

38 Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy,” 51.