

David Carr. *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World.* Oxford University Press 2014. 256 pp. \$69.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199377657).

This work, as the title suggests, has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it elaborates a phenomenology of history and on the other it seeks to instate experience as the foremost dimension of our relationship to the past. Against more established approaches to the philosophy of history Carr is less interested in the nature of the historical or its epistemological status and more concerned with the way ‘history presents itself’, how ‘it enters our lives, and what are the forms of experience in which it does so’ (1). Lacking in more orthodox studies on the philosophy of history, Carr claims, is the need to connect our *understanding* of the past with the actual *experience* of it. As the character and structure of the notion of experience is at the heart of the phenomenological project it takes pride of place in this study. Hitherto phenomenology received little attention in philosophy of history but the tide is slowly changing.

Dominating current theory, according to Carr, are two central notions, representation and memory, and they present serious conceptual difficulties. The representational conception of history strives for some version of historical truth whereby events and actions are portrayed in linguistic and other forms (visual and pictorial, for example); on this account good history is accurate (re-) presentation of the past. On the other hand, history can be seen as an exercise in investigating and assessing the veracity of memories, both individual and collective. Problematic about both these two positions is the vast chasm they fail to negotiate between the present and the past. Crucially, for Carr, ‘a phenomenological approach, based on the concept of *experience*, can be proposed as a means of solving this problem’ (5).

Prior to a detailed engagement with phenomenology Carr adumbrates the various senses of experience as they rise to prominence in the history of post-Enlightenment philosophy: four distinct positions dominated. The first he characterizes as ‘innocence’ (echoing both Martin Jay’s recent work and Blake’s opposition between innocence and experience). This is associated with the unmediated sensationalism of Locke’s empirical thought. The second position stresses *temporality*: ‘the extended and cumulative sense of experience’ (30) (missing from Locke’s account) associated with the cumulative experience of Hume and the teleological dialectics of Hegel and Marx. The third category is something of a synthesis of the first two, combining the elements of immediacy and temporality, and is elaborated within the critical work of Kant, and refined by Hegel, Dilthey, and Husserl. Of little significance for Carr is his final category, what he terms the ‘mystical-religious’ sense of experience as exemplified in the work of Buber and William James, for example. Carr has little to say of this final category other than to identify it as the appropriate place to locate the recent work of Frank Ankersmit, whose *Sublime Historical Experience* has much in common with the general direction of this study, although Carr somewhat distances himself from Ankersmit seeing in his work a romantic aestheticizing of history in the notion of the sublime.

In order to correctly position ourselves in relation to the historical Carr focuses on the first two categories of experience and uses phenomenology to connect an unmediated relation to the world with temporal duration. He sees in the principal phenomenological categories of temporality and intentionality, the legacy of Dilthey and Husserl, the possibility of ‘a non-recollective experience of the past, and for the continuity required by the cumulative and temporally extended...sense of experience’ (65).

In order to develop his position Carr examines what he terms the classical philosophies of history. These 'theories' of history, stemming from Biblical and Augustinian roots, and more recently running from Hegel and Marx to Francis Fukuyama, seek 'an overall pattern or meaning which lies beyond the purview of the historian', or, in the words of W. H. Walsh, aim 'to discover the meaning and purpose of the whole historical process' (81). Despite their sporadic revival in the grand theories of Toynbee, Spengler, and Fukuyama, speculative and metaphysical narratives of the unfolding of history have had a bad press of late, especially from the perspective of positivists, analytic philosophers, and postmodernists, and are no longer as influential as they once were.

It is at this point that Carr makes his most substantial and important claim, namely, that the classical tradition, far from being dismissed as worthless metaphysical speculation, should be seen alternatively from a phenomenological perspective. From this angle the thinkers in the classical tradition were not misguided metaphysicians but proto-phenomenologists with a profoundly instructive understanding of the philosophy of history and historicity itself. Nor were they, as portrayed by Popper etc., idle speculators on the *terminus ad quem* of historical development. What Carr advocates is a re-reading of the classical tradition. Though there is the use of the language of prophecy and prediction, the classical philosophers of history 'are really expressing a practical attitude toward the future and participating...in an effort to move history in a certain direction' (140). Only a phenomenological approach will bring out these features. Husserl's structure of protention and retention and the classical emphasis upon the collective (and practical) dimension to appropriation of past and future allows us to grasp these points. Special emphasis is given to the narrative structure of experience. Taking his cue from Danto's idea of the 'metaphysics of everyday life' Carr discerns the 'rudiments of narrative structure, or a kind of implicit story-telling, in the everyday action and experience of the individual'. The same structure operates in the social sphere 'in the organization of collective experience and action' (121), hence, the historical realm is the developing narrative of collective experience. Once Carr has established this point he reads phenomenology back into the classical theories of the philosophy of history. These theorists were not futurologists but understood the sense in which experience was a practical engagement with the social world and a realization that the future was always a result of social interaction in the creation of a uniquely human world.

The narrative structure of experience is a motif Carr returns to in his final chapter where he seeks to not so much go beyond the theory of narrative he devised in his earlier work, *Time, Narrative and History*, but to refine it. He deals principally with three topics: the relationship between the narratives of history and those of fiction; the question of narrative as a form of explanation; and finally, how the notion of narrative connects to epistemology and ontology. By analyzing the nature of fiction and the role of imagination Carr opposes the more extreme postmodernist historians. He shows how historical narratives are quite separate from those of fiction and the distinction should not be fudged.

Concerning explanation Carr argues that 'we can genuinely be said to explain an action by telling a story about it' (222) here rendering Hempel's desire for covering laws to explain events, motives, and actions, superfluous. Concerning the links between ontology, epistemology, and narrative Carr turns to the hermeneutical tradition for inspiration and devises what he terms an 'ontological theory of narrative'. Just as in hermeneutics we not only interpret the world but are also hermeneutical in our being, so do narrative communities 'exist to the extent that they constitute themselves as narrative unities' (230). And so with history: just as the historian is involved in the creation of narratives, a more fundamental relationship to narratives makes this possible: 'the

“constitution” deriving from the narrative activity of the historian is preceded by the narrative self-constitution of social entities’ (231).

There is much to recommend this work. Its principal objective of an exploration of the relationship between experience and history is largely accomplished. I say largely because the central argument is not always sustained. As this work is made up of previously published papers it does not always follow as a sustained argument. For example, the last chapter, for all its originality and richness fails to fully integrate the motif of experience. Overshadowed by the account of narrative the connection between narrative and experience is not fully explored. Also, Chapter VI, ‘Phenomenologists on History’, is both edifying and scholarly with a detailed studied of the development of Husserl’s thoughts on history, but tangential to the mainstream of the book’s argument.

Minor criticisms aside, this is an excellent work, thought provoking and detailed. It is a significant contribution to debates and studies in the often-neglected area of philosophy of history. More than this the essay is, perhaps in passing, a brilliant introduction to phenomenology.

Finally, there is an excellent bibliography with a detailed collection of important studies in the area of phenomenology and the philosophy of history.

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