The philosophy of history and translation

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14.1 What is the philosophy of history?

Contemporary academic philosophy includes sub-disciplines, such as the philosophy of law or the philosophy of science; just as philosophers in these two fields reflect on the activities of lawyers and scientists respectively, so philosophers of history reflect upon the work of historians. As Collingwood (1889–1943) asserts, the philosopher asks: ‘How do historians know? How do they come to apprehend the past?’ (1946: 3).

Such enquiry has always been with us. Herodotus (c.484–c.425 BC), for example, begins his Histories with this preamble:

Here are presented the results of the enquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The purpose is to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks; among the matters covered is, in particular, the cause of the hostilities between Greeks and non-Greeks.

(1998: 30)

Herodotus, the ‘father of history’ (Collingwood 1946: 29), positions himself in relation to the Homeric epics whilst signalling that he is writing something different, i.e., a record of empirical research (Burrow 2009: 12). His work is both commemorative and investigative. Herodotus is a reflective practitioner who asks (and answers) three questions about his enquiry (Greek historia, which also signifies ‘examination’ and ‘recording’): why he is writing; how he should write; and how he can go beyond recording events to an explanation of their causes (Burrow 2009: 4). His reflection on the historian’s task is philosophical.

Approaching history philosophically forces us to be clear about the concepts used. But as Alviezer Tucker notes, there is, as yet, no widespread consistency among philosophers of history when it comes to terminology (2011: 2); even the key terms ‘history’ and ‘philosophy of history’ have differing uses (Day 2008: xii). ‘History’ can refer to events in the past, such as the Reformation but also to what has been written about these events, such as accounts of the Reformation. It is usually obvious in context which use is meant. The term ‘philosophy
of history’ demands more attention because scholars use it to indicate both ‘substantive’ (or ‘speculative’) theories as well as ‘analytic’ theories. Substantive theories are those overall views of history taken by thinkers, what Zdeněk Vašíček calls ‘meta-thought about history’ (2011: 27) or what Lieven D’hulst calls ‘metahistoriography’ (2010: 397–8), such as the substantive theory of history of Karl Marx. Analytic theories, the meta-discourse of history, include any philosophical investigation of what historians do when they make claims about the past. (There is no necessary connection between ‘analytic theories of history’ and ‘analytic philosophy’.) Such analytic theorising about history is also labelled ‘historiography’, a term that, therefore, can mean both the writing of history and the study of the writing of history so that the term ‘philosophy of historiography’ is also found in the literature. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the ‘philosophy of history’ throughout as a blanket term, following Day (2008). (For overviews of the philosophy of historiography and the philosophy of history, see Kosso 2011 and Vašíček 2011, respectively.)

There have been many philosophical attempts to define the task of the historian. Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) asserts that the historian should attempt ‘only to say how it really was’ (1981: 58). Mark Day calls Ranke’s dictum ‘the most quoted, and the most contested, claim in the philosophy of history’ (2008: 6). It has often been quoted because it commits the historian to evidence and to critical work in the archive, which is regarded as good practice; it has often been contested because it appears to be an impossible, pseudo-scientific task – how can we ever know what ‘really’ happened? Walter Benjamin, for example, argues against Ranke that to articulate the past ‘means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’, rather than attempting to say with any certainty how things were (1999: 247). Judith Woodsworth, in the context of translation history, asserts: ‘Academic historians have long since moved beyond the Rankean paradigm … in our time the very notion of objectivity has been set aside in favour of multiple points of view’ (2012: xiii). To speak of multiple points of view can be, in itself, controversial, however. Am I at liberty to deny the Holocaust, or does the evidence force me to rule out that option? When Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt was sued for libel by Holocaust denier David Irving in 2000, the trial went beyond legal precedents into engagement with the philosophy of history, with historian Richard Evans called as an expert witness by the defence (Lipstadt 2016).

Philosophical questions inevitably arise whenever historical issues are raised. Day notes: ‘We are all historians in so far as we critically approach the past; just as we are all philosophers in so far as we critically approach our beliefs about, say, morality’ (2008: 4). The point is to realise this and to act appropriately. From whose viewpoint should we be trying to see things? What is the role of evidence? What is the role of interpretation? What is a fact? The final question appears simple enough, because most people refer to facts without difficulty in ordinary life. Facts, however, can be hard to establish, as is evident from court cases and the contemporary debate about ‘fake news’. People lie, make mistakes, forget things; evidence can be falsified, found to be contradictory, or goes missing. Martin Luther is popularly supposed to have nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517, but Lyndal Roper argues that it is now impossible to know whether he did so because evidence is lacking (2016: 1). Similarly, if I assess Luther’s work as a Bible translator, to what facts can I appeal? Luther (1997) wrote about his translation work, for example, but it is a matter of judgement how far he is accurately describing what he did. We cannot just cut out his comments and paste them into our history. (See the discussion on Collingwood below.)

Attempting to see things as they really were involves answering philosophical questions, which means that any historian must adopt a framework. John Arnold, for example,
argues that most contemporary historians are ‘marxists with a small m’, because they follow Marx’s example and take the view that people make their decisions in circumstances determined by the past (2000: 85). If a framework is not adopted consciously, then it will have been adopted unconsciously, as Keith Jenkins argues: ‘The only choice is between a history that is aware of what it is doing and a history that is not’ (2003: 82).

History is defined by Woodsworth as follows:

A weaving together of different strands, drawing on diverse stores of evidence … a creative, interpretive act, to some extent an act of imagination. Not unlike translation, in other words.

(2012: xiii)

If this is true, it is unsurprising that historians often disagree with each other, even when they do agree on the facts. A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper, for example, draw different conclusions about Adolf Hitler’s intentions after gaining power in Germany in 1933 (Jenkins 2003: 15). It is because there are different ways of understanding the past that we need the philosophy of history (Day 2008: xi). Hayden White goes as far as to assert that for an event to qualify as historical, it ‘must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence’ (1987: 20). Peter Kosso thus sums up the key issue on which anyone approaching history must make up his or her mind:

One quick way to summarize most of what is at stake is to distinguish between discovering and constructing the human past. How much of what we say about what happened in the past is a matter of discovering what in fact happened, and how much is a matter of imposing ourselves on the past?

(2011: 25)

For postmodern philosophers of history, the past is something that we construct, something on which we do impose ourselves. Keith Jenkins argues that:

the world/the past comes to us always already as stories and […] we cannot get out of these stories (narratives) to check if they correspond to the real world/past because these ‘always already’ narratives constitute ‘reality’.

(2003: 11)

More traditional philosophers of history dispute this position and argue that, even if history is not a science, discovery is possible. Evans asserts, in terms that recall Ranke:

The past really happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical, find out how it happened and reach some tenable conclusions about what it all meant.

(2000: 253)

Our philosophy of history will determine how we tell the histories of translation. There is a parallel with the issue of equivalence in translation. Do we discover equivalence when we translate – by the correct use of a dictionary, for example – or do we construct it (Tymoczko 2007: 41)? History, as Woodsworth notes above (2012: xiii), may be like translation, to which I now turn.
14.2 The relevance of the philosophy of history to translation studies

Translation studies is a young academic discipline, but reflection on translation is as old as the ancient practice of translating. Herodotus, for example, asks how people in the Mediterranean world speaking different languages could possibly understand each other (1998: 118), while philosophers throughout history have asked important questions about translation (see Rawling and Wilson 2019). Translation scholars can benefit from an encounter with the philosophy of history because translation ‘takes place within a context and its great moments are grounded in history’ (Delisle and Woodsworth 2012: 62). The philosophy of history will chiefly be of use to those working in three translation areas: the writing of translation history (see Sections 14.2 and 14.3); the historical theorisation of translation (see Sections 14.2 and 14.3); the translation of old texts (see Section 14.4).

Translation studies is what Maria Tymoczko calls an ‘interdiscipline’ (2007: 52) in which scholars necessarily turn to fields outside their own in order to make progress. Anthony Pym notes how translation theorists often employ philosophical discourses to support their ideas (2007: 24). Tymoczko, for example, uses the Philosophical Investigations (PI) of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in order to advance her view of translation as a cluster concept with no single defining characteristic (2007: 83–90). There is overlap between philosophy and translation studies, in any case, because many issues debated in translation theory are also the subject of investigation by philosophers: evidence, explanation, inference, interpretation, knowledge, etc. (see Day 2008).

A basic question that a philosopher can ask of a translation historian is: why bother to do it in the first place? What is the point of any history, including translation history? Many historians have seen history as furnishing examples of noble conduct (to be emulated) and of base conduct (to be avoided). The twelfth-century English historian Henry of Huntingdon, for example, wrote a history of England from its beginnings to the year 1154, when Henry II took the throne, and specifically states that these were his aims (2002: 4). Writing some 800 years later, Arnold sees three reasons for writing and studying history: for enjoyment, as a tool with which to think, and as a tool for dissent (2002: 122). It is difficult to apply Arnold’s third criterion to the patriotic Henry of Huntingdon, who saw history as teleologically leading under God to the reign of Henry II, and this difficulty shows that reasons for doing history are never independent of the task in hand (Arnold 2000: 109).

History is always for somebody (see Jenkins 2003), and the decision that we make in this respect will have far-reaching consequences. Venuti argues, for example, that the purpose of translation studies is to explain translation and to improve the practice of translation (2012: 13), and his own translation histories are committed to telling stories about the translating past that will change the translating present (cf. Venuti 1998; 2017). The danger, here, is that such a committed approach may fail to find an audience among professional historians. As Christopher Rundle argues, we might be better asking ‘not what history can tell us about translation but what translation can tell us about history’ (2012: 239), by writing stories about the translating past for which no specific connections with the translating present are made.

To place translation history in dialogue with philosophy can at the very least stop us making mistakes (Tucker 2011: 6). For example, philosophers have warned against informal fallacies in historical writing, of which I give two examples, following Paul Newall (2011). The ‘historians’ fallacy’ is ‘the assumption that people in the past experiencing an event would know it exactly as a historian does when studying it today’ (2011: 267); the ‘reductive
fallacy’ assumes that there is one cause to which any historical phenomenon can be reduced (2011: 271). By being aware of the historians’ fallacy, we can avoid, say, treating Luther as if he were a twenty-first-century translation theorist debating foreignisation when he writes of the need to make ordinary people realise that ‘you are speaking German to them’ (Luther 1997: 87). By being aware of the reductive fallacy, we can avoid reducing the whole Reformation (including Luther’s translation activities) to his bowel problems (Newall 2011: 272). By avoiding fallacies in general, we can tell stories about Luther that make sense, as Roper aims to do:

I do not wish to idolise Luther or to denigrate him; nor do I wish to make him consistent. I want to understand him and make sense of the convulsions that he and Protestantism unleashed.

(2016: 13)

What is at stake here is what Collingwood calls the ‘maxim of Spinoza’: ‘neither to condemn nor to deride the feelings and actions of men, but to understand them’ (2006: 184). (It is interesting to note how often Spinoza’s maxim is broken. Within translation studies, we need look no further than Lawrence Venuti’s polemical and influential history of translation The Translator’s Invisibility (2017), for example. Whether Venuti is right to do this is, of course, a matter for debate and will depend on the reader’s own substantive philosophy of history.)

Tymoczko stresses the need to investigate ‘the particular historical and cultural context of any translator, any translation event, and any translation movement’ (2007: 41). To understand Luther as a translator, then, we need to keep the Reformation in view because it explains, among other things, why Luther thought that it was important for all people to have access to the Bible in their own language at a time when ecclesiastical authorities insisted that the scriptures should only be available in Latin translation. Nonetheless, other aspects of the story are relevant: Paul Ellingworth notes that Bible translation in the Reformation period was subject to cultural, linguistic, political, and technological pressure as well as religious (2007: 106 ff.). That the German Reformation unleashed political turmoil, for example, meant that Luther’s translation acquired power in the struggles between German princes and the Pope, which, in turn, indicates that translation can be a political force.

In other words, we cannot read translations, translation statements, and histories of translation in a vacuum, but they must read in history, just as new historicist theorists claim that literary works must be read in history (cf. Greenblatt 1990). I cannot understand, say, John Milton’s seventeenth-century poem Paradise Lost without some knowledge of Puritanism, the Renaissance, the English Bible, the English Civil War, etc. An example of such an approach in translation studies is how Theo Hermans shows that readings of translations of Hitler’s 1926 Mein Kampf [My Struggle] must be historicised (2007: 52–6). The 1939 authorised Dutch translation by Steven Barends is packaged as a Nazi work; the same image of Hitler is on the cover as on that of the source text and the book contains pro-Nazi paratextual material. The US 1939 unauthorised English translation, however, is packaged as an anti-Nazi work; there are no images of Hitler, a map is included to show the territorial ambitions of the Third Reich and there is anti-Nazi paratextual material. Two contemporary translations of the same source text are designed to play different roles in their respective cultures, one supporting and one opposing the regime in Germany. We realise this now by reading the translations in history.
When it comes to writing history, the most basic decision faced by any author is the choice of subject matter. Pressure from postmodernists and their distrust of grand narratives from the 1970s onward opened up new topics to historians (Southgate 2011), many of whom turned from the political and military histories that have dominated the field in order to write alternative histories as part of the general ‘cultural turn’ in the humanities that necessarily affected history (St André 2009: 133). Historians have produced alternative accounts on a larger scale, such as Stephen Gundle’s history of glamour from Napoleon to Paris Hilton (2009), and have also examined particular incidents that can inform us about mentalités (French: ways of thinking) in the past, such as Robert Darnton’s account of the great cat massacre in eighteenth-century Paris (1984). Translation studies is a young discipline, often considered to have been formalised by a 1972 paper by James Holmes (2004) and was inevitably influenced by this cultural turn so that the history of translation has become one such alternative set of narratives. Given the centrality of descriptive translation studies to the discipline (cf. Toury 1995), translation theorists are used to focusing on the particular. Again, there is an overlap.

White argues that all historical narratives are ‘verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences’ (1978: 82). Historians can, however, employ ‘inference to the best explanation’, by which we begin with the evidence available to us and then ‘infer what would, if true, provide the best explanation of that evidence’ (Lipton 2004: 1). In other words, some stories will be more convincing, more plausible, than others, as in a court of law, even if people will tend to come up with clashing views on what is the best explanation. It is significant how certain explanations are dropped over time: Henry of Huntingdon’s metaphysical underpinning of the divine right of kings would now have few supporters, for example. In terms of plausibility, for me, it has more explanatory power when investigating Luther as a translator to see him as part of a long tradition of Bible translation and exegesis than as a unique figure because he must be, to some extent, the product of tradition as well as a revolutionary. We can then work out what is unique about Luther’s translation. For Roper, for example, it is ‘his sense of the music of language’ (2016: 207), although other historians will draw different conclusions. By looking for the best explanations of translation phenomena – a strategy that implies that other explanations are available or may become so in the future and were available in the past – we can avoid turning translation history into hagiography (St. André 2009: 136).

14.3 Using tools from philosophy

14.3.1 The notion of a philosophical tool

To engage with the philosophy of history problematises our understanding and knowledge of the past. But can the resulting problems be solved? Day’s advice is that philosophical approaches should be regarded ‘as tools that may be […] fruitfully applied to the historian’s enquiries into the past. There is no requirement that the historian align themselves with one approach rather than another’ (2008: 232). Here is a further parallel with translation theory because various translation theories exist, and the scholar or student can use one or more to solve a particular problem, without having to join a school (Pym 2010: 166). The tools chosen will inevitably depend upon the ideological and epistemological frameworks that the historian brings to his or her task, which means that we can never conceive of translation history as a neutral task.
In the next two sub-sections I investigate how ideas from the philosopher of history Collingwood and the philosopher of language Wittgenstein can be used as tools.

### 14.3.2 Applying Collingwood

Historians typically discover, weigh, and interpret evidence and then go on to write narratives (Jenkins 2003: 11), perhaps because the mind itself is narrative in nature (Turner 1998). In any case, narrative is ‘unavoidable in any subject that studies different events at different times’ (Day 2008: 168). (Many European languages use the same word for ‘story’ and ‘history’, such as French histoire or German Geschichte.) It is, therefore, tempting to think that we can simply select facts and arrange them into a definitive narrative. Collingwood, whilst against neither facts nor narrative, rejects what he calls this ‘scissors-and-paste’ approach to history (1946: 257). We lack evidence for many past activities, for example, but that does not mean that they did not happen, even if they cannot be pasted into a narrative as such. Many translation activities, especially oral interactions, have left no record (McElduff and Sciarrino 2011: 4), which undermines the very possibility of writing complete histories of translation in the past in a way that the notion of ‘scissors-and-paste’ implies. Day also notes that much can be learned from deliberate falsehoods or silence (2008: 19).

Collingwood proposes ‘imaginative re-enactment’:

> He [the historian] is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event. … his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent.

(1946: 213)

Collingwood complicates the notion of ‘event’, by shifting our attention to ‘action’. Luther’s translation of the Bible, for example, can be regarded on one level as an event, i.e., as a fact for which we have archival evidence; yet, to view this translation only as an event is to miss the drama of what happened, to ignore that the translation of the scriptures was an action, i.e., the result of choices. We need to ask why Luther decided to work on translation in an era when rendering the scriptures could be punished severely. Despite the temporal distance between us and Luther, we may be able to come up with reasons. History is, thus, something that goes on in the present, as we re-enact the traces of the past. ‘All history is the history of thought’ for Collingwood (1946: 215), and the historian’s business is to discern the thought within the actions of the past (1946: 214) so that we discover the mind of a figure from the past much as we discover the mind of a friend who writes us a letter or a stranger who crosses the street (1946: 219). Collingwood’s description is reminiscent of the way that literary translators think themselves into the works they render and of the way in which translation historians reconstruct a translator’s choices, literary tastes, and cultural milieu by comparing a target with a source text.

Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment, according to Stein Helgeby, is ‘a theory of reason and the conditions of knowledge’ not ‘a theory of empathy or intuition or even a methodology of history’ (2011: 505). It has at least two uses. First, we can employ it to evaluate historical writing: Darnton’s description of the Paris cat massacre by printers’ apprentices (who slaughtered their employers’ pampered pets and conducted mock trials) has been influential because he re-enacts ‘how workers made their experience meaningful by playing with themes of their culture’ (1984: 99). He gives us the mentalités. Second, we can develop
methodologies for writing history once we realise that we are aiming at re-enactment. In re-enacting why Luther translated, we can address the following: translation is a way for the Christian translator to read God’s word; Luther wanted to give all speakers of German a way to interact with that word; translation into German can be linked with the growing nationalism of the age; he had the time to undertake such a massive undertaking when hiding in effective captivity at the Wartburg castle in Thuringia in 1521–2; he had a genuine feel for language, as can be seen from his letters and sermons; he was able to work at great speed; he used his translation to support his new theology – for example, using the expression ‘faith alone’ in his translation of Romans 1:17, where the texts from which he worked had ‘faith’ (see Luther 1997: 86); he translated from Hebrew and Greek rather from official Latin translations, in line with new approaches to scholarship. These insights can be framed into a narrative, but three scholars may still write three divergent accounts. One may see Luther as an important figure in translation, whose work helped to standardise the German language, and be content to leave it at that. A second scholar from a Catholic background may lament how Luther’s translational activities supported the cause of heresy and helped to wreck the unity of Christendom. A third may demand that the story include Luther’s betrayal of the German peasants and his virulent anti-Semitism, simultaneously drawing attention to anti-Semitic passages in the New Testament. Once again, philosophical questions arise.

Turning to Collingwood, then, can dispel what might seem to be a natural way to write about the past (scissors-and-paste) and offers instead a way of engagement that is archaeological, one that has analogies with the work of the detective, in which ‘every step in the argument depends on asking a question’ (1946: 273). His philosophical method of looking at the past – as opposed to having a doctrine about the past – might come naturally to those who ask questions about who has written translations and why. Can the later work of the philosopher Wittgenstein, as exemplified by the tools of the *Philosophical Investigations*, take us any further? If Wittgenstein uses philosophical dialogue to help us to re-humanise ourselves, as Rupert Read argues (2010: 596), then his work may be worth applying where it has not been much applied (cf. Read 2007: 3), in this case to the philosophy of history (cf. Winch 2008; for a comparison of Collingwood and Wittgenstein, see Inglis 2009: 158–9, 295–6).

14.3.3 Applying Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein sees meaning in terms of use (*PI* 43). If I want to know what the word ‘history’ means, for instance, I should look at how people use it (and will find different uses and, hence, different meanings, as noted above). Within this intersubjective approach to meaning, Wittgenstein introduces the terms ‘language-game’ (*PI* 23) and ‘form of life’ (*PI* 19). Language-games are everyday activities such as describing something, reporting an event, or singing a round: there is an infinite variety, and what matters is precisely that they are different from each other. Forms of life are the human contexts in which these activities take place: the language-games of religion are played by believers, for example.

Wittgenstein shows the importance of looking at context, at background, which is why his work can be of use both to those working in translation and to those working in history. A translator from French to English needs to know that the proper noun ‘Waterloo’ has varying connotations, for example. That there was a battle at Waterloo in 1815, when French forces under Napoleon were defeated by allied forces, is accepted by historians, but a French speaker today may use the noun in conversation to denote a disaster, whereas one of London’s main railway stations carries the name as a symbol of national pride, on
account of the role played by the British army in that battle. It is also the title of a popular song by Abba. The meaning of ‘Waterloo’ differs according to context. But surely, this does not mean that there are no facts to which we can appeal?

Wittgenstein can suggest a way forward. In *PI* 48 he gives this sentence:

RRBGGRWW

The letters R, G, W, and B represent ‘red’, ‘green’, ‘white’, and ‘black’ respectively. But how should I describe the sentence? Wittgenstein argues that it is possible to say that it has four letters or nine letters. It depends on whether we are looking at the type of the letter or the total number of letters. Confusion can be avoided if we are clear about our terms of reference: it would be wrong to say that this sentence has 43 letters, I take it. We, thus, point out facts, rather than point to facts (Glock 1996: 120). Agreement has to be in judgements (*PI* 242). So, what can I say, once I have pointed out a fact? Wittgenstein answers in *PI* 79:

Say what you please, so long as it does not prevent you seeing how things are. (And when you see that, there will be some things that you won’t say.)

This issue was at the heart of the Irving vs. Lipstadt libel trial referred to above (Lipstadt 2016). Lipstadt’s position was that Irving was free to draw whatever conclusions he wished about the Holocaust, no matter how morally abhorrent, as long as he did not falsify or suppress evidence. Her accusation was that he did misrepresent facts because his anti-Semitic framework prevented him seeing how things were. Her acquittal in the trial was not only a victory for justice, but also for the philosophy of history. Wittgenstein’s words ‘how things are’ recall (in translation) Ranke’s dictum ‘how it really was’: but the position has been transformed through philosophical analysis. We become aware that we are not pointing to an objective reality but pointing out a possible and intersubjective view of the past.

If we combine Wittgenstein’s tools with Collingwood’s theory, we can re-enact the thoughts of historical figures not by some process of mind-reading but by paying attention to language-games and forms of life. We can write narratives that stress aspects of an action, just as I stressed aspects of Luther’s action as a translator above, whilst omitting other aspects, such as his digestive problems. Such a narrative will be what Wittgenstein calls a ‘surveyable representation’ (*PI* 122). The writing of multiple historical narratives that do not misrepresent how things are is to be welcomed and can even be seen as the point of history (White 1987: 20). In translation, we have the multiple translation of literary texts, both within the same language and into different languages, while historians write new lives of figures (such as Luther) who have been the subject of many earlier treatments. Scholarly progress, as Kosso argues, is, to a great extent, ‘a matter of informed agreement’ (2011: 22). Some events are re-narrated from contemporary perspectives, while other events that no longer seem relevant are allowed to fall into oblivion.

The case for both intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration is strengthened; tools for writing narrative become available; a Wittgensteinian approach enables what Peter Winch calls a ‘new appreciation of Collingwood’s conception of all human history as the history of thought’ (2003: 131), i.e., that historical explanation ‘is not the application of generalisations and theories to particular instances: it is the tracing of internal relations’ (2003: 133). By being clear about this, historians of translation can in turn aim to write works that make things clearer for their readers (cf. *PI* 133). Wittgenstein, thus, allows us to answer the question raised above by Kosso (2011: 25) about whether history is a matter of construction
or discovery. That dilemma can fade once we see meaning, including historical meaning, as intersubjective. We have both warrant and methods to move on.

14.4 Philosophising about history in order to translate old texts

The translation of old texts raises its own kind of problematic. Should the Old High German poem Das Hildebrandslied [The Song of Hildebrand], for example, today be translated for an English audience into Anglo-Saxon, given that this was the language spoken in England at the time of its composition in c.800 (cf. Jones and Turner 2004)? How do I deal with the fact that this poem describes customs that are totally alien to my own forms of life (cf. Wilson 2016: 40–3)? Whereas the translator of a contemporary text can ask the author about difficult words or passages, no such help is available for the translator of old texts, and the difficulties multiply the further removed the translator is from a source.

It can be asked if old texts can be translated at all. The (in)famous thought-experiment by Willard Van Orman Quine about a field linguist (1960: 23 ff.) is usually taken to be about meaning, but it can also be read as asserting that any interpretation must be indeterminate, including historical interpretation (Day 2008: 147). Quine’s linguist engages in ‘radical translation’, i.e., an initial attempt to translate a language, and he notes that locals exclaim ‘Gavagai’ whenever a rabbit appears. He concludes that ‘Gavagai’ must be a noun meaning ‘rabbit’. Quine argues, however, that it could mean a host of other things, such as ‘food’, ‘let’s go hunting’, etc. Similarly, a variety of interpretations are always available for any event.

Against this we can set Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment and Wittgenstein’s notions of the language-game and the form of life. To be able to translate ‘Gavagai’ would involve the linguist becoming part of the life that he or she is observing. In Quine’s thought-experiment, the field linguist is curiously static and detached. As Winch asserts: ‘a historian or sociologist of religion must have some religious feeling if he is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the considerations which govern the lives of its participants’ (2008: 82), and this applies also to translators not just of religious texts. Linguistic aptitude may be a necessary requirement for any translator, but the ability to see things from another point of view is also needed. Quine’s linguist refuses to engage in any form of re-enactment, which is why he runs into problems. Wittgenstein analogously criticises the anthropologist James Frazer, author of The Golden Bough (1890), for viewing the activities of so-called ‘primitive’ people as if they were failed attempts to live a modern Western life (1993: 125; see Wilson 2016: 33).

With Ingrid Walton and Clive Wilkins-Jones, I have prepared an edited translation of two Latin works by Alexander Neville (1544–1614), first published in one volume in 1575: De furorisibus Norfolciensium Ketto duce [On the Violent Insurrections in Norfolk, Led by Kett] and Norvicus [Norwich] (Neville 1575). Neville was secretary to Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Elizabeth I of England, and he was commissioned to write two books about Parker’s birthplace Norwich: an account of Robert Kett’s 1549 rebellion and a history of the city from its origins to the reign of Elizabeth.

I, here, examine Norvicus (which has never been translated before, unlike De furoribus) from the point of view of reading for translation.8 We must look at Neville’s own form of life as a Renaissance humanist and pay attention to the language-games he plays, which have to be seen in context. Neville is a constant Ciceronian rhetorical presence in the text, which he several times describes as an oratio [oration]: he digresses; includes material from legends; addresses the reader on moral and religious issues; attacks a rival historian
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(Polydore Vergil); spends many pages taking his reader on a tour of the English shires; includes lengthy quotations from classical authors; writes an encomium of his recently deceased patron; justifies his own strategies; comments on his own style; indulges in extended metaphors, comparing, for example, the writing of history to navigation; asks rhetorical questions; makes patriotic exclamations; includes a number of poems in classical metres; and vilifies Catholicism, etc. (see Walton, Wilkins-Jones, and Wilson 2019).

It is easy to dismiss the work as historically useless for failing to perform an informative function. To do this, however, would be to read Neville with the eyes of the present, similar to the way that Frazer misreads his sources according to Wittgenstein. Neville is self-consciously writing a work of rhetoric that leads up to and glorifies British identity and the Elizabethan religious settlement within the context of the Reformation. (Thus, his attack on Polydore Vergil can be explained by the latter’s Catholicism.) *Norvicus* should be translated not for what it tells us (or fails to tell us) about things that happened in Norwich but for what it tells us about the Elizabethan mind and for what it tells us about the history of thought (cf. Collingwood 1946: 215).

Such an approach comes from seeing history as a narrative, an activity in which style matters and events can be read as actions because they are part of forms of life. We can re-enact Neville by paying attention to the language-games in his texts, as detailed above. The translation can become a surveyable representation, and Neville’s history itself can be theorised as one attempt to translate the past into the present. History in general can, thus, be seen as a form of translation, which is an important conclusion.

We have translated *De furoribus* and *Norvicus* into contemporary English, not into sixteenth-century English. Neville chose to write in Latin for an international audience because Latin was still the European *lingua franca* of scholarship. If his writings are to be rescued from oblivion, then the use of contemporary English is necessary. The purpose and audience of any work is important, as *skopos* theorists remind translators (cf. Nord 1997) and as philosophers of history remind historians (cf. Jenkins 2003). The question arises: for whom is translation history written (St André 2009: 136)? For scholars? For historians? For translators? It is important to be clear about this in any particular case (see Rundle 2012). The new translations of Neville with accompanying paratextual material (Walton, Wilkins-Jones, and Wilson 2019) are intended to be a tool for scholars and a source of pleasure for general readers (cf. Arnold 2000: 122). Philosophical investigation should never allow us to forget that many people are interested in history because it can be fascinating, which opens up yet another field of philosophical enquiry, i.e., aesthetics, to which translation historians can look for support.

14.5 Areas for future research

I intend to examine three areas in which philosophy of history and translation studies can make interdisciplinary progress.

14.5.1 Ethics and translation history

Ethics has always been important in translation. Both the choice of a source text and the way in which that text is rendered raise ethical questions (see Hermans (2007: 52–6) on the translation of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*). Joanna Drugan argues that the growing conversation between philosophy and translation studies can allow philosophy to bring ‘an informed
understanding of ethics to bear on translation theory and practice’ (2019: 252). In terms of translation history, we can identify two aspects to which moral philosophy can be applied.

First, the course of the translating past can be conceptualised in ethical terms. Ben Van Wyke, for example, argues that there has been a general shift away from concentrating on fidelity to the source text (2013: 548) toward the realisation that translation does not take place in a vacuum so that feminist, postcolonial, and other perspectives are needed (2013: 553). Second, the very act of writing translation history is also not neutral. Those working in translation history must evaluate how they write, for whom they are writing, and the possible impact of their research on target groups, as argued above (St André 2009: 136). Philosophy, with its rich tradition of empirical enquiry, can provide tools for translation historians and theorists. Thus, work by consequentialist philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill, might be used to examine the impact of translation choices in the past. The deontological approach of Immanuel Kant might form a basis for investigating the ethical approaches of translators who have gone before us. Practices of individual translators can be theorised in terms of virtue ethics, as associated with Aristotle, who saw good deeds as constituted by what good people do. Drugan also argues for the need to address the neglect of ethical approaches from outside the Western canon (2019: 252), and the broadening of our understanding of philosophy is itself an ethical task. We urgently need to look at philosophical voices from outside the Eurocentric academy.

14.5.2 The poetics of translation history

Scholars pay increasing attention to style in history (White 1978), philosophy (Danto 1985), and translation (Boase-Beier 2006). By looking at such research, scholars of translation history will, in turn, be able to focus on the poetics of what they and others write, aware that narrative is never simple, because their choice of words has an effect on readers. There is no objective viewpoint from which we can write scientific tracts about the past. Looking at the historical novel, for example, can inform us about how historical narrative works, following Georg Lukács, who notes that it has ‘to demonstrate by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed precisely in such-and-such a way’ (1962: 43). The contemporary historical novelist S.J. Parris, whose words take us back to Collingwood, argues that writers of historical fiction ‘must make a judgement about why someone would have acted as they did’ and that this is also the strategy of biographers and historians ‘as they determine the shapes of their narratives’ (2017: 97).

Translation scholars will continue to write alternative histories within the alternative history that is translation history, examining such topics as the history of women in translation, or the phenomenon of non-translation (as evidenced by Neville’s Norvicus). They will write historical case studies to reveal aspects of the processes and products of translation. The work of Hermans is exemplary; his study of the Book of Mormon, for instance, uses the analytic philosopher J.L. Austin to theorise equivalence in a triangulation of translation history, translation theory, and philosophy (2007: 3–7). And it is possible that translation scholars may turn to new genres, new forms of representation, following the example of historians (Southgate 2011: 546), such as dialogues, documentaries, exhibitions, films, novels, plays, and philosophical biographies.

14.5.3 The historicisation of translation theory

Jean Boase-Beier (2019: 76) argues that Benjamin’s influential 1923 essay ‘The Translator’s Task’ (2012) has been misunderstood because it has not been read alongside his other
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writings and has not been historicised (for example, in terms of his interest in Marxism and in Kabbalah). Translation students are often introduced to theory through statements by philosophers (Venuti’s influential *Translation Studies Reader* (2012) includes writings by Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and George Steiner). It can, however, be dangerous to read philosophers out of context if one has no philosophical training, as Pym asserts (2007: 33). Boase-Beier’s recommendation that we should revisit such statements is, therefore, both important and timely (2019: 86–7).

Translators can contribute to the understanding of translated texts used in the philosophy of history. For the anglophone reader, for example, there is a translation issue in Ranke’s dictum ‘only to say how it really was’ (1981: 58). Here is the glossed German:

wie es eigentlich gewesen

*how it really was*

*essentially*

For Arnold, it matters whether we translate *eigentlich* as ‘really’ or as ‘essentially’, because the latter translation might make us posit immutable essences where there are none: each translation of *eigentlich* offers a different way of looking at history (2000: 121). Lipstadt similarly records translation issues arising at her trial: did the German noun *Feldöfen* signify ‘mobile kitchens’, as Irving translated, or ‘incineration ovens’, as Lipstadt’s defence team maintained (2016: 143)? In the context of official documentation by the Nazis, the translation choice has implications for the story told: was Auschwitz a prison camp where people were fed, or a death camp where people were murdered and then incinerated?

Historians depend directly on translation and indirectly on translation studies because nobody commands the linguistic resources necessary for fully independent research. Even if the historian does read a source language and is, thus, able to translate an untranslated text, he or she will then face exactly the same sort of problems that arise when any work is translated. As well as writing translation history, translation scholars can, therefore, describe translations of history and of the philosophy of history and suggest what makes good practice (cf. Pym 2007: 24; Venuti 1998: 122).

### 14.6 Conclusion

We are now living, as Jason Cowley argues, in ‘dark and dangerous times’ when there is ‘no guarantee that things will keep getting better’ because history is not linear but ‘contingent and discontinuous’ (2016: 29). Translation has a vital role to play in such times and turning to philosophy will help translation historians in their tasks, however they conceive those tasks. The last word can go to Collingwood: ‘by understanding it [the past] historically we incorporate it into our present thought, and enable ourselves by developing and criticising it to use that heritage for our own advancement’ (1946: 230).

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Notes
1 These questions are epistemological. Philosophers traditionally define knowledge as ‘justified true belief’.
2 References to Luther’s life and times in this chapter are based on my reading of Roper (2016), Wilson (2008) and Luther’s own works.
3 Luther was notorious for complaining about digestive issues, frequently linking them to major events in his life.
4 Collingwood combines this rule with the ‘maxim of Bishop Butler’, i.e., that ‘every thing is what it is and not another thing’ (2006: 186).
6 Intersubjectivity signifies that we establish truths together as an agreed aggregation of necessarily subjective views.
7 ‘Surveyable representation’ is also found translated as ‘perspicuous representation’, from the German ‘übersichtliche Darstellung’, after Elizabeth Anscombe’s first translation of the Investigations (later revised by Peter Hacker and Joachim Schulte).
8 De furoribus was translated in 1584/5 by Thomas Corbold (manuscript only) and in 1615 by Richard Woods.

Further reading
A survey of how historians have approached their task, from Herodotus to the twenty-first century.
Collingwood’s classic account of the need to re-enact history imaginatively, which involves a rejection of the ‘scissors-and-paste’ approach to history. See especially the sections ‘Human Nature and Human History’ and ‘History as Re-enactment of Past Experience’ in the Epilegomena.
A comprehensive introduction to the field, dealing with the philosophical questions that arise when reading and writing history.
This collection includes 50 chapters on a wide range of issues and forms a valuable research tool. See especially ‘Introduction’ by Tucker Aviezer, Chapter 2 ‘Philosophy of Historiography’ by Peter Kosso, and Chapter 3 ‘Philosophy of History’ by Zdeněk Vašíček.

References