Materialist Philosophy of History

A Realist Antidote to Postmodernism

BRANKO MITROVIĆ

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY • HISTORIOGRAPHY

"*Materialist Philosophy of History* is a truly intriguing piece of work. In a conscientious, thorough, and combative manner, it grapples with the implications of a materialist worldview for the discipline of history. The arguments have the potential to move the debate within philosophy of history forward by pushing antifoundationalism back. Adherents of the latter will want to take issue with the book, but the scholarship is much too solid, the breadth of knowledge too wide, and the arguments too convincing for its views to be brushed aside."

—**Tor Egil Førland,** University of Oslo

What does it mean for our understanding of history if we assume that everything is physical and that no immaterial entities, forces, or phenomena exist? *Materialist Philosophy of History: A Realist Antidote to Postmodernism* examines the implications of a materialist worldview in contemporary philosophy of history. Materialism has wide-ranging consequences for historical research as well as for the credibility of various conceptions of the historical past. Branko Mitrović shows how these implications pertain both to the nature of social institutions and the capacities of historical figures to decide, act, acquire beliefs, and communicate, as well as to the methodology of historical research and problems, such as the interpretation and translation of historical documents. A materialist view also entails rejecting the view that forces such as culture, language, or society can construct physical reality or that the historical past is constructed through the work of the historian. This book examines these consequences and presents a comprehensive materialist perspective on historical research and the understanding of the historical past.

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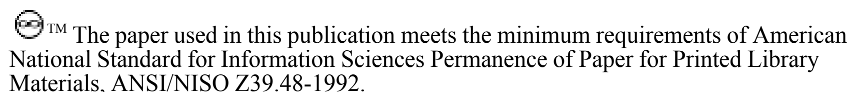

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Contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

1 Realism 29

2 Individualism 47

3 Free Will 65

4 Thoughts and Contents 83

5 Language 105

6 Essentialism 127

7 Contexts and Rationality 143

8 Understanding, Interpretation and Translation 173

9 Transparency 189

Conclusion: Materialism and Humanist Values, Or: How Is Idealism Possible? 209

Appendix: On Not Seeing-As 219

Bibliography 233

Index 249

About the Author 259

Preface

Almost twenty years ago, without thinking that these interests would eventually result in a book, I started to analyze in a systematic way the methodological problems and dilemmas that I encountered in my historical work and in works of my colleagues. Originally, I thought of this interest as an interest in the methodology of historical research, and only after some time I realized that these problems were, in fact, genuine philosophical problems that belong properly in the field of the philosophy of history. I owe this insight to my doctoral adviser in philosophy, Christopher Martin—as he put it when I described the topic: "You are proposing to do more philosophy, not less." The choice of methodological problems that interested me seemed spontaneous at the time. The approach, it soon turned out, had to be bi-disciplinary, pertaining to the philosophical treatment of methodological problems on the one hand and their position in the history of historiography on the other. Over a decade, its result was two series of papers that came out mostly in *History and Theory* and the *Journal of Art Historiography*. I owe huge gratitude to the editors of these two journals, Brian Fay and Richard Woodfield for their interest in my work, encouragement and theoretical feedback regarding numerous issues and dilemmas that I faced while working on these articles. When it comes to the philosophical papers and ultimately the material that makes up this book, I also need to express my gratitude to Nick Zangwill, Barry Smith, Ian Verstegen and Robert Nola for extensive philosophical help, advice and support, as well as to my proof-editors Karen Wise and Julie Perkins for their help with written English.

The papers pertaining to the history of the methodological problems that interested me, mostly originally published in the *Journal of Art Historiography*, gradually came to present a coherent picture about the rise of collectivist ideologies in German (art) historiography and became my book *Rage and*

Denials, published by the Penn State University Press in 2015. By that time I also knew that my philosophical work on the methodology of historical research constituted material for a book. Nevertheless, the awareness about the nature of this project developed in phases. Originally, I thought that the book was about the philosophy of intellectual history, because most of my work up to that time pertained to problems of interpretation. However, methodological problems of interpretation are not limited to intellectual history; all historians face them and it took me some time to accept that the implications of the book necessarily pertained to a wider picture. It took another, later, insight to realize that my methodological concerns, that stimulated my interests in the philosophy of history from the beginning, were consistently motivated by my unwillingness to accept the expansion of ontology beyond the physical world. The very choice of the methodological dilemmas that I sought to resolve in my earlier work was not spontaneous as I originally thought; rather, it was motivated by my rejection of (what I perceived as) the widespread ontological laxity in the historical works that I read. My tendency to see hidden (often political) agendas behind inflationary ontologies only strengthened my motivation through the years in which I worked on these problems.

From the very beginning of my work in the philosophy of history I have been aware that my views and assumptions were incompatible with and opposed to the postmodernist perspectives that were dominant in the final decades of the twentieth century and whose influence is still sometimes strongly felt. My original intention was, nevertheless, to avoid the discussion of postmodernism in this book, and I am therefore grateful to the anonymous reviewer of the manuscript for emphasizing the need to describe explicitly the incompatibility of materialism with anti-realist, anti-foundationalist and social-constructionist paradigms. I have no doubt that postmodernist perspectives have had poisonous effects on the intellectual life and the political culture of English-speaking countries for the past half a century. In the philosophy of history they have led the discipline into a dead end and resulted in its reduction into desperate and unproductive efforts to prove that the past did not happen. The introduction of questions pertaining to the methodology of historical research and to the compatibility of our understanding of the past with the materialist, physicalist worldview should, I hope, help break the deadlock.

Philadelphia, December 2019.

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Mitrović, Branko. "'Without thinkers . . . no theories of the world.' Tim Crane: *Aspects of Psychologism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014 and *The Objects of Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013." [Book review.] *History and Theory* 55 (2016), 141–153.

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Introduction

In some German train stations, one can read the announcement: “Es besteht Rauchverbot” (“There exists a prohibition of smoking”). Presumably, this does not suggest that the prohibition of smoking, *Rauchverbot*, is an entity that can be found in the train station in addition to trains, passengers, shops, and so on. Nor is it a property of the objects that exist in the train station. Rather, the announcement means that a person who smokes will be involved in specific types of interactions with security guards, such as paying fines. What actually exists is the guards instructed to fine everyone who tries to smoke. It is a common practice in many languages, and the German bureaucratic style often requires that situations that involve only material entities (including human beings) be described using sentences about imaginary immaterial entities. Taken literally, such sentences are false because they attribute existence to fictional objects—nevertheless, they convey their message and describe metaphorically a situation that really obtains. The tendency to describe real events by talking about imaginary or abstract objects differs from one language to another. Latin is, in this sense, possibly on the opposite end of the spectrum from German: good Latin style precludes the possibility that an abstract noun could be the subject of an active verb.[1] Students who learn to write Latin are, for instance, told that the English sentence “The replacement of the emperor changed everything” cannot be literally translated into Latin because “the replacement of the emperor” is not really a thing and cannot act or change anything. Rather, one is advised to write the equivalent of “The emperor having been replaced, everything changed”—even though, it may be argued, this does not mean quite the same thing. Similar dilemmas result from standard English phrases as well. A statement such as “people are obligated to act” easily becomes “there exists an obligation to act.” Should this allow us to assume that such obligations are real things, on

equal footing with dogs and electricity? On the one hand, one is tempted to say that they are not, that words such as "obligation" merely refer to widespread types of human relations and interactions. On the other hand, they do make people act in certain ways, and if we admit that they cause events to happen, it is difficult to say that they are mere fictions.

Quandaries of this kind are unavoidable in historical research. Dilemmas about the nature and the causal capacities of historical entities such as states or armies, phenomena or periods such Baroque or Antiquity, or events such as wars or revolutions underlie every attempt to understand and explain what happened in history. Was the Renaissance or the French Revolution an immaterial force over and above participating individuals and their interactions—or are these words merely joint names for these individuals and (or) their interactions? Did the Renaissance and the French Revolution actually have causal powers on their own, and did they cause the interactions of participating individuals—or should a historian assume that their causal powers merely resulted from these individuals' actions and interactions? Were the Renaissance or the French Revolution identical with the actions and interactions of participating individuals, or were they something more? In order to describe or explain an event, a historian necessarily makes assumptions about the nature of the forces and the protagonists involved; these assumptions determine the possible frameworks of the descriptions and the credibility of the explanations a historian can provide.

MATERIALISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: AN OLD DILEMMA

These introductory observations bring us to the topic of this book. Let me use the term "materialism" for the view that things that are not describable within the worldview of modern natural sciences do not exist and have never existed.[2] (Some people prefer words "physicalism" or "naturalism.") A straightforward way to describe this position, which certainly requires further philosophical elaboration, is to say that everything is physical. Human mental states and their contents, on this account, are biological phenomena, human beings are biological creatures, and chemistry that underlies human biology ultimately results from the physics of particles. The assumption is not that everything should be studied using physical methods, but that all that there is, is physically constituted. The aim of this book is to describe and analyze the implications of this worldview for historical research. What does it mean to approach historical research and history-writing with the assumption that materialism is true? What kinds of constraints on the assumptions that a historian can make and what kinds of implications for the methodology of historical research arise from the adoption of a materialist ontology—an

ontology that precludes entities, forces or phenomena that are not physical? What kind of understanding of historical events results from the refusal to include spiritual, abstract, or immaterial forces, entities, events or phenomena in historical descriptions and explanations? Considering the wide and pervasive influence of the materialist worldview today, for anyone interested in history, it is certainly important to know about the constraints that materialism imposes on historical research and our understanding of the past. Quite probably many, maybe the majority, of the readers of this book endorse the materialist worldview in some form. The same applies to the majority of historians I know. This widespread private endorsement of materialism, however, stands in sharp contrast with idealist ideologies and theoretical approaches such as postmodernism, anti-realism, cultural constructionism or anti-foundationalism that have dominated the humanities for the past fifty years—and that often cannot be reconciled with the materialist understanding of the world and its physical constitution. The same applies, we shall see, to various idealist positions in analytic philosophy.

The implications of materialism for historical research and the understanding of history penetrate very deep into a historian's work and have wide-ranging consequences. My motivation for writing this book came precisely from the awareness that these consequences are neither always clear nor obvious to many historians or even philosophers of history. A historian may, for instance, reject the validity of historical explanations that rely on spiritual or divine forces and rely on culture or social context instead, but attribute to cultures or social contexts causal powers that make them different from spiritual forces only by their name. Materialism imposes constraints on historical research that have significant consequences when it comes to a wide range of methodological dilemmas pertaining to, for instance, historical causation, the nature of historical contexts, the contents of the mental states of historical figures, reporting the beliefs of historical figures, the nature of languages, the translation of historical documents, and many others. The purpose of this book is to survey these consequences. Materialism in historical research makes it impossible for a historian to rely on abstract and immaterial entities and forces in understanding, describing, or explaining historical events or phenomena. Hardly any historians today will explicitly state that the Renaissance was a spiritual force in its own right that determined the actions of individuals during the *quattro-* and *cinquecento*—but insofar as they describe and explain the actions of Renaissance individuals, they will have to decide whether they will, or will not, attribute explanatory and causal capacities to the period taken on its own, over and above the actions and interactions of biological individuals. Similarly, a historian who attributes free will to historical figures is bound to provide different explanations for their actions from a historian who assumes that these actions were predetermined by Providence or the social-historical context—and it is important to

discuss whether and in what form free will can be compatible with an understanding of historical figures as biological creatures. The assumption that the contents of the mental states of historical figures result from their neurobiology and do not have abstract, immaterial existence on their own has a wide range of consequences for the understanding and interpretation of historical documents. Additional complexities arise from the fact that historians also live in historical contexts and that, consequently, the assumptions that materialism makes about the contents of mental states, reasoning capacities, free will, the use of language and so on, apply not only to the historical figures they research about but to these historians as well.

The materialist perspective on history is not a novel one. Obviously, ancient historians could not have shared our modern materialist worldview nor did they differentiate between things that can and cannot have physical descriptions the way we do. Nevertheless, Tacitus discussed, though he did not endorse, the equivalent view that historical events are exclusively predetermined by natural causes.[3] Thucydides's and Polybius's avoidance of spiritual forces in historical descriptions and explanations was arguably motivated by ontological concerns that are quite similar to those that motivate the materialist perspective that this book seeks to analyze. Thucydides famously warned about the absence of fabulous events in his narration, and Polybius recommended that wherever one can specify other causes of events, one should not have recourse to gods.[4] An example of a different approach is Herodotus's explanation of the fact that, during the battle of Platea, many Persian soldiers died around the temple of Demeter as the revenge of the goddess for the destruction of her temple in Eleusine.[5] Historical explanations that explicitly rely on divine intervention were still common among nineteenth-century historians: Leopold Ranke thus claimed that God's intervention caused the failure of Maximilian I's plans to create a universal monarchy.[6] One of the turning points in the rejection of divine intervention in historical explanations was the 1890s *Methodenstreit* and Karl Lamprecht's attacks on the Rankean tradition.[7] However, Lamprecht replaced Providence with supra-natural determinism exercised by the collectives to which individuals belong, and the idea of cultural history that he promoted anticipated the supra-individual immaterial forces that marked Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*.[8] About the same time, Alois Riegl introduced into art historiography the concept of *Kunstwollen*, a self-propelled, immaterial artistic force that belongs to the community and has the capacity to causally affect the work of individual artists.[9] In other words, one may cease to use words such as "God" or "Providence" in history-writing, but as long as one relies on immaterial causation, one will have to postulate immaterial causes. As Erwin Panofsky suggested, such a methodology of historical research often merely rearticulates in new words theological positions from centuries ago.[10] A historian who introduces Culture or Discourse as forces on their own that

explain actions of individuals and their interactions, that determine or delimit everything individuals think and know, and even construct their reality, is relying on a concept that is not unlike Luther's conception of a Deity that created reality and predetermines everything, including human actions and thoughts.[11] Old-fashioned metaphysics can thus easily sneak in, disguised by new words. Consider the implications for the history of literature of Roland Barthes's thesis about "the death of the author." This is the view that the author does not contribute to the content of a literary work, that he or she is a mere "scriptor" (*scripteur*).[12] Barthes explicitly rejected the possibility that authors' actions (writing) may result from their free will and insisted that it is *language itself* that writes through authors.[13] It is consequently not clear that (or in what sense) the underlying ontology of his theory of literary creativity is different from the one presented by Plato in the *Ion*. Plato says there that poets do not work by their own skill (τέχνῃ) but are driven by a Divine force (θείᾳ δυνάμει), and God uses them as laborers (ὑπηρέταις).[14] One way to look at what Barthes was saying is that he merely replaced what Plato called "God" and "laborers" with "language" and "scriptors." However credible such a view may have been in Plato's time, today one would be expected to take into account, at least as a possibility, that these "scriptors" are biological creatures that can be affected only by something that can have a physical description. A history of literature based on Barthes's perspective would need to explain the ontology of what Barthes calls "language" and the nature of its causal capacities. If it is an immaterial force, then one needs to explain how it can affect biological creatures such as "scriptors"; alternatively, if it has material causal capacities, then one needs to explain what they might be.

Postmodernist historiography provides numerous similar examples of ontological expansions that introduce immaterial historical forces, such as epistemes or discourses, and attribute to them genuine causal properties.[15] In a 1985 polemic well known to art historians, Norman Bryson criticized Ernst Gombrich for the view that styles of representation change through history, while the natural world that painters strive to represent remains unchanged.[16] He claimed instead that nature and physical reality themselves are products of History. History in this case becomes a force that (not unlike God in Protestant traditions) generates both the physical world and the human mental lives.[17] Another example of similar reasoning one finds in the work of the architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez. Pérez-Gómez explicitly states that the objective world is an illusion and that it does not exist.[18] The reality of the modern world, he claims, "is not independent of our consciousness."[19] This leads him to infer that forces such as language construct the physical reality and human interactions with it. He thus states that "[t] he verb 'to see' was reciprocal in Greek; whoever saw was seen, and the blind were invisible."[20] The claim assumes that language parcels, structures and organizes human reality. If one did not attribute such causal capacities to ancient Greek

language, one simply could not say that "whoever saw was seen, and the blind were invisible" merely because of the claim that the verb "to see" does not differentiate between active and passive forms.[21]

Cultural, linguistic or historical constructionism of this kind is not particular to postmodernism; rather, postmodernism shares it with the idealist tradition to which it belongs. Bryson's claims, for instance, are very similar to a research program described in 1927 by the Viennese art historian Hans Sedlmayr, who claimed that the natural world that artists imitate depends on the *Geist* of the community.[22] For both Bryson and Sedlmayr communal forces (history, the spirit of the community) construct the physical world itself. It is therefore not surprising that the implications of materialism—a position traditionally opposed to idealist worldview—systematically turn out to be incompatible with the core tenets of postmodernist, constructionist, anti-realist, anti-foundationalist agendas, highly influential for the past half a century. Materialism cannot be reconciled, for instance, with the popular views that social phenomena such as culture or language exist over and above human individuals and their interactions, that theory-free perception (and concept formation) is impossible or that language determines the cognitive and mental capacities of historical subjects. The same applies to the idea, promoted by some postmodernist philosophers of history, that colligatory concepts (such as "the Renaissance" of "the French Revolution") have no reference. At the same time, it is not easy for postmodernists to reject physicalism the way idealist philosophers of the past traditionally rejected materialist positions. The claim that human history, languages or beliefs construct the physical reality cannot be simply asserted (the way postmodernist authors often do)—if it is to be credible, one needs to support it with a comprehensive metaphysical elaboration showing that most of our modern science is false.

Throughout the book, I will be thus obliged to point out when the implications of materialism run against popular postmodernist positions. However, the aim of the book is not a polemic against postmodernism. Its aim is also not to prove or to refute the validity of materialism (physicalism). The aim is to provide a comprehensive survey of the consequences of materialism for the philosophy of history and its implications for historical research. I hope, for instance, that a religious reader, who believes that God sometimes intervenes in history and sometimes not, will still endorse the description of historical research presented here as valid insofar as one leaves aside God's immaterial interventions in history. Similarly, I hope that the readers who believe that social institutions or languages are something over and above human individuals and their interactions, or the readers who believe that mental states are something other than brain states, will still agree that the perspective on historical research presented here is accurate, insofar as these non-materialist assumptions are bracketed. Possibly, they may even use the conclusions of the book in order to argue that materialism is not compatible

with a sound methodology of historical research, as they conceive of it. Postmodernists may also try to do the same. It is therefore appropriate to criticize the book if and insofar as it fails to describe accurately the implications of materialism for historical research—but insofar as some readers disagree with these implications as valid approaches to historical research, and think that historical research should proceed differently and consequently in ways that require one to rely on immaterialist assumptions, then this is not really a criticism of this book. Rather, I can only hope that this book will contribute to their project of defining what these immaterialist assumptions need to be. And I can also offer advice: if such project is going to yield credible results, it will need to rely on comprehensive metaphysics, capable of supplanting the materialist worldview. Materialism is a metaphysical position like any other, and since a rejection of a metaphysical position necessarily entails the formulation of an alternative metaphysical position, this alternative position will remain unconvincing as long as it is not appropriately elaborated.

MATERIALISM, PHYSICALISM AND NATURALISM, DEFINITIONS, HEMPEL'S DILEMMA

Throughout the book, I use the term "materialist" for the kind of worldview that many philosophers also refer to as "physicalist" or "naturalist." I considered using one of these two terms instead, but eventually decided that the phrases "physicalist philosophy of history" or "naturalist philosophy of history" sound too unusual. It is generally accepted that the terms "materialism," "naturalism," and "physicalism" are broadly interchangeable; John Searle, on whose views I rely extensively throughout this book, uses the term "materialism."[23] (Some authors suggest that physicalism should be taken to be the modern successor of materialism, materialism that is informed by modern developments in physics.[24] Such a distinction in terminology could be made, but it is also not clear that it would have much relevance for research in history.) I am also aware that for some readers, the use of the term "materialist" in relation to history may invoke associations with the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In one way this is appropriate. I consider their youthful *German Ideology* and *Holy Family* masterpieces of the materialist philosophy of history of their time—though I am skeptical that their later theories about dialectics, class struggle, or revolution are compatible with materialism. These early works certainly have a venerable position in the history of the materialist philosophy of history—a position similar to that of Epicurus's or Lucretius's writings in the general history of materialism—but their concerns, and the arguments they made, are very dated from the perspective of modern materialism. They have very little to say about the topics

discussed in this book. At the same time, it is also not clear why the Marxist tradition should hold exclusive rights to the term "materialism" in relation to history.

It is important to specify here in more detail the assumptions the book makes about the materialist worldview. There exists an extensive philosophical literature about materialism (physicalism). Most of this literature concentrates on the questions of whether materialism is (can be) true, what the arguments are in favor of or against it, how they can be responded to, whether materialism is true necessarily or contingently (if it is true at all), whether our knowledge that it is true or false is a priori or a posteriori, and so on. Instead of discussing such questions, the book examines the implications for historical research of the assumption that materialism is true. In the philosophical literature, there is also an extensive debate about the possible definitions of materialism. Different definitions that have been proposed describe broadly the same position. It is not clear that some of them are more suitable for our discussion here than others. Rather than choosing between them, through this Introduction I will try to survey the physicalist assumptions that are likely to affect historical research. I will start with two common ways of defining materialism and then proceed by analyzing various assumptions that are normally associated with it.

The first way to describe materialism has already been mentioned: this is the view that the world in which we live and in which the historical past happened ultimately consists of particles, forces, fields, entities and phenomena that physics describes, and nothing else. Things that we encounter in the world, on this account, consist of particles and their aggregates that behave in accordance with the laws of physics. Chemical phenomena are understood to be ultimately physical, and biological phenomena are chemical and therefore physical phenomena. Human beings, including historical figures and the historians who write about them, are biological creatures. Their mental capacities and mental states together with mental contents result from their neurobiology.[25] This does not mean that materialism should be understood as rabid reductionism—although this might seem to be the case. Since it is assumed that historical items (entities, events, phenomena) are interactions among biological organisms, that human mental states are or are caused by biological states of the brain, that biological states are ultimately chemical states, and that chemical states are ultimately physical, it may indeed seem that materialism in the historical humanities requires that all historical descriptions and explanations be stated in terms of physical subatomic processes. There is no reason why this should be the case.[26] Neither biology nor chemistry abandons the materialist paradigm when they describe chemical and biological phenomena without talking about them in terms of physical subatomic processes. Rather, when a chemist or a biologist talks about phenomena from their disciplines using terminologies of their disciplines, they are

talking about the way physical phenomena manifest themselves in their disciplines, in terms of their disciplines. They are using a language that is appropriate for their disciplines to describe these phenomena. Reducibility does not imply elimination: water is H_2O but this does not mean that water does not exist nor does it mean that chemical laws do not apply to it; it still freezes at 0ºC. The same applies to historians. When materialist historians describe a medieval battle, from their point of view, all the items they refer to are assumed to be physical items anyway, and the description would not get any more physical if we replaced it with a description that would directly list the movement of all subatomic particles involved. (Even if one could actually list all the movements of all participating particles within a workable time, a description that talks about soldiers and horses would certainly be preferable because it would be shorter and easier to comprehend.) The important consequence of physicalism is, however, that it precludes the assumption that non-physical forces could have participated in historical events or could be relevant for historical explanations—the way it precludes their role in explanations of chemical or biological phenomena.

It may also be pointed out that the reducibility of everything to physical phenomena is problematic because of multiple realizability and Jerry Fodor's thesis about the disunity of science.[27] This is the argument that some types of mental states can be realized in a great variety of neuro-systems in different ways—for instance, octopuses may be able to feel pain like humans, although their neuro-system is quite different. Multiple realizability does not, however, suggest the need to expand ontology and rely on abstract, immaterial or spiritual substances. The fact that pain is differently realized in different biological systems does not mean that it is not biological. Also, the multiple realizability argument pertains to types of events, situations or properties, whereas historians are mainly interested in their individual (token) events, situations and properties. A historian who believes that stomach pain affected Napoleon's capacity to command a battle may be interested in the specific biological condition that caused it, but hardly in its similarity with the pain that an octopus may feel. Finally, it should be mentioned that the multiple realizability argument is not applicable to complex social structures—it cannot be used to argue, for instance, that armies or governments are instantiated in such a variety of ways that they cannot be reduced to biological individuals and their interactions.[28]

There are various other ways to define physicalism.[29] Here is an approach that avoids associations with reductionism.[30] Imagine that there is another world that is an exact copy of our world in all its physical elements (such as particles, forces, fields, causation, laws of nature, and so on) but nothing else. Let me call such a world "a purely material world." In such a world, chemical and biological substances would be the same as in our world, and, insofar as we argue that mental states are biological—ultimately physical—they

would be replicated too. The materialist assumption is then going to be that our world and the purely material world necessarily have the same history. In other words, even if our world contains non-physical items (communal spirits, discourses, immaterial cultural contexts, and so on), the materialist assumption is that they do not participate in history. The question that this book addresses is then: what does it mean for historical research to make this assumption? We shall see throughout this book that the implications are numerous. Two observations should be made here. First, the idea that a world that replicates the physical elements of our world would repeat the same human history suggests a determinist perspective—that the necessity of natural laws fully determined the way human history evolved and historical events happened. In fact, we shall see later that, precisely because of such determinism, materialism in historical research requires historians to make assumptions that are equivalent to the attribution of free will to historical figures in the explanation of their decisions and actions. Second, our assumption will be that indeterminacy at the quantum level of particles does not interfere with human-level history.

The use of the term "physical" in these descriptions of materialism can be questioned. What kind of physics do materialists have in mind? This dilemma, formulated by Carl Hempel, is often cited as an argument against materialism (physicalism).[31] Presumably, someone who is talking about adjusting the worldview of the modern humanities to that of science is not talking about medieval science. But then, should we mean our contemporary scientific worldview, which is recognized to be imperfect in many ways, or some ideal scientific worldview of the future that has achieved ultimate truths about our physical world? If one wants to have views that are consistent with the future worldview of science that has achieved ultimate truths, it is fair to point out that we do not know what such a science would be like, nor what these truths might be. But if we rely on the positions endorsed by our contemporary science, then many of them are likely to be proven to be false in the future. The substantial discussion about this dilemma that exists in the literature about physicalism is, however, hardly relevant for us here. Although we certainly know nothing about the discoveries natural sciences will make in the future, it is nevertheless important to be aware of the implications of the contemporary scientific worldview for research in the historical humanities. We are thus certainly talking about our contemporary physics and contemporary natural sciences. In this sense, historical research does not differ from research in other fields. The fact that biochemistry may make new discoveries in the future does not make it irrelevant for biologists to interpret the results of their research in relation to contemporary biochemistry. This also answers Noam Chomsky's variation of Hempel's argument.[32] Should it happen, Chomsky pointed out in relation to the physicalist approach to the study of the mind, that there exist separate forces that make the

mind function and that are independent of physical forces as we conceive of them today, then the conception of physics will be expended to include them as well—the way it happened with electric phenomena, magnetic fields, and so on, none of which are in the mechanical conception of physics inherited from Newton. One can certainly agree with this. Nevertheless, we do not know what such future discoveries will be like, while it is interesting to know what it means for historical research to assume that the world in which historical events occurred is the one that our contemporary natural sciences describe. It should also be mentioned that discussions presented in this book pertain to the implications of very general aspects of the materialist world-view for historical research—such as causation or the rejection of immaterial, abstract, or spiritual items. Arguably, these elements are unlikely to change with the advancements of science that one can expect in the future. At the same time, since sciences make new discoveries and abandon old views, it is important to be cautious about situations in which well-established positions in historiography and the philosophy of history depend on such abandoned scientific positions. For instance, we shall see that some influential views of Arthur Danto and Thomas Kuhn depend on the 1950s' theories of perception that were abandoned by psychologists decades ago.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT CAUSATION

Assumptions about causation play the core role when it comes to the implications of materialism in historical research.

Throughout the book I will use the term "physical items" for physical things, their properties, physical events as well as physical objects such as particles, their conglomerates, fields, forces, their movements and changes, and so on. In other words: various things, events, phenomena can be described and identified (conceptualized, as we shall see in Chapter Four) in various ways. They count as "physical items" or "can be physically describable" if it is possible, in principle, to state a description that identifies them in physical terms. "In principle" means that the description needs to be possible, but need not be available (for instance, we may lack the information necessary to do that). Also, I will use the term *historical items* for the historical entities, events, phenomena, and so on, that historians write about.

I will rely on the following assumptions or postulates about causation:

(a) Physical or historical items or their properties typically have more than one cause. (For instance, the outcome of a medieval battle may have resulted from the late arrival of auxiliary troops, the better equipment of the victorious army, internal dissension in the defeated army, circumstances such as the fact that the earth exercised gravity on the participants, that water freezes at

0ºC, so that the cavalry was able to charge over a frozen river, and so on.) When providing a historical explanation, we typically presuppose many causes that we do not state. In the third chapter, I will discuss the way historians choose which causes to state in historical explanations.

(b) The causes of physical or historical items precede their effects in time. (In some cases, causes can also continue to obtain during and after events they caused, but they cannot cause them if they do not precede them.)

(c) During human history, no physical or historical items came about or were changed without a cause. In the case of historical and physical items and their changes, *at least some* of their causes must have been actually existing items and their properties. (This point needs to be made because historians sometimes discuss *causation-by-omission*. For instance, it may be argued that an event would not have happened had some other event failed to happen. The non-occurrence of this latter event is then said to have caused the occurrence of the former. But even in such cases, no event could have happened whose only causes were causes-by-omission. Some real events had to happen as well in order to cause it.)

There is nothing particularly materialist about these three postulates. They are formulated to pertain to physical and historical items and could be applied even if these were two different kinds of items. Materialism is introduced with the assumption of causal closure:

(d) Only physical items (items that can have a physical description) can be causes or effects.[33]

Causal closure is a stronger thesis than the statement that non-physical items are non-existent and therefore cannot cause anything. Rather, it is asserted that even if they existed, non-physical items would be causally inert and would have no capacity to affect causally physical items nor could they be affected by them. Herodotus's explanation of the numerous deaths of Persian soldiers in the vicinity of the temple of Demeter thus has to be dismissed not merely because ancient Greek gods did not exist and could not have caused anything, but because such deities, as immaterial items that could not have a physical description, would have to be inert in the sense of causation and could not have caused biological events such as deaths of Persian soldiers.

Non-existing physical items can still be *imagined* to have existed and to have caused something. The assumption that even if they existed, non-physical items could not causally affect physical items is important because historians often discuss the possible causal impact of the non-happening of

certain events. An extensive philosophical literature exists about such causation by omission.[34] For instance, one of the causes that contributed to the successful assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 was the failure of Austro-Hungarian officials to inform his driver about their decision to change the route for security reasons. As a result, the driver drove down the wrong street, and this is where the assassination took place. Had the driver been informed about the change of the route, the assassination would not have happened. It may therefore be said that the non-existence of an event—the communication between the officials and the driver—was one of the causes of the assassination. From this point of view, non-existent items can be causes—which may suggest the view that nothing can cause something. It can be responded that this concern is unnecessary, since we are merely talking here about counterfactual dependence that carries no ontological commitments.[35] Alternatively, one may postulate "negative events" and respond that the actual event that did happen, and that was one of the actual causes that contributed to the assassination, was precisely the non-communication between the officials and the driver.[36]

In relation to such causation-by-omission, causal closure merely states that non-physical items could not have caused anything. A conversation between officials and the driver of Franz Ferdinand would have been a physical event, and it is perfectly legitimate to say that had it happened, the assassination could have been prevented. Imaginary physical events can be legitimately imagined to have imaginary physical effects. But it is quite different if we say that "Had angels removed to iceberg from the course of Titanic, the disaster would not have happened." Angels are not physical entities and they cannot move icebergs. The important point is thus not to argue that non-physical items could not have existed and therefore could not have had causal capacities. (It is assumed that they could not have existed anyway.) Rather, the point is to deny them even hypothetical causal capacities: even if they had existed, such items would have been causally inert in the sense that they would have been unable to produce a causal impact. Physical items cannot be affected by non-physical items, regardless of whether the latter exist or not. (But also note that the statement "had angels removed the iceberg, Titanic would not have sunk" is still true, even if we accept causal closure. What is false is the belief that angels could have removed the iceberg from its course.)

CAUSATION AND EXPLANATION

Some further clarifications about causation are necessary here in order to complete the picture. In contemporary philosophical literature, causation is typically understood in two ways.[37] One view is that when we talk about

causation, we must rely on some kind of regularity that ensures that an event of a certain kind is always followed by an event of another kind. David Lewis, in the 1980s, developed an alternative, counterfactuals-based approach.[38] This approach seeks to explain causal dependence in terms of counterfactual dependence—in general, the idea is that an event is the cause of another if the latter would not have occurred had the former not occurred. Regularity-based conceptions of causation are usually not helpful for historians because it is difficult to state the general rules that would underwrite historians' claims about causal relationships between historical events. Also, historians are more concerned with causal relationships between particular events and not general law-like regularities anyway. Alexander Maar has therefore convincingly argued that counterfactuals-based conceptions of causation are more applicable in historical research.[39] In any case, the above assumptions about causation are compatible with both regularity-based and counterfactuals-based approaches.

In the natural and experimental sciences, one often establishes causal laws on the basis of generalization from a large number of instances. In principle, experiments should be infinitely repeatable, and one can construct various experimental situations in order to confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis about a general causal law. In historical research, as well as in some sciences such as astronomy or geology, one typically deals with a limited number of instances. It is therefore often possible to state a general rule that applies to all cases, because their number is limited, but such a rule need not pertain to actual causes.[40] All Caesars who were named Caius died by the dagger, Suetonius observed. [41] It is not quite clear that this claim is true, but even if it were true, we would not say that the person's name is the cause of death. Full coincidence of a type of event with other events need not indicate a *causal* regularity. More generally, one should bear in mind that coincidence does not always indicate causation.

Questions pertaining to causation also arise in relation to historical explanations. There is the view that in order to state an explanation, one needs to state information about causes. The alternative view is that explanation merely requires explanatory information that need not always pertain to causes.[42] There is no need to enter this debate here—information about causes certainly plays an important role in many (or most) historical explanations, even if someone may deny that this is always true. Different approaches to the dilemma should nevertheless make us careful about different intuitions that people may have about the use of words such as "cause," "effect," "event," or the like. During the battle of Stalingrad, in the final days preceding the Red Army counteroffensive, the Soviet units in the city itself fought with their backs to the Volga River, in order to avoid encirclement. One could therefore say that the position of the river (partly) *explains* the position of the Soviet units at that time. But should we say that the position of the river

(partly) *caused* the disposition of the Soviet units? Or should one say that such geographical facts are explanatory circumstances or conditions, but not causes? Different people can have different intuitions about the use of the word “cause” in similar dilemmas. Something similar applies to the claim that only events can be causes. One may argue that geographical facts about an area are not events and that therefore the position of the river could not have *caused* the disposition of the Red Army units. This would be equivalent to saying that the presence of oxygen should not count as a contributing cause of a forest fire, because it is not an event. It may be responded that “geography” in the case of the Battle of Stalingrad results from the geological events that determined the position of the river many thousands of years ago, so these events should count among the causes of the position of Soviet military units. “The presence of oxygen that enabled a forest fire” then stands for the events in the history of our planet that provided it with an atmosphere with a high level of oxygen. Alternatively, one may turn the argument in the opposite direction and respond that the position of the Volga should count as an event precisely because it caused the Soviet units to take the positions that they did, and only events can be causes. Some authors propose simply stretching the use of the term “event” so that it can include the presence of oxygen when explaining a forest fire.[43] An additional complication results from the common assumption that causation is transitive, in the sense that the cause of a cause of an item also counts as that item’s cause.[44] Sometimes transitivity contradicts our intuitions about the use of the word “cause”—for instance, in the case of very remote events or when our value systems make it hard for us to say that an event that we regard as good caused something bad. A doctor may save the life of a patient who dies some years later in a car crash. Had the patient not been alive, he or she could not have died in the car crash, but it is awkward to say that by saving the life of the patient, the doctor caused him or her to die in the car crash. One might propose using a different word in order to refer to such causes—for instance, one may call them “contributing factors” or the like—but this would merely re-name and not change the actual scheme of events that produced an effect. Throughout the book I will simply assume that causation is transitive and, more generally, try to avoid unproductive discussions that are based on different intuitions about terminology. I will also assume that contributing circumstances that enable an item (for instance, the presence of oxygen in the case of forest fire) count among its causes.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE MENTAL STATES OF HISTORICAL FIGURES

The existing literature about materialism (physicalism) is dominated by questions that pertain to the mind-body problem. The rejection of the expansion of ontology beyond the physical world implies the rejection of immaterial and spiritual conceptions of the mental capacities of historical figures (such as Cartesian dualism and some versions of emergentism), and this has a wide range of consequences for positions that can be taken in historical research. For instance, an approach to historical research that precludes cultural or historical contexts having affected historical figures independently of any material interaction with them is likely to deliver different results than an approach that assumes that this could have happened.

There are a number of different materialist positions in the philosophy of mind. The core assumption of materialism in regard to the minds of historical figures has to be that, in order to be in a certain mental state, historical figures had to be biological organisms and were in that state in virtue of having certain physical (biological) properties and nothing else. Depending on the kind of materialist position in the philosophy of mind that one endorses, it may then be argued that these physical properties caused the mental state, or that they were identical with the mental state, or that the mental state is reducible to the possession of physical properties, or that it was realized by these physical properties, or that it supervened on them—various other formulations are also possible.[45] It is certainly preferable for discussions in this book to avoid commitments to any of these specific views and to remain as general as possible. The rejection of Cartesian dualism is arguably sufficient for our discussion here. A correlated assumption is that if two historical figures were in different mental states, they must have been in different biological states. However, it does not follow necessarily that if they share the same mental state they had to be in the same biological state. Also, their intrinsic[46] mental states such as beliefs and pains could not have changed without some change of their biological states. Finally, causal closure implies that mental states can only be causally affected and their changes caused by physical (neurobiological) states. It should also be mentioned, for readers less acquainted with the contemporary philosophy of mind, that none of this suggests that historical figures did not have mental states such as beliefs, motives, or pains or that they were mechanical automata. They certainly did have such mental states—otherwise, the materialist claim that these states are, or are reducible to, or are caused (and so on) by biological states would be pointless. Readers may find John Searle's view—that mental states are caused by the biological states of the human nervous system, but that the subjective nature of human experiences (pain, thoughts)

makes it impossible to reduce the way we experience them to the biology that causes them—particularly well-suited for our discussion.[47]

The principle of causal closure also provides a way to specify the materialist view on emergentist positions. It is sometimes argued that in the case of complex systems (such as the human brain or social entities), the organization of their parts results in the emergence of macro properties that are irreducible to parts and their interactions. Since the nineteenth century, emergentist positions have been particularly widespread in the philosophy of mind and the social sciences. The idea is that the organization of parts (such as molecules or human individuals) into highly complex systems can result in the emergence of new properties that are not reducible to the parts of the system that generate them and their interactions. The notorious problem is that it is not clear what "emergence" might be, or how to define "reduction." Here, too, a distinction made by Searle is going to be helpful.[48] Searle differentiates between two concepts of emergence. "Emergence 1" is the view that complex structures emerge from the parts of the system as a result of causal interactions among parts. From this point of view, the brain and the mind have different properties, but the presence of mental properties (such as consciousness, mental states, the capacity to make decisions) can be deduced or established from the state of neurons and their causal interactions. Similarly, a social institution can have different properties than its participating individuals, but its properties can be deduced, in principle, from the properties of individuals and their interactions. Emergence 1 is unproblematic from the materialist point of view, since it merely describes a result of causal interactions. "Emergence 2" involves a much stronger claim: a certain complex structure is emergent 2 if it has causal powers that cannot be explained by interactions among its constitutive parts. In other words, it comes about in a way that such interactions are not sufficient to explain. If the mind or social institutions were emergent 2, then they would have causal powers that could not be explained by the causal behavior of the elements of the nervous system or interactions among individuals that participate in a social institution. As Searle put it in the case of consciousness, the idea is that "consciousness gets squirted out by the behavior of the neurons in the brain, but once it has been squirted out, it then has a life of its own."[49] If a mental state is emergent 2 on the nervous system or a social institution is emergent 2 on the participating individuals and their interactions, this means that the causality of the material world cannot explain their existence. Saying that it is emergent 2 means saying that its causation is something over and above material causation. In order to explain their existence, it is necessary to expand ontology beyond the assumptions of the materialist worldview. This is precisely the kind of position that materialism rejects.[50]

Because of the variety of possible materialist positions in the philosophy of mind, I have struggled to find terminology that is appropriately inclusive.

The term that I have found very useful in order to deal with these difficulties is “to describe.” Throughout the book I often talk about the possibility of describing mental states in physical (biological) terms, and this technical term is meant to cover the possibility of giving a materialist account of the relationship between the mind and the body in general. It avoids commitments to specific materialist theories about the body-mind relationship. It is also necessary to take into account that modern science does not actually know how the functioning of the mind relates to the functioning of the brain. This is why I use the potential form “describable.” When I say that it is assumed that mental states are “describable” in physical terms, I mean that the assumption is that although the information necessary to state such a description may not be available (mental states cannot be “described”), such a description should be possible in principle. In other words, the assumption is that Cartesian dualism is false and that in order to explain mental phenomena one does not need to rely on non-physical items. In situations unrelated to the mind-body problem, I use the phrase “physically describable” to say that if the necessary information were available, something could be described in purely physical terms without reference to non-physical phenomena. I also use the term “describable” in relation to historical and social entities, events, and phenomena: I say that they are describable as sets of individuals and their interactions in situations when the necessary information is not available, but if it were available, it should be possible, in principle, to describe these entities, events, and phenomena as individuals and their interactions. For instance, we do not have lists of all soldiers who participated in Napoleon’s invasion of Russia, but if we had it, we would be able to describe it as a set of individuals.

APPROACH

Describing and analyzing the materialist perspective on history and historical research does not mean advocating it. Some readers may believe that the assumptions about the materialist worldview I have described here are true and that they indeed state how the world works. Others may think that some or all of them are false. This disagreement is something that this book cannot address. Rather, the question is, what does it mean for historical research to endorse the materialist worldview? Readers may also disagree about the validity of various historiographical models that the book describes. Some readers may believe that the book shows that materialism is in line with standard and established approaches to historical research, or even that historical methodology can be valid only insofar as it is in line with the materialist worldview. Others may think that some implications of materialism that I describe are so out of tune with standard and established approaches to

historical research that my description constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the materialist view of history. My intention here is not, nor could it be, to prove that materialism is true, or to argue that abstract, immaterial, spiritual, divine, or similar forces do not exist and did not intervene in history. I am even not sure how such arguments could be made. (In these matters a historian is in the same situation as a natural scientist who assumes, but cannot prove, that spiritual forces do not systematically interfere in experiments.) Similarly, the book cannot be expected to refute the existence of abstract and immaterial entities or Platonic Forms, or to show that languages are not immaterial ahistorical entities, or that historical epochs or cultures are not immaterial forces that exist over and above individuals and their interactions. Rather, the aim is to analyze and to describe what it means for historical research to assume that this is so. It will also be necessary to analyze how arguments in favor of various kinds of ontological expansion beyond the world of physical items can be responded to from the materialist point of view. In order to give a fair account of the materialist perspective on historical research, it is important to see how it can be criticized and defended. One of my major efforts throughout the book is to present possible responses to arguments that suggest the need to postulate abstract and immaterial entities, forces or phenomena. Since the discussion pertains to materialism in historical research, it will also be important to see when ontological expansion beyond the material world leads to ahistorical or anachronistic perspectives on the past.

The discussion analyzes arguments from a wide range of philosophical disciplines. This very emphasis on arguments, as well as the fact that many of them derive from works written by analytic philosophers, is likely to make many readers classify the book as a work in the analytic philosophy of history. I have made the effort to ensure that discussions related to problems in analytic philosophy are up to date. A number of the positions on which I rely may be novel to readers who have knowledge of more traditional positions in analytic philosophy (for instance, I endorse the impenetrability of vision in the philosophy of perception and metalinguistic descriptivism in the theory of names, I reject externalism about mental contents, and so on)—and I believe that when it comes to the philosophy of history, there are good reasons to move away from the traditionally established views. At the same time, I have included a range of examples from historiography, and this wider perspective results in a style that may be unusual for readers used to reading works in analytic philosophy. The examples I have chosen come largely from ancient historians, the fields of historical research in which I have formal training (histories of architecture and philosophy), fields in which I have worked (history of art), or topics that interest me (the July 1914 crisis)—and I hope that examples will help with the reception of the book among scholars in the historical humanities.

In general, I assume that many (maybe the majority of) readers are not necessarily acquainted with arguments and debates in analytic philosophy discussed here. The major challenge is to present these arguments and debates in a way that is clear without sacrificing intellectual complexity in those aspects that are relevant for problems of the philosophy of history. In particular, I have endeavored to ensure that readers with a general philosophical education but without specialist training in analytic philosophy can follow the arguments that I present. (For instance, I assume that such readers understand terms such as "ontology" but not necessarily "supervenience"; terms more specific to analytic philosophy had to be explained or avoided.) Attention to technical rigor typical of works in analytic philosophy really becomes important in the consideration of arguments and debates that directly pertain to the philosophy of history. In these matters, I had to struggle between a technically accurate presentation and one that would be clear and accessible, and I can only hope that I have found the right balance.

There is, also, an important caveat regarding the relationship between the materialist perspective on history presented here and some mainstream positions in analytic philosophy. The analytic philosophers whose views I discuss throughout the book are not necessarily materialists. Also, it is not uncommon that well-established positions in analytic philosophy imply ahistorical or highly counterintuitive perspectives on history or historical research. In many details, the materialist positions discussed here are opposed to views that are dominant, or were dominant among analytic philosophers. Analytic philosophers are sometimes as susceptible to idealism as postmodernists. For instance, forty years ago, the view that all thinking is verbal was absolutely dominant among analytic philosophers; similarly, many analytic philosophers today still seem to subscribe to externalism about mental contents. As we shall see, applied to historical research, the former position results in unbridgeable difficulties for a historian who wants to report the beliefs of historical figures who used languages different from the one in which the historian is writing; the latter view can easily lead to anachronistic attributions of beliefs to historical figures. A philosophy of history needs to approach the challenges and arguments formulated in other philosophical disciplines from the point of view of its own topic, history, and in a way that is informed by what happens in historical research, its practice and methodology. Morton White once protested against the idea that philosophers of history should become methodological consultants—but it is also fair to be skeptical about the actual relevance of a work in the philosophy of history that does not engage with actual historical research and the methodological dilemmas that require philosophical treatment.[51]

The implications of materialism for historical research that the book describes tend to correlate *grosso modo* to the views of some contemporary philosophers of history, such as Aviezer Tucker, C. Behan McCullagh, or

Tor Egil Førland. Obviously, this does not suggest that any of these philosophers of history conceive of their views as materialist—they may or they may not, and in various details their views certainly differ, but my point here is rather that materialism can be seen compatible with or even supporting (many of) their positions. Also, there are authors whose assumptions are quite far from being materialist, but on whose important theoretical contributions I have been able to rely. Throughout the book, I have relied extensively on Mark Bevir's theory of understanding and interpretation that, because of Bevir's principle of "procedural individualism," avoids the need to expand ontology and introduce abstract, immaterial meanings—even though, more generally, the assumptions of Bevir's approach are quite far from the materialist perspective that this book sets out to analyze.[52]

In the book I discuss the implications of materialism for historical research, rather than for historiography or history-writing. In the final decades of the twentieth century, the influence of narrativism in the philosophy of history produced the tendency to emphasize history-writing over other things historians do. It is, however, fair to say that some of these things, such as archival work, the interpretation of documents, the analysis of physical artifacts, the study of alternative interpretations in the work of other historians, and so on, are much more central to a historian's work. The emphasis on history-writing has produced the tendency to blur the distinction between artistic literary pursuits and history as a discipline of research and inquiry. Arguably, for most historians, the actual activity of reporting the results of their investigations—that is, writing for publication—is secondary to actual historical research. Otherwise there would be nothing to write about. It is true that history-writing itself is not reducible to the mere reporting of research results and that it is often difficult to separate it from the interpretation of these results. While writing, the historian often creates new concepts and formulates new questions that shed further light on the research results that history-writing articulates. But this does not mean that historical research is part of history-writing—or even more radically, that history-writing is like other literary pursuits and that, since other fields of literature, such as fiction of poetry, are not constrained by reality, historical works have no relationship to historical reality. Rather, it means that history-writing itself is part of historical research and one of its tools.

CONTENTS

The aim of the book—to provide a comprehensive survey of the consequences of materialism for historical research and the philosophy of history—implies that it has to analyze a wide set of philosophical topics, debates, arguments and dilemmas. Some of these topics have strong ties to other

topics, some do not, and some almost stand on their own. The diversity of topics is reflected in the order of the book's nine chapters and their relationships. It has also made the book exceptionally hard to compose.

The first three chapters of the book are reasonably independent of each other and in principle they could be read in any order. They describe general aspects of the materialist philosophy of history and frame the discussions that follow, but later chapters do not depend on them for technical details. In a way, these chapters stand as essays on their own. *Chapter One* addresses the debate about historical reality and analyzes the view that historical past is constructed by historians, for instance, as a coherent account of historical evidence. I argue that the necessary causal connection between historical events and evidence about them makes such anti-realism slightly credible. The past has to have happened in order to cause the existence of evidence. *Chapter Two* discusses the dilemma about the nature of historical (social) entities, forces, events and phenomena, such as armies, governments, crises, wars and so on. Can they be understood as sums of individuals and (or) their interactions—or is it necessary to assume that they are something more and attribute to them abstract and immaterial existence in order to understand how they happen or function? The dilemma is debated much more vehemently among philosophers of the social sciences than among philosophers of history, but it has significant importance for the topic of this book: if one could successfully argue that social and historical entities, forces, events or phenomena have immaterial, abstract existence, then materialism in the philosophy of history would be hard to defend. The second chapter therefore surveys the debate and the arguments that have been proposed in the social sciences in order to show that they do not successfully demonstrate the need to expand ontology beyond the material world. *Chapter Three* addresses a cluster of dilemmas pertaining to historical explanations and causation in history. There exists a long-standing debate about the nature of historical explanations and in how far they need to provide causal information. On the one hand, Hempel's thesis about general laws in history is known to face problems when it has to explain decisions and actions of individual historical figures. On the other, it is not clear whether and how Erwin Panofsky's conception of humanist historiography, that attributes free will to historical figures, can be squared with materialism. The third chapter develops a theory of *quomodo* explanations that resolves these dilemmas in a way that relies on the compatibilist understanding of free will and is aligned with materialist assumptions in the philosophy of history.

Chapter Four is in many ways the central chapter of the book. It introduces a series of philosophical distinctions that play a core role through the rest of the book. Its main topic is the attribution of mental contents (concepts, propositions, consequently beliefs, knowledge and so on) to historical figures. The aim of the discussion is to establish how this can be done without

postulating such contents as abstract and immaterial entities. The chapter provides the basis for the analysis of the materialist understanding of language presented in Chapters Five and Six, and the subsequent discussion of historical interpretation developed in the final chapters of the book. At the same time, in combination with the discussion of concept-free perception in the Appendix, it provides the basis for the rejection of anti-foundationalism. *Chapter Five* then expands this discussion on problems of language and seeks to show that it is unnecessary to postulate linguistic meanings as abstract, immaterial entities, independent of the mental states of historical figures. (Obviously, should such expansion of ontology be necessary, this could seriously affect the possibility of a materialist philosophy of history.) The rejection of the understanding of meanings as abstract and immaterial entities makes it necessary to discuss a number of well-established philosophical arguments pertaining to externalism about mental states, such as Hilary Putnam's "Twin Earth" and Tyler Burge's argument about arthritis. *Chapter Six* addresses the problem of essentialism—that is, the assumption that among various concepts that identify the same item one pertains to its essence, its true nature, that what the item really is. The idea that things have essences is problematic from the materialist point of view, and it also results in anachronistic attributions of beliefs to historical figures. Historians thus have good reasons to avoid essentialism, although it is often implied in historical writings (especially, for instance, in the history of science).

Taken together, these three chapters whose contents I have just described, Four, Five and Six, provide philosophical analyses of a series of methodological problems well-established in historical research, that are hardly ever addressed in the contemporary philosophy of history. They should be thus particularly interesting to practicing historians. At the same time, they are also philosophically the most demanding and technical parts of the book. On the one hand, these chapters deal with problems of language while methodological problems of historians' work often derive from the fact that historical research is predominantly a language-based activity. On the other, my efforts are largely directed towards showing that it is possible to account for linguistic phenomena relevant to historical research without postulating meanings and reference as immaterial, abstract, physically unexplainable entities or relationships. This latter aim obviously results in significant philosophical technicalities. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that the analytic philosophy of language has dealt only marginally with the dilemmas that result from differences between languages, such as those that pertain to translation. At the same time, many methodological problems of historical research originate precisely from these dilemmas. Providing the proper balance between the necessary philosophical technicalities and the need to make the text accessible to non-philosophers has been a particularly difficult task when it comes to these three chapters.

The last three chapters deal with problems of interpretation. *Chapter Seven* addresses the relationship between historical, social and linguistic contexts on the one hand and the contents of the mental states of historical figures and historians. One important problem pertains to situations in which certain views, ideas or beliefs were inconceivable for individuals from certain contexts. The validity of such claims is an important methodological dilemma for a historian. Another problem derives from the view (widespread in the humanities of the final decades of the twentieth century) that all thinking is verbal and thus constrained by the limits of the linguistic community that the historical figure or the historian belongs to. I will argue that this view results in irresolvable difficulties when it comes to the translation of historical documents. Finally, important problems arise from the fact that historians are historical figures too, and if historical-social contexts affect the mental states of historical figures, they also affect the capacity of historians to grasp these mental states and report about them. This is the well-known "reflexive argument" in historical research that presented an insurmountable difficulty for the German historicist tradition. A significant advantage of the materialist philosophy of history, I will argue, is that it can avoid it. *Chapter Eight* deals with the distinction between meaning and interpretation in historical works, problems of translation, and the situations in which a historian has to report beliefs of historical figures who expressed them in languages different from the one in which the historian is writing. *Chapter Nine* addresses the problem of the meaning and reference of historical works taken as wholes. It presents a transparent alternative to the narrativist view, advocated by Frank Ankersmit and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, that historical works are opaque and do not refer to the historical past.

NOTES

1. Colebourn, *Latin Sentence*, 56.
2. For a history of materialism in modern times see Papineau, "The Rise."
3. Tacitus, *Annales*, 6.22, described an equivalent of the materialist position but did not endorse it. Rather, he extensively relied on astrological predictions (ibid., 6.21), supra-natural apparitions (ibid., 11.21), and described the terrible prodigies announcing Nero's rise to power (ibid., 12.43, 12.64).
4. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.22. Polybius, *The Histories*, 36.17.1. See also ibid., 2.38.4–5.
5. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, 9.65.
6. Ranke, *Geschichten*, 131.
7. See Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 25–44. See also Schleier, "Der Kulturhistoriker," Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte*, vol. 2, 227–235 and Chickering, *Lamprecht*, 175–253. For descriptions of Lamprecht's wider influence see Seeba, "Ansätze," Spreizer, "The Old Guard," and Brush, "The Cultural Historian." A comprehensive survey of Lamprecht's polemics is Seifert, *Der Streit.*
8. Lamprecht, "Kulturgeschichte." Lamprecht, *Einführung*. Spengler, *Untergang*.
9. See Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 38–41.
10. Panofsky, "History of Art." He presents the individualism-collectivism debate in art history as a variation of the debate about free will between Erasmus and Luther. For an analysis of Panofsky's views see Mitrović, "Humanist Art History."
11. Luther, *De servo*, 615.
12. Barthes, "La mort."
13. The origin of scriptor's actions is language itself ("le langage lui-même"), ibid., 64. He attributes to Mallarmé the view, with which he agrees, that it is language who speaks, not the author. Ibid., 62.
14. Plato, *Ion*, 534C.
15. The well-known problem in the case of Michel Foucault's writings is the source of the causal capacities that he attributes to "discourses." In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49, 122, he attributes to them the capacity to form the objects of which they speak, and states that the source of this causal capacity does not belong to the mental states of individuals or a communal opinion. It remains unclear what this source might be. Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, xxiv admit that "the causal power attributed to the rules governing discursive systems is unintelligible." The causal capacities of discourse thus do not have a possible physical, materialist explanation. (See also the discussion in Elder-Vass, *Reality*, 143–158.) In any case, one should not think that the idea of discourses as immaterial, non-mental forces with causal capacities is present only in Foucault's writings. Another good example is, for instance, to be found in Burr, *Constructionism*, 63–67. The tendency to postulate immaterial historical forces is a commonplace in idealist perspectives on history. There are, for instance, important parallels between Foucault's discourses and Oswald Spengler's cultures and Spengler faces similar problems as Foucault when he has to explain their causal capacities.
16. Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, 13.
17. See the analysis in Mitrović, "A Defence of Light."
18. Pérez-Gómez, "Abstraction," 50.
19. Pérez-Gómez. "Place," 134.
20. Pérez-Gómez, "Myth," 11.
21. This latter claim, with regard to Greek grammar, is actually false. The verb ὁράω ("I see") has different active and passive forms in various tenses. For instance, in aorist active εἶδον and passive ὤφθην; perfect active ἑόρακα or ἑώρακα and passive ἑώραμαι or ὦμμαι.
22. Sedlmayr, "Quintessenz."
23. For an analysis of terminology, see Stoljar, "Physicalism" and Stoljar, *Physicalism*, 10–12.
24. See for instance Kim, *Philosophy of Mind*, 11, 32.
25. Throughout the book, I assume the compatibility of realism about consciousness and mental states with the materialist worldview. This is not a book about the philosophy of mind;

the positions on which I rely throughout the book when it comes to consciousness, mental states, and so on, are *grosso modo* aligned with the views of philosophers such as John Searle. (See Searle, *The Rediscovery of Mind*.)

26. See Kim, *Physicalism*, 55 and 160 for a discussion of this argument.

27. For a general discussion see Cat, “The Unity of Science.” See also Fodor, “Special Sciences or: the Disunity of Science” and Fodor, “Special Sciences: Still Autonomous.”

28. Some sociologists such as Keith Sawyer and Harold Kincaid have unsuccessfully tried to apply the multiple realizability argument to social structures. See the discussion in Mitrović, “Multiple Realizability.”

29. For instance, Loewer, “Physics,” 37: “Physicalism claims that all facts obtain *in virtue of* the distribution of the fundamental entities and properties—whatever they turn out to be—of completed *fundamental physics*.” Witmer, “Sufficiency Claims,” 69: “Every law of nature and every particular fact is either physical or to be explained by the physical in such a way as to imply that the nonphysical facts are nothing over and above the physical facts, where the physical facts include the actual distribution of physical properties and the laws of physics.” For Otto Neurath and Rudolf Carnap physicalism was the thesis that every meaningful sentence could be translated into physical language. See Gates, “Physicalism,” 251.

30. See Witmer, “Sufficiency Claims” for a detailed elaboration of various possible formulations of physicalism on the basis of replication of physical properties of our world.

31. Hempel, “Comments.” See also the summary of the discussion in Nay, “Defining Physicalism” and Stoljar, *Physicalism*, 93–108.

32. Chomsky, “Internalist Explorations,” 262.

33. There are various ways to formulate the principle of causal closure. Typically, authors insist that causes have to be physical. See Papineau, “The Rise,” 8: “all physical effects are fully determined by law by prior physical occurrences.” Kim, *Physicalism*, 50: “Any cause of a physical event is itself a physical event—that is, no nonphysical event can be a cause of a physical event.” Since I am here assuming that everything is physical, then effects cannot be non-physical anyhow. This corresponds to the traditional formulation that goes back to Lucretius, *De natura*, 1.304: “Tangere enim et tangi, nisi corpus, nulla potest res.”

34. For a survey of arguments about causation by omission see Paul and Hall, *Causation*, 173–214.

35. That is, we are merely talking about statements that “if the event A occurred then . . .” and “if . . . , then the event B would have occurred.” See Paul and Hall, *Causation*, 227–276, esp. 254.

36. See Lewis, “Causation.”

37. See the survey of approaches in Paul and Hall, *Causation*, 7–24.

38. See especially Lewis, “Causation.” For counterfactuals-based understanding of historical causation see Issue 3 of the 2016 volume of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* that was guest-edited by Aviezer Tucker and dedicated to counterfactuals in historiography. See especially the analysis by Maar, “Applying” in the same volume.

39. Maar, “Applying.”

40. See especially the discussion by Cohen, “Causation,” 18–19.

41. Suetonius, “Caligula,” LX.

42. For the former view, see Lewis, “Causal Explanation.” For the latter view, see Railton, *Explaining Explanation*. For a discussion of the later view in relation to historical research, see Førland, *Values*, 113–134.

43. See for instance Paul and Hall, *Causation*, 225–276, esp. 227.

44. For a discussion see Paul and Hall, *Causation*, 225–276. Some authors, such as McCullagh, *Truth in History*, 177, reject transitivity.

45. For a survey of possible positions see Kim, *Philosophy of Mind.*

46. I say “intrinsic” in order to exclude those mental states that can be affected by changes in the external environment without any physical change in the organism itself. For instance, I know that China is the most populous country in the world, but this knowledge will become a false belief if India becomes more populous. By comparison, it is assumed that beliefs or pains cannot cease to be beliefs or pains without some physical change in the organism itself.

47. See Searle, *Rediscovery*, esp. 111–126.

48. Ibid., 112.
49. Ibid., 112.
50. In other words, in a world that (as described earlier) would fully replicate all physical elements (particles, fields, forces, time-space and so on), items that are emerging 1 according to Searle would be reproduced, but those that are emerging 2 would not.
51. White, *Foundations*, 2.
52. The differences in assumptions between Bevir's *Logic* and the materialist perspective that this book seeks to analyze are extensive. Bevir explicitly rejected physicalism (Bevir, *Logic*, 29, 92). Also, he assumes that observation is inseparable from theory, whereas my assumption here, in line with contemporary psychology of perception, is that perception is largely independent of and impenetrable for the conceptual contents associated with it. (See the Appendix; it should be mentioned that Bevir was writing before Pylyshyn opened the debate about the impenetrability of the visual perception.) Similarly, following Quine, Bevir assumes that "we can continue to believe in a proposition despite evidence to the contrary simply by adjusting our background theories." Ibid., 94. The materialist worldview that I analyze in this book assumes serious constraints on such adjustments in historical research. Also, Bevir actually defines facts as "something the members of a community accept as a fundamental proposition" (ibid., 99)—and in Chapter One I analyze the problems that this kind of view entails. Nevertheless, when it comes to the understanding and the interpretation of texts, the principle of procedural individualism that he formulates in his book is of fundamental importance for my discussion here because it coincides with the materialist perspective. (It is actually not clear that the principle of procedural individualism is compatible with anti-foundationalism. Bevir obviously introduces it as the foundation of his discussion of interpretation and, as can be seen from his formulation cited in Chapter Two, the principle postulates the existence of "specific individuals.") One should also remember that Bevir was writing in the 1990s, during the heyday of anti-foundationalism. It may not be quite true that at the time, as Tom Rockmore claimed, "everyone, or almost everyone, has switched to anti-foundationalism"—counter-examples such as Searle are not hard to think of—but anti-foundationalism was certainly a very widespread view during the period. (Rockmore, "Introduction," 1.) For a rejection of anti-foundationalism that was published in the same year as Bevir's book see BonJour, "Dialectic." See also Elgin, "Non-Foundationalist Epistemology" and Cleve "Why Coherence is not Enough."