

# A Panofskyian meditation on free will and the forces of history: is humanist historiography still credible?<sup>1</sup>

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Erwin Panofsky's essay 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline' published in 1940 succinctly identified a web of metaphysical problems that underlie not only art historiography but the entire province of the humanities.<sup>2</sup> The dilemma about the nature of historical subjects has well-known variations: is history made by human individuals or by collectives (such as nations, cultures or classes)? Are these collectives forces on their own or should we understand them as mere sums of individuals? Should we not rather assume that individuals are merely manifestations of the groups they belong to? Can membership of a group explain (and thus be taken to determine) the thoughts, actions and the creativity of individuals?

A historian cannot avoid such questions; one cannot write history without deciding about the characters it is about. Implicitly or explicitly, all history writing has to make assumptions about the nature of historical phenomena, entities and forces. Panofsky pointed out that these dilemmas are inseparable from another profound metaphysical perplexity – that of free will and the correlated quandaries about the nature of human rationality. If a historian attributes free will to historical figures, one cannot say that their creativity or acting were *determined* by their social context. The possession of free will implies the capacity to differentiate between available options – whereas if collectives determined human thoughts and beliefs (as opposed to merely influencing or enabling them), then free will would be

<sup>1</sup> This paper expands and continues the presentation of the individualism-collectivism debate beyond the period that was covered in my book *Rage and Denials. Collectivist Philosophy, Politics and Art Historiography 1890-1947*, Penn State University Press, 2015. I owe special gratitude to Nick Zangwill for the help and advice in the preparation of the article, as well as to Brian Fay, Robert Nola and Ingo Turtenwald for the discussions of specific problems.

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', first time published in T. M. Greene, ed., *The Meaning of the Humanities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1940, 89-118. Cited here according to the version in Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, 1-25. For an analysis of Panofsky's views, see Branko Mitrović, 'Humanist art history and its enemies. Erwin Panofsky on the individualism-collectivism debate', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, 78, 2009, 57-76.

impossible. These insights seem obvious—but on what grounds can one attribute free will to historical figures? What are the implications of the large body of philosophical arguments about human free will for history writing?

The dilemma about free will of historical figures and its relationship to the forms of causation manifested in historical events and phenomena has a different form for us today than it had in Panofsky's time. The historiographical models dominant in Panofsky's time often relied on spiritualist assumptions and incorporeal historical forces (such as *Geist*) that historians imagined to be instantiated in human collectives. Such assumptions are hardly credible today (though they may occasionally or inadvertently persist in history writing in some less explicit forms). It is therefore appropriate to ask about the implications of Panofsky's strictures and the relevance of what he defined as the humanist perspective on (art) historiography within the materialist worldview—the latter characterized by the assumption that human beings are biological individuals whose mental processes (including beliefs, desires and their decisions to act in specific ways) ultimately result from biological processes in their brains. Insofar as it is identified with the rejection of spiritual substances and forces, this materialist perspective is the fundamental assumption both in the social sciences and in discussions about free will in analytic philosophy. This paper is therefore intended to survey arguments from these two discussion frameworks in order to describe credible views on the relationship between the attribution of free will to historical figures on the one hand and the problem of the nature of historical entities and forces on the other—and in order to compare them with Panofsky's position.

### **Panofsky's programme**

Panofsky's essay articulated a programme that fundamentally opposed the tradition of German Romanticist historiography in which Panofsky himself was brought up; the essay also constituted a significant break with his own earlier approach to history writing.<sup>3</sup> The idea that an individual's creative and intellectual capacities are mere products of the collective (culture, ethnicity, nation, linguistic group) one belongs to—that there is no universal human nature constituted by human reasoning capacities—is one of the core theses of the Romantic worldview that goes back to Johann Gottfried Herder. It was also a standard assumption that Panofsky made in his early writings. In his youthful 'Der Begriff des Kunstwollens', one thus reads that Polygnotus, because of 'the necessity that predetermined his will' was not able to conceive of a naturalistic landscape.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the central thesis of the

<sup>3</sup> For a description of the process how Panofsky history writing changed see Mitrović, 'Humanist art history'.

<sup>4</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'Der Begriff des Kunstwollens', in Erwin Panofsky, *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, Karl Michels and Martin Warnke, eds, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998, vol. 2, 1019-

young Panofsky's essay 'Perspective as Symbolic Form' — that the discovery of perspective in the early *quattrocento* was a result of the newly acquired way of perceiving and understanding space — assumed that before the Renaissance people could not conceive that it is possible to draw the same geometrical figure from every point in space nor was their perception organized according to this principle.<sup>5</sup> Panofsky was not merely arguing that historical figures could not have acquired certain ideas that were genuinely inaccessible to them in the times when they lived — the way one could say that Archimedes, for instance, did not have access to the mathematical knowledge and the experimental equipment necessary to discover quantum physics. In the case of Polygnotus, one cannot state a specific skill or knowledge that he lacked and that prevented him from conceiving of a naturalistic landscape (indeed, we do not know whether he might have painted one, that has not been preserved). Rather, in his early works Panofsky assumed that membership of a collective determines and explains the mental processes and actions of individuals and can prevent them from forming certain ideas, regardless of what they may or may not know — that community is an intellectual force in its own right that cannot be reduced to interactions between individuals.

Written in the years immediately preceding World War Two, when Panofsky settled down in the USA, 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline' articulated Panofsky's break with this kind of historiography — in the essay he called it 'insectolatrist' — in favour of an approach that attributes rationality and free will, as well as their fallibility and frailty, to human individuals as historical subjects.<sup>6</sup> For Panofsky, these assumptions constituted art history into a humanistic discipline. Fallibility and frailty accounted for the fact that humans often fail to act rationally and that their weaknesses can prevent their exercise of free will. The debate about free will between Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther that Panofsky cited pertained to the same dilemma. Luther famously claimed that all ideas and thoughts, good or bad, that a human being can have, occur by absolute necessity predestined by God; Erasmus responded that it is not clear what would be the purpose of a human being if God could work in it like a sculptor in clay. The analogy of Luther's position with the one Panofsky was rejecting was obvious; from the historiographical point of view there is little relevance whether one calls the force that determines historical events 'God', 'History', 'Culture' or something else.

In the context of the scholarship of its time, Panofsky's essay was an open attack on the methodological models widespread in German historiography in the preceding decades. The idea that individual creativity and intellectual life merely reflect membership of a community and that individuals have no choice but to think

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1034: 'weil er — kraft einer sein psychologisches Wollen vorherbestimmenden Notwendigkeit — nichts anders als eine unnaturalistische Landschaft *wollen konnte*'. (1023)

<sup>5</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form'', in Panofsky, *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze* vol. 2, 664-757.

<sup>6</sup> Panofsky, 'History of Art', 2-3.

and create in accordance with the groups they belong to became increasingly influential after Karl Lamprecht's polemics against Rankeans in the 1890s.<sup>7</sup> In the same decade Alois Riegl introduced the concept of *Kunstwollen*, the creative artistic will of a community that drove, determined and explained the creativity of individuals.<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin and Dagobert Frey subsequently elaborated the view that race and ethnicity determine the intellectual and creative capacities of individuals.<sup>9</sup> In the years after World War One, the popularity of Spengler's *Decline of the West* substantially contributed to the promotion of collectivist views in all subfields of German-speaking cultural and intellectual historiography. According to Spengler, individual cultures (for instance, Graeco-Roman or modern Western culture) repeat the same phases and development; an individual in this scheme has no choice, but to fulfil the destiny that he or she has been assigned by history.

Among art historians, the most comprehensive theoretical statement of such methodology was formulated by Hans Sedlmayr in 1929. Sedlmayr rejected the assumption that human individuals are the ultimate explanatory units in history.<sup>10</sup> It is wrong, in his view, to see in groups merely individuals or to assume that they are mere names for the sets of individuals. Rather, collectives are real things in their own right—in Scholastic terminology, they are not mere *nomina* but *realia*. Consequently, historical processes cannot result from interactions between individuals; instead, Sedlmayr claimed that events possess genuine unity that results from the self-propelled movements of the Spirit (*Geist*). This Spirit is assumed to be a real historical force, whose movements may be postponed or slowed down, but cannot be prevented. Sedlmayr also rejected the Kantian belief in the universality and immutability of human nature and human reason. It is also wrong to assume, in his view, that Nature that artists imitate merely remains the same, unaffected by the movements of Spirit. Sedlmayr does not say it, but his denial of universal human nature *de facto* meant that there are no human beings *tout court*: one cannot say that some beings are humans if they have nothing in common, if there is no nature that human beings share (such as, for instance, rationality, reasoning capacities or biological structure). Instead, the implication is that what we call human beings are manifestations of the social contexts that result from the movements of Spirit and determine individuals' acting, thinking and creativity. Differences between various groups are, on this account, comparable to differences between biological species. According to this view it would be quite wrong, for instance, to explain a Renaissance painter's ability to use of perspective

<sup>7</sup> For a collection of Lamprecht's texts from that debate see Karl Lamprecht, *Alternative zu Ranke*, Lothar Reher, ed., Leipzig: Reclam, 1988. See also the analysis of Lamprecht's views in Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 31-38.

<sup>8</sup> See the analysis of Riegl's views in Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 38-41.

<sup>9</sup> See the analysis in Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 65-70.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, 'Die Quintessenz der Lehren Riegls' in Hans Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit*, Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978, 32-48, 46.

individualistically, as a result of his contacts with other individuals that enabled him to learn the skill. An individualist explanation of this kind would imply that the Renaissance was merely a huge set of interactions between individuals, stimulated and enabled by the circulation of ideas in urban environments, the invention of the printing press, the influx of Byzantine scholars and so on. Contrary to this view, the position that Sedlmayr advocated could be compared to the assumption that the *Geist* of the Renaissance, a genuine spiritual force, landed on Italy about year 1400 and determined Italians' intellectual activities for the next two centuries. A painter had to paint in accordance with the dictates of this force. 'A thinker has no choice', says Spengler in the opening section of his *Decline of the West*.<sup>11</sup>

Asserting free will was thus a major step out of the well-established perspectives of German collectivist scholarship: if individuals have free will, then one cannot say that their actions were determined by the will of the spirit of the community, *Geist*, history, context or some other super-individual force. The strength of Panofsky's antidote, one should note, is largely based on the fact that free will is a notorious metaphysical quagmire. A historian (or a philosopher of history) must claim to have resolved one of the most difficult problems in the history of philosophy in order to claim that the actions of historical figures were determined by their historical or social context. Even if one admits that a suitable solution of the problem of free will is not available, this makes deterministic explanations of the actions of individuals ungrounded. In other words, Panofsky's criticism was that collectivist historians were writing metaphysical checks they could not cash. Most German collectivist philosophers of history explicitly rejected free will—this was the case with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Johann Gottfried Herder, Karl Lamprecht, Oswald Spengler, Dagobert Frey and Hans Georg Gadamer.<sup>12</sup> (The few who did not, such as Theodor Droysen and Ernst Troeltsch, ran into methodological problems that they were not able to resolve.<sup>13</sup>) However, considering the difficulties that the problem presents, their rejections could only be stated as simple claims that were made in order to generate a consistent position in

<sup>11</sup> 'Ein Denker ist ein Mensch, dem es bestimmt war, durch das eigene Schauen und Verstehen die Zeit symbolisch darzustellen. Er hat keine Wahl. Er denkt, wie er denken muß, und wahr ist zuletzt für ihn, was als Bild seiner Welt mit ihm geboren wurde.' Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, Munich: DTV 2003, vii.

<sup>12</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986, 25. For Herder's view on Providence in history, see Beiser, *Historicist Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 141-143. Karl Lamprecht, 'Was ist Kulturgeschichte', in Lamprecht, *Alternative*, 213-272, 228. Spengler, *Untergang*, 152. Dagobert Frey, *Kunstwissenschaftliche Grundfragen. Prolegomena zu einer Kunstphilosophie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992, 60. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses', in Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 2 vols, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr 1990, vol. 2 (*Ergänzungen*), 121-132, 129.

<sup>13</sup> See the analysis in Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 13 and 49-54.

the philosophy of history—none of these authors, not even Hegel, provided anything like a conclusive argument against free will. The unstated implications of Panofsky's challenge are profound: without a credible response to the problem of free will, the historicist and Romanticist scholarship that dominated German intellectual life during an entire epoch dissolves into arbitrary and poorly justified fantasies.

### **Materialism**

The problem is, however, that the boundary where fantasy starts, is also the place where reality stops; by saying that something is unreal one necessarily makes assumptions about reality as well. For us today, historical accounts that postulate divine interventions or spiritual substances are little credible; the perspectives that are recommended by the modern scientific worldview preclude such historical forces. From this latter point of view, there are only material objects and other physical phenomena with their properties in space and time, to be ultimately understood in accordance with modern physics. However, the application of this view is not necessarily easy when it comes to historiography, for it implies that all abstract entities and historical forces that cannot be understood as sets of material, individual human beings, their properties and interactions with other individuals and with the physical environment, have to be eliminated from history writing. The materialist rejection of spiritual phenomena such as *Geist* may, or may not, turn out to disqualify many other concepts that some historians may regard as necessary in history writing. The materialist perspective also suggests that the human intellect and the capacity to make decisions result from the neurophysiology of the brain, which is ultimately reducible to interactions between physical particles. But if this is so, it will be pointed out, then the price for banning immaterial collective forces from history—for saying that historical phenomena have to be understood materialistically, as individuals and their interactions—has to imply the denial of free will, since human thinking and the capacity to decide have to be regarded as the consequences of the natural laws according to which the human brain operates. Historiography shares the former of these two problems—the question about the status of abstract, immaterial social forces in the context of the materialist worldview—with the modern social sciences. The second problem—the dilemma about the possibility of free will—is hotly debated in analytic philosophy. The intention of this paper is to summarise the implications of both debates for the philosophy of history writing.

The former problem has been with social scientists ever since sociology was formed into a discipline in the nineteenth century. The new discipline was intended to study social phenomena in a way that was aligned with the assumptions of modern science, which precluded immaterial and spiritual forces from sociological explanations. The obvious problem is that this same materialist perspective seems to

allow individuals with their interactions as the only valid elements in the explanations of social phenomena. Since human acting results from human mental processes, it would follow that sociology has to be reducible to psychology.<sup>14</sup> To make things worse, the founders of the new discipline found their position complicated by the implications of the problem of free will: if human beings act according to their free will, then their actions result from their free decisions, and one cannot say that sociological laws cause their behaviour. As a result, it becomes hard to talk about social causation at all. As early as 1885 Ludwig Gumplowicz in his *Grundriss der Soziologie* rejected the possibility of free will. He opposed the reduction of sociology to psychology by claiming that modern sciences have established that the individual human spirit (*Geist*) is subject to physical laws and derives from natural phenomena.<sup>15</sup> The grave error of modern psychology in his view is the assumption that human beings think. They do not. What thinks in the human being is his social environment which is the source of every individual's

<sup>14</sup> The concern that sociology will somehow lose its relevance if it is shown to be reducible to psychology can be found even in modern sociologists' writings. Murrey Webster: 'Psychological Reductionism, Methodological Individualism, and Large-Scale Problems,' *American Sociological Review*, 38, 1973, 258-273, 258: 'Even superficially, to speak of 'reducing' sociology to psychology clearly implies the diminished importance of socio-logical phenomena, and suggests that they are simply special cases of something more 'fundamental.' Similarly, Lars Udehn, *Methodological Individualism*, London: Routledge, 2001, 3: 'Many social scientists, especially sociologists, have, no doubt, rejected methodological individualism, because they believed that it implies psychologism, or the reduction of sociology to psychology. If so, methodological individualism would rob sociologists of their discipline.' Concerns of this kind seem little justified. Tod Jones, who in his 'Methodological Individualism in Proper Perspective', *Behavior and Philosophy*, 24, 1996, 119-128 defended the individualist position, observed that there are certainly many situations when it is preferable to talk in terms of high-level explanations: 'If we insist that we must always speak only of the actual identifiable implementing mechanisms instead of high level entities, shouldn't we insist that we abandon not only a high level social vocabulary, but also the vocabulary of psychology, in favor of neurological or physical laws? ... a case can be made for the position that a complete scientific understanding of the world requires us to uncover high level generalizations even when low level ones can explain the phenomenon in question.' (125-126) In fact, if sociology were reducible to psychology this could hardly affect its status, the way the scientific status of chemistry is not threatened by the fact that chemical events are reducible to physical events. As David Hugh Mellor, 'The Reduction of Society', *Philosophy*, 57, 1982, 51-75, 60, put it, '...it may well be that chemical phenomena can and should be studied in chemical vocabulary, and that attempts to reduce them to physics are methodologically quite perverse, even if they are in reality 'nothing but' physical processes. Talk of groups and social attributes may likewise serve social scientists far better than talk of people and psychological attributes, and sociology may still be reducible to psychology.'

<sup>15</sup> Cited here according to the second edition: Ludwig Gumplowicz, *Grundriss der Soziologie*, Vienna: Manzsche k. u. k. Verlags- u. Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1905, 111.

thinking. A human being must think in accordance with the concentrated social influences that come together in his brain.<sup>16</sup>

Within a decade Émile Durkheim proposed a perspective that indeed seemed to explain the social determination of human actions in a way that was aligned with the contemporary science of the era.<sup>17</sup> His theory postulated social facts—forces *sui generis* that were able to exercise a coercive influence on the consciousness of individuals.<sup>18</sup> According to this view, the collective phenomena that come about when humans get together are irreducible to individuals' actions.<sup>19</sup> There are, he pointed out, similar phenomena in natural science: a living cell contains nothing but chemical particles, but life does not reside in the atoms of specific elements. The hardness of bronze is not in copper or tin, which are both soft metals; it arises from their mixture.<sup>20</sup> Social facts similarly emerge from and are characterized by their capacity to exercise a coercive force on individuals.<sup>21</sup> 'The group thinks, feels and acts entirely differently from the way its members would if they were isolated.'<sup>22</sup> 'Collective representations, emotions and tendencies have not as their causes certain states of consciousness in individuals, but the conditions under which the body social as a whole exists.'<sup>23</sup>

At first, one might be tempted to dismiss Durkheim's attribution of thoughts to groups as preposterous crypto-spiritualism—after all, thoughts are neurophysiological processes that are possible only in a brain, and groups have no brains; only individual humans do. One could also point out that Durkheim's statements about bronze or living cells are inaccurate: science does not say that their properties are *sui generis*, but that they come about as results of interaction between parts, such as atoms and molecules. A description of that interaction (how bronze comes about from copper and tin, how various elements constitute a living cell) is ultimately a reduction of bronze or a cell to its constitutive parts. This response is valid, but it overlooks the historical context of Durkheim's views. Durkheim's reasoning was fully in line with the emergentist doctrines that were widely accepted in the sciences of the era.<sup>24</sup> At the time, no physical explanation of the chemical bond

<sup>16</sup> Gumplowicz, *Soziologie*, 268.

<sup>17</sup> Émile Durkheim: *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Steven Lukes, ed., W. D. Halls trans., New York: The Free Press, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Durkheim, *The Rules*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> Durkheim, *The Rules*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Durkheim, *The Rules*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Durkheim, *The Rules*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Durkheim, *The Rules*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Durkheim, *The Rules*, 131.

<sup>24</sup> For the history of emergentist doctrines in the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century see Achim Stephan, 'Emergence—A Systematic View on its Historical Facets' in Ansgar Beckermann; Hans Flohr and Jaegwon Kim, eds, *Emergence or Reduction? Essays on the Prospects or Nonreductive Physicalism*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992, 26-48 and

was available. Today, modern science routinely reduces chemical phenomena to physical interactions between particles—but this perspective became available only after 1922, when Niels Bohr proposed to explain some properties of chemical elements and the periodicity of the periodic table in terms of the behaviour of subatomic particles.<sup>25</sup> Before this time, it was plausible to assume that genuine chemical forces emerge when elements are combined and that such forces are not reducible to the laws of physics. The very word ‘emergence’ was introduced by George Henry Lewes in 1875.<sup>26</sup> The example Lewes stated is similar to Durkheim’s: the properties of water, he pointed out, are unexplainable by the properties of its constitutive elements, oxygen and hydrogen. In its nineteenth-century form, emergentism was a fully-fledged materialist doctrine; it assumed that matter had atomic and molecular structure and that all change must result from the movement of elementary particles. Nevertheless, emergentism also postulated genuine and irreducible chemical and biological phenomena and assumed that at a certain level of complexity new structures arise with effects that are unexplainable by and irreducible to the effects of individual parts.<sup>27</sup> These emerging structures were further assumed to act on their constituents as causes, while this action was conceived of as unexplainable by the actions of the constituents. The fluidity of water thus can cause its constituent atoms to move, although the fluidity itself, according to this paradigm, is not explainable by the characteristics of these atoms. The paradigm allows downward, *top-down* causation that affects constituent parts but is irreducible to their interaction.

### Bottom-up versus top-down

More than a century later it is very hard to find some credible examples of top-down explanations of phenomena in natural science; most examples of top-down causation cited by Durkheim and emergentists have been explained away by bottom-up processes in the meantime. One important exception is the human brain, whose complexities have been invoked as a possible example by a number of social scientists.<sup>28</sup> They suggest that social phenomena arise in a non-reducible way from

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Brian McLaughlin: ‘The Rise and Fall of British Emergentism’, in Beckerman, Flohr and Kim, eds, *Emergence and Reduction?*, 49-93.

<sup>25</sup> McLaughlin, ‘The Rise and Fall’, 55.

<sup>26</sup> George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind. First Series. The Foundation of a Creed*, London: Trübner, 1875, 412. See also Stephen, ‘Emergence’, 28 and McLaughlin, ‘The Rise’, 65.

<sup>27</sup> See McLaughlin, ‘The Rise’, 49-51 for a description of the position.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum, ‘Societal Facts’, in John O’Neill, ed., *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism*, London: Heinemann 1973, 221-234, 232, pointed out that one needs to postulate a special ontological level in order to avoid the reduction of the mind to the biology of the

individuals and their interactions the way (one assumes) mental events emerge from, but are not reducible to, interactions between the parts of the brain. At the same time, this emergentist understanding of mental phenomena is far from being uncontroversial among the philosophers of mind and has been even mocked as the belief in ‘causal powers that magically emerge at higher-level’.<sup>29</sup>

The history of the opposite, bottom-up approach in the social sciences goes back to Georg Simmel, who defined the object of sociology as a complex system of interactions between individuals that generates social structures or historical events. He thus eliminated the need for the assumption that social entities and phenomena are something more than sets of interacting individuals.<sup>30</sup> Society comes into being when a number of individuals interact, he pointed out.<sup>31</sup> It is but a name for a group of individuals, he wrote in *Individuum und Gesellschaft*, and it is better understood as an event than as a substance.<sup>32</sup> This emphasis on interactions has been an immensely valuable contribution to the debate and to the understanding of social phenomena. A social event or a phenomenon (a soccer match, for instance) is not a set of individuals; it is interactions between the participants in the event or the phenomenon. The use of nouns to refer to social phenomena can easily mislead one to conceive of them as entities in their own right and even as forces that determine what individuals do. The fact that we talk about a ‘soccer match’ does not entail that there is such an entity, an object on the soccer field, in addition, over and above interactions between the players—rather, it is nothing more than what the players do. In some languages like German, the good style in writing emphasizes nouns and

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brain—and that once a separate ontological level is postulated in the case of the mind, it is plausible that a similar relationship can be said to obtain between social entities and the individuals that compose it. Harold Kincaid: ‘Reduction, Explanation and Individualism’, *Philosophy of Science*, 53, 1986, 492-513, 492, similarly expressed the view that the reduction of social phenomena to individuals and their interactions fails for the same reasons that make it impossible to reduce mental states to the physical predicates of the brain. Udehn, *Methodological Individualism*, 331, explained the concept of supervenience by comparing the relationship between the brain and the mind with that of the individual and society. See also Keith Sawyer, ‘Nonreductive Individualism: Part I—Supervenience and Wild Disjunction’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32, 2002, 537-559, 541.

<sup>29</sup> Jaegwon Kim, ‘Multiple Realization and the Metaphysics of Reduction’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52, 1992, 1-26, 17.

<sup>30</sup> As he put it: ‘Vielmehr glauben wir jetzt die historischen Erscheinungen aus dem Wechselwirken und dem Zusammenwirken der Einzelnen zu verstehen, aus der Summierung und Sublimierung unzähliger Einzelbeiträge, aus der Verkörperung der sozialen Energien in Gebilden, die jenseits des Individuums stehen und sich entwickeln.’ Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*<sup>[SEP]</sup> *Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1908, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Simmel, *Soziologie*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Georg Simmel, *Individuum und Geseschaft*, Berlin: Göschen’sche Verlagshandlung, 1917, 12, 14-15.

actually requires authors to generate ontologically false sentences. The sentence that can be seen in some German railway stations 'Es besteht Rauchverbot' ('there exists the prohibition of smoking') is strictly speaking false, since *Rauchverbot*, the prohibition of smoking, is not an entity and it cannot exist.<sup>33</sup> What one wants to say using the sentence is that if one smokes, one will get involved specific interactions, such as paying fines. Ontological inaccuracy of this kind can be seen as a mere stylistic feature common in various forms in various languages, but it does become a problem if one makes assumptions about physical reality on the basis of the stylistic practices common in a language.

The importance of interactions between individuals for the understanding of social phenomena can be also illustrated by some very recent formulations in the philosophy of the social sciences. An example is Keith Sawyer's argument about the impact of railroads on individuals' lives in the Midwest of the USA: the position of railroads determined the rise and fall of many Midwestern cities, he points out; 'Once established, these transportation networks had causal power over individuals'.<sup>34</sup> However, railroads are results of individuals' interactions and the railway system is certainly not an abstract immaterial force in its own right. Saying that 'transportation networks had causal power over individuals' is then merely an abbreviating phrase for the fact that the actions, interactions and decisions of some individuals affected, in important ways, the lives and activities of other individuals. Or, consider the argument about the continuity of institutions: while the individuals that make up an institution are often replaced by other individuals, the institution remains the same. It may seem that in such situations one cannot say that the institution is a set of individuals: normally, in the case of a set, when elements are replaced, a set becomes another set. It has been therefore argued that the replaceability of individuals within an institution implies that an institution must somehow be more than any single set of individuals—for instance, that the Supreme Court of the USA cannot be identified with any specific set of Supreme Court judges.<sup>35</sup> The Supreme Court is certainly not identical with the set of judges that currently serve on the Court, because the Court has made decisions in the past two centuries and in times when the current judges were not even born. The answer to the dilemma is, however, straightforward if we take into account interactions between individuals (including those individuals who appoint judges). One can say, for instance, that the Supreme Court is the total set of all individuals who have ever

<sup>33</sup> See for instance the article on Rauchverbot on Wikipedia, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rauchverbot>, accessed on 15 September 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Sawyer, Keith: *Social Emergence. Societies as Complex Systems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 221.

<sup>35</sup> The argument occurs in various authors see for instance Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 220-221. The variation of the argument based on the example of the Supreme Court of the USA is from Gabriel Uzquiano, 'The Supreme Court and the Supreme Court Judges: A Metaphysical Puzzle', *Nous*, 38, 2004, 135-153.

been appointed to serve as judges, while, at any given time (between their individual appointment and the termination of appointment) only some of them are active and make decisions for the whole set.<sup>36</sup> Or, one can identify the Supreme Court with the set of judges who serve at a given time. In that case, different sets of individuals will make the Supreme Court at different time (the way, for instance, the Pope can be a different person at different times).

A similar argument can be made about the fact that the set of Supreme Court judges (appointed by the President of the USA) can happen to be the same individuals as those that make up the Committee on Judicial Ethics (appointed by the Senate). This is the so-called coincidence argument. The Supreme Court and the Committee on Judicial Ethics are consequently one and the same set of individuals, but when the Supreme Court is in session we cannot say that the Committee on Judicial Ethics is in session. It may therefore seem that it is not enough to say that they are one and the same set in order to describe the two institutions. The response is going to be that the Supreme Court is in session when they interact in one way and that the Committee on Judicial Ethics is in session when they interact in another way—but that they are nevertheless nothing over and above a set of individuals.

However, by taking interactions between individuals into account one can eliminate only some arguments that are presented in favour of the claim that social entities are more than individuals and what individuals do. Interactions between individuals follow certain patterns, it can be also pointed out; in social institutions there are rules, regulations, roles and so on, that determine the interacting of individuals. One can therefore argue that in order to explain the functioning of institutions, one needs to expand ontology beyond individuals and their interactions and that rules, regulations and similar aspects of institutions need to be postulated as separate social forces or as entities in their own right. In a widely cited article published in 1955, Maurice Mandelbaum discussed the situation when a person enters a bank in order to cash a check.<sup>37</sup> This action, according to Mandelbaum, can be understood only 'in terms of the organization of the society to which individuals belong'. It is necessary to take into account the social status and

<sup>36</sup> The solution presented here is an equivalent of the solution proposed by David-Hillel Ruben in his 'The Existence of Social Entities', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, 1982, 295-310. Different solutions were proposed by Uzquiano, 'Supreme Court', Nick Effingham, 'The Metaphysics of Groups', *Philosophical Studies*, 149, 2010, 251-267 and Katherine Ritchie 'What are Groups', *Philosophical Studies*, 166, 2013, 257-272. Though they do not discuss interactions, they all rely on interactions in order to define the sets that define the Supreme Court. (Uzquiano and Ruben then argue on different grounds that it is still necessary to expand ontology beyond the sets of individuals.)

<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere he says 'If societal facts are as ultimate as psychological facts, then those concepts which are used to refer to the forms of organization of a society cannot be reduced without remainder to concepts which only refer to the thoughts and actions of specific individuals.' Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts', 226 and 223.

the role of the person cashing the check and the cashier.<sup>38</sup> Mere behaviour of individuals cannot explain the institutional roles that determine their acting; such explanations may require reference to concepts such as 'social status' and these concepts are irreducible to statements about the behaviour of individuals. However, the response is going to be that rules, roles or regulations do not exist as independent forces that cause the behaviour of individuals; rather, they exist only insofar individuals act, according to their beliefs about rules, regulations and roles. Explaining individuals' behaviour does not require us to refer to social rules as a separate kind of entities, but to individuals' beliefs, including beliefs about social rules or entities. Mandelbaum actually considered this response, but rejected it because

... in attempting to analyse societal facts by means of appealing to the thoughts which guide an individual's conduct, some thoughts will themselves have societal referents, and societal concepts will therefore not have been expunged from our analysis.<sup>39</sup>

This counterargument is not valid: the fact that our description of people's motivation refers to certain entities does not mean that our beliefs about these entities are true or even that these entities exist in the form that people may believe they do, or at all. What matters is that they have beliefs which make them act in a way that makes the institution function. Beliefs may be false (or pertain to non-existent entities; people may believe that a bank is a spiritual force) and still motivate individuals to act in a way that enables institutions to perform their functions. It is the existence of individuals' beliefs about how they should act in the institutional environment, that makes individuals follow institutional rules.

### **Implications of materialism**

Historical figures cannot live in history without living in a society, and a historian consequently cannot avoid the considerations that motivate arguments in favour or against individualism in the social sciences. In the nineteenth century Leopold Ranke was still able to postulate direct divine intervention in historical events and sound credible to his readers; in the early decades of the twentieth century Sedlmayr, we have seen, relied on *Geist* as the force that stood behind historical phenomena. The assumption that non-human spiritual substances drive historical events is unlikely to be seriously proposed by a historian today. The important point is not merely that historical explanations should avoid the *words* such as 'God' or 'the spirit' of a community, an era, or time; rather, the point is that one cannot credibly rely on the assumption that there are immaterial forces that drive historical

<sup>38</sup> Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts', 224.

<sup>39</sup> Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts', 225.

events. The problem is the same as the one about the nature of rules, regulations or roles that Mandelbaum struggled with: are there social forces that exist independently of human individuals? Can institutions such as banks or schools be always explained by the interactions of individuals? The arguments about individualism that have been presented in the philosophy of the social sciences directly pertain to equivalent dilemmas in the philosophy of history—and for the past half a century much more work on the topic has been done in the former field than in the latter.

Unlike German historians of the Wilhelmine and Weimar era, English-speaking theorists of the social sciences after World War Two have been little inclined to drop materialist commitments and introduce immaterial forces into their ontology. This *de facto* means that *ontological individualism*, the view that societies do not consist of anything else but individuals and that individuals exhaust the social world, is the mainstream position that few of them challenge; those that do, do so merely in order to point out that other material factors, such as the physical environment also affect social processes.<sup>40</sup> We have also seen that positions in the debate about the nature of social rules, regulations and roles can imply a challenge to ontological individualism. At the same time, many authors combined ontological individualism with the rejection of a position to which they refer as *methodological individualism*, typically defined as the view that social entities and phenomena are *reducible to or explainable by* individuals and their actions or interactions.<sup>41</sup> Methodological individualism does not mean that the descriptions of social or historical events in terms of individuals are preferable to those that use collective

<sup>40</sup> For instance, Udehn, *Methodological Individualism*, 2 and 215; Tor Egil Førland: 'Mentality as social emergent: Can the Zeitgeist have Explanatory Power?', *History and Theory*, 47, 2008, 44-56, 44, 45; Brian Epstein, 'Ontological Individualism Reconsidered,' *Synthese*, 166, 2009, 187-213, 187, 188; Christian List and Kai Spiekermann, 'Methodological Individualism and Holism in Political Science,' *American Political Science Review*, 107, 2013, 629-643, 630; Sawyer, 'Nonreductive Individualism: Part I' 537, 539; Sawyer, *Social Emergence*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance Steven Lukes: 'Methodological Individualism Reconsidered', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 19, 1968, 119-129, 120, 121, 123; Webster, 'Psychological Reductionism' 259, 260; Graham MacDonald, 'Modified Methodological Individualism,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 86, 1986, 199-211; Kincaid, 'Reduction, Explanation and Individualism', 493; Jones, 'Methodological Individualism', 119; Lars Udehn, 'The Changing Face of Methodological Individualism,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 2002, 479-507, 497; John William Neville Watkins ('The Human Condition. Two Criticisms of Hobbes', 691-716 in R.S. Cohen, ed. *Essays in Memory of Imre Lakatos*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976, 710) cited according to Udehn, *Methodological Individualism*, 216; Daniel Steel, 'Methodological Individualism, Explanation and Invariance', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 36, 2006, 440-463, 440; List and Spiekermann, 'Methodological Individualism', 629; Jon Elster: *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 13; Rajeev Bhargava, *Individualism in Social Science. Forms and limits of a Methodology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 19; Sawyer, *Social Emergence*, 73.

terms—for instance, the expectation that a historian who writes about Napoleon’s invasion of Russia lists individually all the soldiers participating in the invasion rather than use the collective term ‘grande armée’. For the individualist, the very use of collective terms is not controversial since (insofar as) they are assumed to refer to the sets of individuals and their interactions. Finally, it can be misleading if one approaches methodological individualism with assumptions that it precisely precludes. An example is the argument that social entities or functions are irreducible to individuals and their interactions because when one tries to reduce them, one still has to rely on social terms.<sup>42</sup> For instance, in order to refer to individuals such as teachers or inmates, one necessarily invokes their roles within social institutions such as schools or prisons and consequently has to refer to such institutions. However, it will be responded that insofar as they are understood as institutions, schools or prisons are merely joint names for sets of individuals who interact in certain ways. The ‘refutation’ is not valid because it already relies on the assumption that methodological individualism is false.

An example of an argument against methodological individualism that assumes the validity of ontological individualism pertains to the *multiple realizability* of social entities. The argument has had a long history and was originally imported by Harold Kincaid in 1986 into the social sciences from the debates about the (ir)reducibility of psychology to neurobiology.<sup>43</sup> A decade before, Jerry Fodor argued that mental phenomena are realized (occur) in such a great variety of neurological phenomena that it is impossible to state the laws that systematically convert the former into the latter.<sup>44</sup> The relationship between psychology and brain physiology, between mind-states and brain-states, he pointed out, is quite different from the well-known examples of the reduction of phenomena from one science to another, such as the kinetic molecular theory of heat or the physical explanation of the chemical bond. A mental state, such as pain, can be realized in great many very different biological structures: humans, lizards or octopuses can feel pain, though the biological mechanisms that enable this are likely to be very different. Consider, for instance, Fodor submits, a law of economics that describes what happens in monetary exchanges under certain conditions.<sup>45</sup> While every act of monetary exchange can be described as a physical event, some of them are made with dollar bills, others with string wampum, yet others by signing a name on a check or by executing commands on a computer; they are so widely different that one cannot

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Harold Kincaid, *Individualism and the Unity of Science. Essays on Reduction, Explanation and the Special Sciences*, London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997, 23, 34 35, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Originally it was presented in Kincaid: ‘Reduction’, and subsequently elaborated into the book Kincaid, *Individualism*.

<sup>44</sup> Jerry Fodor: ‘Special Sciences (or: the Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis)’, *Synthese* 28, 1974, 97-115.

<sup>45</sup> Fodor, ‘Special Sciences’, 103.

state a *physical* law that encompasses all of them. Fodor's argument (in its application to the relationship between brain states and mind states) was not left uncontested, which resulted in a protracted debate between Fodor and Jaegwon Kim.<sup>46</sup>

Those social scientists and sociologists who wanted to endorse ontological, but reject methodological individualism were quick to note parallels between theirs and Fodor's position and to attempt to apply the multiple realizability argument in their work.<sup>47</sup> Kincaid thus argued that a 'peer group' or 'bureaucracy' may be realized in 'any number of different relations between individuals'.<sup>48</sup> While he endorsed ontological individualism and accepted that such configurations are exhausted by the collectives that realize them, he claimed that the possibility of diverse multiple realizations of social entities and phenomena means that no single type of the configuration of individuals and their interactions corresponds to the predicates of a social theory.<sup>49</sup> As a result, it will be impossible to formulate, using individualist terms, laws about social events or phenomena. Terms that pertain to individuals describe specific realizations of social phenomena, and will therefore not be able to cover what is covered by social terms. Kincaid stated as an example the claim of Marxist sociology 'if the French Revolution failed there would be another bourgeois revolution in France'.<sup>50</sup> If we were now to replace 'bourgeois revolution' with a description that uses individualist terminology, he argued, we could only refer to individual events such as the English Revolution or the Dutch Revolution or similar. But it makes no sense to say that 'if the French Revolution failed there would be the English or the Dutch or ... revolution in France'.

A position that endorses ontological individualism but rejects methodological individualism is likely to be appealing to a modern historian or a philosopher of history, for the same reasons that make it appealing to a sociologist or a social scientist. It enables the historian to avoid ontologically suspect, immaterial and possibly spiritual forces in history writing, while it does not imply

<sup>46</sup>Jaegwon Kim, 'The Myth of Nonreductive Materialism', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 63, 1989, 31-47; Jaegwon Kim: 'Multiple Realization and the Metaphysics of Reduction', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (1992) 1-26; Jaegwon Kim, 'Making Sense of Downward Causation' in Peter Bøgh Andersen, Claus Emmeche, Niels Ole Finnemann and Peder Voetmann Christiansen, eds, *Downward Causality. Minds, Bodies and Matter*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2000, 305-321 and Jaegwon Kim, 'Emergence: Core ideas and issues', *Synthese*, 151, 2006, 547-559. Jerry Fodor, 'Special Sciences: Still Autonomous After all these Years', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 11, 1997, 149-163, 152-155. Ned Block: 'Anti-Reductionism Slaps Back', *Noûs*, 31, 1997, (Supplement 11, *Mind, Causation, and World*), 107-132.

<sup>47</sup> See for instance Kincaid, 'Reduction' as well as the analysis of the implications of the argument by Jones, 'Methodological Individualism'.

<sup>48</sup> Kincaid, *Individualism*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Kincaid, 'Reduction', 497.

<sup>50</sup> Kincaid, 'Reduction', 501.

the obligation to assume that historical forces, structures and events are reducible to individuals and their interactions. To put it figuratively, the position allows history writing to be muddy and non-transparent, without becoming slippery. In the case of art historiography, for instance, it allows the historian to dismiss the explanations of artistic styles based on the interactions of individuals (such as the influence of artistic education), while it does not oblige one to introduce spiritual and immaterial forces as alternatives. The difficulty, however, is that the multiple realizability argument can be challenged. Consider the following problem: if banks or revolutions or bureaucracies were indeed realized in so different relationships between individuals, then how can we recognise a bank or a revolution or bureaucracy?<sup>51</sup> The application of multiple realization argument to social or historical entities and phenomena overlooks the fact that, however diverse, the sets of individuals and their interactions need to have the properties that are necessary for them to be classified as banks, revolutions or universities. According to this counter-argument, the terms used in conditional sentences ‘if ... then ...’ that formulate social laws pertain to the sets of individuals and their interactions that fulfil the conditions that are necessary in order to be classified in a certain way. In the case of Kincaid’s example about the French Revolution, the proper replacement is not ‘the English Revolution or the Dutch Revolution or ...’ but, for instance, ‘an event that satisfies the definition of a bourgeois revolution’ so that the sentence becomes: ‘if the French Revolution failed, there would be another event that satisfies the definition of a bourgeois revolution in France’. Such an event, like any other, is something done by the individuals who participate in it.

### **Materialism and free will**

It is within this framework of possible positions on individualism that one needs to discuss Panofsky’s dilemma about the free will of historical figures. The perspectives on the dilemma that are tenable today rely on the assumptions that are significantly different from those Panofsky would have encountered in his youth. The kind of determinism that modern philosophers discuss when they talk about free will does not take into account the possibility of supra-individual spiritual forces such as *Geist* or *Kultur*. Rather, their concern is the materialist determinism based on the idea that human mental processes, like everything else in this world, are determined by the natural laws that govern the movements of physical particles—which, in their turn, constitute the neuropsychological structure of the human brain. In contemporary analytic philosophy there exists a vast body of research on the problem of free will and these perspectives cannot be avoided. At

<sup>51</sup> For the elaboration of this argument see Branko Mitrović, ‘Is multiple realizability a valid argument against methodological individualism’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, <http://pos.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/04/22/0048393116643591.full.pdf+html> accessed on 2 October 2016.

the same time, a remarkable aspect of the two debates—the one about ontological and methodological individualism in the social sciences and the other about free will in analytic philosophy—is that they have progressed for decades without taking any notice of each other. While surveying the material for this article I have not found one single mention of the problem of free will in the modern discussions of individualism in the social sciences. Similarly, the idea of social determination seems to be utterly absent from analytic philosophers' debates on free will—the kinds of determinism they talk about is biological and sometimes even theological. Even encyclopaedia surveys of the debate about free will fail to mention social determinism as a relevant position. The article about free will in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* observes that 'The main perceived threats to our freedom of will are various alleged determinisms: physical/causal; psychological; biological; theological'<sup>52</sup>—the possibility of social, cultural or historical determinism is simply left unmentioned.

Let us therefore consider the implications of the attribution of free will to the individuals who participate in social and historical entities and phenomena for our understanding of these entities and phenomena. This assumption will affect our understanding of causation within such entities and the explanations that state why certain events happened the way they did. If human individuals have free will then one cannot say that events happened because of some supra-human force or that the event was caused by a social law, such as a law of economics. A collection of individuals or their properties that causes a certain social phenomenon on one occasion may not cause the same phenomenon on another occasion under identical circumstances, simply because the individuals involved may decide to act differently. Nevertheless, this still does not mean that if we attribute free will to participating individuals the laws that define the behaviour of social entities become impossible—they are possible insofar as individuals do not exercise their free will, for instance in those situations when they have already made their decisions how to act. The laws of economics, for instance, function insofar as they are applied to individuals who are committed to making financial gain and who have certain beliefs about the ways to achieve it—they are not applicable to a population that believes, for instance, that financial gain is better avoided because it is detrimental for the salvation of the soul. Also, the individualist implications of free will cannot be avoided by saying that the social context should not be taken to determine what individuals do, but that it defines the pool of options they have—that it is an enabling and constraining factor, but not the driving factor of their actions. This is certainly a convincing perspective, but these enabling and constraining effects of social environment are produced by the actions and ultimately free will of other individuals.

<sup>52</sup> Timothy O'Connor, 'Free Will', <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/>, accessed on 20 May 2015.

These general considerations do not remove doubts about free will in the context of the materialist paradigm that has dominated our discussion so far. If it is assumed that the human ability to think and decide results from neurological processes in the brain—that no immaterial or spiritual forces are involved—then these processes occur according to natural laws and there can be no place for free will. At the same time, people do believe that they are making their decisions freely and on the basis of their reasoning processes. As John Searle put it, the dilemma is

How can we square this self-conception of ourselves as mindful, meaning-creating, free, rational, etc., agents with a universe that consists entirely of mindless, meaningless, unfree, nonrational brute physical particles?<sup>53</sup>

The result of the dilemma is that in contemporary analytic philosophy there are three possible positions on free will. One may assume that the human capacity to think and decide is somehow independent of the materiality of the brain and the physical laws that underwrite its functioning. This view is commonly referred to as *libertarian*. (It is not necessarily related to and should not be confused with *political* libertarianism, which asserts that governments should interfere as little as possible in the everyday lives of their citizens). Contrary to this view is *hard determinism*, which asserts that human mental processes are determined by the neuro-psychology of the brain, and that free will is merely an illusion. Finally, there is the view that the natural laws according to which the brain functions indeed determine the functioning of the mind, thoughts and decisions, but that *nevertheless* human beings have free will. This last position is known as *compatibilism*. Obviously, both hard determinists and libertarians oppose compatibilism; the former because they believe that human thinking is determined by the biology of the brain and that this leaves no space for free will; the latter because they believe that human mind is in some way independent of the biological determinism of the brain. One way or another, their views are *anti-compatibilist*.

## Compatibilism

Let us consider the compatibilist perspective first. As mentioned, this is the view that human mental life is *determined* by the neurobiological properties of the brain, but that human beings nevertheless possess free will—and this position requires clarification since it is likely to appear self-contradictory. How can one say that people have free will if their acting is pre-determined? The response is that according to compatibilists' understanding, freedom of will is the absence of constraints. In everyday life, one often talks about freedom as the absence of coercion, and one can similarly expand this understanding to individuals' internal

<sup>53</sup> John Searle, *Freedom & Neurobiology. Reflections on Free Will, Language and Political Power*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 5.

lives. Free will, on this account, is an unencumbered will; we act freely if we are able to perform any action we choose to—even though one accepts the determinist view that what we choose to do is predetermined by our constitution and ultimately neurobiology. Daniel Dennett in his *Elbow Room* argues that this kind of freedom is all the freedom that one may want: it is pointless to desire freedom to do things that one does not want to do.<sup>54</sup> It may be responded that the absence of constraints is still not sufficient for the freedom of will, if the underlying assumption is that what one wants, as well as one's decisions, are determined by the neurology of the brain. The compatibilists' response is that the absence of determinism would not be proper free will but sheer arbitrariness; it would imply the inability to control one's own actions and decisions. Actions would happen by chance or luck and would not result from rational and responsible decision making processes. Imagine a person who has to decide whether to include Venice or Florence into his or her Italy trip. Various reasons can be considered when making such a decision, and one would normally say that the person made the decision freely if he or she could have followed his or her reasons when making the decision. But if the decision were made independently of any preceding mental states (such as motivations or beliefs), it would be arbitrary in the sense that it was undetermined by and independent of any preceding considerations. This would mean that the person can make diverse decisions following the same line of thoughts (preceding mental states). Arguably, this is a symptom of problems in neural processes rather than free will.

Compatibilists therefore assume that determinism holds and that all human decisions merely result from neurological processes in the brain. From this point of view, human actions are subject to natural laws and should be predictable in principle. For instance, in theory, on the basis of natural laws, it should be possible to determine whether the person is about to rise his or her arm if one knew the positions and the movements of all particles in the person's brain. Freedom for compatibilists pertains to the possibilities we have to act relative to a description of our circumstances, whereby that description leaves aside certain kinds of information.<sup>55</sup> Simply, we do not know where our own determination will drive us. The claim that a person can decide to rise her hand means that she can freely decide to perform this action if we abstract from any information about what he or she will choose to do. At the same time, this is precisely the information that the person who makes the decision does not have. It is in that sense, from the compatibilist point of view, that we talk about the person's free will. Determinism allows the theoretical possibility that others may predict a person's actions with complete certainty on the basis of their knowledge about the state of the world and the person's brain at a given time, while that person cannot predict his or her actions. Here is an example

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room. The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

<sup>55</sup> A good description is in Hilary Bok, 'Freedom and Practical Reason' in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 130-166.

stated by Hilary Bok.<sup>56</sup> Imagine that a person owns a small gadget—an immensely strong computer—that can perform all the necessary calculations about the particles that make up that person and the person’s environment and can consequently predict what he or she will do next. The device can calculate the contents of the person’s mental processes on the basis of information about all the particles in the person’s brain and the surrounding, predict the person’s next action and state the prediction on its small screen. The person could read these predictions—but nevertheless decide to do the opposite, if he or she wants to do that. Arguably, it would be therefore possible to say that the person has free will. But does that mean that the person’s mental capacities can somehow beat causation—that they somehow emerge into something over and above the causation that operates the brain? The answer is negative. Another device, that would have the necessary information about the particles in the person’s brain and the environment to which the person reacts (including that person’s predicting device) would predict the person’s decisions to cheat the device as well. Nevertheless, when the person decides whether or not to act according to the predictions of his or her device, he or she is genuinely choosing what to do, in the sense that the outcome of these deliberations cannot be known to him or her in advance.

In a way, the processes in the brain that determine a person’s decision can be said to be that person. It is not necessary to postulate something over and above these processes in order to expect a person to be able to judge and evaluate situations in the social environment in a manner that is not *socially* constrained. Processes in the brain enable the person to think, act rationally, make decisions and choose between different options in relation to the context. Once we acknowledge this, such a person can still be expected to make decisions and act freely, in the sense of making relevant decisions in everyday life in an (externally) unconstrained manner. It is interesting to compare this view with the way Erasmus wrote about free judgment (*liberum arbitrium*) or Thomas Aquinas about human choice (*electio humana*).<sup>57</sup> For Erasmus or Aquinas human mental processes certainly did not result from material, neurological processes in the brain. Nevertheless, they were aware of the argument that God could predict human decisions and actions because His position was external to the temporal processes of this world. This extra-temporal perspective obviously had to be bracketed insofar as they wanted to attribute to humans the free, unencumbered capacity to judge actions and choose between them—in a way that is similar to the way a compatibilist brackets the causality of the processes in the human brain.

The emphasis on the capacity to decide about, judge, choose actions freely—as opposed to the capacity to act differently—is also important because of an

<sup>56</sup> Bok, ‘Freedom and Practical Reason’.

<sup>57</sup> Desiderius Erasmus Roterdamus, *De libero arbitrio διατριβη sive collatio*, Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1935. Thomas Aquinas, ‘De electione humana’ in Tommaso d’Aquino, *Il male e la libertà*, Milan: RCS libri, 2014, 672-725.

argument that was presented by Harry Frankfurt and that has played an important role in discussions about compatibilism. The important dilemma about free will cannot be the question of whether a person could have acted differently.<sup>58</sup> Frankfurt presented the example of two persons, Black and Jones: Black wants to coerce Jones to do something, but does not want to act unless he has to do so. If it is clear that Jones is going to perform the desired action, Black will not act at all; if it becomes clear that Jones may not act as Black wants, Black will take steps to ensure that he does.<sup>59</sup> In the case Black has no need to act because Jones has already decided to act as he wants, Jones bears the responsibility for the action. But what action Jones performs is not up to him; whether he finally acts on his own or as a result of Black's intervention, ultimately he performs the same action. The idea that a person is morally responsible if he could have acted differently is therefore mistaken, Frankfurt pointed out. In his view, the principle that a person is morally responsible if he or she could have acted differently should be replaced by the principle 'a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise'. Another way to respond is to say that what matters is not how the person acted but his or her decision to act and whether he or she had an unconstrained capacity to decide.

### **Anti-compatibilism**

From the individualist perspective, the compatibilist position has certain advantages: it allows one to admit that human mental processes result from deterministic processes in the brain, but that human thinking and the capacities to choose and decide are not determined by the social environment, even if the social context (the actions of other individuals) may be able to constrain the actual actions that individuals can perform. The problem is that the opponents of individualism can deny this—and the result will be a stalemate in the debate. The stalemate nevertheless obtains only as long as one does not consider the implications of the materialist perspective that underwrites the functioning of mental processes for both the compatibilist and the hard determinist. In order to explain this, it is necessary to consider the anti-compatibilist approaches.

A particularly influential presentation of the anti-compatibilist position was presented by Peter van Inwagen.<sup>60</sup> He summarised the argument as follows:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on

<sup>58</sup> Harry Frankfurt: 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility' in Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 167-176.

<sup>59</sup> In various versions of the argument authors imagine, for instance, that Black is a neuroscientist who has installed a device in Jones' brain that can affect how Jones acts.

<sup>60</sup> Peter van Inwagen, 'An argument for Incompatibilism' in Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 38-57.

before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.<sup>61</sup>

On the libertarian side, the obvious difficulty derives from the need to avoid the implications of the understanding that a human individual, being a biological creature, is subject to natural laws. For libertarians it is necessary to argue that mental processes, which result from the biology of the brain, are somehow independent of natural (biological) causation. This position typically requires postulating dualism between the mind and the brain, the immaterial soul or some other source of free will, unaffected by the causality of the natural world. Of course, one may believe in such entities, but it will not be easy to reconcile such beliefs with the modern scientific worldview. An alternative possibility is to rely on emergentism and assume that at a certain level of complexity macro-properties emerge from micro-properties and that they have causal powers which are not reducible to the interaction of micro-properties.<sup>62</sup> This would mean attributing to the human mind the causal capacities that are not reducible to the causal capacities of the brain. Similarly to emergentism, this would mean that the mind possesses the capacity for top-down causation of the actions of bodily parts that cannot be explained by the bottom-up causation that derives from the neurology of the brain. Timothy O'Connor thus advocated the view that the organization of matter into highly complex systems can result in the emergence of new, irreducible properties, that will enable one to make decisions independently of the causation that derives from the material structure of the brain.<sup>63</sup> Obviously, it can be responded that there is no proof that this actually happens.

A well-known example of a libertarian theory was formulated by Roderick Chisholm.<sup>64</sup> In order to assert free will, Chisholm argued, one should drop the assumption that all events are always caused by other events. Rather, it is necessary to rely on *agent causation*. If an agent is to be responsible for a specific action, then there must exist events that are caused by agents and not by other events.<sup>65</sup> (30) The value of Chisholm's contribution was that he described the kind of position that was needed in order to attribute to human subjects the capacity to decide freely. However, at the same time, critics pointed out, he merely presented a description, a label, of what was needed.<sup>66</sup> Agents that he conceives of as the sources of

<sup>61</sup> Inwagen, 'An argument', 39.

<sup>62</sup> For the elaboration of this position see Timothy O'Connor, 'Agent Causation' in Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 255-284, 262-264.

<sup>63</sup> O'Connor, 'Agent Causation'.

<sup>64</sup> Roderick Chisholm, 'Human Freedom and the Self', in Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 26-37.

<sup>65</sup> Chisholm, 'Human Freedom', 30.

<sup>66</sup> See in particular Gary Watson's comments in his 'Introduction' in Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 1-25, 10.

independent of causation imply that the human self is placed outside the empirical world. As Gary Watson put it,

If free and responsible actions were not lawfully related to the states and processes of individuals, including their beliefs, values and critical thinking, then exercises of agent-causation would seem to be divorced from psycho-physical reality, the rationally inexplicable outbursts of a structureless substance.<sup>67</sup>

Chisholm's view can be taken to be a general model of a theory that postulates agents capable of free action—a view that is compatible with many religious perspectives and that has exercised a huge influence through history. Quite in line with Panofsky's view, from this perspective, there is no place for social determinism, and as Chisholm puts it, there can be no science of man.<sup>68</sup> Sciences describe laws—but if agent causation holds, then 'there will be human actions which we cannot explain by subsuming them under any laws'.<sup>69</sup> (This would obviously not apply to the situation described earlier, where large numbers of individuals act in accordance with the decisions that they made previously.) Whatever its ultimate (meta)physical justification, this kind of theory is finely aligned with Panofsky's postulates of humanist historiography.

We get a more unexpected perspective when we consider hard determinism, as the alternative anti-compatibilist position. In this case, free will will be denied to historical subjects on the basis of the argument that human mental processes are biological in nature and subject to the natural laws that leave no space for it. It has been mentioned that Gumplowicz dismissed free will as a phantom because, in his view, modern natural sciences have shown that material processes determine human spirit (*Geist*).<sup>70</sup> This claim was intended to enable a science of social phenomena—he argued that it would be impossible to formulate social laws if the individuals participating in social entities could freely decide about their actions. In his view *every* social phenomenon is a necessary effect of the social causes that precede it; *every* social phenomenon must derive from (a number of) sufficient social causes.<sup>71</sup> This strong claim implies that social causes are sufficient to produce every social change as their effect.<sup>72</sup> Individuals' actions, properties or reasoning capacities do not matter. But here is the rub: it is far from clear that the understanding of human mental processes as determined by the biology of the brain—on which Gumplowicz relied in order to dismiss free will—is compatible with the social

<sup>67</sup> Watson, 'Introduction', 10.

<sup>68</sup> Chisholm, 'Human Freedom', 35.

<sup>69</sup> Chisholm, 'Human Freedom', 35.

<sup>70</sup> Gumplowicz, *Soziologie*, 111.

<sup>71</sup> Gumplowicz, *Soziologie*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> Gumplowicz, *Soziologie*, 127.

determination of the acting of individuals. If the biology of the brain determines human thinking and acting, then it is not clear how social causation can play its role. Biology is always the biology of individuals and if it determines individuals' acting, then social causes can affect social phenomena only through the mediation of individuals' biology. Any interaction of individuals with society has to go through the senses, while the senses can be affected only by material objects, such as other individuals. There is no immaterial interaction of the mind with society. Society can thus exercise influence on individuals only through their interaction with other individuals or the material objects other individuals make. Any influence of society on individuals' thinking has to be analysable in terms of the person's interaction with individuals or artefacts individuals made. Society can affect the processes in the brain that (from the hard-determinist point of view) determine an individual's thinking, decisions and acting, only through the specific acts of interaction with other individuals. The same applies to the determination that modern analytic philosophers talk about when they discuss free will. If neurobiology determines the functioning of the mind, then society can affect it only through the person's specific interactions with individuals that participate in the social world. There can be no social determination that does not consist of specifiable interactions with other individuals, and that is therefore not reducible to such interactions. The totality of the influence that social forces, entities or phenomena can exercise on an individual is therefore reducible to (in most cases, a large number of) interactions with other individuals.

## Conclusion

The final result of this survey of debates about individualism and free will is thus, one could say, unexpected. On the one hand, Panofsky's perspective, and with him the idea of humanist historiography (understood as the approach to history writing that assumes the reducibility of historical events and phenomena to the actions of and interactions between individuals) can be seen as vindicated. On the other, this vindication is different from what one could have expected and, contrary to Panofsky's approach, the consideration of free will turns out to be irrelevant; once materialist assumptions are introduced in historiography, even hard determinism ends up as an individualist perspective. The introduction of materialist perspectives in history writing means that social forces can influence human individuals only through their senses, which further implies that this can happen only through interaction with other individuals or results of their activities. Even if we accept the emergentist views of society and assume that social entities and phenomena emerge from individuals and their interactions in ways that makes them irreducible to individuals and what individuals do, this may have a huge importance for the social sciences, but little for (art) historiography, that seeks to explain the creativity and actions of individuals. Insofar as such supra-individual emergent forces and

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phenomena exercise any influence on individuals, this can happen only through the senses and consequently must have the form of and be reducible to interactions with other individuals.

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