

Editorial: Philosophy of History

In this issue we publish the prize winning entry from the 2016 prize essay competition, which was on the philosophy of history. We also include one of the runners-up, and another will be published in July. Encouragingly there were a very large number of entries, encouragingly because in Anglo-American academic circles the subject has not received a great deal of attention in recent decades.

One of the reasons for this is that, a brief flutter in the 1990s on ‘the end of history’ aside, the idea that history has a direction and that this direction can be perceived by those in the know has been largely discredited; and up to a point deservedly, because this view has too often been used by those who claim to know the direction, particularly as it bears on the future, to marginalise, suppress or even liquidate those who disagree. There is perhaps a slight sense of *Schadenfreude* from the observation that those in the know (Marxists and communists of various stripes, Nazis, etc.) have, in one way or another, been shown to be wrong empirically, even after appalling bloodshed and violence. History has not turned out as they, and many other intellectuals, thought it would.

However, in reaction to the apparently discredited direction of history theme, in true post-modernist mode, the study of history itself sometimes seems to dissolve into a host of alternative, competing and contradictory ‘narratives’. These narratives are often written from a particular point of view, and their proponents will tend to criticise those with whom they disagree of being in thrall, consciously or unconsciously, to some ideological bias, usually reprehensibly so.

Clearly underlying both the direction of history school and the ‘narrativist’ reaction, there are some important philosophical issues. In a certain sense, even if only in retrospect, there is a course of history, which is, up to a point intelligible, and more than a random sequence of just one damn thing after another. On the other hand the narrativists, if we may call them that, have a strong point in stressing the extent to which history itself always involves processes of selection, with the selection criteria often heavily influenced by historical fashion themselves. Some of these underlying issues are ably taken up in our prize essays.

We, as human beings, do want to tell stories about ourselves, and to understand how we have come to be as we are, socially as well as individually. All this is part of our identity, apart from anything else. If

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we are modestly wary of claiming certainty or infallibility here, we still want there to be something (quite a lot) right about our narrative about ourselves. To be told that our story (even our island story) is *just* a narrative, not containing some truth even in the midst of bias and partiality, and capable, with intelligence and good will on the part of historians, of getting nearer to the truth would not just be depressing. If all history is, in the deflationary sense, just another narrative, just another philosophy of history as Herder might have had it, then so is that deflationary claim about history itself. And why should we accept *that* narrative, as opposed to the realist view embedded in so much of our daily practice, that there is a past and that there is a good deal we already know about it and more to be discovered?

In reaction to the current 'post truth' miasma – itself a combination of evasion and sloppy analysis which bears crucially on the validity of history and even its meaning – there is certainly room for some robust philosophical work on history.