



History as a moral endeavor

Bennett Gilbert: A personalist philosophy of history. New York: Routledge, 2019, 227 pp, £36.99 PB, ISBN: 9780367662356

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Bennett Gilbert's book *A Personalist Philosophy of History* is an ambitious contribution to the ongoing dialog in theory and philosophy of history. It deals mainly with the question of what should be considered essential in historical writing and how historians, theorists, and scholars in the humanities can judge and use the knowledge of the past.

Gilbert's focus locates itself on the moral side of our understanding of and writing about our and our society's past. The numbering of the sections (1.1–4.12) may remind the reader of Spinoza's *Ethics*. The author takes the ambiguous term “personalism,” which he clarifies carefully and with outstanding philosophical tact, to build his argument on the need for an agency, for a moral actor whose consideration shall define what is to be said and written about history and in what form it should be given to the public as a knowable result. Gilbert's ambition is to highlight the importance of philosophy of history as a field not only in relation to history and philosophy but also to the entire humanities and even more. In four chapters, he makes a journey to the core of history. And he travels through time both as a process—the past, present, and future—and as a concept.

In the first chapter, the author forms his idea about our moral position when he claims to have the right to study the past. By concentrating on this aspect of our relation with the past, Gilbert brings into his narrative all the subjects that concern him for the remainder of the book. First and foremost is the idea of a person and personhood, and second is the idea of an alternative, non-linear time. But before going into these ideas, as he does in the second and third chapters, he attempts to clarify, in the first chapter, what exactly is meant by the past, what is its distinction from the present, and what is our role as agents in moving from the former to the latter and having consciousness and knowledge of this movement. “The present is identified with knowledge and the past is identified with objects ... The present exists in our knowledge of it, and not vice versa” (17). Therefore, the center of gravity shall

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always be the present knower, who gets access to the past, in order to better understand their own reality and find ways to improve their future (27). Defining the people of the present—of any present, that is—as knowers and the past as an object of infinite knowledge, Gilbert can move to his main question: how are we responsible to the past and, following this, how were the people of the past responsible to their past and to their successors, the future people who are going to view their past as a heritage and as a burden to their present? (40):

Immediately following this line of argumentation, the subject of the second chapter is adequately established: personhood. Gilbert moves on to a brief analysis of Parker Bowne's work on personalism, to show that "personhood is the most real thing in the universe" (53). This idea is mainly based on our own experience but is not restricted to what we strictly understand as persons; personhood may even include non-human subjects who are able to make moral choices based on the knowledge they take from the past, immediate or distant. It is hard for the reader at this point to understand the difference, in Gilbert's scheme, of personalism from moralism, as the author seems to regard this connection as almost self-explanatory (62). He is, however, aware of the objections such a focus on the person as a moral agent may have for philosophers of history and, therefore, he defends in advance his position against possible charges of essentialism and anthropocentrism. As he explains, concerning this possible critique, "moral agency personalism requires no foundation" (65). It does not pursue the establishment of a correct moral code (65), nor does it imply that personhood, as we can understand it today, is a universal category that will remain unchangeable, excluding other forms of life that may be, or already are, able to act as moral agents. In this sense, a personalist approach to the past does not restrict our knowledge to the strictly "human aspect" of it, but it suggests we study everything (83).

After clarifying who is the agent that learns from history/past, Gilbert moves on to how they can relate and understand what connects them with this past: time. Apart from the standard mechanized time, Gilbert identifies two other forms of time: the "dimensional-time," as a form of time that is studied by philosophers and includes mechanized time but with anachronic possibilities; and "consciousness-time," which is a transcendental sort of time that overcomes the two former ones as it covers "every effective practice of temporality in our collective life" (95). The problem that Gilbert wants to overcome here is the almost negligible attention that philosophers of history give to the philosophy of time, which he regards as essential for constructing his argument about the importance of personhood in our understanding of the past. Therefore, he introduces the readers to four major intellectual figures who tried to make this connection, Henri Bergson, R.G. Collingwood, Walter Benjamin, and David K. Lewis, to show how, despite their differences, the different dimensions of time create moral consequences for the agents and knowers of the present (131).

This leads us to the fourth and last chapter of the book, where the author attempts to bring all these interesting and complex topics together. Moving from concepts of time to the theory of narrative to even dance theory, Gilbert's effort is to establish a basic and general theory of everything that we may understand as the consciousness of our moral existence. Against notions of traditional historiography, and even against ideas such as Hayden White's "practical past," Gilbert seeks a holistic

approach to the past that, in the end, shall take into consideration nothing more than our own human experience. To be sure, this is “inadequate for fully titivating a system of ethics” (184). But his call for compassion and pursuit of justice as the core of the meaning of history may exceed the scope of the book’s argument.

I have three criticisms. First, the connection between personhood and moralism should be more clearly articulated. The first chapter constitutes an excellent basis to define what personalism and personalist philosophy of history is or can be, but, from the beginning, it creates a gap between the two terms that is not bridged in the next chapters. Second, although the author establishes clear connections between his general concerns and the contemporary dialogs in theory and philosophy of history (narrativism, anti-foundationalism, anthropocentrism, etc.), his concrete ideas do not always make clear how these general concerns can be integrated into the discourse of the discipline. This comes, of course, with a positive development: his focus on largely undiscovered topics—and in these, I include both moral personalism and the issue of time topics—gives originality and cognitive value to the argument. The book could, however, benefit from making some of the concepts more clear and easier to comprehend in the general context. Finally, although the book claims a vague universality, it is almost solely restricted to references from Western literature. The reader, therefore, is forced to ask how the author can make universal claims about non-human moral agents, without first coming to terms with what human, moral, person, agent, etc., mean outside of their restrictive western context. Of course, Gilbert does not fail to mention this (185). But the “fact” that morality is a universal value still remains on the level of the self-evident, which is problematic.

Despite these criticisms, the book constitutes a very learned effort to bring vital ideas for the future of the philosophy of history into the dialog. The philosophical background of the author is particularly steady, which is not always the case in this field, and the book raises problems whose solutions, or search for solutions, are not only of academic interest but contribute to our general understanding of what history and past are, as well as what our responsibilities are to our surroundings, extended to the past and the future. Hopefully, such concerns will not remain between theorists and philosophers of history but will “ring a bell” for practicing historians as well.

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