

In Defense of Presentism[†]

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... an irretrievable image of the past threatens to disappear if any present does not recognize it as meaningful to itself.

(Walter Benjamin)¹

It is the rare historian who asks herself what the discipline of history can contribute to human flourishing. How human beings can live more fulfilling lives; how they can best use their various capabilities; how they might achieve their own goals along with those of others: these are matters she might think are best left to her colleagues in philosophy, psychology, or even religion. Questions about human flourishing are fundamentally ethical but the contemporary discipline of history seems allergic to tacking moral matters. Historians almost never wonder, “To whom is the historian responsible and for what? And how are these values and this responsibility effective in historical work?”² They—or, I should now come clean, and say *we*—offer no courses in professional ethics nor do we swear an historians’ equivalent of the Hippocratic oath. (A Thucydidean or Herodotean oath, perhaps?) That does not mean we have no professional identity or any defining principles for our craft: we possess the whole panoply of graduate training, the granting of PhDs, and the processes of hiring, assessment, reviewing, and promotion to maintain professional standards. What we do lack, however, is a broad and open consensus on *why* we pursue those goals. And that in turn means overlooking for *what*—meaning, especially, for *whom*—we feel responsible as we try to achieve them.

Historians also hardly ever consider how history might promote human flourishing, nor do we debate whether some forms of historical work would advance it better than others. Least of all do we define the value of history according to that capacity. We are generally much more comfortable debating arguments from within our discipline, using our own professional tools, than we are stepping outside our consensus to ask whether the tools are the

[†] Forthcoming in Darrin M. McMahon, ed., *History and Human Flourishing* (Oxford, 2020). I am grateful to the participants in the Humanities and Human Flourishing project and to audiences at the Universität Freiburg, the Forschungszentrum Gotha der Universität Erfurt, and the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen for their responses.

¹ Benjamin 695: “... es ist ein unwiederbringliches Bild der Vergangenheit, das mit jeder Gegenwart zu verschwinden droht, die sich nicht als in ihm gemeint erkannte.” Translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

² Rösen 196.

right ones for the job, or even what the purpose of that job might be. To do so would apparently threaten the prime purpose of history as a professional discipline: to reconstruct the past without the distorting effects of the present. Human flourishing, by contrast, is pursued in the present tense and directed towards our future: the past, and the study of the past, would seem to offer little help in this regard. Historians have certainly assumed so, with sometimes debilitating effects for the health and the public role of our discipline.

A recent historical encounter might indicate a different relationship between past and present, and with it one possible means to link history and human flourishing. In 2014, two Hawaiian women travelled from Hawai‘i to London, where they found their own past confronting them vividly in the present. At the British Museum, Malle Andrade and Noelle Kahanu had the opportunity to see five Hawaiian images of feathered gods, known as *akua hulu manu* that had been given to Captain James Cook in 1779 when he visited Hawai‘i on his last voyage of exploration. Kahanu declined to visit the gods but Andrade later described the overwhelming effect the meeting with them had upon her:

What I experienced was a profound sense, not of my looking at them, but of them looking at me. It was as if they were asking me, “Who are you?” “Why are we here?” “What are you going to do about it?” To be in the presence of sacred objects, created at a time so very different from our own, is to ask ourselves, “How have we changed?” ... Under their gaze, we are compelled to ask ourselves, “Are we doing enough for our family, our ancestors, our community, our nation?” I feel such sentiments emanating from these ancestral works, as though each was an elder who watches your behaviour with a set of expectations that we need to rise to, individually and collectively.³

Two of these Hawaiian gods were more recently displayed for a wider audience at London’s Royal Academy of Arts in a 2018 exhibition held to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Cook’s first expedition. The remarkable force of these images was palpable there even to non-Hawaiians: “Their power, when confronted in an exhibition, remains unabated and brings the past dramatically into the present.”⁴

³ Brunt and Thomas, eds. 298; on the *akua hulu manu* more generally, see Caldeira et al. 44–45.

⁴ Brunt and Thomas, eds. 198–99, 298 (quoted).



Fig. 1. Feather god images (*akua hulu manu*), Hawaiian Islands, late eighteenth century.

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Few traces of the human past are perhaps as charismatic as these Hawaiian war gods, and most of us cannot feel quite so direct an ancestral connection with its traces as the Hawaiian visitors to London: even Kahanu's reluctance to meet her gods was evidence of their spiritual force. Nonetheless, an encounter such as this indicates just how strikingly the past can erupt into the present and intervene into our current concerns. And it reminds us that it is only in the present that the past can make any claim on us at all. It does so with an accompanying ethical challenge, "a set of expectations we need to rise to, individually and collectively," that point towards the future. There could be signs of an alternative approach to history in the poignant rending of the fabric between past and present that Andrade reported.

To many, perhaps most professional historians, such a breach would appear profoundly unhistorical—in fact, quite the opposite of one fundamental value defining our professional creed: the commitment to separate the concerns of the present from the scientific treatment of the past. The past does not speak *to* us; we speak *for* the past. Nor does the past look at us: we examine the past. Historians control the interpretation of the past, but it cannot control us. And because the past does not confront us in the way that Andrade found the *akua hulu manu* staring at her, it does not demand if we are fulfilling our duties to our family, our ancestors, our community, or our nation; it makes no claims about our flourishing as humans. Indeed, the past does not even ask us if we are doing right by history because it demands nothing of us and expects nothing from us.

One name for the opposite failing is *anachronism*, the willful or inadvertent misunderstanding of the past by applying standards or interpretations from outside the immediate era, context, or milieu under study.⁵ A less polite term for it is *presentism*, “a term of abuse conventionally deployed to describe an interpretation of history that is biased towards and coloured by present-day concerns, preoccupations and values.” It is a truth almost universally acknowledged among historians that an aversion to presentism “remains one of the yardsticks against which we continue to define what we do as historians.”⁶ And not only historians: a leading scholar of literature recently described presentism as “a term of opprobrium to claim at one’s peril.”⁷ And yet, as we shall soon see, the meaning of presentism is not quite as straightforward as these statements might suggest. The range of possible presentisms includes some that are compatible with writing good history and even conducive to human flourishing. It is these forms of presentism that I will attempt to defend in this essay.

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“Whatever it is, I’m against it.” The words—lyrics, in fact—are Marx’s: *Groucho Marx’s*, from the opening of the 1932 Marx Brothers’ film, *Horse Feathers*. If pressed about presentism, most historians would identify as Marxist to this extent: whatever presentism is, they’re against it. For some of the most senior members of the historical profession in the United States, at least, opposition to presentism—whatever that may be—is almost a price of admission to the historians’ guild. In this vein, the eminent American historian of the French revolution, Lynn Hunt, entitled one of her monthly missives as president of the American Historical Association in 2002, “Against Presentism”. “Who isn’t, you say?,” she began, as if it were a self-evident truth that any student of the past must reject presentism on professional principle.⁸ A few years later, the equally esteemed historian of the American Revolution, Gordon Wood, similarly condemned what he called “flagrant examples of present-mindedness in history writing” in a review of books on slavery and the US Constitution under the banner of “Presentism in History”.⁹ He invoked the great Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn’s injunction against “an obvious kind of presentism, which at worst becomes

⁵ Spoerhase (2004).

⁶ Walsham 214.

⁷ Dimock 257.

⁸ Hunt.

⁹ Wood 292.

indoctrination by historical example,” as if any tendency so blatant that it could lead to “indoctrination” (with all the Cold War baggage that word carries) must necessarily be a Bad Thing. For such eminences as Profs. Bailyn, Hunt, and Wood, presentism may be a shapeless bugbear rather than a substantial entity, yet it is one to be avoided at all costs. They did not define just what presentism is, but of one thing they are as sure as Groucho Marx: they are firmly against it, and they assume that all other historians must be as well.

For most professional historians today, presentism is rather like Augustine’s famous definition of time in his autobiographical *Confessions*: if nobody asks them what it is, they know; if you ask them to explain it, they don’t.¹⁰ (I will return to Augustine’s philosophy of time in my conclusion.) It is for just this reason that a leading historian in Britain has described presentism as “slippery, amorphous, and polyvalent”.¹¹ If historians are so adamant in their rejection of presentism, we should at least be clear what it is we are rejecting. And if we accuse others of being presentist, we should be sure of the failings we diagnose in our fellow historians. By my count, presentism has had at least five meanings among historians.¹² (What it has meant for other scholars, in fields such as philosophy, psychology, and the history of science, I will discuss later.) These species of presentism condemn, variously, teleology; the pressure of the present in reconstructing the past; the “present-mindedness” that shapes historian’s questions; the shrinkage of their horizons to contemporary matters; and the omnipresence of the present in our everyday lives. These forms of presentism are not mutually exclusive and they sometimes overlap in the ways in which historians use them—usually to condemn others, but never as a self-identification. *I* may be an historian, and *you* might be present-minded, but *they*—our enemies, or professional outsiders—are presentists, and thus to be shunned.

Among professional historians, the most famous demolition of presentism, though it did not use that exact term,¹³ came in 1931 from the Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield in his short polemical book, *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Butterfield wrote in England in the aftermath of the Great Depression, the General Strike, and the rise of the Labour Party, from a perspective on British political history stretching back through the rise of mass democracy in the late nineteenth century all the way back to the constitutional revolutions of

¹⁰ Augustine 230.

¹¹ Walsham 217.

¹² Dray (1989) provides a parallel anatomy of presentisms.

¹³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the terms “presentist” and “presentism” had both appeared in English as nonce-words by the early 1920s but neither seems to have come into broader usage with meanings approximating those described here until after the Second World War: *OED*, svv. “presentism” (first recorded 1916), “presentist” (1923).

the seventeenth century. These shifts in the balance of political power occurred especially in the relations between the monarchy and Parliament, and were often taken to have their roots in ideas of popular sovereignty derived from the Protestant Reformation, first in Europe and then in England. Butterfield discerned a robust mythology that underpinned a conception of English, and later British, political exceptionalism he called Whig history, after the late seventeenth-century political party that had led the movement for greater parliamentary sovereignty in reaction to the threat of alleged Catholic absolutism. According to Butterfield, the Whig interpretation of history is “the tendency in many historians to write on the side of the Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.”¹⁴ This is presentism as teleology, the belief that history only matters for those elements that were the seeds of progress in the present.¹⁵ Butterfield’s Whig historian is smug, partisan, and full of self-praise; she selects her material to suit not just present needs but to justify, even to glorify, those she or her party finds most immediately admirable. As a form of presentism, Whig history is positive, directive, and selective: it underpins a particular vision of the present, and usually for political purposes.

Such ideological presentism is a specific instance of a broader idealist presentism best summed up in the aphorism from the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce that all history is contemporary history. Because Croce’s judgment is often quoted out of context, its meaning becomes clearer in a passage from the original essay in which it appeared: “The practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of ‘contemporary history’ [*storia contemporanea*] because, however remote in time the events there recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate.”¹⁶ Croce thereby recognized that the historian can never be entirely disinterested in her choice of historical questions, the tools she brings to them, or the way she constructs her answers to them with a contemporary audience in mind.

¹⁴ Butterfield v.

¹⁵ For more subtle and informed conceptions of teleology see Trüper, Chakrabarty, and Subrahmanyam, eds.

¹⁶ Croce (1938) 5: “Il bisogno pratico, che è nel fondo di ogni giudizio storico, conferisce a ogni storia il carattere di ‘storia contemporanea,’ perché, per remoti e remotissimi che sembrano cronologicamente i fatti che vi entrano, essa è, in realtà, storia sempre riferita al bisogno e alla situazione presente, nella quale quei fatti propagano le loro vibrazioni”; Croce (1941) 19.

Historians have never taken Croce's view of presentism to be normative but it has had other distinguished proponents. For example, the early nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke—the practitioner most often held to be the founding father of the modern historical profession as a procedure for reconstructing “how it actually” (or “essentially”) “was” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)¹⁷—acknowledged the pressure of the present when he wrote early in his career: “That history is always rewritten has already been remarked. Every age and its dominant tendency makes history its own and transfers its thoughts onto it ... Would one study [history] at all without the impulse of the present?”¹⁸ A century later, John Dewey argued that “all history ... is, in an inescapable sense, the history not only of the present but of that which is contemporaneously judged to be important in the present.”¹⁹ The British historian E. H. Carr concurred, in his classic answer to the question *What Is History?* (1961): “we can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present”; because history is written not simply *for* the present but *in* the present, it constitutes “an unending dialogue between the present and that past.”²⁰ We can call this position idealist in that it assumes the past is not an object independent of its observation or its reconstitution in the minds of contemporary historians. A stronger version of this claim, and one explicitly indebted to Croce, was argued for by the British archaeologist and philosopher of history, R. G. Collingwood, in his conception of history as a mental reconstruction or “re-enactment” of past thought in the mind of the present-day historian.²¹

Idealist presentism may avoid the opprobrium attached to ideological conceptions of presentism. It can do so by frankly acknowledging the active role the historian's mind—her mental categories and structures as well as the horizon of possible questions, meaningful encounters, and plausible interpretations—plays in shaping history from the fragmentary evidence of the past. Behind these sophisticated, or we might say “thick,” conceptions of presentism lies a thinner and more negative version of analytical presentism. This is what Lynn Hunt, speaking for many (perhaps even most) historians, has termed “the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms.”²² This definition is confusingly circular—presentism is what presentists do—but it presumably corresponds to what other scholars have more

¹⁷ Gilbert (1987).

¹⁸ Ranke 52: “Die Historie wird immer umgeschrieben, was schon bemerkt worden. Jede Zeit und ihre hauptsächlichliche Richtung macht sie zu eigen und trägt ihre Gedanken darauf über ... Würde man sie aber ohne den Impuls der Gegenwart überhaupt studieren?”

¹⁹ Dewey 235; compare Lovejoy.

²⁰ Carr 24; compare Elias (2006) 8: “Contemporary circumstances decide *how* [the historian] sees ‘history’, and even *what* he sees as ‘history’.”

²¹ Collingwood; see also Dray (1995).

²² Hunt.

helpfully described as present-centeredness: that is, the procedure of using current categories or imperatives not only to determine historical topics but then to interpret them in terms distant from, or unrecognizable, to the past itself.²³ Present-centeredness need not imply the strong teleology that Butterfield associated with the Whig interpretation of history, nor does it depend on the philosophical conception of idealism that Croce and Collingwood espoused. However, it is perhaps what is most often meant by vulgar invocations of presentism, especially when one historian condemns it in the practice of another.

To these strains of ideological and idealist presentism we can add what might be called a perspectival presentism. This is a concern as much about the teaching of history as research and writing and describes the trend among both historians and their students to limit our interests to modern history and even contemporary events: or, in Lynn Hunt's words once more, "the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past".²⁴ Presentism in this sense is a descriptive category more than an analytical one: it concerns the construction of academic syllabi and course offerings, and the selection of historical subjects as much as the framework for the construction or analysis of history itself. Nor is it unique to historians. For example, some historical sociologists have complained for almost thirty years that their discipline was witnessing the "death of history" as it made a "retreat into the present".²⁵ For very different reasons, relating to the nature of the fossil record and the rate of diversification of species, biologists have similarly cautioned against "the Pull of the Recent" or "the pull of the present" in their own research.²⁶

Presentism is now a particularly pressing concern among historians, particularly in a national field like the United States, because classroom enrolments in history courses have declined by some 30% between 2011 and 2017. There is a parallel concern in the United Kingdom, where in 2017/18 history was reported to be the only academic field to drop out of the top ten subjects studied by undergraduates at university since 2012/13.²⁷ It is an open question whether such local concerns have any wider global significance for the practice of history specifically or for the humanities more generally.²⁸ Nonetheless, at least since Michel Foucault suggested the category of the "history of the present" (*histoire du présent*), there has

²³ Wilson and Ashplant.

²⁴ Hunt. For an illuminating example of such foreshortening, in the field of African history, see Reid.

²⁵ Elias (1987); Inglis (2010); Inglis (2014).

²⁶ Raup; Jablonski, et al.; Etienne and Rosindell. My thanks to Michael Wade for references to the biological literature.

²⁷ Schmidt; Higher Education Statistics Agency.

²⁸ Compare Schneider, et al.

been a positive and productive movement to deploy historians' analytical tools on contemporary structures and problems, as well as to use prompts from the present to pursue genealogical and archaeological inquiries into the past.²⁹ Perspectival presentism is not necessarily negative, as it may lead to engagements with deeper histories rather than simply to a constriction of temporal horizons. It is also especially in relativizing the present and making us aware that our own arrangements are not only not inevitable but as much the outcome of good and bad choices, and greater and lesser accidents, as the varied pasts we study as historians.

But what if the present is now the only temporal horizon we can inhabit as creatures of late modernity? This is the proposal for a more substantive conception of presentism offered by the French classicist François Hartog. Hartog writes of a new “regime of historicity” characteristic of our own time in which the past matters less and less in its own terms, the future is increasingly hard to imagine, and “the category of the present has taken hold to such an extent that one can really talk of an omnipresent present.”³⁰ If the present is indeed omnipresent, then it may fall to historians, as students of time and change, to compare this condition with other historical “regimes”, and to provide a perspective on our current presentism to cure perspectival presentism. A fish may not be able to analyse the medium in which it swims, but humans—especially critically trained humans, like historians and other historically minded scholars—certainly can do so.³¹ Only then might we hope to escape what another contemporary French historian has ominously termed “the tyranny of the present” (*la tyrannie du présent*).³²

So far, I have attempted to anatomize five distinct but sometimes overlapping conceptions of presentism among historians: first, the teleological (and ideological) presentism classically dubbed the “Whig interpretation of history” by Herbert Butterfield; then the idealist presentism assumed by historians from Leopold von Ranke via Croce and Collingwood to E. H. Carr and beyond; thirdly, the analytical presentism otherwise known as present-centeredness; fourthly, the perspectival presentism that has shrunk the attention of students and scholars alike to the near-present; and lastly, the omnipresent presentism proposed by François Hartog as part of our inescapable historical condition.

²⁹ *History of the Present*.

³⁰ Hartog (2015) 8; see also Hartog (2014); Bouton; Tamm and Olivier eds.

³¹ Lorenz and Bevernage eds.

³² Baschet; compare Lübbe on the “shrinking of the present” (*Gegenwartsschrumpfung*); Clark (2003) 7–11 on presentism as “dehistoricization”.

With this anatomy in mind, we might ask whether historians are against all these things at once when they decry “presentism” in our field or more broadly as a cultural phenomenon. To be sure, few if any historians would now wish to be accused of “Whiggism” or the kind of construction of history now mostly associated with writers such as Francis Fukuyama or Steven Pinker, who make teleological claims about human progress in works like Fukuyama’s *The Last Man and the End of History* (1992) or Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (2018). But can we plausibly deny that we choose our subjects according to our own present concerns and then bring our immediate analytical frameworks to bear upon them? There is always a dialogue between the current state of our scholarly discipline—the questions and methods that propel and inform it—and the problems individual historians find most immediately urgent. Even an alleged retreat into the present can be an opportunity for historians to reassert their ability to historicize present-mindedness itself. I submit that historians should not reject all these tendencies, especially if we can learn from adjacent disciplines where presentism has more positive connotations and where it is more closely connected to human flourishing than to the identity of an academic discipline.

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It is mostly among historians that confusion reigns about the meaning of presentism. It is also mostly among them—again, I should say, among *us*—that presentism carries predominantly negative connotations. In other fields—for example, in philosophy, psychology, the history of science, legal history, and literary history—presentism has a wider range of meanings and broader scale of valuation attached to it. For example, among philosophers of time, presentism is the position that “only present objects exist” and thus “that only the present is real”: that is, the thesis that you, I, and the Taj Mahal exist but that Sappho, your unborn grandchildren, and the Library of Alexandria do not.³³ The philosophical alternatives to this position—variously termed by philosophers *non-presentism*, *eternalism*, or *four-dimensionalism*—hold that time is a dimension like space: that it extends forwards and backwards from the present; that past, present, and future objects all exist; and, contrary to presentism, that reality consists of all these objects in past, present, and future time, even though non-presentists may still disagree whether past and future objects—Sappho, your

³³ Markosian 47; Crisp 211.

grandchildren—are equally real.³⁴ Philosophical presentism seems commonsensical: it accords with our intuitions that the future is unknowable because we have no access to it and that the past, though once known and actually existing, has a different status from the present.

Historians have not engaged seriously with philosophical presentism: in fact, they have not, as far I can discover, ever engaged with it at all. This might be because there is some risk of confusing one family of presentism—the historians’—with another—the philosophers’—but I suspect the absence of interest reflects a broader unwillingness among historians to reflect on the ontological status of the past, and on our historical epistemology for gaining access to that past and then interpreting and explaining it within the present. Yet when philosophical presentism is stated so baldly across the disciplinary divide between philosophy and history, it challenges historians to be more explicit about our own philosophical commitments. How do we understand the nature of the object we study? Do we believe the past *qua* past exists? If so, in what sense might we understand its existence? Do we hold, with the novelist William Faulkner, that the past is never dead and that it is not even past? If so, then does it exist only in the present? Or does it exist simultaneously—perhaps even sequentially—in a present that is now past and a present that is now present but which is itself receding immediately into the past? If the historian believes the past does exist, does that mean that her *métier* is an “art of time travel” between present and past, as the Australian historian Tom Griffiths has put it?³⁵ Or must we commit, along with a Croce or a Collingwood, to a presentism that is both epistemological *and* ontological, the position that the past only exists in the present because it is only in the here and now that we have access to its existing objects, shards and fragments, broken echoes and murky memories, though they may be? In defense of this kind of presentism, I suggest that we should: otherwise, how are we to account for our ability to examine the past except as it exists in the present, through the incomplete evidence remaining from the shipwreck of history itself?

If we turn now to the status of presentism in psychology, we might find that such a commitment to representational presentism is inescapable. A psychologist would say that our incomplete access to information demands a degree of “filling-in” to render it meaningful. The exact degree differs between our partial recollection of a fractured past and our premonition of a wholly unexperienced future: in the words of the psychologist Daniel Gilbert, “if the present lightly colors our remembered pasts, it thoroughly infuses our

³⁴ Bourne.

³⁵ Griffiths.

imagined futures.”³⁶ Presentism, in this construction, is the unavoidable tendency to populate the future—and, to a lesser extent, the past—with our immediate experiences and expectations. In this form of psychological presentism, our imagined future selves are extensions of our present selves, with all our current prejudices and attachments.

The psychological problem of presentism accordingly bulks larger for the future, that imagined space where our actions come to fruition, than for the past, the remembered place in which our choices and those of innumerable other actors have already been made. This has led the psychologist Gilbert to conclude with relief and perhaps a touch of *Schadenfreude* that “the good news is that most of us aren’t historians,” trying to escape the trap of viewing the past through the present, but the “bad news is that all of us are futurians, and presentism is an even bigger problem when people look forward rather than backward.”³⁷ Yet this may be rather cold comfort for students of history. On this account, historians must carry a double burden. In our civilian lives, as it were, we are trapped in a future-determining presentism; however, when we are in the historiographical trenches, a backward-looking presentism constrains us. As historians, we could no doubt still relieve some of this pressure by reading more positive psychology: this might conceivably enhance our human flourishing. However, giving up our day jobs as historians would probably not have such positive effects.

Renunciation may not be necessary, however, because historians can turn to their close colleagues in the field of the history of science for more positive models of presentism. Historians of science, in particular, have engaged with presentism more systematically more sympathetically than historians more generally, in part because their own discipline has had a longer and more formative engagement with it.³⁸ Their field was born largely in revolt against teleological “Whig” narratives of scientific progress often written by practising scientists keen to ratify, even glorify, the achievements of their subfields. It is notable in this regard that Herbert Butterfield himself, the slayer of Whig history, wrote whiggish accounts of England and of the history of science, such as *The Englishman and His History* (1944) and *The Origins of Modern Science* (1959): scholars of Butterfield’s work have not overlooked this irony.³⁹

The disciplinary inoculation of historians of science against whiggism may have fortified them against the infectious strains of teleological and analytical presentism. More recently, some in the field have returned to consider the possible benefits of presentism and

³⁶ Gilbert (2006) 127.

³⁷ Gilbert (2006) 162.

³⁸ Stocking is a classic early engagement with the topic by an historian of science.

³⁹ Jardine; Moro-Abadía; Sewell.

they have proposed some novel forms of it that may have wider utility. Like historians, the historians of science are not agreed on any single meaning of presentism; unlike historians, they seem to believe that, whatever presentism is, they are not necessarily against it. They have variously anatomized presentism, in their own field and in adjacent sub-disciplines, to produce a broader and less prejudicial taxonomy. Some of these strains of presentism point the way forward to a more productive engagement with presentism, and more robust defenses of it, among historians more broadly.

Historians of science may also now be more tolerant of presentism, and hence more willing to explore its possibilities, than historians because of their closer affiliation with the natural sciences, with their greater investment in causal reasoning than interpretive explanation.⁴⁰ These modes of academic inquiry are not mutually exclusive, of course. Many historians not only engage in both but see them as dependent upon each other. However, the roots of at least part of the field of the history of science in the natural sciences themselves may lead its practitioners to have a stronger belief that there are continuities over time: the kind of continuities assumed by a belief in natural laws more characteristic of the natural sciences than most of the human sciences. With this affinity in mind, two recent historians of science, the American historian of the politicization of contemporary science, Naomi Oreskes, and French historian of biology Laurent Loison, have proposed a variety of critical forms of presentism that they argue can avoid the dangers diagnosed by other opponents of presentism.⁴¹ Among the species of presentism they propose are what they variously term *substantive*, *normative*, *empirical*, *methodological*, *descriptive*, *narrative*, *critical*, and *motivational* presentism. I briefly examine each in turn before concluding with a tempered defense of presentism drawing on these conceptions of presentism generated and debated outside the discipline of history itself.

Substantive presentism works on the assumption that fundamental elements of the past and the present are substantially alike and that this continuity allows for explanations and analyses that encompass both historical materials and those from the contemporary world.⁴² This continuity of substance may be true, though perhaps to differing degrees, for bodies, brains, or rocks. However, even evolutionary biologists—who would surely agree that natural laws are uniform and that they work through the mechanisms of evolution—might be skeptical just how far the idea of continuity can be pressed when it has now become possible to speed up evolution and to observe it in experimental time. Historians are even less likely to

⁴⁰ Oreskes 595.

⁴¹ Oreskes; Loison.

⁴² Oreskes 600.

be persuaded of the merits of substantive presentism. For example, most would question whether human beliefs and behaviors exhibit uniformity and continuity, even over generations, let alone longer periods of time or across space and culture. Most of us would also emphasize contingency over continuity and particularity over perdurability: these features are not incompatible, of course, but historians will tend to avoid accounts that assume lateral contexts rather than longitudinal ones. For all these reasons, this form of presentism might not be the most easy to defend or the one most appealing to historians who do not study the natural sciences within which substantive continuity is more broadly accepted.

More closely confined to the history of science, and therefore perhaps also less relevant to history more broadly, even if more defensible in its own terms, is *normative* presentism.⁴³ This is the effort to use current scientific theories to explain the forms or the limits of scientific enterprises in the past, for example by deploying contemporary genetics to fathom the interpretive constraints of Lamarckian conceptions of evolution or to supplement Darwin's theory of natural selection. This approach might assume a model of cumulative progress that other historians would find impractical or, outside the natural sciences, implausible for other fields, such as the human sciences. Other historians' aversion to anachronism usually leads them instead to engage in what philosophers call interpretive charity: that is, to assume that past actors were rational in their own terms, and that the historian's job is to reconstruct those terms. Of course, objectivity in this sense does not imply neutrality.⁴⁴ To reconstruct past rationality is not to approve its products, for example to generate sympathy for the agents of massacre or genocide, however much we might want to comprehend their motivations for mass murder. This procedure of rational reconstruction nonetheless works against the assumption that there is a continuity between past and present and that the two are alike. It leads to the creation of historical accounts even of processes such as evolution that are conducted according to the understanding of historical actors not that of a recording angel—or of contemporary scientific orthodoxy—standing outside time. The historian's job, then, is to “see things their way,” even if in some regards, such as the knowledge of genetics, we now know better than our predecessors.⁴⁵

More modest in this regard, and thereby perhaps more defensible, is what these historians of science have termed *empirical* presentism. This implies the use of present-day knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, to supplement or elucidate the interpretations of

⁴³ Loison 32.

⁴⁴ Haskell.

⁴⁵ Clark (1997); Chapman, Coffey, and Gregory, eds.

phenomena, again particularly scientific phenomena, by actors in the past.⁴⁶ Suspicion of anachronism and the reaction against presentism can induce a needlessly restricting form of self-denial for scholars, this argument might run. If historians are trying to interpret the origins, diffusion, and effects of bubonic plague, for example, why should they deny themselves current understandings of, say, the aetiology of the disease or the evidence of genetic material, even if those forms of understanding and evidence were neither accessible nor comprehensible to contemporaries?⁴⁷

Methodological presentism extends this empirical presentism beyond scientific knowledge to the knowledge of human, rather than just natural, phenomena. The recommendation here would be to use current or recent events to understand the past, for example, by taking the Arab Spring as a lens through which to view the dynamics of the French Revolution.⁴⁸ Put as baldly as this, such methodological presentism might seem to be indefensible for most historians. It approaches the forms of presentism decried by Lynn Hunt because it limits the historian's analytical armory to those tools, concepts, events, or processes observable in our present or near-present. It thereby closes off a much wider range of analytical options, especially those at hand for participants at the time, however partial or incomplete their perspective may have been. To be sure, there may be much ampler and diverse documentation available to interpret the Arab Spring than there is for the French Revolution, along with the possibility of interviewing contemporary actors, for instance. This might generate new questions for historians of the French Revolution—because, to recall Croce, all history remains contemporary history, and interest in historical revolutions may increase in light of recent events. Nonetheless, historians will still aim to reconstruct explanations idiomatic to the past, even if contemporary imperatives impel to seek those explanations.

The obverse of methodological presentism is *descriptive* presentism. This is the imperative for historians—in this case, historians of science, but perhaps other historians as well—to translate arguments, ideas, and beliefs from the past into terms that are comprehensible in and for the present.⁴⁹ On the face of it, this procedure might seem both unavoidable and unexceptionable: for how else are we to communicate about the past to our audience in the present? Avoiding anachronistic vocabulary is one thing if we are not to turn “history into a pack of tricks we play on the dead,” as the intellectual historian Quentin

⁴⁶ Loison 30–31; Tosh.

⁴⁷ McCormick.

⁴⁸ Oreskes 600–01.

⁴⁹ Loison 31.

Skinner once famously put it.⁵⁰ But equally we cannot return to the semantic world of the past itself.⁵¹ Even Jorge Luis Borges's character, the modern writer Pierre Menard, found that his attempt to write Miguel de Cervantes' seventeenth-century novel *Don Quixote* afresh in the twentieth century produced the same words but an entirely different meaning in the context of its reconstruction. As the Italian phrase has it, *traduttore, traditore*: the translator is a traitor. We might wonder just what might be lost in translation, and whether any concept be redescribed without accounting for any intervening mismatch between past and present understandings? Descriptive presentism might be a pragmatic, indeed essential, strategy, but it still needs handling with great care if we are not to subsume history to our own imperatives and to efface its idiomatic peculiarity. For that, we need a "controlled" anachronism, simultaneously revealing through analogy but estranging in its awareness of the difference between past and present.⁵²

Descriptive presentism raises the problem of translation; similarly, *narrative* presentism offers challenges with regard to selection and sequencing. As defined by Loison, narrative presentism rests on the assumption that "the past effectively and causally produces the present".⁵³ If we ignore, for the moment, the arguments of philosophical presentism, then we might concur, at least for pragmatic purposes, that this form of presentism rests on plausible grounds. Because the present has nowhere to come from but the past, then tracing that sequence backwards before narrating it forwards can be defended as a literary procedure and as a causal account of the origins of the present. Similarly, we might go further to argue that the future has nowhere to come from but the present: for this reason, narrative presentism might extend into the realm of projection, if not quite prediction. Even if the historian does not go quite that far, from the past via the present into the future, there is still the suspicion that narrative presentism might be a form of Whig history, and thereby a version of teleological or analytical presentism. By selecting some elements rather than others from the past, we might foreclose possible lines of historical inquiry; more worryingly, by selecting from the past those elements that most closely connect to features of the present, we may equally misdirect our attention or overdetermine our findings.⁵⁴

More promising than descriptive or narrative presentism are the two final flavors of presentism described by Loison and Oreskes: *critical* presentism and *motivational* presentism.

⁵⁰ Skinner 14; and see now Frazer.

⁵¹ Prudovsky.

⁵² Loraux; Rubin.

⁵³ Loison 31–32.

⁵⁴ Fischer 135–40.

According to Loison, critical presentism is the obverse of the Whig interpretation of history—we might call it the “Tory” interpretation—in that it deploys the historian’s apprehension of the complexity and contingency of the past to dethrone the pretensions of the present. On this account, the present is not the goal towards which the past had been striving, nor can it be the realization of the past or of past actors’ aspirations.⁵⁵ This too shall pass; all flesh is grass, one might say. This kind of presentism dampens dogmatism. It might have such a general use, but its particular purchase might be in scholarly fields founded on assumptions about the progress and accumulation of knowledge: fields such as the natural sciences and even the history of science itself. To be critical in this sense is to oppose presentism in its various teleological guises and also in its narrative mode. A group of literary historians have championed just such an approach under the banner of “strategic presentism”: the effort, that is, to “help us better understand and address the ways the past is at work in the present”.⁵⁶ In similar terms, a legal historian has called for a “New Presentism,” in which “history serves its purpose when it engages the public in discussion about why particular claims rest on misplaced certainty or misunderstood history, and counters had history with more nuanced and complicated alternatives.”⁵⁷ This new strategic presentism might accord better with the natural skepticism about causation and connection built into most historians’ working assumptions. It may thereby be more compatible than other forms of presentism with the practical work of researching and writing history.⁵⁸

Finally, *motivational* presentism—the term comes from Naomi Oreskes—is a more self-aware version of Croce’s conception of history as being always contemporary. We define our choice of historical subjects to meet the demands of our own individual interests as historians, to be sure, but also to answer contemporary dilemmas or concerns. “What matters to us about the past has everything to do with who we are, where we live, and what we think is important—to us, here and now, in the present.”⁵⁹ Oreskes herself is an historian of science who studies topics that generate much current controversy, such as the uses and abuses of science by the tobacco industry or the industry of climate change denial.⁶⁰ She practices what she preaches: her major concerns as an historian speak strongly to contemporary debates and reflect her motivations to contribute to present-day discussion; she has gone further, to enlist

⁵⁵ Loison 34–36.

⁵⁶ Coombs and Coriale 88; see also Dimock; Kornbluh and Morgan; Sawaya.

⁵⁷ Dale 318–19.

⁵⁸ For a brief argument in favor of a “progressive,” critical presentism against a self-affirming, “conservative” presentism, see Coss.

⁵⁹ Oreskes 603.

⁶⁰ Oreskes and Conway (2010).

the future to illuminate the present by imagining a Chinese historian in 2393 looking back on the “collapse” of our civilization by failing to tackle climate change.⁶¹ For many historians, however, this determination of subjects may be further than they wish to go. Yet it might still be possible to discern motivational presentism in more banal ways, such as the historian’s desire to contribute to ongoing scholarly debate, earning professional approbation or advancement, or securing promotion and tenure. In the end, though, motivational presentism encourages the healthy tendency to scrutinize one’s own choices and to be frank, with oneself and with one’s readers, about the various internal and external pressures that shape our historical work.

* * * * *

In light of this anatomy, we might ask if there are there versions of presentism here that historians could affirm without suffering cognitive dissonance or professional ostracism? I will conclude by suggesting that there are. To do so, I would like to return briefly to Augustine and to the discussion of time in his *Confessions*. In Book XI, Augustine continues a dialogue with God that has occupied most of the book and tells his Lord that, because eternity is His, everything Augustine confesses to Him will be in the nature of a reminder not a revelation. Past, present, and future are simultaneously accessible to the divine vision: not so for human beings, who must distinguish them ontologically (Do they each exist? If so, where and how?) and epistemologically (Do we have equal access to them? If not, are they all apprehensible?). Augustine refuses to commit to philosophical eternalism: he insists that time is not like space and that to ask where the past or future *is*, as if they were analogous to physical extensions of the present, is to commit a category error. Instead, he argues that when we reflect on the past, we look “on its image in present time,” as Augustine himself did when recollecting his childhood in the *Confessions*, for instance. In parallel, those who claim to predict the future cannot apprehend something that does not yet exist though “perhaps their causes or signs which already exist”: that is, in the present. Augustine then concludes that it is simply a mistake to say that past, present, and future *exist*—at least, if you are not God, for whom alone they do. “Perhaps,” he argues, “it would be exact to say: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come” (*tempora sunt tria, praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris*).⁶²

⁶¹ Oreskes and Conway (2014).

⁶² Augustine 234–35 (*Confessions*, XI. 26); see also Pawelski.

Augustine argued for an early version of presentism, in the sense used by philosophers of time. His kind of presentism can, I believe, suggest one way out of the impasses we historians have created for ourselves by failing to think hard enough about what should be the central concern of our discipline: time. If we acknowledge with Augustine that there are three times, but that they are past present, present present, and future present, we might be able to draw more readily upon the insights of those philosophers who have defended their conception of presentism, as well as those of the psychologists who have diagnosed its effects in forming our interests, our motivations, and our judgments. To admit this is to recognize that we have no direct access to the past any more than we can immediately grasp the future: our reconstruction of history can only take place in the present, just as our imagination of events to come occurs in the here and now. The past, that is, has no *ontological* status independent of the present, just as we have no *epistemological* standpoint from which to analyse it except that present. “If all time is eternally present, / All time is unredeemable,” T. S. Eliot argued in his *Four Quartets* (1941), while meditating on Augustine’s presentism. On the contrary, the historian inspired by Augustine might counterargue: it is only because of that eternal presentism that time—meaning, for the historian, past time—can be recovered at all.

It is the rare historian, and perhaps only a foolhardy one, who would dare to defend presentism.⁶³ Past efforts to do so fell flat because the term is so misunderstood, so frequently—even essentially—contested, and so firmly decried that it has almost become indefensible within the historical profession. Confusion about the meaning and import of presentism has led to the multiple babies being thrown out with the bathwater: worthwhile campaigns to root out teleology, to refute idealism, to judge the past on its own terms, or to resist the narrowing of historical horizons to the last few decades, all under the name of presentism, have closed off productive avenues for historical research and reflection. They have effectively rendered causal explanation null, prevented serious discussion of historical epistemology, broken the ancient tradition of history as a teacher of life (*magistra vitae*), and until recently discouraged the emergence of a rigorous “history of the present”.⁶⁴ This is surely too high a price to pay for professional self-definition alone.

Why might this matter? I would argue that it matters a great deal—to historians, and for the place of historians within a larger public culture, because such indiscriminate antipathy to presentism also has *ethical* implications. Historians are trained to reject presentism: we are likely to argue that our duty is to the past and its inhabitants—not to the present, and certainly

⁶³ So far, only a philosopher and a literary scholar seem to have taken up the challenge: Hull; Spoerhase (2008).

⁶⁴ Koselleck (2004); Guldi and Armitage.

not to the future. In this regard, the late philosopher of history Hayden White's charge, more than half a century ago, that history is the "conservative discipline par excellence" whose members have since the nineteenth century "affected a kind of willful methodological naiveté" can still sting.⁶⁵ The obverse of this tendency has been a rampant ahistoricism in other fields and among wider publics, accompanied by the temporal foreshortening most dreaded by, but hardly prevented, by historians themselves. By disavowing a long-standing duty to speak to the present, and leaving to others the task of shaping the future, historians could do little, White argued, to relieve their contemporaries of the burden of history itself. That remains an urgent task if historians are to attain—or, more accurately, to recover—their standing within the humanities as architects of human flourishing. But we can only do that if we can discriminate among presentisms and defend those forms that are defensible. For, as the American legal historian Samuel Moyn recently put it in his own brief defence of presentism, "Whatever respect we owe the dead, history is still written by—and meaningful to—the living. If so, abuses of the past call for uses in the name of a better future."⁶⁶

Human flourishing—the individual's maximization of her human capabilities, and our collective endeavor to realize the best for humanity as a whole—is at once present-centered, future-oriented, and past dependent. It is present-centered because it is only within our own shifting horizon of expectations that we can judge what will best contribute to our own flourishing, as persons and as a species. It is future-oriented since within that horizon we form plans, and discard alternative projects, in order to achieve our goals more effectively. And it is past dependent because only history—again, only our individual experiences and that collective record of the human past in all its forms, from the cultural to the cosmic—can supply the information and the imagination to shape our choices, in the present, among multiple potential paths into the future. If historians too freely use presentism as a slur or as a taboo, then we may be guilty of depriving our readers, and indeed ourselves, of one valuable resource for promoting human flourishing: history. (We might also, as a result, put ourselves out of business by failing to justify our craft and our profession to publics starkly confronted with the challenges of the present.) Yet once we accept that "every history was, is, and will be a history of the present," we can at least start to make the case for our contribution to the larger enterprise of human betterment.⁶⁷ When the past erupts into the present, like those Hawaiian gods in the British Museum, it poses unsettling ethical questions for us individually

⁶⁵ White 112.

⁶⁶ Moyn xiii.

⁶⁷ Koselleck (2018) 103.

and collectively. Only if we embrace presentism will we be able to hear those questions and to frame answers conducive to human flourishing.

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