Theology and historicism

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Abstract
This paper discusses attempts to think historicity in the work of the theologian Rudolf Bultmann and the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg. It then draws on the work of the Jesuit theologian Robert Doran in order to suggest how an historical pragmatics without historicism might be relevant to a future theology with social import.

Keywords
Hermeneutics, historicism, Lonergan, pragmatics, theology

Introduction
In this essay I revisit the relationship between theology and historicism. In part one I differentiate some accounts of theology and historicism in order to discriminate the terrain of my argument. In part two I consider the attempts to negotiate this terrain in the work of the New Testament exegete and theologian Rudolf Bultmann. In part three I consider the case of the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg. In part four I use the work of the Jesuit theologian Robert Doran to introduce the possibility of an historical pragmatics. In part five I locate my discussion in regards to the problem of what theology can now be.

I
The term ‘theology’ is used in many senses, including 1. *noetic participation in spiritual mysteries*, or, in the language of the Orthodox church, the world of the divine energies (on this interpretation theology is not propositional, but the deepening of *pistis* into *gnosis*); 2. *critical reflection on praxis* which brings us, our societies, and our cultures to judgement; and 3. *discourse oriented towards ultimacy*. Theology in these senses does
not mean the science of God or speculations about a divinity beyond human experience. Nor need theology involve the legitimation of ‘religion’ in its current or historical organizational forms.\(^1\) Theology can be anti-religious just as it can be religious. Indeed, some theologians argue that human religions are false, dangerous and harmful and seek to use theology to prune or restrict religious claims. Even stronger, some theology suggests that Christianity is about the abolition of religion, with the implication that any attempt to make religion intrinsic to Christianity may be mistaken.\(^2\)

The term ‘historicism’ is also contested. To regiment a complex field, I distinguish between:

1) historicism as the claim that it is possible to predict future events or changes on the basis of alleged historical laws, a position famously critiqued by Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin and Raymond Aaron. Historicism in this sense is not the primary focus here.

2) historicism as a stance on causation and ontological description that insists upon the need to interpret phenomena in terms of historical change. This historicism is associated with the claim that the historical origins and contexts of Xs are of decisive importance for attempts to accurately identify and explain them. It often takes the form of reductionism which takes the significance of Xs to be determined by their place in an allegedly linear history and the way in which they are connected to one another in immanent causal series.

3) historicism in the sense of solipsistic relativism or the doctrine that Xs can only be understood from the historically relative and contingent perspectives of specific historical communities, traditions and situations. This version of historicism is closely allied to immanentism or the claim that all historical knowledge is immanent to the societies and cultures in which it occurs, such that no extra-historical transcendent standpoint is available.

4) historicism in the sense of radical historicity, or the claim that human beings are intrinsically defined by their throwness within changing historical circumstances such that this existential immanence is the key to many of their basic characteristics rather than more traditional staticist accounts of human nature.

5) historicism in the sense of radical discontinuity, or the claim that historical circumstances vary discontinuously over time, such that the Xs with which we are familiar turn out either not to have existed in the past or to have taken a very different form, a position which subverts the intelligibility of historicism in the first sense differentiated. This historicism may take either Romantic or anti-Romantic forms, but it is not incompatible with a Romantic cult of the pastness of the past (the past as alterity).\(^3\)

In the context of theology it is mainly historicism in the third sense that needs to be overcome, although historicism in the fifth sense also raises problems.

Historicism in senses two, three, four and five is problematic because it promotes the questionable notion that traditional, logical or epistemological aporiae can be dispensed with by ‘going historical’. There is also a problem about the level of such theorising. Granted that the possibility of constructing a single history is undermined if a transcendent site of knowledge is given up, it hardly follows that the move upwards to
historicism as a general theory is justified. Such historicism may simply attempt too much. Consistent with this, the historical record suggests that it is difficult to assert a coherent historicism over time, since particular historicisms tend to either implode into incoherence, leading to return to some notion of epistemological absolutism, or to be transformed into transcendental historicisms, in which case tensions between invariant and variant considerations re-emerge. Thus the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, for example, was eventually forced to argue for an historical transcendentalism which posited different contingent root principles in different historical periods. In this way he tried to save the transhistorical intelligibility of different outlooks and to explain how reason could be both radically historical and accessible across time (Ortega y Gasset 1971). Likewise, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci opted for an extreme immanentistic historicism meant to replace attempts to know transhistorical verities within philosophy as political or the attempt to change actual existing socio-cultural traditions. Yet Gramsci experts note how transcendentalism reappears with cruel insistency in his work, as it had in the later works of his mentor Croce (see Nemeth 1980). Such considerations suggest that historicizing should be pursued without attempts to use ‘history’ to resolve problems which philosophers have assayed for centuries.

II

I now turn to the problem of historicism in the work of the theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), being emphasized the need to bracket all absolutist world views and cosmologies once we grasp the historicity of the human being. Bultmann was a major New Testament exegete who became famous for his programme to demythologize the New Testament. Bultmann’s historical thought, however, was complex and refined, and has been widely misinterpreted in English, partly because of omissive translations of his technical German vocabulary. Bultmann’s theology is broadly Lutheran and indebted to Kierkegaard and to his teacher Wilhelm Hermann more than to Heidegger, despite Anglo-Saxon misinterpretations of this point, especially those of John Macquarrie (Macquarrie 1955, 1960). Like Barth, Bultmann was a dialectical theologian, and he rejected the Kantian moralism, the secularism, and the theology-culture synthesis associated with German liberal theology. Like Barth, he emphasized the infinite qualitative difference between God and man and between time and eternity and took a deeply pessimistic view of the natural man and the course of human affairs. He was neither a German liberal nor a secularist (Dennison 2008). While emphasizing the need for hermeneutics and the fact that any interpretation had presuppositions, Bultmann was never a strict Heideggerian. He took from Heidegger an emphasis on phenomenology and a formal analysis of pre-understanding in the context of exegesis; he did not engage with Heidegger’s philosophy as such or even much engage with Heidegger’s Destruktion of historicism. (For a brilliant account of Heidegger’s response to historicism, see Bambach 1995.) Bultmann’s existentialism was profoundly theological rather than Heideggerian. Nor, despite what his critics alleged, did Bultmann confuse the kerygma with existentialist philosophy. On the contrary, he clearly distinguished between the existential self understanding of the person (das Existentielle) and the existentialist or philosophical understanding (das Existential) (Bultmann 1958: 74).
Like Barth, however, Bultmann saw that theology had to come to terms with the challenge of historicism outlined by Ernest Troeltsch (1865–1923) and, like Barth, he rejected Troeltsch’s solution. Troeltsch shaped much of the German theological discussion of historicism by concentrating on the loss of absoluteness and the problem of relativism which arose once Christianity was understood in intra-historical terms. Troeltsch, however, claimed that the problem of historicism could be solved using the resources of history. To do so, he proposed to combine a Schleiermachian theology of consciousness as directed towards the absolute and a neo-Kantian value theory, and to deploy both in the study of material resources from cultural history. Troeltsch sought to clarify the distinctive nature and historical development of religion by resort to the comparative history of religion, to determine the role of religion in the intellectual history of the human being, to incorporate the findings of the psychology of religion, and to identify a religious a priori which could provide the basis for a general theory of human religious performance grounded in testable psychosocial laws.

In Historismus und seine Probleme (1922) and in his outstanding historical studies, especially The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (1912; English trans. 1931), Troeltsch faced the implications of locating Christianity within world history and natural historical experience. As a philosopher of culture in Berlin he proposed an activist philosophy of history which took account both of the irreducibility of cultural history and the need for existential decision in adopting stances towards it. Specifically, he resorted to a material philosophy of the history of religions which would thematize the normative advances the historical record revealed. Troeltsch was also committed to a Kulturstaat based on the unitary values of the German Volk, but not uncritical of internal political developments in church and state. Troeltsch’s achievements here have been trivialized in much of the reception history by a tendency to dismiss him as a German liberal who collapsed revelation into a natural theology of religion and supported the German cause in the First World War.

Troeltsch was a constructive theologian who sought a new understanding of Christianity in a new situation and a new world. He sought to address the crisis of Western culture with a wider purview than that of the church and he rejected both orthodox dogmas and the self-glorifying accounts of the history of Christianity promoted by the churches. A friend of Max Weber, he was a great sociologist of Christian history who sought to present the truths historical inquiries exposed. For Troeltsch theology had to be a relative historical response to a specific historical situation; a synthesis of a specific situation and historical resources (‘heirlooms’) from the past, something constructed to explicate the ‘essence’ of Christianity for this present. Here his work is part of the background to the correlational theology of the American theologian David Tracy.

In the service of historical truthfulness, Troeltsch was happy to drop the incarnation, Christology and the Trinity as well as divine redemption and intervention and to negotiate an intra-historical status for Christianity. He insisted that Christianity could not be studied in separation from history generally, and also that the absoluteness of Christianity had to be given up. He also saw the need to transcend any presociological dogmatics. Following Schliermacher, he retreated from supernaturalism (although he was prepared to admit a weak inclusive supernaturalism applicable to all religions) to the domain of ‘religion’ and emphasized that there was no participation in or knowledge of the divine essence, a
stringency which made it difficult to ground any theology in hermeneutics. Like other German liberals, Troeltsch had a pious side and in his *Glaubenslehre* he made theology a practical science which provided a theory of doctrine for the church. The result was an admixture of a *Geisteswissenschaften* approach to history, indebted to Southwestern neo-Kantianism and the personalism of Hermann Lotze, and the beginnings of an historical objectivity which excluded the *Parteitlichkeit* central to orthodox dogmatics. Troeltsch’s critical outlook never led him to doubt the reality of ‘God’ as the ground and goal of religious experience, or to question ‘religion’ as the sphere in which the highest experience of the absolute appeared. He was prepared to admit, however, that Christianity itself might come to an end. In some of his work he flirted with a religious metaphysics and stressed that the relative and the absolute belonged together in history. On this account the absolute was always being thematized, albeit from a relative point of view, so that there was a measure of truth within history (Troeltsch 1902: 42). In the end, however, his evaluation of Christianity was situational: it was the religion central to the Western tradition and crucial to the values of Europeanism. Religion centred on cult and community was what seemed to matter, not the Word of God.

Bultmann rejected this intra-historical response to historicism as too removed from the *Krisis* conception of faith promoted by the new dialectical theology and attempted instead to promote an eschatological reinterpretation of Christianity which would meet the challenge of historicism in another way (see Dennison 2008). Against liberal ideas of Jesus as a moral teacher, he reasserted the centrality of eschatology in Christianity and then existentialized ‘eschatology’ in order to focus upon God’s address to the human being through his Word. Bultmann’s programme of demythologization was both an attempt to distinguish the *kerygma* from the mythology in which it was expressed in the New Testament and an exegetical rule that the meaning of New Testament myths should be explained in terms of the existential relation between God and man. For Bultmann redemption turned on eschatological events in which the human being came to self-understanding about the possibilities of existence. Myth was to be demythologized because myth obscured the radical alterity of the eschatological events it expressed. By ‘myth’ Bultmann meant the tendency to treat spiritual things as if they were this-sided, and could be objectified. Nonetheless, he did not treat the scientific world view as absolute, although he held that it was superior to earlier mythical systems in some respects. The scientific world view was not a complete world view of reality, but faith was not another world view or a world view of any kind (Bultmann 1958: 65). Faith for Bultmann was a response to an address which called the natural man into question, not the communication of supernatural knowledge. What mattered was the understanding of existence given to faith in response to revelation, the ending of the natural man, and his opening up to new and authentic existence, not the mythology through which it was conveyed. Bultmann saw historicism as establishing that there was no extra-historical standpoint and so as leading to a deeper understanding of the human being as historicity: as always on the way and in every moment open to the now of responsibility and decision. Nonetheless,

_Historicism … misunderstands the determination by the past as purely causal determination … It does not understand the present situation as the situation of decision – a decision which, as our decision over and against our future, is at the same time our decision_
over against our past concerning the way in which it is to determine our future . . . The relativity of each present moment, rightly seen by historicism, is therefore not relativity in the sense in which any particular point within a causal series is a relative one, but has the positive sense that the present is the moment of decision. (Bultmann 1957: 141)

The eschatological event was repeated in history in preaching and in faith, but not as an event which can be confirmed by a historian. The meaning of history always lay in the present in so far as the eschatological moment could be awakened in every moment, but it was not found in universal history (Bultmann 1957: 151). Bultmann attempted to provide a phenomenology of existence in faith, for which faith was a response to the illusion shattering crisis of hearing the Word of God. Faith put the human being in crisis and involved abandoning all positions; it was not itself a position. He insisted that faith was never objective and worldly, just as Hermann had insisted against Troeltsch that ‘religion’ was never worldly. Here Bultmann’s theology of faith threatened to resurrect the problems he himself associated with Karl Barth’s rationally ungrounded doctrine of Heilsgeschichte and to introduce geschichtlich events which historians could never study.5

Despite his iconoclastic stances, however, Bultmann’s theology was more orthodox than his critics suggested (a point taken by Karl Barth, who defended Bultmann against those who wanted to brand him a heretic), and he did not reduce theology to anthropology. Rather, Bultmann strove to explain how it was possible to know and speak of God in contemporary philosophical terms. Here he leant heavily on a theory of analogy. Unlike Barth, he insisted that the decisive thing for theology was the conception of reality which it assumed, an issue which required ontological and hence philosophical reflection (see the fascinating Bultmann-Barth correspondence in Jaspert 1982: letter 94). Bultmann’s conception of eschatology, however, did not provide a defensible ontological conception of reality, and he could never rationally explicate the notion that God was only available in his Word or his privileging of a fideiist construction of ‘Jesus Christ’. Bultmann’s privileging of eschatological events was softened because he presented it using existentialist conceptuality, but the underlying ontology of divinely initiated acts which never formed part of the ontic order remained problematic. Consistent with Dilthey and some forms of neo-Kantianism, Bultmann distinguished between what was historisch in the sense of part of scientific history accessible to a detached observer and what was geschichtlich in the sense of graspable only by engaged encounter. He never denied that the life of Jesus of Nazareth was a real geschichtlich event, and he further asserted that in Jesus’s case the historical event was the eschatological event.6 Moreover, he insisted, in Schellingese terms, that everything depended on the ‘that’ (das Dass) of Jesus. Nonetheless, this ontology of history made it impossible for him to solve the major problems raised by historicism. Christ was to be found in the kerygma: only faith could perceive that Jesus was the Christ, the once and for all act of God. But this meant that persons of different faiths could not agree on what for them were the most important realities in history. For Bultmann the devout Lutheran this was not a problem. Consistent with his Lutheran background, he emphasized that no place in the world was holy, that God and his actions could never be rendered visible in the world, and that faith was a miracle which could only be affirmed in spite of experience (sola fidei). He was
equally insistent that God was incomprehensible to the natural will and desire of ‘fallen man’, and intransigent in treating the whole world of human symbolism as prone to illusion and sin.

Bultmann alarmed conservatives by doubting that any reliable biography of Jesus could be found in the Gospels, which were theological works and manifestations of faith, not scientific documents, by suggesting that little could ever be known about the psychology of Jesus, by rejecting supernaturalism and divine interventions in causal processes, and by denying that a physical resurrection had taken place. Bultmann’s attempt to overcome the *aporiae* of historicism floundered, however, in an implicit transcendentalism for which the *form* of existence was always the same. He provided no clear account of why this should be the case, and no account of how these notions applied to the evolution of the species. Instead, he spoke in ahistorical, philosophical anthropological terms of the historicity of the human being as if this was invariant. Bultmann also perpetuated the dualism between history and nature promoted by Dilthey and Rickert, and so perpetuated the notion of history as a separate realm, as if human beings were not within the universe. Indeed, in some respects Bultmann fell below Troeltsch’s achievements, and he never entirely grasped that objective historical studies would dissolve the exclusivist identities attributed to the Israel and to Christianity. For all his stress on historicity, there was an anti-historical side to his 19th-century Kierkegaardian claims about *Existenz*, and he never fully faced the dissolving consequences of historical immanence. It was simply unconvincing (as his followers eventually conceded) to claim that the mythological presentations of the *kerygma* in the New Testament were important because of the understanding of existence they expressed. Likewise, although Bultmann insisted that historicism in the sense of relativism could be overcome because different understandings of existence could be objectively ranked, he had no way of resolving irreducible differences about what happened in the events of historical experience. Faith became a night in which all cows were black. Bultmann, of course, saw this self-restricting, finitist dimension of his theology as evidence of historical maturity, but he is open to charges that his theological hermeneutics is secretly, and without adequate grounds, transcendental, lacking in a proper account of the mediations of language, especially metaphor, and ultimately a form of Pietist absolutism in iconoclastic disguise.

Bultmann challenged historicism in the sense of immanentism by introducing existential eschatological events. He rejected historicism in the sense of immanentism by assuming an identity of the address of Word of God across changing historical circumstances and cosmologies. Above all, he celebrated the historicity of the human being. In all three cases, however, he left the major and ontological and epistemological issues unexplored, while implying that such matters were satisfactorily handled in at least some respects by Heidegger’s philosophy, a promissory note which neither he nor Heidegger were able to cash. As a result, one of the great imaginative exercises of 20th-century theology remained philosophically insecure and verged at times towards collapse.

III

Next consider the case of the German philosophical historian Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996), whose radical approach to historical immanence has provoked continuing
controversy. Blumenberg seeks to advance enlightenment by promoting scepticism about ultimate questions and encouraging renewed attention to more delimited questions which may have answers. In doing so, he attempts to combine an emphasis on discontinuous historical change, directed against continuism and substantialism in historical explanation, with a minimalist naturalism. In effect, a deficit philosophical anthropology, indebted to Helmuth Plessner, for which the human life is characterized by burdens and anxiety, is allied to a set of Kantian questions about the possibility of cultural changes.

Blumenberg’s projects vary from book to book. Often it is assumed either that Blumenberg should be read as a unique voice or else that his work should be compared to that of Jürgen Habermas. Against such readings, I suggest that Blumenberg’s work can usefully be approached in terms of his relation to the European philosophical anthropology movement, a movement which emerged in the 1920s and attempted to reorient a wide range of disciplines by explicating the nature of ‘man’ and ‘his place’ in the universe. In the existing literature Blumenberg’s debt to the movement known as European philosophical anthropology is noted, but its implications are not critically discussed. To be fair, the structural significance of Blumenberg’s links to European philosophical anthropology is not prima facie obvious. A straightforward interpretation might be that Blumenberg reworks the philosophical resources of an older European philosophical movement. But there is more at stake because Blumenberg advanced a phenomenological anthropology which implied that Husserl’s phenomenology could be renewed by taking the step to anthropology Husserl refused to take (see Pavesich 2008: 421–48; Wetz 2009: 389–414).

Blumenberg makes no secret of the fact that he draws upon the work of the philosophical anthropologist Paul Alsberg and his The Riddle of Humanity (1922) in particular (Blumenberg 1981: 114–16). He is also explicit about his borrowings from Arnold Gehlen, especially his Man: His Nature and Place in the World (1940) (1981: 114–16). Indeed, Blumenberg adopts Gehlen’s claim that ‘man’ differs from other animals in his lack of adaptive instincts. In his account man develops culture as a means of orienting himself in environments because he lacks the adaptive instincts which other animals possess. Blumenberg also builds on the theory of institutions Gehlen set out in his Social-Psychological Problems in Industrial Society (1949) and Early Man and Late Culture (1956) (1985: 136, 646), according to which human attributes and capacities vary with institutional fields. His debts to Max Scheler, the founder of European philosophical anthropology, are also clear. Blumenberg cites both Scheler’s sociology of knowledge and also his late works, including his idea of ‘God becoming’. There is also evidence that he has read Helmuth Plessner (b.1882), and there may be an echo of Plessner in Blumenberg’s identification of ‘self assertion’ as the principle of the modern world (1983: 564, 576, 664; 1985: 652).

An even more crucial influence appears to be the work of the philosophical anthropologist Erich Rothacker. Rothacker sought to relate the grand concerns of European philosophical anthropology to the study of human cultures. He also explored the idea of a non-static world outlook and the need to relate human deeds and decisions to the ‘pressures of reality’. In addition, Rothacker developed a theory of how certain questions dominated the thought of a culture. Here Rothacker’s work may be the background to
Blumenberg’s emphasis on the ‘questions’ of an epoch. At the very least Blumenberg retains decisive elements of Rothacker’s project, including the philosophical anthropological approach to culture, the stress on world views, and Rothacker’s doctrine of ‘significance’, which states that things in the human cultural world have different valences from those they have in the objective world studied by natural sciences (1985: 67–9, 642). Blumenberg makes his relation to Rothacker explicit, including their rivalry over how to develop a cultural historical approach to metaphor. He also acknowledges his debt to Rothacker’s On the Genealogy of Human Consciousness (Bonn 1966), albeit not perhaps its extent (1981: 12–15). He does not explain how he can reconcile deployments of elements of Rothacker’s rather rigid framework with his own more radical intentions.

However, Blumenberg’s links with European philosophical anthropology are even wider. Blumenberg derives key elements of his philosophy of culture from Ernest Cassirer, a thinker known in the English speaking world as a neo-Kantian, but interpreted on the continent as philosophical anthropologist. Once again Blumenberg ‘corrects’ an older approach. Blumenberg criticizes Cassirer for assuming that symbolic forms expressed the nature of the human beings. Instead, it is necessary, he argues, to explain why such forms arose. Symbolic forms are not given, but are solutions to the problem of our lack of adaptive instincts. But this preserves Cassirer’s functionalist approach to culture (1985: 160–1, 167–8, 641, 648).

Similarly, Blumenberg’s famous debate with Karl Löwith over the secularization thesis takes on new dimensions once we realize that Löwith was a philosophical anthropologist as well as an historical sophisticated theological thinker, for whom religious needs were related to aspects of the human condition (1983: 27–9, 598). Blumenberg also draws extensively on the work of Hans Jonas, another philosophical anthropologist cum philosopher of biology. Indeed, he uses Jonas’ dated Gnosis and the Mind of Late Antiquity (1934–1954) as a major source for his discussion of Gnosticism (1983: 531; 1985: 179, 185–6, 199, 205, 290–1, 646, 649, 650).

Likewise, there are references in Blumenberg’s work to Hannah Arendt (1983: 8–9, 597) and to Erich Voegelin (1983: 606), also philosophical anthropologists, although this is not the context in which their work has always been received in the Anglophone world. Indeed Blumenberg’s much criticised interpretation of modernity as a second overcoming of Gnosticism can be read as a response to Voegelin’s account of the modernity-Gnosticism relation according to which major modern ideologies are manifestations of Gnosticism. Similarly, Blumenberg turns for his theory of anxiety to Kurt Goldstein, again a figure closely linked with European philosophical anthropology (1983: 5–6). When the discussion turns to historicity, Odo Marquard, another philosophical anthropologist, is the discussion partner (1983: 56–61, 601, 648).

Such intellectual relations alert us to the possibility that an older framework underlies radical texts. In Blumenberg’s work philosophical anthropology as a doctrine which attempts to derive human cultural achievements (Leistungen) from fixed attributes or capacities of human nature is overcome. Philosophical anthropology in another sense, however, is renewed. It is renewed as the inquiry that, consistent with philosophy’s mission to dismantle what is taken for granted, calls the naturalness of attributes applied to ‘man’ into question. For Blumenberg, philosophical anthropology needs to
deconstruct what is supposedly natural and to show how such attributes may in fact be the results of specific accomplishments. The question becomes not what is human being, but how is human being possible? The later Blumenberg refined his anthropology considerably and implied that anthropology needed to be radically extended to include not only scientific but cultural and linguistic perspectives. Blumenberg saw culture and language as human self assertion against the absolutism of reality. On his view metaphors, myths, religion, science and technology were all adaptive ways by which human beings sought to keep their distance from a threatening world. Faced with the absolutism of reality, the human being sought refuge in the caves of religion, myth and metaphor. In his anthropological metaphorology Blumenberg especially emphasized the role of absolute metaphors which provided orientation for human beings even though they were irreducible to any more fundamental level of reality, just as they could not be replaced by concepts (see Blumenberg 1996, 2010).7 Neither true nor false, they answered unanswerable questions and became constitutive of what human beings became. This emphasis on the human distance from nature and on the discursive constitution of humanity enabled Blumenberg to emphasize the centrally adaptive character of human cultural inventions as ways of handling the difficulties of life.8 Nonetheless, it is far from clear that he successfully resolves the problems to which he draws attention, partly because his love of powerful language triumphs much of the time over exact analysis.

Consistent with the legacy of neo-Kantianism in 20th-century German philosophy, Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology seeks to explain the conditions of the possibility of human life (1981: 114–15). Here his emphasis is reminiscent of the project of renegotiating the thematics of transcendental idealism found in the work of Gehlen and, in a different way, in Plessner. This project involved attempting to discover conditions of the possibility of phenomena by turning to empirical considerations which were not central to Kant’s version of transcendental idealism. Blumenberg also stresses the need to inquire into ‘conditions of the possibility of’ phenomena. For him, however, such conditions of possibility may vary over time, consistent with the strategy of historicizing a transcendental framework.

This insight takes us beyond the fact that Blumenberg’s debts to philosophical anthropology lead him to radicalize a range of potentially conservative positions. Thus Blumenberg’s stress on the transepochal character of myth implies that rationality is not enough and parallels themes in the work of Leszek Kolakowski (1974), just as his renovation of Gehlen’s philosophy of institutions implies that institutions may have functions that are not immediately transparent to reason. Likewise, Blumenberg’s emphasis on the tension modern people experience between the life world and modern scientific discourses takes up a theme which was deployed in the work of Gehlen and other philosophical anthropologists to criticize modern life as well as the modern natural sciences. Such observations may qualify readings of Blumenberg as a ‘postmodern’ or a ‘post-Enlightenment’ thinker, but they do not highlight the central problem. The problem is: how far can historicizing and a transcendental approach be reconciled?

Blumenberg is a historicist in the sense of one who attempts to explicate the character of phenomena as the result or product of a specific path of historical development. As a historically minded post-Enlightenment thinker, he seeks self-clarification through
historicizing. Blumenberg emphasizes, however, that a historicizing approach need not involve a totalizing historicism (1987: ch. 3). He has sympathy with the need to recognize standards immanent to an epoch or period, but he also sees that an unrestricted relativism destroys the methodological basis for historicizing in the first place. But how can relativism be avoided? Blumenberg’s solution might be characterized as a radical form of transcendental historicism or an attempt to combine historicizing with recurrent structural features which involves claims about the conditions of the possibility of historical intelligibility. Transcendental historicism is a classic move made by thinkers who attempt to embrace historicism only to conclude that there must be enduring minimum conditions for historical intelligibility. A version of such an approach can found in Dilthey, Ortega y Gasset and Gramsci. Blumenberg may not appear to be committed to a strong version of transcendental historicism based on allegedly unchanging organizational features of the human mind. But, like others who play the historicizing card, the radical implications of his work are qualified to the extent that a transcendental historicism is admitted. This is the case because claims are made which allegedly hold across epochs, even if the possibility of making such claims is alleged to be a product of the current epoch. The making of such claims goes to the limits of historicizing as a strategy. It implies that historicizing may be constrained by constants or recurrent structural features with consequences to which historicists might not be sympathetic. Put bluntly, it is not clear why such recurrent structural features should not also be historicized if things change in the course of history as much as historicists suggest. Conversely, if things do not change that much, then historicizing may have limited applications in other areas as well.

Blumenberg’s transcendental historicism then is a combination of a minimalist philosophical anthropology, which posits a permanent problem for human beings: their lack of adaptive instincts, and a functional account of culture, which emphasizes what a particular type of cultural configuration does for and to the human beings who deploy it. His historicizing turns out, like all transcendental historicism, to fall back on the basic requirements of a minimal logic. Thus Blumenberg’s famous reoccupation thesis, according to which the same positions are reoccupied in different epochs, even though these positions are occupied by different or even quite heterogeneous historical contents, allegedly provides the identity conditions for our capacity to perceive historical events (1983: 467). By this Blumenberg means that we would not be able to identify such historical events as the events they are if minimum structural continuities did not hold.

Such a claim invites the rejoinder that it is necessary to show that the right structural continuities have been identified. The problem is that Blumenberg cannot prove the empirical elements in the philosophical anthropology he assumes or the speculative psychology he invokes. The status of his references to ‘affects of consciousness’ (1983: 232), let alone to constant functions of consciousness, is unclear. Nor can he prove what the ‘function’ of any specific cultural configuration (e.g. myth) is, either in a specific epoch or across epochs. Blumenberg can show that some boundaries and distinctions are necessary for historical discourse to be possible, but he cannot show that the boundaries and distinctions he proposes are necessary. In a replay of his own reoccupation thesis, the places may have to be filled, but there is no need to accept Blumenberg’s placeholders.
This means that Blumenberg’s version of transcendental historicism is methodologically insecure.

If so, then the implication may be that Blumenberg pitches his discussions too high. We may not be able to decide what made the Copernican revolution or anything else ‘possible’ in Blumenberg’s neo-Kantian sense. But then it is not clear what precisely his transcendental historicism has achieved. Blumenberg offers quasi-historical narratives which suggest that something valuable can be learnt if we understand what made the contingent cultural formations we have possible. This is plausible if what we learn is to change the questions we ask: to stop, in other words, asking questions in an unhistorical ‘transcendental’ way. On the other hand, there seems to be no way, on Blumenberg’s premises, to determine whether two different doctrines do in fact occupy identical positions in the system of man’s interpretation of the world and himself (1983), or what any specific cultural formation in isolation does to make human beings biologically viable, just as there is no way to prove Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropological thesis that human beings develop culture as a way of coping with their anxiety.

A minimalist interpretation might seek to avoid the impasse by claiming only that Blumenberg is offering a heuristic which enables us to read the historical record in novel ways which displace established interpretations. But if we cannot establish the truth of those readings at the level at which they involve claims about possibility, and if both the philosophical anthropology and the cultural functionalism on which they rest remain speculative, then it may be suggested that his work remains too tied to frameworks derived from European philosophical anthropology, and that these frameworks lead him to make stronger and more a-historical claims than a minimalist approach to ‘work on history’ requires.

This matters because the problem of how to reconcile historicizing with a transcendental approach is a structural problem for much contemporary historical thought. Clearly one solution is to opt for historicizing and to drop questions of a transcendental site of discourse and of recurrent structural features over time. Some post-Foucauldians explore variants of this approach. Nonetheless, both logical considerations (as Blumenberg observes) and naturalistic considerations count against such an approach and the solipsism and/or relativism to which it leads. If, however, we take the point that historical data is intelligible from the remote past, that we can understand Babylonian and Assyrian astrophysics, including why they made the mathematical mistakes they did, then we need to explain such transepochal intelligibility.

Blumenberg’s work is important because while stressing discontinuities and unexpected effects, he offers an approach to this problem which combines a specific minimalist philosophical anthropology with a form of transcendental historicism. If his approach is insecure or indeterminate, then the question is: should we attempt to reconcile historicising and a transcendental approach in another way? Or, should we drop any attempt at such reconciliation and opt for a more localist community-relative version of historical intelligibility? This structural problem remains unsolved after Blumenberg, as it does after Foucault and after Rorty. It is unlikely to go away. A more fruitful attack may be to embrace historicizing without historicism and to reformulate transitivity without transcendentalism, but then the quest for a better methodology takes us beyond Troeltsch and Bultmann as well as Blumenberg.
IV

I now turn to the work of the Jesuit theologian Robert Doran, who extends and further develops technical innovations proposed by the Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan (1905–1985). It is perhaps surprising to introduce Doran after a discussion of Bultmann and Blumenberg since experts on German philosophy and theology often prefer to remain within a familiar cultural tradition. I do not do so in the manner of Lonergan’s disciples, who sometimes write as if matters of the greatest philosophical moment had already been resolved by Lonergan, or would be so resolved if people read his texts more carefully. Nor do I suggest that Dorian is a figure of the stature of Bultmann or Blumerberg. My strategy is simply to show how an approach of a very different kind involving the management of historical life may be able to take matters in a different direction.

In the course of some 25 volumes, including an attempt at an alternative mathematical economics, Lonergan attempted to provide a new conceptuality which would rise to the level of the times and give theology a basis for a cognitional advance comparable in quality, though not degree, to that achieved for the natural sciences by the scientific revolution. To do this, Lonergan developed a version of transcendental method (here ‘transcendental’ means ‘unrestricted’) for which the subject could come to understand what it is to understand by self-appropriating the invariant normative patterns of the recurrent operations of conscious intentionality involved in all cognitive activity. Lonergan wrote:

> Thoroughly understand what is to understand, and not only will you understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood, but also you will possess a fixed base, an invariant pattern, opening upon all further developments of understanding. (Lonergan 1958: 22 note xxviii)

In providing a theoretical articulation of the cognitive performances involved in passing from consciousness to knowledge in terms of the actions of understanding, judging and deciding, Lonergan did not provide a philosophy of consciousness, a theory of knowledge, or a cognitional theory, despite overstatements by his followers to this effect. Rather he developed a doctrine of human understanding, thematized in terms of a series of intentional acts. Lonergan distinguished conscious and intentional operations on four distinct levels of experience, understanding, judgement and decision. More generally, he extended transcendental method to metamethod and advocated a generalized empirical method applicable to both the data of the senses and the data of consciousness. Further, consistent with his mathematical and scientific background, Lonergan argued for a form of critical realism as an orientation within contemporary metascience and as a basis from which to experiment for cognitive integration. According to this critical realism, reality cannot be immediately empirically inspected.9

The later Lonergan was less dependent on a Thomist philosophical architecture and argued for a genuinely historical concept of reality grounded in open world process based on emergent probability and conditioned schemes of recurrence exhibiting a pattern of upward dynamism towards higher integrations. He married his emphasis on the reconstruction of interiority with a new sensitivity to historicity, including the emergence of interiority as a new control of meaning and a norm for the self-mediation
of meaning. Indeed, he held that his fourth level of intentional level of consciousness (the level of decision, valuation and responsibility) could be the basis for a second enlightenment (see Lonergan 1972: 96). On this interpretation, Lonergan signalled, even if he did not explicitly articulate, a dynamic pragmatics, extending his shifts from deductive logic to a general dynamics, his acceptance of a moving viewpoint in place of closed world views, and his recognition of the importance of an ongoing genesis of methods. According to Lonergan this dynamic pragmatics could help human beings to cope with unexpected historical change and contribute to the intelligent management of an experimental world of emergent probability. Lonergan’s pragmatics included both transcendental precepts, designed to keep the subject oriented to authentic subjectivity, and a looser array of quasi-canons, designed to encourage a rationally differentiated interdisciplinary approach to cultural change informed by a post-classical conceptuality and an awareness of different cognitive levels. It remained to be seen how Lonergan’s pragmatics related to his ambitious proposal to transform metaphysics into heuristics to reform and reorient historical cultures by mediating between common sense, imagination and theoretical consciousness. According to Lonergan metaphysics as heuristics contains virtually and structurally what the sciences are to discover formally and in detail (cf. Lonergan 1958: 508). Lonergan spoke of metaphysics as the department of knowledge that transforms and unifies the others by overcoming their limitations. Lonergan was never able to fully theorize the last phase of his thought, and as a result he left a rich legacy of half-developed ideas which were still not completely rethought in a satisfactory historical and sociological framework. Indeed, his philosophy arguably remained over-dependent on his transcendental turn to the subject, although Insight already implied an inter-subjective standpoint in some respects. 

Lonergan’s originality was occluded for some readers by his limited educational formation, by his immersion in church-based institutions, and by his tendency to schematize complex problems in scholastic classifications rather than genuinely explanatory terms. He never developed the minimal philosophical anthropology his work required, although his emphasis on the historical differentiation of affects could arguably have been developed to include a theory of emergent senses. He also failed to provide the cognitional theory his work required and continued until the end to smuggle Thomistic finalism into his accounts of the intentionality of consciousness and the dynamism of nature. He also never really overcame his rather restrictive Thomist intellectualism, even though he placed a belated Augustinian emphasis on experience and feelings in correction of his earlier one-sided views.

Against the background of Lonergan’s vast but technically under-developed achievements, the Jesuit theologian Robert Doran modifies and extends Lonergan’s indications and argues for a transposition of theology into a theory of history. Like Troeltshch, Doran insists on the need for a new theology in a new age of theology. For Doran revelation is about being summoned to a new stage of historical life, as Israel was summoned to transcend its folk national identity and address its moral vision to the nations. Consistent with this, the contemporary task of theology is to theorize the next historical advance: to constitute world generative meanings and to promote new values for a world cultural (as opposed to a posthistorical) humanity (see Doran 1990: ch. 17). Concretely, it is necessary to overcome modernity’s instrumentalization of reason, the practicist bias
of common sense, and mechanamorphic forms of consciousness in order to enhance the positive possibilities of human historical evolution.

To do so, theology requires a heuristic structure for understanding the processes of history. Doran argues, that Lonergan’s legacy here needs to be extended. An adequate theological approach to history requires not only a cognitional base in an interiorly differentiated consciousness but also a critical self-appropriation of the sensitive psyche allowing for interaction between consciousness and the unconscious, and constructive control over neural demands (see Doran 1981, 1994). Here Doran extends Lonergan’s intentionality analyses to unconscious data and supplements his work with psychic, affective, moral, intellectual and religious conversions. According to Doran the subject is underpinned by a symbolic operator that coordinates neural process through image and affect and produces psychic integrations between conscious and unconscious operations. Moreover, this subject is accessible through the movement of feeling. Doran emphasizes the existentialist and pragmatic concerns of the later Lonergan and that the foundation of Lonergan’s pragmatics is the concrete contingent human being as knower, chooser and lover.

In this way, Doran modifies Lonergan’s pragmatics in less rationalist directions. In particular, he refines Lonergan’s theorization by arguing that these four levels of intentional consciousness and feeling are open at both ends to a transcendental wave before waking experience, and to finality as undeterminative directed dynamism. Moreover, the transcendental wave needs negotiation just as much as the intentional operation. Similarly, cognitive functions depend not only on intelligence and intentional operators, but on their interplay with the movements of life (see Doran 1990: chs 7, 8, 9).

In the same way, Doran expands Lonergan’s analytical critique of history based on a dialectics of progress and decline. Specifically, he proposes a dialectic of the subject, integrating neural demand functions and dramatic intentionality, a dialectic of community between spontaneous inter-subjectivity and practical common sense, and a dialectic of culture between cosmological and anthropological meanings (for a more regimented account see Doran 2005). Likewise, extending Voegelin, cosmological, anthropological and soteriological differentiations need to be integrated such that the compactness of the cosmological differentiation is modified by the anthropological differentiation (recognizing the irreducible metaxy of the human being) and by the soteriological differentiation of world transcendent reality. Further, Doran takes up Lonergan’s concern to inherit the critical analyses of Marxism and recognizes the need to propose detailed institutional alternatives to capitalism. Here he corrects the tendency to relate everything to the interiority of the subject on the part of Lonergan’s more transcendentally oriented followers and allows for a richer engagement with historical materials and institutional structures. In the longer horizon, he urges the development of new forms of publicity which achieve the superstructural embodiment of advanced values, so overcoming the modernist cult of the sublime and the neglect of historically innovative organizational forms (cf. Dodosky 2009). He also emphasizes the radicality of Lonergan’s notion that a new control of meaning is emerging to replace ‘theory’. The new control is ‘interiority’ or reference to interior integrality in place of externalizable criteria.

At times Doran’s work is over-deferential to Lonergan’s formulations (which are often dated and technically inadequate) and arguably does not expose Lonergan’s formulations
to enough detailed analytic criticism. On the contrary, he tends to recycle Lonergan’s formulations as oracles from a higher intelligence. As a result, Doran does not always sort out the many problems Lonergan’s formulations (e.g. of intentionality or dialectic or emergent probability) involve. He is also unable to extend Lonergan’s work in the crucial areas of mathematics and the natural sciences. On the other hand, Doran manages to reset much of the legacy of Ernst Troetsch without his concessions to immanentism and his attempt to correlate theology and culture, although, like Lonergan, he is not free from a tendency to locate ‘the divine’ outside ‘this world’. In doing so, he pioneers a constructive theology which avoids historicism in the sense of solipsistic relativism, while saving its useful emphasis on the changeability and open-endedness of human beings, cultures and societies over the course of history. He does not even manage to capture the powerful critique of premature absolutizations of transient cosmologies implicit in Bultmann, although he does escape Bultmann’s apolitical tendency for the most part to collapse eschatology into personalist account of individual existence.

Doran is one of the courageous theological thinkers of the 21st century and it may be possible to reconstruct aspects of his work in another theoretical framework, one aiming at a universal rather than a specific ecclesial theology.

This essay has opened up the possibility of overcoming the challenges of historicism by resort to an historical pragmatics which allows for transitivity without surrendering to either immanentism or relativism. However, it is indicative at best. Clearly it is necessary to address the question of what ‘theology’ can now be in greater depth, and to clarify what kind of pragmatics would be historical – to specify what such a pragmatics could and could not do, and to explain how historical change in pragmatics itself will be theorized. Here I can only locate my discussion, by way of conclusion, in regards to the problem of what theology can now be.

Currently it is probably not possible or desirable to overcome the tensions between ecclesial theologies embedded in particular churches and their traditions and universal theologies which seek to provide a conceptuality for the identification, performance and management of religiosities and spiritualities world-wide. My own work falls within ‘theology’ in a critical sense, but ecclesial theologies embedded in particular traditions can obviously draw upon my work when and where they find it useful to do so. A historical pragmatics in my view needs to locate human beings in a universe characterized by ontological determinacies and restrictions which persist as long as the world is organized in some and not other ways. Any uncritical denial of all ‘generality’, whether New Historicism or otherwise, should be rejected. That matters assumed to be ‘general’ (i.e. co-extensive with instances designated by the qualifier) by 18th- and 19th-century Western European, specifically German, discourses are not or were not ‘general’ is easily proved. It does not follow from this, however, that there are not real attributes of the physical universe at specific times which limit and constrain human actions, or that certain repertoires and combinations do not recur across space and time. Indeed, generality in this sense is fundamental to such natural scientific, mathematical and logical technical knowledges as we possess. The logically decisive point here is that some of
the logical relations involved in accounting such generals do not depend upon the historically contingent constructions of natural scientific, mathematical and logical technical knowledges. On the contrary, the intelligibility to human animals of such relations is what makes the vastly different knowledges so constructed over millennia understandable to any competent student of such matters. Given real generals, however, transcendental historicism can be avoided and transitivity can be reconstructed in terms of emergent laws and characteristics. In this way, historicizing can be pursued without historicism, and a complex body of theory, both bio-historical and organizational materialist can be built up.

At the same time the historicity of the human being can be saved by an emergentist account of somatics and cognition, such that human beings have different bodies and minds in different periods relative to changing technologies. This provides a stronger version of historicity than those impressed by historicism proposed, without the dangers of historicism in the sense of radical discontinuity. Finally, a futurological naturalism which accepts the purchase of scientific inquiries without prejudging their results can encompass naturphilosophisch, phenomenological and hermeneutic perspectives because it does not confuse critical realism with an account of what exists, or accept that either ontology or cognition can be reduced to the language of the natural sciences. A futurological naturalist framework need not be secular. On the contrary, it can accept the need to research and cultivate many different kinds of non-mundane organization, experience and performance.

A historical pragmatics deploying such a framework can incorporate the universal history and the historical sociology of religiosities and spiritualities implicit in the work of Ernst Troeltsch, just as it can thematize the conception of historicity explored by Bultmann, including the primacy of existential decision, the need to demythologize attempts to attribute ultimacy to transient cosmologies, including our own, and the need to challenge the delusional beliefs and institutionalized self-worship of the churches. It can also incorporate a finitist philosophical anthropology of the kind signalled by Blumenberg, and so the formative role of language and metaphorlicity in historical experience. However, it would do so by deploying a futurological naturalist framework which does not subscribe to the Geisteswissenschaften dualism accepted by Bultmann and Blumenberg. This theology can respond to the self-implosion of recent French thought by emphasizing that the study of metaphysics, mathematics and logic is essential for any coherent approach to the explanation of life in our universe. By researching cognitive and social emergence within bio-historical frameworks it can also promote the somatic re-embodying of intellectuality asserted rather than worked out by feminist philosophers and theorists, and so address the Balthasarian theme of a theological erotics. None of this, however, implies that eliminative forms of pragmatics of the kind associated with Dewey and Rorty can be sustained in the light of logical and empirical criticism. On the contrary, a non-eliminative pragmatics will explore a charismatic hermeneutics which reasserts many of the insights of Hegel, Schelling and German Idealism in form informed by the advances of analytical philosophy. It may therefore have some of the resources needed to promote a convergence of the Catholic, Orthodox and Reform traditions within Christianity, but also to recognize and work with the evidence for ingresson found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.
Notes
1. ‘Religion’ in the modern sense might not have been central to Early Christianity. In the world of Early Christianity social groupings were based on kinship, ethnic issues, power, and politics. Individual consciousness was subordinate to social consciousness and religion, like other social factors, was enmeshed in kinship and politics. In the first century CE Christianity was a fraternity of voluntary members which resulted in a newly-created fictive kinship group (see Esler 1994: 6–12).

2. The Protestant theologian Karl Barth famously characterized religion as unbelief, idolatry, and self-righteousness. He also insisted that the moment when it appears that religion is self-contradictory and impossible per se is a moment in the life of religion.

3. There are also references to naturalistic historicism, which emphasizes the similarities rather than the differences between history and nature, aestheticist historicism, which emphasizes the role of the spontaneous creative imagination of the historian in constructing the objects of historical understanding. However, such distinctions are not strict type distinctions (naturalistic historicism could also be aestheticist). Nor do they resolve the difficulty of allowing for the role of the rhetorical choices of the historian without losing the positivity of legal facts, such as that the Confederacy lost the American Civil War.

4. Just how ‘Lutheran’ is now disputed, partly because Luther’s work has been subject to profound reinterpretation by Finnish theologians.

5. Under the influence of Franz Overbeck’s scepticism, Barth located the truth and authority of Christianity at the boundaries of temporal historical existence and not in the flux of history. Indeed, he saw Troeltsch’s reliance on historical developments as trusting in the righteousness of human beings instead of the righteousness of God. Indeed he emphasized that God was extrinsic to the point of implying that history was meaningless, a relativistic flux in which the absolute was not to be found.

6. For Bultmann’s answer to Heinrich Ott’s charge that he made a methodological distinction into an ontological one, see his Reply in Kegley (1966: 259).


8. For Blumenberg’s later version of philosophical anthropology, see his Beschreibung des Menschen (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006) in which he emphasises the human being’s awareness of its visibility.

9. Lonergan’s most important contribution to philosophy may be his doctrine of judgement, which sets his critical realism apart from empiricism (see Morelli 1999).

10. Lonergan’s thought is largely pre-sociological, despite his appropriation of the work of Gibson Winters, and his accounts of language and meaning are radically incomplete (see Lonergan 1985).

11. Lonergan’s interpretations of Thomas are now contested by scholars who complain that he overlooked the Dionysian dimensions of Thomas thought in favour of a scholastic reduction of intellectus.

12. A futurological naturalism may need to attempt to reconstruct Philip the Chancellor’s theorem of the supernatural in contemporary terms.

13. For the contemporary re-evaluation of German Idealism, see the work of Dieter Henrich (especially Henrich 1992) and Freundlieb’s excellent introduction to Henrich (in Freundlieb 2003). For the growing convergence between Hegel and analytical philosophy, see Redding (2007).
References


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