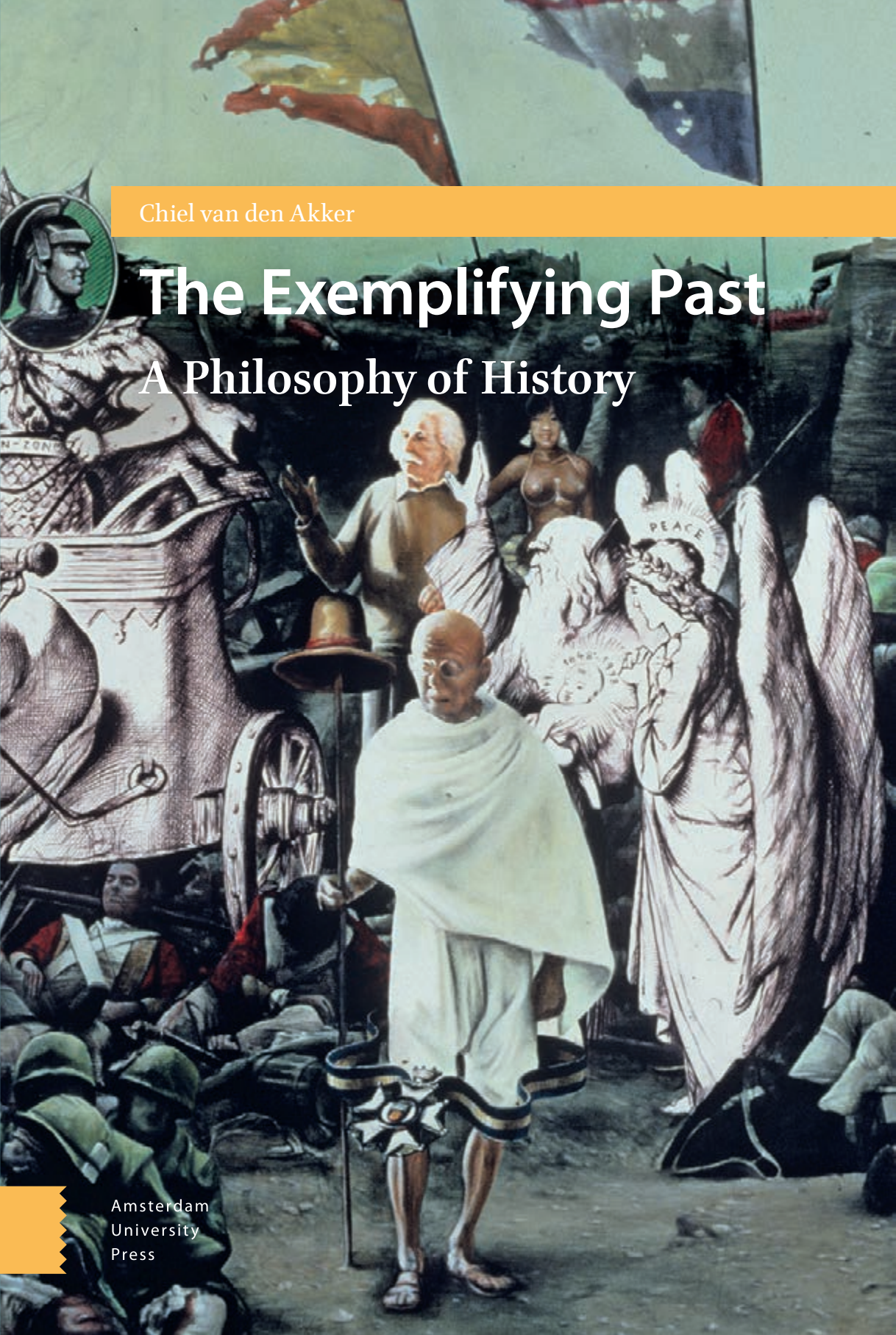

Chiel van den Akker

The Exemplifying Past

A Philosophy of History

Amsterdam
University
Press

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To L.D.B.

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– Wilhelm von Humboldt

Preface

The Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) famously claimed that modern man was born in the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and although he wanted his readers to be astonished by this high point in European culture, he also warned his readers that all mid-nineteenth-century modern evils – radical politics, unbridled egotism, corruption, the cheapness of the masses' aesthetic taste – had their roots in the individualism that defined modern man. Here history estranged its audience from the present world they lived in by raising historical awareness of the way they lived their lives. This is how, I think, it should be. It is not that we should turn to the past to criticize the present – we may equally well turn to the foreseeable future to do that, for we know that in the future, the present has become past, and our criticism of the present, if we have any, is to serve future pasts. It is also not that the past should be used to tell us how we ought to behave and act. It is that historical awareness makes us realize that life is historically conditioned, and in that realization, we estrange ourselves from the present we happen to live in, for what at first appeared to be natural and self-evident, turns out to be mutable and subject to change. It is not always clear how a particular view of the past has us take a particular attitude towards our present, but inasmuch as a view of the past intends to have an audience see the past in a certain light, it is an instrument of rhetoric. Burckhardt not only interpreted and explained fifteenth-century Italian culture and its antecedents in the fourteenth century in his *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, he also presented it in a certain way, namely as the birth of modern man. This is how he proposed we should view the past.

Such views of or theses on the past interest me philosophically in this book. This interest is motivated by the observation that the historian *sees* something *in* the past which was not there according to past witnesses and the evidence that is available today. Think of how Burckhardt called Petrarch 'one of the first truly modern men' because of his sense of natural beauty (Petrarch famously climbed Mont Ventoux to enjoy its view and allegedly was the first man since antiquity to do so). This sense of natural beauty was there in the past to witness and there is evidence for it, but it is Burckhardt who saw in Petrarch a *modern* human being. One explanation of this remarkable feature of historical understanding is that views are never part of what they are a view of: what the historian sees in the past simply was not there to see. Another related but different explanation of it would be to claim that the historian's view or thesis *retroactively* became *concrete*

in the past. Petrarch *became* a modern man because of Burckhardt's work, and with that, a predecessor of him and his contemporaries. There are, in other words, two sides to the views of the past. In this book my interest is not only in the nature of these views; I am equally interested in how the past makes us view it, i.e. in how we see *in* the past what has become concrete in it, but which was not there for witnesses and their contemporaries to see.

At this point readers no doubt will be unconvinced that there really are two sides to these views of or theses on the past. It is the task of this book to convince them.

The argument of this book is built up cumulatively, and even though some of its chapters have appeared as articles, they are not to be read as independent essays.

Chapter 3 was published as 'Mink's Riddle of Narrative Truth' in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* in 2013 in a special issue on history and truth, edited by Professors Frank Ankersmit and Jeff Malpas. Chapter 6 appeared in the same journal in 2018 as 'Arthur Danto, the End of Art, and the Philosophical View of History' under its then new Editor-in-Chief Professor Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen. Several minor revisions and additions have been made to these essays. I thank Koninklijke Brill for their permission to republish them. Chapter 4 makes use of some of the material of the essay 'Ankersmit on historical representation. Resemblance, substitution and exemplification,' published in the journal *Rethinking History* in 2011. All of the reused material has been thoroughly rewritten and the argument substantially expanded and improved upon. I thank Editor-in-Chief Professor Alun Munslow for his kind support in having the essay published. An early version of Chapter 5 appeared in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* in 2012 at the invitation of its then Editor-in-Chief Professor Ankersmit. The essay has been fully rewritten and updated, and its argument reworked and substantially expanded, making it a rather new chapter. I am grateful to Ankersmit for his support of my work.

Rob Scholte I thank for his kind permission to use his wonderful 1998 *Vrede van Münster* for this book's cover, which depicts a detail of the work. Museum Prinsenhof Delft provided me with its image. The painting was commissioned by the Nationaal Comité Herdenking Vrede van Münster to commemorate the 1648 Peace of Münster. It presents the European order as the outcome of war. This legacy, the painting tells us, is ours and it is not to be forgotten, as peace is still but a 'newborn' in the hands of Time.

Chiel van den Akker
Amsterdam, 2018

1 Introduction: Retroaction, Indeterminacy, and Seeing-in

1 Seeing-in

This book argues that to see the past in a certain light is to have the past exemplify the spirit of its age. The latter term may seem antiquated and sound too Hegelian to some tastes, but the reason to use it here is that it captures the scope of the argument. (Rest assured, the book most of the time makes use of a contemporary idiom instead of this 'ghostly' entity.) The book wants to make sense of the claim that the spirit of an age *retroactively* becomes *concrete* in what has actually been found to have existed. Take the widely known example used in the preface, and think of how the spirit of modern man became concrete in the behaviour, attitudes, and concerns of the Italians studied by Jacob Burckhardt, in how they treated the states of affairs objectively, or how Francesco Sforza personally earned the credit of his soldiers. Think also of their calculated self-interest, the Venetian statistical accounts of its resources, their modern desire for fame and sense of moral responsibility, their discovery of the aesthetics of the outer world, and their depiction of chivalry as ludicrous. Such behaviour, attitudes, and desires exemplify the birth of modern man. It is something that Burckhardt as an historian *sees in* the past. Several other and more recent examples of this special and defining feature of historical understanding will be discussed in this book.

The emergence of modern man in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italy can be said to be Burckhardt's *view* of or *thesis* on the past. In this book my interest is not only in the nature of these views;[1] I am equally interested in how we retroactively see something in the past which was not there to see at first, but which has become concrete in what has been found to have existed. This claim suggests that the past is indeterminate and mutable, open and subject to change. It is one of the claims that are argued in Chapter 3 of this book. Here I start with the very idea of the indeterminate past and the philosophers who put this topic on the agenda of the philosophy of history.

1 Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1, notes that only since the last third of the twentieth century these views are being analyzed by what has become known as the narrativist philosophy of history. I discuss the narrativist philosophy of history in Chapters 3 and 5 of this book.

2 Indeterminacy and Re-description

One reason why the past is indeterminate is that new concepts and newly acquired sensibilities may motivate us to re-describe past actions. Since such re-descriptions change what someone in the past did, the past is indeterminate. Of course, the historian's intuition to avoid anachronisms is to be taken seriously, as is his objective stance towards his subject matter, but we cannot expect him to simply ignore concepts that help him understand past actions because those concepts were unavailable to the persons he aims to understand. Nor can we expect him to simply shake off all of his moral values: that would be to ask him to deny that the values he has are historically conditioned. I might add that historians have always successfully incorporated concepts from other scholarly and scientific disciplines into their work to improve their understanding of the past, and that is one of the reasons why their work is so interesting. The result of re-describing past actions may surprise. This is what Ian Hacking has to say:

> If a description did not exist, or was not available, at an earlier time, then at that time one could not act intentionally under that description. Only later did it become true that, at that time, one performed an action under that description. At the very least, we rewrite the past, not because we find out more about it, but because we present actions under new descriptions.[2]

Hacking gives the example of deserters who were executed during the Great War and who retroactively were said *not* to have deserted but to have suffered from a post-traumatic stress disorder. Another example concerns the Scottish explorer Alexander Mackenzie who in 1802 married a fourteen-year-old girl, which at that time was not illegal according to Hacking. Retroactively, his consummation of the marriage is labelled as child abuse and thus presented under a new description. A third example, and one that he criticizes, concerns someone who regards *Oedipus Rex* as

2 Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul. Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 243. This aspect of the book is much discussed. Of particular interest is Paul Roth, 'Ways of Pastmaking,' *History of the Human Sciences* (2002), 15(4), 125-143, which, in my opinion, offers the most interesting discussion of Hacking's claims. Arthur Danto's *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) is mentioned by neither Hacking nor Roth. This is surprising since Danto's book is all about presenting past actions under new descriptions at a later date. Elsewhere, in a somewhat different context but also in relation to Hacking's emphasis on retroactive re-descriptions, Roth does discuss Danto's views. See Roth, 'The Pasts,' *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), 313-339.

a story of child abuse.[3] This appears to be a clear case of an anachronism gone wrong, or perhaps it is simply a case of someone missing the point of this particular story, or of someone misunderstanding the concept of child abuse. The line between warranted and unwarranted anachronisms cannot be drawn beforehand other than by stating that the concepts used to describe the past should clarify rather than obscure it to us. Here the point is that the past is indeterminate in that past actions are presented under new descriptions after a new moral, medical, or other type of concept, has become available.

Using new moral and medical concepts are evident examples of re-descriptions that change what someone did, but also new economic, social, political, cultural, and artistic concepts allow us to present past actions under new descriptions. Arthur Danto gives the following example: 'Monet influenced not a single member of the New York School [of abstract expressionism] but because these men began to paint in a special way Monet *became* a predecessor in his later works.'[4] Or think of the pre-Socratic philosophers who were not intentionally doing this sort of philosophy, as if they knew how philosophy would change after Socrates would enter the scene. The description of their philosophy as being pre-Socratic changed the philosophy they in fact professed. Perhaps someone would object that such re-descriptions do not alter the past itself but merely alter our way of talking about it. But since all action is action under a description,[5] newly available descriptions do change what happened in the past. There are not, on the one hand, actions outside any description, and on the other, descriptions and re-descriptions of these actions.

The distinction central to this book is that between events under the description of witnesses and their contemporaries and events under the description of historians which were *unavailable* to witnesses and their contemporaries. Here talk of events is a shorthand for talk about what individuals did and went through, and the attitudes, desires, beliefs, fears, volitions, values, hopes, and dreams we associate with these occurrences and the circumstances that made them possible. To be sure, historians study remains rather than events, but these remains are intelligible *as* remains insofar as they can be related to the behaviour and inner states of the individuals that brought them about.

3 Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, 241-242.

4 Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, 168.

5 The point was first made by Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Under a Description,' *Noûs*, 13(2) (1979), 219-233.

We often use new concepts to re-describe past actions. It does not follow, or not for the reason suggested by Paul Roth, that 'we choose, in some important respects, our history as well. For what sense can be made of our past also depends on our stock of descriptions for describing it.'[6] We are less free than Roth suggests, because the stock of descriptions that *is* available, and with that, the sense we *can* make of our past, is itself historically conditioned and therefore not a matter of choice. Our sense of the past depends on how the present came to be, i.e. on the stock of descriptions that *has become* available and the reasons for it. The point that Hacking, Roth, and Danto agree upon is that some description available at *t*-2 was not available at *t*-1, and the past at *t*-1 is re-described by using a description that became available at *t*-2. This makes evident that the past is indeterminate, but it does not explain why the past is this way. The reason is because the future is. This is Danto's argument. Since later events determine the meaning of the earlier events with which they are connected, events will always be re-described as long as the future is open. These yet unknown future events will allow for new connections to the events that are already known, and those unknown future events will determine the future historian's interests and the stock of descriptions then available and preferred. The openness of the future thus guarantees the openness of the past.[7]

Re-describing the past with the help of new concepts or because of new sensibilities is not the only reason why the past can be said to be indeterminate. Another reason is that historical *narratives* make it clear why some event is *significant* in terms of its connection with later events and in terms of what historians *see in* them. Here too past events are presented under new descriptions that were unavailable to witnesses and contemporaries. The description of an event as being historically significant is only available at a later date. Danto brought this feature of historical knowledge to our attention and it forms the heart of his analytical philosophy of history.[8] He puts it thus:

> events are continually being re-described, and their significance re-evaluated in the light of later information. And because they have this

6 Roth, 'Ways of Pastmaking,' 136.

7 Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, 17, 181.

8 The field is habitually distinguished from the so-called substantive or speculative philosophy of history, which is concerned with the nature of the historical process, its direction and purpose, rather than with the nature of historical knowledge, with which the analytical philosophy of history is concerned. Substantive philosophy of history is typically associated with Hegel's and Marx's grand theories of history. I discuss the distinction between the substantive and analytical philosophy of history in Chapter 6 of this book, and, in a sense, propose to draw that distinction anew.

> information, historians can say things that witnesses and contemporaries could not justifiably have said.[9]

Think once again of Burckhardt's description of Petrarch as the first truly modern man because of his sense of natural beauty.[10] This description was not available to Petrarch and his contemporaries – and even if it were available, it could not have meant to them what it does to us, since our understanding of it depends on our knowledge of what has happened *after* Petrarch, and that, obviously, is something Petrarch and his contemporaries could *not* have known. The re-description of the past here depends on the narrative that makes evident why Petrarch's climbing of the Mont Ventoux and enjoyment of its view is historically significant. Such action or event may, because of that dependency, be called an action or event *under a narration*.

In this book I am interested in re-descriptions that attribute a historical meaning to what someone in the past did. Such re-descriptions depend on narrative. The argument is that past behaviour, attitudes, desires, and the objects and events associated with them, exemplify certain properties *after* being historically understood. As will be explained in Chapters 5 and 6, the historical thesis presented by the historian retroactively becomes concrete in the past he discusses. In virtue of his narrative, the past exemplifies the historical thesis the narrative expresses. The exemplification theory of history as proposed in this book thus explains both how the past acquires its meaning and how it is related to the historian's narrative.

One of the remarkable effects of history writing is that a historical thesis expressed by some narrative may become concrete in events that are *not* discussed in that narrative. If narratives were theories, this would not surprise us, for theories, after all, treat events as instances of the theory that explains their existence. But narratives are no theories. The events they represent are not instances of the thesis they express; rather those events exemplify the thesis expressed by the narrative. The relation they have to the evidence is different. A theory treats what exists as an instance of the theory and uses evidence of what exists to validate the theory. The evidence either confirms or disconfirms the particular theory or hypothesis. This is not how evidence relates to historical theses. A central though counterintuitive claim of this book, which is argued in Chapters 3, 5, and 6, is that a historical thesis cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed since there is no empirical

9 Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, 11.

10 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (1878), 119.

evidence for or against it, yet such thesis has become concrete in the past under consideration, is credible, and can be *taken* to be true in the sense that it is our best *guide* to the past present at hand. Historical theses, I hold, are *exemplified* rather than being *justified* by the available evidence.

I might add that this last claim does not in the least oppose the idea that there are rational criteria such as consistency and scope that enable us to evaluate the merits and plausibility of historical theses, as philosophers of history such as Frank Ankersmit and more recently Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen have convincingly argued.[11] Such criteria are not, however, what this book is concerned with.

3 Exemplification

The notion of exemplification figures in two of this book's central claims. One is that past objects and events exemplify the historical thesis of some narrative, even if those objects and events are not mentioned in the narrative expressing that thesis. The other claim is that historical theses are exemplified rather than being justified by the available evidence.

The notion of exemplification is well known from Nelson Goodman's theory of symbols.[12] I depart from his notion for reasons that are rather technical and that I discuss in the margins of Chapters 4 and 5. It is not my aim to be true to Goodman when using the term 'exemplification'. However, I take from Goodman the idea that exemplification is a semantic term; a form of reference that runs in the opposite direction from the direction we are accustomed with: it runs from object or behaviour under consideration to symbol rather than from symbol to object or behaviour;[13] and I take from Goodman the idea that the exemplifying object or behaviour only exemplifies some but not all of its properties. I argue that the past under consideration in some narrative exemplifies the historical thesis expressed

11 See e.g. Frank Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 15 and 96-97, and Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, especially 155-158.

12 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1976). On the relevance of Goodman for the philosophy of history, see Eugen Zeleňák, 'Using Goodman to Explore Historical Representation,' *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 7(3) (2013), 371-395.

13 This is the most striking feature of exemplification. Goodman, *Language of Art*, 65, writes: 'exemplification is reference running back from denotatum back to label.' When a tailor uses a swatch to show you the fabric of some suit, the swatch exemplifies the fabric. Similarly, when a historian uses some event to show the reader how some part of the past is to be understood in terms of some thesis, the event (the denotatum) exemplifies that thesis (the label).

by that narrative as a result of being historically understood. Past events only retroactively acquire the property of being of a certain kind relative to some narrative.

The term 'exemplification' has its place in a semantics of narratives rather than in a semantics of statements about the past. This is one of the claims argued in Chapter 3. The concept is further discussed in the context of different theories of representation in Chapter 4. There the term 'representation' is used in Goodman's sense of *symbolization* and in the sense proposed by Ankersmit in his theory of historical representation. Historical representations, Ankersmit argues, are proposals as to how the past should be viewed.[14] The notion of exemplification is subsequently discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of the so-called narrativist philosophy of history. Finally, the concept of exemplification is discussed in relation to what I will call the *philosophical view of history* and Danto's somewhat notorious end-of-art thesis in Chapter 6.

This last chapter may appear to stand out from the others in that it is as much concerned with the philosophy of art as with the philosophy of history. However, the reader soon will realize that its main concern is the philosophy of the history of art. The themes that are discussed in the other chapters – the indeterminateness of the past, retroactive re-description, narrative coherence, the concept of representation, and the nature of historical

14 Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983); Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*; and Ankersmit *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2012). The term 'representation' is somewhat unfortunate in that it suggests a representational view on knowledge and language (Ankersmit does not hold such a view: historical representations are not pictures or (mirror) images of the past). In this book I agree with the anti-representationalists Donald Davidson (Chapter 2), Willard Van Orman Quine (Chapter 3), Nelson Goodman (Chapter 4), and Richard Rorty that it is misleading to talk about a ready-made world that our representations should fit, match, mirror, or correspond to. This is not to deny that historians should accurately represent the past. In his essay 'John Searle on Realism and Relativism' in his *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 63-83, Rorty urges us to distinguish between what he refers to as the philosophical view of accurate representation (which has to do with the view that language should represent reality as it is and hence correspond to it) and the non-philosophical view of accurate representation (which has to do with the norms of the historical profession, such as being unbiased, doing research free from state and church, using methods and being transparent about them, not intentionally disregarding evidence, not letting prejudice cloud one's judgment, and so on). The best introduction to anti-representationalism to my knowledge is Giancarlo Marchetti, 'Davidson and the Demise of Representationalism,' in Jeff Malpas ed., *Dialogues with Davidson. Acting, Interpreting, Understanding* (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 2011), 113-128.

theses – all come together in this chapter and the philosophical view of history that it argues for. Danto's end-of-art thesis is, I argue, a historical thesis, and the artworks that he discusses exemplify rather than justify his thesis. Not only historians are capable of seeing a historical thesis in the course of past events. Anyone who turns to the past in order to have his or her audience take a particular attitude towards the present has to take recourse to a historical thesis at some point.

The book starts in Chapter 2 with separating the problem of other minds (how do we understand others?) from the problem of other periods (how do we understand times other than our own?). The first problem is concerned with understanding utterances and inscriptions of witnesses and their contemporaries. The second with the historian's language that is outside the grasp of witnesses and their contemporaries. As said, the distinction between events under the description of witnesses and their contemporaries and events under the description of historians is central to this book.

4 A Motto

The question whether history is a science, an art, or both, and whether that is how it should be, has shaped the field we know today as the philosophy of history.[15] The question itself has become rather tedious for some time now, and it is not one I incline to address in this book. I do, however, agree with Danto, when he concludes that:

> A certain autonomy then attaches to history, indeed to narrative history, which cannot become more 'scientific' without losing its defining human importance since it is human interests, after all, which determine which events are important and under what sort of descriptions.[16]

If I were to give this book a motto, it would be this.

15 On the first and defining days of this field, see Frederick C. Beiser, *After Hegel. German Philosophy 1840-1900* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 133-157. The question was again defining the field in the twentieth century in the aftermath of the publication of Carl Hempel's, 'The Function of General Laws in History,' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 39(2) (1942), 35-48.

16 Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, xii.