
Dialogue on Historicism

Characterizing Historicist Possibilities: A Reply to Claes Ryn

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A Wayward Ally?

In his “Defining Historicism,” published in these pages in 1998, Claes G. Ryn notes that a renewal of historicism has been central to the postmodern turn. But though potentially valuable, historicism in its postmodernist guise has seemed to invite overreaction—from the authority of “foundations” to a combination of relentless negativism and irresponsible “play.”¹ In assessing the recent embrace of historicism, Ryn devoted particular attention to my *Nothing but History*,² generously crediting its range and offering a number of perceptive characterizations of its argument. He clearly finds me an ally up to a point, for each of us seeks a kind of middle ground between “ahistorical ‘foundationalist’ metaphysics” and aspects of postmodernism that we both see as an overreaction (91). Whereas, as Ryn puts it, historicism in its deconstructive postmodern form becomes “almost wholly nega-

¹ Claes G. Ryn, “Defining Historicism,” *Humanitas* XI, no. 2 (1998), 86-101; references to this article hereinafter cited in the text.

² David D. Roberts, *Nothing but History: Reconstruction and Extremity After Metaphysics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995). Ryn also refers to my earlier *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987). I had occasion to bring together the material on Croce in *Nothing but History*—especially in tandem with Nietzsche, Gadamer, and Richard Rorty—in a more focused way in *Una nuova interpretazione del pensiero di Croce: Lo storicismo crociano e il pensiero contemporaneo* (Pisa and Rome: Internazionali, 1995).

tive" (90), obsessed "with discrediting inherited norms and meanings" (90), we both find scope for a more constructive orientation. Thus my emphasis, as in my book's subtitle, on the scope for ongoing historicist reconstruction, stemming from responsible ethical response, which can even be responsibly rational insofar as it is informed by historical understanding.

A historicist reconstruction.

In the last analysis, however, Ryn finds my way of recasting historicism wayward, partly because of a prejudicial tilt toward radicalism reflecting academic fashion, and typical of deconstructive postmodernism (96-97). But part of what is at issue, as we seek to think without foundationalist philosophy, is the meaning of such categories as radical and conservative, extremism and moderate, and their interface with the cultural possibilities before us. A measure of inflexibility on this score leads Ryn to misconstrue my argument at several points—and thus to magnify our differences. But more interesting are some genuine differences in orientation, which would seem worth pinpointing and exploring. Most importantly, Ryn holds that I place such emphasis on contingency, particularity, and finitude that I have difficulty explaining the basis of the continuity and coherence, weight and responsibility, that I myself find necessary for the reconstructive middle ground (95-96). As one of the editors of this journal, Ryn was good enough, even before finishing his own piece, to invite me to respond, and I gratefully accept the chance to do so.

Ryn and I agree that postmodernists have tended to overreact partly because, not knowing their own history, they have failed to engage earlier thinkers who explored much the same ground that the postmodernists themselves now breathlessly discover.³ Central for both of us is the once influential, long misunderstood, and now neglected Italian thinker Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), who ended up propounding what he called an "absolute historicism." But we differ radically over Croce's center of gravity, even as we each claim him for our respective brands of reconstructive historicism.

Postmodernists neglect Croce.

Most immediately at issue is the place in Croce's intellectual biography of the relatively systematic moment, centering on his

³ Ryn is especially good in characterizing the tendency to reinvent the post-foundationalist wheel in what passes as the most innovative contemporary thought. See *Humanitas* 11:2, 86-92, as well as the introduction to the second edition of his *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Babbitt, Croce, and the Problem of Reality* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1997), especially xxvii-xxx.

circle of distinct spiritual categories, or attributes of human being, that he outlined in the core volumes, published from 1905 to 1908, of his "Philosophy of the Spirit."⁴ For Ryn, this moment was central to Croce's enterprise, for in elaborating these categories, Croce "discerned a permanent structure of human consciousness" (100)—and the basis for the "enduring meaning" that Ryn finds crucial. Because, from Ryn's perspective, I downplay the enduring categories, I end up slanting Croce too much toward postmodernism—and end up too postmodernist myself.

Although I surely do not neglect the categories to the extent Ryn suggests (97), it is surely true that I do not feature them as he does.⁵ Indeed, I counter that Ryn overvalues them because he has not placed them, as Croce himself came to do, in the context of Croce's whole career. Whereas Ryn finds my reading of Croce "rather truncated" (95), I argue that his is the truncated reading of Croce.

In one sense, of course, this particular squabble is distinctly a side issue. As with any thinker, especially one so rich and long-lived, readers may take Croce in various directions. What matters here is what Ryn himself can offer by building on Croce's earlier, more systematic works. Even if I should persuade the present reader that Ryn's appropriation of Croce is one-sided or incomplete, that would say nothing about the force of Ryn's argument, which, like my own, draws not only on Croce but on a number of other sources—for Ryn, most notably Irving Babbitt. But because he does not do justice to Croce's overall enterprise, and the place of the enduring categories within it, Ryn fails to grasp why the position I outline, derived especially from Croce, but also from Heidegger, Gadamer, Rorty, Derrida, and an array of recent think-

⁴ The works constituting the core of Croce's "philosophy of the spirit" were his *Logica come scienza del concetto puro* (first preliminary edition, 1905; second definitive edition, 1908), and *Filosofia della pratica: Economia ed etica* (1908). Each is available in (problematic) English translation. In Italian, the magnificent new national edition of Croce's works, in course of publication by Bibliopolis in Naples, supersedes the long-familiar Laterza editions. Bibliopolis published both the *Logica* and the *Pratica* in the national edition in 1996. In my "Croce in America: Influence, Misunderstanding, and Neglect," *Humanitas* 8, no. 2 (1995): 16-18, I argued that Ryn was overplaying Croce's relatively systematic philosophy even as I noted the wider significance of his embrace of Croce.

⁵ For my treatment of this dimension in Croce, see especially chap. 2 of my *Benedetto Croce*.

ers, is enough for a reconstructive historicist middle ground—and why his own way of embracing Croce’s categories is counterproductive.

Immanence and Transcendence

Ryn offers what he calls a “value-centered historicism,” which takes “value” as the stuff affording “moral, imaginative, and intellectual form to man’s historical existence” (91). At issue is the relationship between whatever endures, whatever we take to be universal or suprahistorical, and the fundamental historicity of things that we have come to embrace, or at least sidle up to, over the last century or so. Ryn insists on “historical universality,” understood as “universality in particular form” (91). In other words, “[t]he transcendent reveals itself in history by becoming selectively immanent in it” (88). Thus, for example, moral goodness is universal but we know it only through its historically specific instances. In the face of the postmodernist “obsession with discrediting inherited norms and meanings,” Ryn is determined to show the place of “enduring order or unity,” especially “enduring standards” and “enduring higher purpose” (90, 100). And obviously what he finds in Croce is precisely an understanding of the essential universal or enduring element.

Although Ryn finds me tilting toward what he takes to be the general postmodern assumption “that in the end contingency, incoherence and meaninglessness are the whole of life (101),” I too am concerned with what endures. That there is some measure of continuity and coherence goes without saying; the world is not a heap. I even have room for “enduring standards.” That only seems to be the issue between Ryn and me if we have not grasped the alternatives. To get what is genuinely at issue, the first question is how we conceive and characterize what endures; the second concerns the wider cultural stakes of the differences in our respective ways of doing so.

The difference at issue is not between “enduring order or unity” and some mishmash or heap, but between residual transcendence and radical immanence, residual metaphysics and absolute historicism. To be sure, our dualistic language, affording us the binary transcendence/immanence, may seem to make the dichotomy too neat, to overstate the differences. It is easy to assume—and Ryn may be assuming—that whatever it is that makes

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the world other than a heap is “transcendent” by definition. The issue, however, is not merely semantic—as becomes clear when we explore the wider cultural implications of conceiving “what endures” in terms of radical immanence, as Croce came to do, as opposed to residual transcendence, as Ryn does.

Ryn most tellingly tips his hand when characterizing the role of the philosopher: “bothered by what he does not yet know, or cannot yet express with conceptual clarity, the genuine philosopher is always striving to remove obstacles to fuller understanding” (98). Ryn goes on to say that “philosophical examination of human experience tries faithfully to record what is actually there,” so that we might “improve our cognitive, conceptual hold on what persists in the midst of change and particularity” (99). Such accents suggest that philosophy is the culturally privileged enterprise of getting as best we can at something given, suprahistorical. Because we ourselves are historical and finite, as is our experience, we cannot definitively lay out the prior structure of reality, as a metaphysics. We can do no better than glimpse the universal, or perhaps approach it asymptotically as we “improve our cognitive, conceptual hold.” But Ryn fears that without this premium on getting at something enduring, we invite postmodern play and even a collapse into meaninglessness. But these priorities mean that Ryn’s position is more a throwback to Dilthey than an embrace of the mature Croce of absolute historicism.

From a perspective like Dilthey’s, we recognize—as explicitly for Ryn—that we can only glimpse the universal in the particular because we have come to understand ourselves as finite, historically specific. But though we get at it only indirectly, we still require that transcendent level; without it, we face the danger of relativism, nihilism, cultural collapse. So philosophy, with its aim of getting ever closer to the level of enduring truth, is a cultural priority, and a particular class of intellectuals called philosophers is especially equipped for this task—and thus plays a privileged role.

In *Nothing but History*, I use Gadamer in tandem with Croce, so it is worth recalling Gadamer’s critique of Dilthey—as not sufficiently radical in embracing the fundamental historicity of the human world. Critique of Dilthey was a crucial starting point for Gadamer in his magnum opus, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Croce had cut his teeth partly on the German tradition to which Dilthey was central, and two generations before Gadamer, by the eve of

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the First World War, he too sensed that he had simply moved beyond the orbit of Dilthey and such other Germans as Windelband and Rickert, whose priorities were similarly parallel to Ryn's.⁶

Towards an Absolute Historicism

The problem, then, is that Ryn's concern with enduring categories and structures leads him to overplay that dimension in the whole trajectory of Croce's long career. Taking philosophy as privileged, Ryn assumes that Croce's works after 1914, many of them lumped dismissively as "short essays" (97-98), were merely exercises deploying the philosophical categories that Croce had established before the First World War. But in those works Croce expanded and deepened his thinking considerably, specifying the place of his philosophical categories within the overall, explicitly post-Christian cultural framework he was developing. Partly in response to the new political extremes, including especially Italian fascism, that had emerged from World War I, Croce began casting his conception in broadly political terms, as neo-liberal, accenting both the irrevocability of human freedom and the openness of the world, the scope for genuine novelty. He brought the overall cultural orientation together only gradually during the interwar period, and it was not until 1945, when he was seventy-nine, that he suggested definitively that philosophical idealism, with which he had long been associated, was "a term to be abandoned" and that his own position could best be characterized as "absolute historicism."⁷

Even as Croce posited them in his early, relatively systematic works, the enduring categories were relatively empty, even as empty as possible. There was simply little to be said up front—but that was a measure of the freedom and openness that we come more seriously to understand with the end of "modernity," foundationalist philosophy, metaphysics—or whatever it was that was ending. As Croce noted explicitly, we might initially find it inadequate that we are left with nothing but this—in his terms, a poor, finite spirit, merely human being itself, endlessly respond-

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⁶ Daniela Coli, *Croce, Laterza e la cultura europea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983), 77-80.

⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Discorsi di varia filosofia*, 2 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1959), 2: 15-17 (1945).

ing to the results of its own prior activity. Or we might feel a giddy sense of lightness—nothing matters, nothing lasts, so anything goes. But once we think more deeply about the meshing of human being with the coming to be of this, our particular world in history, we come to understand that what we have is enough. Indeed, it as an invitation to proceed, putting our distinctively human capacities in gear as we respond to what the world has come to be so far.

Even the early, relatively systematic works that Ryn features offer plenty of indication that Croce was on his way to something more radically new than Ryn's accents suggest. As Ernst Cassirer noted disapprovingly in a pointed analysis in 1913, even Croce's relatively systematic *Logic* was an attempt radically to recast logic and thereby to show what truth comes to mean in an ever-provisional world of particular instances: "[Croce's] whole doctrine, even though it proclaims logic as the basic science, in fact turns out to be an unlimited historical relativism in which change is studied so to speak for its own sake, in which no objective-logical enduring factors of any kind are discerned or set off."⁸ Cassirer understood that Croce's was no ordinary logic; it was rather a kind of giving in to history, and Cassirer himself wanted no part of it. And in light of the question at issue between Ryn and me, let me highlight Cassirer's sense—his disapproving sense—that with Croce's historicist recasting of logic, "*no objective-logical enduring factors of any kind are discerned or set off*" (my emphasis).

By the turn of the century, Croce was seeking to follow Vico, for whom language and even the mind itself changes as human response generates a purely human, or historical, world. But whatever the center of gravity in the early, relatively systematic works, Croce placed the categories he had derived in those works, and the uses of philosophical clarification more generally, in better perspective as his historicism became more consistent and thoroughgoing. By the early 1920s he was insisting that, contrary to our longstanding assumption, philosophers have not been wrestling all along with the same big problems. Indeed, there is no single

⁸ Ernst Cassirer, "Erkenntnistheorie nebst den Grenzfragen der Logik," *Jahrbücher der Philosophie*, 1 (Berlin, 1913): 34. See also John Michael Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 10-11. This quote, and the attendant context, appear in precisely the same way in *Nothing but History*, 84.

enduring complex of philosophical problems. Rather, philosophy is always an effort at ad hoc clarification.⁹

As Croce himself was coming of age during the late 1880s and early 1890s, he had encountered the challenges of positivism, pragmatism, Marxism, and decadent aestheticism, which together had produced the historically specific cultural confusion that had led him to specify the categories, and the distinctions among them, as he did. But as he was soon insisting explicitly, those formulations did not constitute a system but had been mere *sistemazioni*—relatively systematic clarifications, on a level of relative abstraction from the particular cases, intended to clear up the historically specific confusions arising from such cases.

Thus it is hardly surprising that Croce was not satisfied with his prewar formulations but found it necessary to keep fiddling with the relationships among the categories—first especially with the ethical and truth, as he sought to show that openness to truth is ethical. By the later 1940s, he had become preoccupied with what he had earlier understood as “utility,” or “the economic” dimension of human activity. That category apparently had to be understood more broadly as “vitality” if there was to be any possibility of understanding historically, in Crocean terms, the unforeseen disasters that Croce and his contemporaries had just lived through. Croce probed and tinkered until his death in 1952, but no one would claim that his way of recasting the category was adequate to the task.

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Although even his early works suggest that Croce was on his way to something radically different, it is surely possible for someone who has not studied the whole of Croce to draw conclusions like Ryn’s, positing the categories as the core, the end point of Croce’s thinking—and as denoting some sort of enduring “structure.” But whereas Ryn’s argument can and must be judged on its own terms, he cannot claim to be making it on the basis of the whole of Croce. Indeed, his preoccupation to cast what endures in terms of a residual transcendence leads him to an understanding of the Crocean categories that stands opposed to Croce’s own deepest insights. So Ryn makes his argument not because of Croce but in spite of Croce—as in spite of others who are too radically

⁹ I explore Croce’s conception of philosophy and its limits most fully in my *Benedetto Croce*, 83-85, 90-116.

postmodern for his taste. Conversely, because he has not come to terms with the radical immanence of the mature Croce, Ryn cannot do justice to the scope, at present, for a reconstructive postmodernism with no need for reassuring glimpses of something transcendent.

Enduring Human Being

Ryn's charge that "postmodernists generally assume that in the end contingency, incoherence and meaninglessness are the whole of life" (101) surely does not apply to Croce in my interpretation—or to my own position. On the contrary, the point is precisely to show why that is not the case—even if we do without Ryn's way of conceiving enduring standards and categories. My argument is that, in Croce's terms, an immanent spirit, a radical historicism, is sufficient to establish the reconstructive middle ground. What endures, most basically, is simply the inseparable tandem of human being, with its distinguishable modes of activity, and the actual particular world that endlessly comes to be in history through human activity, which responds creatively to the resultant so far.

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For Ryn, as we have seen, it is essential that we take another step and fasten upon the structure—the circle of distinct categories—that Croce claimed to have discerned, and that in some sense persists in the midst of the endless coming to be. And up to a point, even this further emphasis is congruent with my own. Imaginative, cognitive, ethical, and "economic" responses remain as distinguishable but related moments of the spirit, as defining capacities of human being. As long as there is human being, in other words, individuals will respond in the ways that we presently understand and distinguish as we do. Thus, the scope for ethical response, for example, is enduring and irreducible. In the same way, to use the Heidegger-Gadamer characterization, human being is the space for the happening of truth. Truth occurs simply because of what human being is—though other human capacities may obstruct or compromise the actual happening of truth. But we can distinguish, for example, among competing historical accounts on the basis of cognitive—as opposed to aesthetic, moral, political, or merely self-serving—criteria, thereby heading off a tendency toward blurring that has indeed accompanied the post-

modern turn. In very similar terms, Croce and Gadamer each showed how to make the necessary distinctions.¹⁰

In that sense, then, it is fine to say both that philosophy articulates the categories and that standards endure. The question is what all that means. What place do the categories have in the cultural economy, and how prescriptive are the standards? Do the categories and standards partake of something transcendent and universal, or are they immanent, merely dimensions of historical coming to be?

Croce's premium was not on philosophy but on "history as thought and action," on knowing the world so that we may then respond to it in action. We orient ourselves for action insofar as we understand the present situation in its historical genesis, and as we respond, we experience our action as world-making, history-making. On that basis alone, it is possible to answer Ryn's queries about the sources of the continuity and coherence, weight and responsibility, necessary for the historicist middle ground that I claim to block out.

Openness to the learning that prepares responsible action is itself ethical—and indicates an immanent enduring standard. This means that we respond, differentiate, and judge not by invoking something transcendent, but immanently, creatively. We give new meaning, new content to the distinction or standard or criterion in question every time we make any such judgment. So what endures is our ongoing judging, not some category that might be established, discovered, or even glimpsed—and then invoked to shape practice. In the same way, we are in no sense simply applying enduring categories or standards as we respond and judge. Again, we endlessly revivify the categories and recreate the standards, which have no existence apart from this ongoing historically specific activity of human being. This is the difference between im-

What endures is our ongoing judging.

¹⁰ Croce did so a mere half century earlier, of course. And as I've pointed out again and again, his way of suggesting how we sidestep relativism, offered in its classic form in 1915, anticipated almost to the letter the argument that Gadamer made in 1971. For a start on the issue, see *Nothing but History*, 164. The obvious anomalies in this case say something, first, about German provincialism and, second, about the limits of intellectual history at present. But I emphasize that Gadamer, especially on the basis of his reading of Heidegger, offered insights that went well beyond Crocean historicism. For my take on Gadamer's contribution, and its relationship with the Crocean legacy, see *Nothing but History*, chap. 7.

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manence—an absolute historicism—and transcendence, a residual metaphysics.

Croce made the point with particular force in several essays around the end of World War II, when many all over the Western world found a return to transcendence or natural law essential. Among Italians taking that tack were some of Croce's long-time followers like Guido de Ruggiero, who explicitly criticized what now seemed the dangerous emptiness of Croce's position. Croce pointedly addressed one of his essays, dated May 1945, "To my friends who are seeking the 'transcendent.'" And in another, responding to de Ruggiero, he found an effective metaphor for the difference between transcendence and immanence. There simply is not the transcendent, heavenly searchlight that so many think we need, but the portable lantern that we each carry with us is sufficient—for us to go on living, responding, evaluating.¹¹ This means that, as we noted above, we do indeed have the "enduring standards" so important to Ryn, but only because we continue, on the basis of our defining ethical capacity, actually to evaluate, thereby reinventing the standard, if only infinitesimally, as we respond to each next new situation.

In the same vein, Croce had long been quite clear on what can and cannot be judged. The fact that the ethical persists does not afford some standard of judgment—some basis for second-guessing someone else's ethical response. Rather, I can only show it was or was not an ethical response—as opposed to a "useful" response stemming from "economic" self-interest.

For Ryn, it is somehow not enough to say that evaluating continues simply because human being continues. To be able to say that "standards endure," we have to be able to posit a given structure that we might work to understand better, or even transcendent values that we might grasp and apply. But thus Ryn is closer to those "friends" to whom Croce was directing these pieces than to Croce himself.

What we presently understand by the ethical indicates a persisting human attribute, but the point is not to specify ever more fully or accurately wherein it consists or how it works—as if, as Ryn implies, we need an ever firmer grasp of the enduring structure. We require no such grasp to be able to respond ethically. As

¹¹ Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, 141-45.

we have seen, philosophy has an ongoing role in Croce's mature thinking, but it simply affords clarification when we find ourselves hung up, unable to understand or respond. Inherently ad hoc, philosophy depends on the particular instances before us, and the clarifications it affords merely enable us to get back to business—in this case, to put our ethical capacity in gear in response to the concrete, historically specific situation we face.

It is in this sense that philosophy is simply a move to a more abstract or theoretical layer in response to particular confusions. Contrary to Ryn's characterization (96), I do not portray this move as abstracting from particulars, in the sense of seeking generalizations, but rather as taking a step up to ponder the conditions of judgment in the particular case at issue. That enterprise is fruitful insofar as it maintains connection with historically specific problems, but not insofar as an implication of residual transcendence leads philosophy to take on a privileged life of its own, as the effort to "improve our cognitive, conceptual hold on what persists."

As we noted above, Ryn's value-centered historicism rests on the notion that, to choose one of a number of analogous statements, "the transcendent reveals itself in history by becoming selectively immanent in it" (88). What are the stakes of Ryn's use of the term "the transcendent," which Croce explicitly eschewed? As I have emphasized, ethical capacity, for example, is indeed universal, enduring, but it is immanent, constantly renewed through concrete action. To insist on "the transcendent" instead does not simply afford the reassurance of a stable structure and enduring standards but suggests that we might establish the conditions of ethical response a priori, even specify "values." More generally, once philosophy is afforded the privileged role of getting us as close as possible to "the transcendent" that "reveals itself in history," it easily becomes an effort to specify, in some definitive way, rules, conditions of possibility, or "what counts as" such and such.

Contesting Standards

Just as I do not view philosophy as abstracting from particulars, neither do I conflate rigorous systematic thinking with the claim to final authority, suggesting that Croce eschewed the former—thereby opening the slippery slope to play—because he eschewed the latter (98). Just as Ryn insists, Croce thought rigorously and systematically, even if he explicitly eschewed any claim

to have settled things once and for all. The human capacity for conceptual rigor endures, and when theoretical clarification is necessary, we must indeed be as rigorous and systematic as possible, not indulge in play on the grounds that there are no transcendent standards for rigor. At issue is what such systematic thinking gets us, the place of the concepts at issue in the overall cultural economy. Also at issue, at least implicitly, is whether the notions of rigor and system themselves imply the universal, enduring standards that Ryn thinks we need.

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Elaborating the concepts is an ongoing activity—more necessary at some points than others—but always preliminary to understanding the actual as historical, the world as history. There is no premium on systematically elaborating enduring forms once and for all. However, such clarifications establish provisionally enduring layers, thereby contributing to the building up of our particular world, the immanent foundation for our further response. But we establish these layers on the basis of what has come to be so far, not from some ever clearer grasp of the way things already are on some transcendent level, not by applying something transcendent, bringing it down to earth.

So it is not just because we are finite and historically specific that we cannot establish universal, enduring categories once and for all. If that were the whole of it, we could still aspire, with Dilthey, to glimpse facets of that semi-hidden realm. The deeper key is that the world itself is incomplete, provisional, ever-new—keeps coming into being. At each moment, we may build on those prior clarifications as we respond to what the world has newly become. But precisely because the world is not some manifestation of enduring transcendence but is immanent, provisional, unfinished, in process, there is also ongoing scope for revisiting, questioning, even deconstructing. So there is a place both for ad hoc clarification and for revisiting earlier clarifications, but there is no cultural priority on building up a repertoire of finished philosophical truths, getting ever closer to the way things are, as Ryn implies.

Even when we pull back from particulars to the more abstract theoretical or philosophical level, whatever we come up with is historically specific and subject to contest as part of the ongoing historicist conversation. The scope for rigorous thinking endures as a human capacity, though we might sometimes need to move to a higher level and talk about criteria or standards of rigor. But

there is no scope for specifying how to do it once and for all, no method to be specified, no algorithm.

My point is obviously akin to Gadamer's versus Habermas that any such higher-level discussion—about categories or conditions of possibility, about the rules or how we decide how to make the rules—is also hermeneutic, or historicist.¹² Anything at all that we might say about “enduring standards” or criteria of rigor will be historically specific—and thus part of the hermeneutic interaction, part of the continuing history, as opposed to “Rational,” or “Enlightened,” as if the discussion could be stopped by appeal to something universal, some transcendent principle. That is the danger, lurking in Ryn as in Habermas, if we do not specify that even the abstract level of the rules is subject only to provisional agreement, not to determination from above based on some transcendent principle, including reason with a capital R. There is no scope for prescription based on access to transcendence, “what is actually there,” “what persists in the midst of change and particularity.” Here again we note that Ryn's accent on residual transcendence, despite his willingness to forego the old foundationalism, entails wider cultural implications—and risks. Insofar as the philosophy he values actually seems to get at, or even merely to get closer to, “what endures,” there can seem some basis for a claim to privilege, to judge in terms of a priori rules, values, or standards alleged to have been somehow derived or elaborated philosophically. And the implication that a reconstructive historicism requires this sort of transcendence invites charges of “authoritarianism” and breeds precisely the overreaction that Ryn wants to head off.

Whatever the danger of sliding into such claims to authority and privilege, cultural priorities are at issue. Insofar as we feature “philosophy” with Ryn's quasi-transcendent aims, we divert ourselves from action, the concrete tasks at hand. We may need ad hoc clarification, but any abiding preoccupation with what endures, the empty dimension of the categories, simply deflects us from what we need instead—the historical understanding of the present situation that prepares responsible action.¹³

¹² See especially Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 18-43 (1967).

¹³ Even insofar as he recognizes, though without making clear why, that philosophy and history become one for Croce, Ryn seriously misconstrues the cul-

Of Radicalism, Conservatism, and Postmodern Moderation

As an indication of my alleged radicalism, Ryn notes that I repeatedly signal that being suspicious is good (96). And he worries that my open-ended invitation to suspicion precludes the necessary measure of stability and structure. But his thrusts miss their target in two senses. First, Ryn conflates such suspicion of “inherited norms and meanings” with discrediting “the notion of enduring standards” (90; my emphasis). But these are quite different. Even as we may question and perhaps undermine one or more of these norms and meanings, standards endure, though immanently, as we have emphasized.

But, in any case, the scope for questioning anything and everything need not occasion the cultural seasickness that Ryn associates with it. As I noted above, layers are established from our convincing clarifications, including our more down-to-earth historical inquiries stemming from contemporary concerns. And together they constitute the common culture that sustains us as we proceed. But precisely because they are themselves historical, any of those sustaining layers can be questioned, unearthed, deconstructed. An array of thinkers, from Nietzsche to Ortega y Gasset to Collingwood to Foucault, have been more helpful than Croce in showing the scope for such questioning. At the same time, Gadamer, adapting Heidegger, added a dimension missing in Croce to deepen what we can learn from our own past.

As an indication of my untoward radicalism, Ryn points to my concern with what I label “prejudicially conservative” tendencies in Croce and Gadamer, the thinkers to whom I am most indebted. I raised the issue because in significant circles of postmodern discussion each has been dismissed on precisely that basis, as prejudicially conservative. More specifically, each has seemed to critics to restrict the range of historical questions, even to end up justifying whatever is.¹⁴ My concern with what has been widely con-

tural proportions in suggesting that “the historiographer is more concerned to record the details of history than is the philosopher. The philosopher studies history in order better to understand himself and his own time” (99).

¹⁴ Those like John D. Caputo who find Gadamer prejudicially conservative believe his emphasis on “the authority of tradition” means that aspects of our present world cannot be questioned. See *Nothing but History*, 175-79, for my discussion of the treatment of Gadamer in Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

strued as Croce's historiographical elitism seems to Ryn further evidence of my prejudicial radicalism (96). With his emphasis on "ethical-political history," focusing on guiding elites, Croce had no room for the new social history, nor did he specify the scope for the remarkable expansion of the historiographical focus that we have seen over the last two generations—though it is readily understood from within his historicist framework.

Although historiographical preclusion was not essential to the wider position of either Croce or Gadamer, there was a measure of ambiguity in each, and neither explicitly invited certain forms of questioning that seem to me to open in the purely historical world each posits. So as part of my effort to highlight the potential contemporary uses of both thinkers, I found it imperative to tackle the issue of "conservatism" head on, putting the elements that might be construed as prejudicially conservative in perspective and, where necessary, showing the opening for admixtures from other thinkers.

Croce and Gadamer were subject to different limitations, and each can cover the deficiencies of the other to a certain extent. But I also found it necessary to embrace, as a complement, the "deconstructive" questioning that, in their different ways, Foucault and Derrida pioneered, partly by adapting Nietzsche and Heidegger. Despite certain prejudicially radical or disruptive accents, each of these four "prophets of extremity" helps us grasp the scope for an expanded range of questioning, beyond what Croce and Gadamer seem to warrant.¹⁵ The fact that I allow these figures any space at all is surely part of what bothers Ryn, but in no sense do I give Foucault and Derrida the last word.

Scope established for expanded questioning.

Indeed, in *Nothing but History* one of my major purposes, which Ryn does not mention, was to account for the negativism prominent in postmodernism by analyzing the tendency toward extremity, in tandem with the scope I found for a more moderate, reconstructive position. I somewhat grudgingly came to recognize a postmodern place for certain non-constructive, quasi-religious responses, even including a kind of ritualistic disruption, alongside the reconstructive strands I feature. But I also showed that such

¹⁵ I refer to Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985). As Megill himself was quick to note, my *Nothing but History* is in some ways a response to his book. Megill was the source of the term "extremity" in my subtitle.

*Ritualistic
disruption
distinct from
genuine
historical
questioning.*

negativism tends to breed excess, confusion, and overreaction, especially insofar as ritualistic disruption becomes confused with, or masquerades as, genuine historical questioning, open to learning. Conversely, I sought to demonstrate at the same time that certain of the insights of “extremists” like Foucault and Derrida can serve precisely my reconstructive purposes insofar as they are folded into a framework derived especially from Croce and Gadamer.

More generally, my concern to head off any prejudicial conservatism and even to show the scope for radical historical questioning does not mean a priori privilege to radicalism or criticism. A conservative leaning is no more automatically suspect than a radical one. Conversely, I surely recognize that there is an element of prejudicial radicalism in the academy—and that postmodern confusions encourage it, just as Ryn laments. Thus, for example, the political reductionism, the privilege to an oppositional stance or to subaltern studies, the premium on disrupting historical outcomes and constellations of power—as opposed to open-ended historical inquiry that seeks genuinely to learn. Whether I myself am guilty of such radicalism is for others to judge, but the charge would surely bemuse genuinely radical postmodernists like Mark Poster, for whom I have a high regard, but with whom I have clashed on the basis of my more moderate orientation.¹⁶

Still, though Ryn neglects the context of my references to conservatism and radicalism, it is certainly true that, as he puts it, I signal that being suspicious is good. To his credit, Ryn himself recognizes the considerable potential value in the sort of unmasking deconstructive questioning that has opened with the postmodern turn. And of course the suspicion I invite obviously encompasses the current scholarly fashions he so deplors. These, too, are historical products that can be deconstructed. But obviously Ryn is concerned that the generality of my invitation to suspicion and questioning feeds the relentless negativism he dislikes. In fact, it does not—but thus, in part, the importance of my effort to show, by probing postmodern “extremity,” that the negativism has other sources.

¹⁶ David D. Roberts, “Postmodern Continuities: Difference, Dominance, and the Question of Historiographical Renewal,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 3 (1998): 388-400. This is a review essay on Mark Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

What ensues from a historicist invitation to suspicion is simply not as disruptive as Ryn seems to fear. Indeed, the postmodern middle ground entails recognition of the scope for both ongoing questioning and criticism, on the one hand, and ongoing re-establishment of consensus, on the other. An invitation to suspicion is simply to open, to expand the range of historical questions, and thus the scope for learning. In principle, any layer of the actual world that has come to be in history can be apprehended historically, examined in its historical genesis, and even deconstructed. But though everything is open to suspicion, we cannot question everything at once. Indeed, even in criticizing we simultaneously affirm and thus continue something actual, including at least some of the “enduring standards” Ryn values. Moreover, in a passage Ryn quotes (95), I emphasize explicitly that radical questions—seeking to unearth deeply embedded cultural layers—may yield answers “conservative” in implication, leading us to leave things as they are. And even when the answers feed criticism and cultural disagreement, the resulting contest may—and in some spheres surely will—yield new agreement, a restored consensus. Though Croce made much the same point, I follow Gadamer, especially, in emphasizing that such questioning takes place within a continuing tradition; the answers come back to the tradition, which expands as they do so. Ragged and endlessly contested though it is, the process of our questioning and response yields a particular world—but it is immanent, provisional, without given foundations or transcendent sanctions.

Even in criticizing, we affirm something actual.

At the same time, I accent the rationale for focusing historical inquiry on dominant strands, the coming to be of the actual—the winning of something and the marginalizing of the rest. But this is not to justify or celebrate what is, as radical postmodernists like Poster are quick to assume, yet neither is it inherently critical or disruptive, as those more conservative like Ryn tend to argue. The desirability of any particular outcome is a moral judgment to be made after historical understanding—after we know what it is we are judging.

Ryn is obviously concerned that radicalism and suspicion undermine the enduring standards he finds so important. Standards are indeed enduring—if they endure. Most do, but none is beyond question. Or is Ryn, with his emphasis on enduring universals, saying that some are off-limits? If so, what would he tell us we

No standard is beyond question.

cannot question—and on what basis? Who decides and how? By some appeal to Reason—or Values? Does his “so what” reaction (96) to the charge that Crocean historiography is elitist mean that he himself would want to restrict the historiographical focus, so that subjects like gender that Croce never considered are off-limits?

*Contingency
does not
connote
meaningless-
ness.*

This openness to deconstructive questioning does not entail the understanding of contingency that Ryn, reading it in the negative, associates with modernism—and attributes to me. As he sees it, “postmodernists generally assume that in the end contingency, incoherence and meaninglessness are the whole of life” (101). And in line with my tendency to make even Croce too postmodern, I portray a Croce for whom “history is ultimately reducible to mere contingency and finitude” (100). But contingency does not connote meaninglessness—only a lack of necessity. What happens, what comes to be, is not the deployment of something prior and transcendent, not the unfolding of something necessary, not the process of reaching some given end. There is no prior structure—other than, as we noted, that whatever happens is the outcome of human response to what has come to be so far. Because human being is free and creative, but also finite and immanent, the coming to be of the actual world in history is radically contingent, though we understand it retrospectively as necessity—which means simply that what happened was necessary for the present world to be as it is, not that there was some prior necessity that we might apprehend, thereby gaining a short-cut to understanding.

In light of contingency, we can orient ourselves, understanding how this or that present situation came to be, only through historical questioning. But insofar as we are open to learning, we can achieve the orientation we seek. To accent contingency thus does not mean, as Ryn seems to fear, downplaying the scope for cognitive understanding. Nor does it affect the scope for ongoing ethical response. In light of our care for what the world becomes, we respond in action to some aspect of the present; conversely, part of what the historical account traces is the contingent concatenation and outcome of prior ethical response.

Still, finite and immanent as we are, we cannot foresee the results of our actions, no matter how purely ethical and informed by historical understanding they might be. Accompanying all we do is a sense of risk—even a sense of potential futility that sometimes

threatens to overwhelm us. In this sense, the fundamental contingency of things is central to individual experience. And Croce, especially, was much attuned to the uncertainty that surrounds action in a purely historical world. Thus his emphasis on “the immortality of the act.” Though we can never fully foresee the outcome of our actions, what we do lasts, affecting what the world becomes.

*All actions
entail risk.*

In Richard Rorty’s terms, we entrust what we do to the strangers who will come after us.¹⁷ In Rorty himself, to be sure, the sense of uncertainty contributes to what Ryn and I both deem postmodern excess. Part of my aim in *Nothing but History*, especially in my chapter on Rorty, was to show why it need not, why there is scope for a premium on history as thought and action as opposed to the edification and irony that Rorty features. As Croce emphasized, explicitly recasting traditional religious categories for a flattened-out historicist world, what sustains us is faith—which now can only be faith in history. This is faith not in some providential outcome but simply in the scope for each of us to connect with the world, to help to shape the future. This sense of the enduring weight of what we do is bound up with a sense of kinship with our predecessors, whose actions resulted in our world. We hope we use their legacy well as, transforming it through the sum of our responses, we entrust it to the future.¹⁸ Thus, even in a post-modern world, we need not grasp at some residual transcendence to show the scope for responsible action, action that is not merely a gesture of self-affirmation or a playful self-indulgence in a world beyond understanding.

Whatever differences Ryn and I might have on the immediate political level, we seek much the same cultural orientation, revolving around some version of historicism, in light of the waning of the old ahistorical foundationalism. And that orientation is to invite ongoing moral commitment, intellectual rigor, and disciplined action—as opposed to play, personal edification, or the relativism that leads to political reductionism. But Ryn thinks that unless we can specify a universal dimension, even a kind of asymptotic rela-

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 41. I discuss this issue in *Nothing but History*, 241-43.

¹⁸ See especially Croce’s noted essay “Antistoricismo” (1930), in *Ultimi saggi* (Bari: Laterza, 1963), 263-64.

tionship to a transcendent sphere, we leave too much open and invite the familiar postmodern excesses. Though I appreciate the intellectual force of Ryn's value-centered historicism, I contend that the more thoroughgoing historicism I outline, starting from Croce, affords a more convincing and culturally effective reconstructive middle ground than Ryn has recognized.

In light of the embrace of contingency, particularity, and finitude that so troubles Ryn, my prescription is indeed more postmodern than his—but I do not thereby invite either play or prejudicial radicalism. We can open the culture more widely than Ryn allows without falling into the excesses he rightly fears and criticizes. And to do so is congruent with a fuller reading of Croce the absolute historicist than is reflected in his single-minded insistence on the enduring categories. That fuller reading opens the way to a historicist postmodernism that, contrary to Ryn's charges, entails the continuity and coherence, weight and responsibility, necessary for the reconstructive middle ground.