
Responses to Postmodernism

Defining Historicism

Claes G. Ryn

The Catholic University of America

A Fragmentary Historicism

The American academy has been abuzz in recent years with a need to identify and get rid of "foundational" thinking. There are, we are told, no suprahistorical essences, no permanent ends, no enduring identities, meanings, or truths. We are said to live in a "post-metaphysical" and postmodern age.

The great fuss is anachronistic in that similar assertions were made long before and the postmetaphysical phase in philosophy can be said to have started at least as early as Immanuel Kant. But Kant and German idealism have long been fumbled in Anglo-American thought. The historicism of Benedetto Croce has had only a limited impact, although Croce's aesthetics, imperfectly understood, has had a wide following since the early decades of the century. The historical sense in philosophically mature form somehow never struck deep roots in Anglo-American soil, a fact in which some American intellectuals, though largely uncomprehending with regard to this type of historicism, take a kind of pride.

Now historicism is being embraced with a vengeance in extreme, one-sided postmodernist forms. Writers of generally radical temperament are making highly selective use of anti-metaphysical, historicist elements of thought to discredit social and intellectual structures not to their liking. Insufficient exposure to the larger tradition of historicism together with importunate political and other passions contributes to an often egregious lack of philosophical discipline and balance.

Still, besides a great mass of intellectual extravagance and frippery, postmodernism contains a flickering of historicist understanding. The

emphasis on the “situatedness,” contextuality, contingency, and perspectival nature of human existence carries intimations of the kind of historical consciousness that has long been taken for granted by some. Postmodernism has brought increased awareness of the epistemological naivete of philosophies claiming a vantage outside of history.

A failure fully to recognize the historical nature of human existence continues to retard philosophy, and the partial truths contained in postmodernism might conceivably mitigate that situation. Even when exaggerated and unbalanced, some postmodern critiques have been useful in exposing ideological rigidities and generally in challenging ahistorical universalist assumptions—useful, that is to say, for people still in need of such enlightenment. A serious problem with postmodernism is that its heavy ingredient of philosophical carelessness and superficiality is at the same time undermining philosophical stringency. A lack of *gravitas* is indirectly admitted in postmodernist circles, which, e.g., in celebrating “playfulness,” try to make a virtue out of weakness. There is a danger that the light touch of postmodernism will give historicism of all types a bad name and provide another excuse for thinkers who are clinging to retrograde ahistorical conceptions of philosophy.

Lack of stringency.

Postmodernism is for the most part not particularly original. It is reminiscent, for example, of the old romantic opposition to rational and other interference with intuition, spontaneity and freedom. Postmodernist complaints about the oppressiveness of existing intellectual, cultural and social structures recall Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was an early critic of the Enlightenment—from within, as it were—as well as a critic of prescribed form within the arts. Postmodernism has much in common with the thought of such critics of rationalism and scientism as Ralph Waldo Emerson in America and Henri Bergson in Europe. Sometimes it sounds similar to the ideas of nineteenth century writers of politically conservative or reactionary orientation, especially in Germany, who defended historically evolved particularity against abstract universalism.

History as Synthesis of Universality and Particularity

The postmodernist criticism of “metaphysics” and rationalism is foreshadowed in the English-speaking world in the work of Edmund Burke. This statesman-thinker opposed “abstract” rationality and stressed the need to consider historical circumstance, but he did not exhibit any of the fondness for extremes so characteristic of post-

modernism. Burke did not try to undermine rationality of every kind, but defended a humble, historically informed and adapted understanding. He did not let his acute sense of the particularity of history overwhelm a sense of historical continuity. Neither did this Whig show any inclination to distrust all restrictions on freedom. The civilized freedom that he advocated is inseparable from order, although, in his view, it cannot be decided in the abstract what amount of either freedom or order will be appropriate in particular historical situations. It is necessary to adjust to the circumstances of time and place. Burke was highly suspicious of ahistorical conceptions of universality—he despised the Jacobin fondness for moral abstractions—but he did not on that account deny the existence of something ultimately normative in human life. There is, he believes, a standard of good that is not a mere creature of time and place but universal. Yet, for him, that standard becomes embodied in and known to man *in historical particulars*.

*Union of
universality
and
particularity.*

The prehistoricist mind does not see the possibility of actual union, as distinguished from accommodation, between universality and particularity. Universality, it assumes, has to be separate from history, from that which is forever changing. It is possible and perhaps desirable to try to make the individual conform to the universal, but the latter, as universal, cannot take individuality into itself; that would be contrary to its essential character. But the historicism of Burke and of various later German thinkers opens up another perspective. Moral goodness, for instance, can be seen as a universal quality that an infinite number of *different* actions may have. Because this unifying quality transcends all particular situations, the older notion of universality contains an element of truth. But moral universality, while remaining universal, also enters human experience in historically particular form, as specific actions advancing good. The transcendent reveals itself in history by becoming selectively immanent in it.¹

Burke was not sufficiently a philosopher in the technical and systematic sense to make this conception of universality explicit, but it lay implicit in the intimate connection that he saw between the historically evolved best insights and achievements of humanity—"the general bank and capital of nations and of ages"—and what orders human existence to good.² In Germany especially, historicism evolved in philo-

¹ Cf. Joseph Baldacchino, "The Value-Centered Historicism of Edmund Burke," *Modern Age*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 1983).

² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 76.

sophically very sophisticated, if not always fortuitous, ways. The “concrete universal” was a refutation both of the abstract, ahistorical transcendent of old and of any cult of the particular as self-sustaining. Even when marred by excessive intellectualism and other flaws, as in Hegel, this historicism disproved enlightenment rationalism and universalism and destroyed the foundations of positivism even before that philosophically crude French and English movement spread across Europe and began stifling humane inquiry.

The more promising elements of German idealism, notably the elaboration of the possibility of synthesis, had pointed the way to a broad reconstitution of philosophy, but its more questionable manifestations, such as Hegel’s extravagantly schematic philosophy of history and his sometimes conceited intellectualism, damaged its reputation and made possible the suffocating reign of positivism. What is referred to as nineteenth century historicism is often in actuality a brand of positivism applied to historical studies. The German *strengwissenschaftliche Methode*, though it produced large amounts of historical scholarship, was not itself an expression of the authentically historical consciousness. The latter is not a disposition diligently to gather sundry empirical materials about the past, although it does inspire strong interest in the past as the source for human self-understanding. Neither is historicism necessarily a claim to have discovered the ultimate meaning of history or to have found the one right method for studying it, or a desire to understand the past just as it understood itself, or a belief that all points of view are historically conditioned and therefore merely transitory. The historical consciousness is most fundamentally an acute awareness of the past as moving in the present, a sense of the historicity, the historical nature and context, of the here and now. Human existence is a living whole across the generations, change and continuity together. Though the particular individual may be oblivious of it, how he acts, thinks and imagines is in very large measure shaped by history.

*Historical
consciousness.*

Early in the century when Benedetto Croce revived and strengthened historicism the positivist trend was dominant. His brilliance and originality was only partly recognized by a philosophical culture that had been badly damaged by positivist prejudices, and, in the English-speaking world especially, also by aversion to anything looking like German philosophy. Only Croce’s aesthetics became widely discussed and admired, and that part of his philosophy, too, was incompletely understood. Had Croce’s thought as a whole been generally absorbed,

many of the targets against which postmodernism has taken aim would not exist or would look very different. Crocean historicism anticipated many of the concerns of postmodernism, but without falling prey to its glaring weaknesses.

Postmodernism carries earlier opposition to rational, moral or aesthetic rigidity to extremes, sometimes absurd extremes. Its sense of the historicity of human existence, though welcome in some respects, displays the kind of one-sidedness that is one of the hallmarks of the movement. Distinctive to it is a radical, "liberationist" obsession with discrediting inherited norms and meanings, especially the notion of enduring standards. It expends great energy demonstrating the changeability, flux, transitoriness, discontinuity, and subjectivity of human existence. In a world without a lasting higher purpose and without a commonality of meaning there is no need to struggle with conscience, the latter having been shown to be merely an arbitrary, historically bound imposition; no need to live up to high intellectual expectations, these being just the preferences of a particular cultural regime; no need to "do it right." Behind the postmodernist preoccupation with demonstrating the historicity of all existing order one detects a Rousseauesque desire to be rid of obstacles to living out one's preferences of the moment. Even when postmodernism helps expose the conceit and partisanship of ideological and other constructs, its contribution is almost wholly negative. By itself, it is an entirely inadequate vehicle for the transmission of historicist thought.

Postmodernism is not wrong to contend that human existence is full of transitory structures and norms. Some of these are indeed arbitrary and/or oppressive; they express the egotistical preferences of individuals or groups. But postmodernism also forbids the possibility of structures of a different kind, ones that serve as aids to an intrinsically desirable existence. Such structures would advance a not merely partisan and temporary objective but would be always subject to change in new circumstances. Postmodernism is viscerally opposed to the notion of an enduring higher purpose. It wants *all* order to be ultimately contingent and arbitrary.

A great weakness of postmodernism, which is far from exclusive to it, is that it cannot fathom that life might be indistinguishably both changeable and unchangeable, contingent and non-contingent, coherent and incoherent. That life might have an enduring purpose, but one that manifests itself differently as individuals and circumstances are different, seems a contradiction in terms. That there is a trans-

individual commonality of experience, though marked by tension and diversity as well as consensus, is similarly unpalatable. Deconstructionists make much of the point that no two persons can read the same text in the same way, as if this notion were some kind of original and recent discovery. In actuality it has long been regarded as self-evident by philosophical historicism. What postmodernists do not know, and would prefer not to hear, is that the uniqueness of personal experience and perspective does not exclude the possibility of shared humanity and meaning.

Missing from postmodernism as from so much other philosophy is the possibility of synthesis, of the mutual implication of universality and particularity. Here is perhaps the very crux of modern philosophy, but postmodernism is barely aware of its existence. Emphasis on the contingency and flux of history distorts human experience unless balanced by attention to equally present order and continuity. What postmodernism needs, granted, is not the order and continuity of ahistorical “foundationalist” metaphysics, but that of value-centered historicism, “value” standing for the qualities that give moral, intellectual and imaginative form to man’s historical existence. Understanding unity and diversity together—not as separate, reified entities, but in their relationship of mutual implication—yields the concept of historical universality. Historical universality? Precisely: universality in particular form. That such an idea should elicit incomprehension and incredulity betrays a debilitating defect in Western philosophy of many types.³

*Contingency
and
continuity.*

Lacking attention to what might center, anchor, and discipline it, postmodernism succumbs to its own instability and subjectivism. Such coherence as it is able to muster comes from parasitic reliance on the not yet obliterated structures of language and other forms of custom belonging to an older but despised society. As deconstruction proceeds, postmodernism loses historicity itself. Without an implied continuity and permanence, “historical contingency” is not a philosophical idea but a mere movement of the lips.

Another example of postmodernist one-sidedness is the tendency to stress theory, language, text, and imagination—the contemplative side of life—to the neglect of practice. As with many of the romantics of old what is regarded as most significant in life lies outside of practical action. Postmodernism likes to point out—here expecting credit for

³ For an article-length explication of value-centered historicism, see Claes G. Ryn, “Universality and History,” *Humanitas*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (Fall 1992/Winter 1993).

something that students of Croce have long regarded as standard fare—that intellectual and cultural constructs are not disinterested. They are “regimes of power,” expressions of willfulness. Postmodernism has much less to say about what the will is and how it influences the whole of the human. Especially alien to it is the idea that there are morally contrasting potentialities of will and that the will might actually transcend arbitrariness or egotism. Here, too, postmodernism resists what might center it and give it more of the weight and thickness that marks serious philosophy.

A Historicist Defense of History

One who has closely studied and been substantially affected by postmodernism is Professor David A. Roberts, a leading intellectual historian who was until recently chairman of the Department of History at the University of Georgia. Roberts has written a broad and ambitious survey and analysis of generally anti-metaphysical strains of historical thinking from Vico to the present, *Nothing But History*.⁴ His purpose is to take stock of the meaning of “history” in a “post-metaphysical” world. Roberts accepts the trend away from “foundational” assumptions and is highly sensitive to postmodernist concerns, but also objects to extremes in contemporary anti-metaphysical thinking. He wants to indicate the preconditions for a “moderate” strand of historicism that “plays off” “the extreme responses that also merit a place, but not an exclusive place, within a postmetaphysical culture of history” (xii).

Roberts brings to his task unusual strengths. Unlike so many American historians and philosophers Roberts knows a great deal about the wider stream of historicism. He has previously written extensively on Croce, most notably *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (1987). In his most recent book Roberts examines a number of major approaches to history in the postmetaphysical era. He places postmodernism in a historical perspective and provides a philosophical framework considerably wider than its own for assessing it. Roberts’s book is an excellent corrective for the self-centeredness to which postmodernist discussion is strongly prone. Substantial sections on Vico, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Croce, Heidegger, and Gadamer precede

⁴ David D. Roberts, *Nothing But History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). [Ed. note: recently published. xiii+324 pp. \$40.00.]

discussions of such thinkers as Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, and Habermas. Roberts considers a number of other philosophers and historians less extensively. He summarizes and considers the pros and cons of particular positions with a view to making his own contribution to how we should view history. Roberts weaves his way among thinkers and ideas, continually juxtaposing and comparing and making use of whatever seems to him promising and viable.

A survey of this scope is a daunting task, but Roberts is well-equipped for it. Considering the difficulty of many of the thinkers discussed and the great complexity of the philosophical issues involved, his range is impressive. Roberts has a flair for digesting and lucidly condensing ideas. Although he lets each thinker speak, he remains in control of his material, pursuing his own objective. The large number of thinkers considered makes it difficult even for the most knowledgeable readers independently to evaluate each summary and assessment, but the reader develops confidence in the author, sensing that he is a serious scholar striving to be accurate and fair. Roberts is an old-fashioned historian at least in the sense that he would never knowingly distort the work of another to facilitate his own task.

A problem with a book ranging as widely as Roberts's is that ideas cannot be discussed in philosophical depth. Another thinker or intellectual current is always waiting to be reviewed. An intellectual historian rather than a philosopher, Roberts usually discusses philosophical issues in fairly general terms, a habit that is reinforced by the need to cover much ground. Really to assess his estimate or use of particular thinkers requires repairing to the original sources. Roberts provides enough paraphrase and quotation from the thinker under review to make his own comments plausible, but not quite enough to turn them into full-fledged discussions of the matter at issue. His work is a hybrid between a "history of" and a thematically argued treatise. The book is full of observations, hints and suggestions, many of which are helpful and intriguing, but philosophers will see a need to unpack, explore, clarify, sharpen and extend.

History and Radical Contingency

Roberts wants fully to embrace the historicity of human existence. Discussing Derrida, he writes, "Our world . . . cannot be stable, centered, self-identical in the way that the metaphysical tradition led us to expect" (199). Mankind needs to learn to live without the old certain-

ties, without an extrahistorical frame of reference and source of order. With the waning of metaphysics historical particularity emerges as the ultimate reality. No matter how hard we try to go beyond it—an effort that Roberts, in a revealing relapse into prehistoricist thinking, assumes to be a matter of “abstracting” from particulars—we run into yet more historicity. “Each higher level, as we become ever more abstract, is shown up to be merely historical as well. Even when we reach the level of what had seemed the suprahistorical frame—metaphysical, teleological, or scientific—we find but a different level of history, itself particular, riddled with contingency” (315). Life is, as the title of Roberts’s book indicates, “nothing but history.”

*Disruption
not enough.*

Roberts discusses the postmodernist stress on contingency, incoherence, and instability at great length and even with deference, but he is not prepared to surrender coherence and meaning. History as an intellectual discipline has a future. It is no longer credible to search for a single, correct theory of history or prescribe once and for all how to study it, but scholars open to persuasion and willing to engage in intellectual exchange can still advance knowledge and understanding. They can do so by becoming aware of and resisting obstacles to openness such as egotism, laziness, fear, and “contextual interference.” It is possible for the historian to weed out distortion and blindness. “Though the ongoing interaction never yields suprahistorical rules or criteria, its weak, provisional resultants afford the measure of coherence necessary for dialogue and learning—and for a continuing history” (309). Roberts reacts against the purely negative import of so much recent thinking. “The Foucault and Derrida currents converged in their mistrust of authority and their premium on disruption” (205), but more is needed, Roberts believes, than subverting existing order. Although he treats deconstruction with respect, he bemoans “frivolous” forms of literary deconstruction in vogue in America (307).

Roberts wants to be constructive. Wishing to preserve coherence and meaning, he shows himself willing in the end to make concessions to a “conservative” position. Intellectual openness requires, he argues, that in questioning what we have become we leave open the possibility that the actual may have something to recommend it. We do not have to assume that what has come to exist is illegitimate. As if concerned not to damage a radical image, Roberts introduces these concerns unobtrusively and tentatively, brings them in by the back door, as it were, but towards the end of the book he states them more affirmatively:

Radical historical questions can yield answers with conservative implications, suggesting, to put it simply, that some actual state of affairs is not so bad after all. To uncover the contingencies and preclusions entailed in the coming to be of the actual does not in itself demonstrate its illegitimacy but simply affords a rational basis for moral response. Insofar as the range of historical answers is restricted a priori, precluding those that seem conservative in implication, the enterprise slides from historical inquiry to edification or propaganda (315).

Making his contribution towards rethinking and rebuilding the discipline of history in the postmetaphysical era, Roberts draws on a large number of thinkers, but throughout the book the influence of Croce is evident, although, as shall be discussed later, Roberts's use of him is rather truncated. Roberts is also attracted to Gadamer, who, while advocating openness, "viewed the fact that we are fundamentally historical creatures to be an invitation to a creative encounter with our tradition, an encounter that leads to ongoing growth" (166). Roberts points to what he calls "one of the essential dimensions of Gadamerian hermeneutics—the moment of cohesion, consensus, coming back together *within* [a] postmetaphysical framework" (308).

According to Roberts, the kind of "undistorted communication" that Habermas desires can be reconciled with a society in which tradition still maintains "some measure of authority." This will be the case if "the outcome is not authoritarian and menacing, requiring a premium on disruption, but sufficiently weak to invite our creative and reconstructive engagement with it" (308).

Towards the end of his book Roberts gives a summary of the "weak but constructive" approach to history that he advocates. His statement is meticulously balanced and attentive to diverse considerations discussed earlier in the book. It should appeal to a rather wide range of thinkers, though it may do so in part precisely because of its very breadth and generality. Some will think that, even in the context of the book, it begs too many questions. The position favored by Roberts is

weak enough to avoid charges of authoritarianism yet strong enough to avoid aestheticism; it is weak enough to be convincing in light of the wider displacement but strong enough to serve ongoing reconstruction. It establishes a place between play and domination, between endless subversion and enslavement to the tradition. It entails neither innocence nor disengagement but responsibility, weight, and risk. We take ourselves seriously even while recognizing our contingency and finitude—and thus our need for interaction and the impossibility of completeness and the last word (317).

Questions that arise, even here at the end of Roberts's book, are:

"Weak but constructive" approach.

Why exactly, on his showing, should we “take ourselves seriously”? What precisely is the meaning and source of the mentioned “responsibility”? Whence the “weightiness” attributed to our efforts?

Roberts’s book is a most welcome attempt to tame the extremes unleashed by postmodernism. His painstaking, even-handed review of types of historicist thinking and his careful, balanced judgments should shame the flimsiness and carelessness of too much current academic writing. In its intellectual seriousness and scholarly ethos the book can be seen as an embodiment of the kind of approach to history that Roberts recommends. Yet so strong is his emphasis on the theme of contingency, particularity and finitude that he has difficulty explaining the sources for the continuity and coherence that he deems desirable. He posits the possibility of a “rational and moral willingness to learn” and of “adjudicating” conflicts on “the more abstract or theoretical level” (showing a predilection for the abstract that is curious in a historicist), but these possibilities are assumed rather than supported with sustained argument (308).

Some of the “liberal” rather than radical academic powers-that-be may like Roberts’s mild and limited advocacy of “conservatism.” After all, would not the kind of society preferred and constructed by modern “liberals”—including the welfare state, “gender” equality, and “gay rights”—be placed in jeopardy without retaining some respect for “tradition”? But Roberts also tries throughout his book to maintain a generally radical image. He repeatedly signals to the reader that being suspicious of existing social, cultural and intellectual structures is a good thing. He is in favor of “democratizing” historical culture, is highly respectful of “gender” studies, careful to give Marxism its due, and so on. Radical ideas, even at their most extreme, are treated respectfully and given the benefit of the doubt. Ideas that will strike the academic powers-that-be as “conservative” are treated differently. Roberts is quick to point out when thinkers are, in his repeatedly used phrase, “prejudicially conservative.” One strike against Croce, for example, is that he “tended to be overtly elitist” (108). A non-egalitarian or merely open-minded reader may ask, “so what?” In a scholarly rather than a political context, why should a “conservative” leaning be automatically suspect? Roberts does not worry as much, at least not in his published text, that a thinker might be “prejudicially radical.”

In view of Roberts’s desire to defend continuity and coherence it is unfortunate that he does not more fully explore their possible sources. One obstacle to his doing so is the general bias just discussed. He holds

it against Gadamer and even Croce, thinkers he nevertheless admires, that they are “prejudicially conservative in important respects” (17). Gadamer, Roberts contends, seems “to *overemphasize* the moment of agreement, the authority of tradition, and the ongoing reestablishment of consensus, at the expense of the scope for questioning and criticism” (171). Croce is superior to Gadamer, Roberts contends, in that Croce “overcomes an essentialist and prejudicially conservative tendency in Gadamer” (172). Roberts may well be right in this judgment, but his own larger purposes would have been better served by in-depth exploration of the differences between the two thinkers than by intimations that Croce is more compatible with radical aims.

Croce's Historicism

Roberts's apparent desire to accommodate postmodernism wherever possible affects his approach to Croce, which highlights his “absolute historicism” and his denial of definitive truth (85). Roberts rather conspicuously downplays the systemic core of Croce's philosophy, as put forth in his three seminal works *Aesthetic* (1902), *Logic* (1905) and *Philosophy of the Practical* (1908), books that provide the philosophical context for all of his other writing. These works develop his philosophy of the forms, or categories, of the human spirit—imagination, thought, and practical action—and their relationships. Reluctance to delve into these ideas slants Roberts's view of Croce and produces some incomplete or questionable interpretations. Roberts is still able to offer many very apt and felicitous summaries of Croce's thought. His book shows how, on issue after issue, Croce anticipated and dealt in depth with concerns made fashionable by postmodernism much later in the century. He did so not only with respect to historicism in general, but with respect to particular philosophical questions that have received much attention in recent decades. For example, Croce was far ahead of Derrida and others when, in his 1902 *Aesthetic*, he set forth “a radically antipositivist view of the world, based on imaginative language as the cutting edge of the growing spirit. Worlds come to be in language, which is inherently poetic and creative” (91).

*“Categories”
at core of
Croce's
philosophy.*

That Roberts does not explore Croce's philosophy of the categories is surprising considering its centrality in Croce's thought and how much it can contribute to our understanding of continuity and coherence in history. It may be that as a historian Roberts has spent more time on Croce's large number of studies of special historical topics and

on his numerous short essays than on those more "technical" philosophical works that systematically integrate his ideas. Roberts may also have been deterred by the suspicion—strong not just in postmodernism but in older Anglo-American thinking—that "systematic" thinking represents an arrogant claim to final knowledge. Postmodernism also resists any suprahistorical interference with openness. But, as Roberts himself points out, "Croce came to insist that no philosophy, including his own, could be definitive. Indeed his repeated attacks on system building and any pretense of definitive philosophy are among the most striking features of his thought" (84). Robert's comment is correct and yet could easily mislead the reader. An important clarification is needed. True, Croce opposed "system-building" as Roberts understands that term. But he was very much a *systematic* philosopher and regarded himself as such. Being systematic after Croce's fashion means something quite different from being a "system-builder." It is wholly compatible with intellectual humility, may indeed be integral to it.

Roberts is both right and wrong when offering the following summary: "For Croce philosophy would always be with us, but it would always be ad hoc and provisional—hardly foundational" (84). He is right in that for Croce the work of philosophy is never done. It cannot be "foundational" in the sense that it is able to separate itself from history and achieve final, incontestable insight. And yet, some philosophical insights, though they must be expressed within the limitations of time and place, are not merely provisional and ad hoc. Good philosophy tries to capture the enduring traits of human existence, not as something existing apart from history but as giving form to particularity. In so far as philosophy is successful, it both possesses and does not possess lasting truth. Though always falling far short of definitive, comprehensive Truth, what it humbly and gropingly knows, it does know. That knowledge is not negated by the fact that it is at the same time tentative in the sense that particular formulations of what is known can be forever improved, extended, and applied. Life goes on, and it continually offers new material for examination.

Philosophizing, then, is a condition of both knowing and not knowing the truth about our own existence, which is another way of saying that the philosophical mind is dialectical. Oriented by what he knows but 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 a fuller understanding.

Croce distinguishes between philosophical and pragmatic thought, and shows how science exemplifies the latter. In one of his many admirably concise and correct summaries of Croce's thought, Roberts writes that "though science is essential to us, its laws and generalizations are only rough-and-ready abstractions from particular cases, based on questions we have formulated for practical purposes" (86). Croce is an epistemological pragmatist in so far as some thought-processes, those serving practical utility, are concerned. What Roberts does not delve into is that Croce is *not* a pragmatist in his view of what he considers philosophical rationality. The latter is able to discern, among other things, the pragmatic nature of science. In so doing it observes something about the enduring forms of man's historical existence: pragmatic rationality—one of the "categories" of human activity without which there would be no human consciousness. Philosophical examination of human experience tries faithfully to record what is actually there. Unlike pragmatic thought, it does not simplify the experiential evidence or take such short-cuts or liberties with the facts as is compatible with achieving a particular practical objective. Philosophical rationality is not aimed at achieving practical purposes. It is an attempt to *know*—faithfully to know as much as it can about life in all its complexity—to improve our cognitive, conceptual hold on what persists in the midst of change and particularity.

Philosophical thought different from pragmatic.

For Croce history and philosophy ultimately become one and the same, though 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. In Croce's phrase, quoted by Roberts: "all history is contemporary history." Philosophical rationality seeks understanding about human life, expressed with the greatest possible conceptual clarity, but it is not trying to jump to some extrahistorical vantage believed to be protected from the contingencies and uncertainties of existence. Philosophy does not pursue abstraction, metaphysical or otherwise, but seeks conceptually to articulate the categories of man's actual, historical life. These forms are indistinguishable from their particular content, and they interact in every moment of life. Roberts writes correctly, if only in passing, that for Croce they are "an endless 'circle' of related but distinguishable forms of the spirit" (88).

Philosophy seeks truth about history.

As an effort to articulate the continuity and coherence of human life while recognizing its inescapably historical character, Croce's philosophy of the categories could have substantiated and strengthened

Roberts's rather tentatively stated notion of what might hold the study of history together in a postmetaphysical intellectual culture. Not least, Croce's distinction between pragmatic and philosophical rationality is highly relevant. The same is true of his ethics and aesthetics, though they relate less directly to Roberts's primary concern. In Croce's claim to have discerned a permanent structure of human consciousness, there is, to repeat, no implication that philosophy might now come to an end. Neither does Croce in his affirmation of enduring meaning appeal to an extrahistorical order. History, whether as an intellectual discipline or as the arena of human action, derives its coherence from the ongoing interaction of universality and particularity. Unfortunately, Roberts does not bring into focus just how Croce both synthesizes and maintains the distinction between them. Closer attention to those of Croce's philosophical works that deal systematically with the subject might have lessened the appeal that some postmodernist conceptions of historicity have for Roberts. Croce's historicism may be in one sense "unrelenting" (310), which is what Roberts wants it to be, but this does not mean that for Croce history is ultimately reducible to mere contingency and finitude.

Respect for History

It is unfashionable to take seriously the possibility of enduring order or unity, but what is unfashionable may be philosophically required. Although the attacks on "foundationalism" are not without justification, there is something obsessive and therefore disingenuous about the categorical denial of lasting structure and meaning. Postmodernists would have us think that only now, after the likes of Derrida, Foucault and Rorty have spoken, is it possible to view the world without illusion. Transcendence, universality, and higher purpose and meaning can no longer be given any credence. The conceit of this blanket rejection of old notions is all the more striking because it emanates from people laying claim to extraordinary intellectual openness. For many centuries, mankind's best minds, often a good deal more learned and brilliant than their critics today, have taken these notions very seriously. Yet we are supposed to believe that, while they succumbed to illusion and delusion, those who now pronounce on their limitations are sufficiently free of such encumbrances to know what they are talking about. Only those older thinkers held beliefs on flimsy grounds. But, again, *they* did not think that their grounds were

flimsy. Postmodernists generally assume that in the end contingency, incoherence and meaninglessness are the whole of life, but mankind over the generations emphatically disagrees. Granted that philosophy has made new discoveries over the centuries—though postmodernists would have a hard time defining progress—must not earlier thinkers be credited with some intelligence and discernment? They, too, were trying hard to understand human existence. If earlier generations thought that they felt the authority of conscience or the presence of the divine, does not that sense of a center or ultimate ground of human existence deserve respectful attention? If almost all thinkers prior to the ones now in vogue were prone to “foundationalist” assumptions, is that not an argument for carefully considering the possible justification for that strong and persistent tendency? The postmodernist habit of simply ignoring or dismissing what humanity has long believed suggests just the kind of willfulness that postmodernists like to condemn in others. They attribute to themselves openness, respect for “difference,” playfulness, and flexibility, but with reference to beliefs that they spontaneously dislike, that is, beliefs different from their own, they are typically close-minded, rigid and intolerant.

To return to “foundationalist” and metaphysical conceptions in their old form would indeed be philosophically retrograde and anachronistic, but to explore what valid elements are contained in them and how they might be retained in revised form would seem to respect human experience. There is a historicist approach that is compatible with the notion of transhistorical order and probably even with the notion of transcendence, understood in a new way.⁵ Philosophy needs to encompass as much as possible of mankind’s experience and reflection in order comparatively to assess what should be carried forward and to consider how it might be done—in the interest of human well-being. This task requires the opposite of intellectual self-absorption and of haphazard, merely “playful” selectivity. It requires a historically well-founded sense of direction or gravity derived from genuine openness, fairness and balance.

⁵ For an extended argument for this kind of historicist position, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, second expanded edition (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997).