

Frederick Beiser

The German Historicist Tradition.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

xii + 600 pages

\$110.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-969155-5)

The present work grew out of Beiser's essay for *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, although 'grew' probably understates the heft of this volume; perhaps 'metastasized' would be a better characterization. Despite the length of the book, Beiser's aim here is really quite modest: he wants to introduce this neglected German philosophical tradition to English-speaking readers. This introductory approach lends the book its many strengths but it also leads to some weaknesses that, while by no means fatal to the project, must be noted as well. Indeed, Beiser brings up one such weakness in his introduction when he notes that an early reader of the book believed he should include a discussion of the relationship between the German historicist tradition and various political movements within Germany. A second minor criticism is that the book ironically leaves out an important conservative faction within the German historicist tradition by neglecting even to mention Jakob Burckhardt; similarly, it only mentions Friedrich Nietzsche in the context of a discussion of Max Weber's work.

First, the good: this book exhibits the stylistic virtues that readers have come to expect from Beiser's work, above all the virtue of clarity of exposition. Of the historians currently working in the field of early modern German philosophy and German idealism, Beiser is justly renowned for his deft handling of difficult ideas through a hermeneutic approach which lends itself to the exposition of complex ideas in a clear, readable way. The book introduces readers to figures that are likely unfamiliar even to one who is fairly conversant with German philosophy and intellectual history, thinkers such as Johann Martin Chladenius and Justus Möser. The book draws new connections both among philosophers of history and between philosophy and allied disciplines such as legal studies and sociology. Beiser organizes the book chronologically beginning in the eighteenth century with the pre-Kantian thinker Chladenius (dubbed "The German Vico") and continues through the early twentieth century, concluding with a discussion of Georg Simmel and Max Weber, thereby connecting the historicist tradition with the rise of sociology. Due to the length of the volume and the many figures involved in Beiser's interpretation, I shall begin with Beiser's definition of German historicism as a methodological program, then proceed through the Kantian framework that Beiser employs in order to make sense of the German historicist tradition and conclude with a discussion of the end of the tradition and the rise of sociology. The two criticisms mentioned above are not meant to deter people from reading this fine re-interpretation of an important and neglected philosophical tradition: scholars working in fields such as German intellectual history, German historiography and philosophy of history, and nineteenth-century German philosophy all can stand to benefit.

We may begin from the observation that Beiser's book is not concerned with the New Historicism, the name given to work by European and American thinkers such as Stephen Greenblatt, Stanley Fish, and Gayatri Spivak: no Foucault or Derrida here. Instead, his book traces the roots of this later-twentieth-century historicism back to eighteenth and nineteenth century German thought from Chladenius through Weber and thereby provides the historical

context for these later, “new” historicists, though the task of drawing the explicit connections between these intellectual movements remains.

Beiser begins by pointing out that the term ‘historicist’ has had many different meanings over the years, something that is an obvious source of confusion. Rather than describing and analyzing these various terms, he declares that he is going to use the term prescriptively as a heuristic device characterizing how historicism *ought* to be understood and how the term should be used, despite the various actual uses of the term. *Prescriptively*, then, the term for Beiser means that all things pertaining to human beings is historically determined, that “everything in the human world—culture, values, institutions, practices, rationality—is made by history, so that nothing has an eternal form, permanent essence, or constant identity which transcends historical change” (2). The second defining feature is what Beiser calls the principle of individuality (4). While Beiser notes that this means many different things depending upon the thinker in question, all these manifold meanings converge on a basic claim at least as old as the Greeks, namely that understanding the individual provides both the subject matter and the goal of historical inquiry (4). However, historical inquiry cannot be reduced to understanding individuals and their motives; instead, what distinguishes this historicist approach is that the individual can only be comprehended as an historical agent once she has been placed within her particular historical context, the wider political, cultural, and historical *milieu* which provides the individual with her identity.

Beiser focuses on the tradition as an epistemological movement whose members were primarily concerned with “second-order reflection upon historical knowledge; it was not *metaphysical*, involving first-order speculation about the laws, ends or meaning of history itself” (8). Indeed, as Beiser points out, some prominent members (Humboldt, Ranke, Dilthey, and Weber) of the tradition “were highly critical of the philosophy of history, fearing that any association with its metaphysics would contaminate or undermine the scientific status of history itself” (8). Beiser argues that Anglophone scholars often err in identifying the movement as a speculative philosophy of history. Instead, the basically anti-metaphysical thrust of its members’ writings is also clear in their questioning of ahistorical and a priori ways of thinking. This places the movement squarely within the Kantian rather than the Hegelian legacy of German philosophy.

In sum, what the German historicists sought was to elevate history to the status of a science on par with the natural sciences, but distinct from the metaphysical speculation that dominated the early part of the nineteenth century as an aspect of the Hegelian legacy. Neither positivism nor metaphysics, the adherents of this tradition sought to carve out a space between these two dominant intellectual currents of the nineteenth century. As a result, the German historicists were methodological, though not metaphysical, dualists.

The movement itself cut across many different fields and intellectual movements. One of the many strengths of the book is that it helps us to see the relationship between fields such as German Idealism and Romanticism, the incipient anthropology of Herder and Humboldt, and Savigny’s historical school of law in a new light. I shall briefly discuss this connection between the historical theory of law and German Idealism as representative of early nineteenth century

German historicism before highlighting the connection Beiser draws between the Southwest Neo-Kantianism of thinkers such as Windelband, Rickert, and Lask.

Carl Friedrich Savigny (1779-1861) is the main figure of the historical theory of law, but it has roots in the thought of Herder and Humboldt and their antipathy toward natural law in particular. The natural law tradition establishes the basis for legal and moral right upon invariant features of human nature which are typically (though not always) guaranteed by God. Adherents of historicism find such reliance upon invariant features of human nature both dogmatic and misguided: human nature is subject to historical change, but this historical change must be explained holistically, at the level of the society rather than the individual.

Here Savigny employs a term that will come to have problematic connotations (an understatement, to be sure): *Volksgeist*, a term that figures prominently in the work of Herder and Humboldt as well, though the political implications are not Beiser's focus. The "spirit of the people" is meant to explain both the factual origins of law as well as serve as a normative justification of this legal system; Savigny develops his theory of legal history through an analysis of Roman law. In addition to the later associations that this term will come to have, the problem with *Volksgeist* as an explanatory principle is that it proves unverifiable, though Savigny does not believe this to be an insurmountable problem (249). Following Herder, Moser, and Montesquieu, he defines *Volksgeist* as the national character of a nation, that *je ne sais quoi* that renders a group of individuals a people. One finds an emotional bond that ties a people together, a deeper bond than that found in rational agreements favored by the social contract theorists. In this way, Savigny's *Volksgeist* ends up doing the same work as the natural law theories that he apparently opposed (251–252).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Johann Gustav Droysen diagnoses what will later come to be known as the "crisis of historicism", i.e., the problem of the relationship between the contingent and individual on the one hand and the universal and necessary on the other (321–322). It is no accident that this distinction sounds more than a little Kantian; the problem of the relationship between historical contingency and universal reason will be taken up during this period by the great Neo-Kantian thinkers Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, and Lask. What unites these thinkers, despite their many differences, is an attempt to formulate a Neo-Kantian philosophy of history that would operate within the Kantian methodological distinction between reasons of nature and reasons of freedom in order to avoid the various Positivist attempts to reduce history to natural science (312). These various attempts to investigate historical inquiry as a key aspect of the inquiry in the nature of human freedom culminates in the work of Georg Simmel and Max Weber, whose theorization signals the end of the German historicist tradition. Dilthey takes up the baton from Droysen and formulates a theory of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Dilthey thought of himself as doing for the human sciences what Kant had done for the natural sciences, namely determining the conditions for their possibility. For Dilthey, the neo-Kantian distinction between this ahistorical normative realm and the historical descriptive realm was itself unjustifiable.

The roots of German sociology can be found in this debate between the non-normative historicism of Dilthey and the normative version advanced by the Neo-Kantians. The beginnings of sociology spell the end of the German historicist movement. To see why, we must begin with

the work of Georg Simmel. Simmel's work spans a variety of disciplines; it is only once we recognize that he is more than a sociologist that we can begin to do justice to the richness of his work. Beiser argues that it is only once we read Simmel as a philosopher that we can begin to make sense of this (469). Nonetheless, both Simmel and Weber take the historicist tradition in a sociological direction, which was a possibility immanent to the tradition from its beginnings. From the outset, historicists sought a science of human nature that was expressed socially (470). Beiser argues that Simmel brings the tradition back to its roots in the sociality of reason. But this is not the end of the story.

Despite his rejection of the neo-Kantians, Simmel's contribution to the historicist project remained broadly Kantian. Simmel applied the Kantian critical insight that knowledge is possible only through categories that we impose upon intuitions to history itself (485). However, he follows Hegel in conceiving of the categories as conditioned by history and therefore relative. Furthermore, history turns out to be an aspect of psychology, more specifically, psychological laws applied to the field of history (488).

History is comprehensible because we re-enact it, "we reproduce (*nachbilden*) the person's mental acts within ourselves..." (489). Dilthey and Simmel both adhere to the basic hermeneutic principle that understanding (*Verstehen*) occurs through the exact reproduction of linguistic meaning between speaker and listener, although this ideal of perfect understanding is rarely achieved (489). Just as he makes the neo-Kantian tradition his own, Simmel re-appropriates and transforms the hermeneutic tradition. He denies the basis for universal validity sought by the neo-Kantians at the same time that he denies the implicit realism found within the hermeneutic tradition. Proponents of hermeneutic theories of meaning since at least Giambattista Vico had held that human meaning can be transparent and completely known (because it is fashioned by us), while nature remains ultimately mysterious. Simmel denies both the perspicacity of natural and human meaning (490). The epistemological optimism characterized the movement from this beginning—the idea that history is knowable—is thus put in jeopardy.

Weber's work stands as both the culmination and the end of the German historicist tradition (511). Just as we must read Simmel against the common sociological reading of his work if we are to understand his importance for the historicist tradition, Weber the historicist appears very different from Weber the sociologist. Beiser argues that we will best understand Weber when we read his work as an attempt to synthesize the historicist and positivist approaches. "His thinking combines in a subtle and sophisticated manner the theory of *Verstehen* with naturalism, positivist objectivity with neo-Kantian value-orientation, historicist holism with positivist individualism" (514). Initially, this would seem an impossible synthesis. After all, does historicism not get its identity at least in part from favoring historical holism in opposition to individual facts? Indeed, and this attempt at a grand synthesis of the two warring camps spells the end of the German historicist tradition, but we can only understand why this is necessary when we see the historical and institutional context in which Weber formulates it.

Weber follows Kant in claiming that empirical data alone shows us nothing. But if Weber sought to refute positivism, then how does his work spell the end of German historicism? This is a question that Beiser leaves unanswered, and one wishes for more of a conclusion to the

book. Presumably, Weber's work spells the end for the German Historicist tradition because he resolves various issues that plagued the tradition, specifically the question of objectivity and value. One hopes for more of a conclusion that would evaluate the movement as a whole. Still, this is a welcome book that will be of interest to scholars in various disciplines from history and philosophy to literary and legal studies. Nevertheless, Beiser could have done more to contextualize the movement within the context of debates in German society at large. These quibbles aside, this should become the standard introduction to the German historicist tradition, and Beiser has done scholars a great service by re-introducing us to this unjustly neglected group of thinkers. It does what a good introduction should, for it raises more questions than it answers.

Corey McCall
Elmira College