



## Hermeneutics, Historicism, and *The Concept of History*

Adam J. Graves

*Metropolitan State University of Denver*  
agrave13@msudenver.edu

**Abstract:** This essay offers a critical assessment of Dmitri Nikulin's effort to advance a theory of history that avoids the pitfalls of universalism, on the one hand, and historicism, on the other. I focus my attention upon the relationship between three key concepts in Nikulin's study; namely, the *fabula*, the historical, and *logos*. On my reading, Nikulin implicitly adopts an epistemological orientation, inherited from late nineteenth-century neo-Kantian philosophers who envisioned history as an object that must be thematized in order to be studied scientifically. As a result, Nikulin comes to characterize history in terms of an untenable schema/content dualism that almost entirely extricates the historical past (or, data) from the contemporary effort to understand (or, interpret) it. By contrasting Nikulin's view with those of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, I show that a hermeneutic conception of history offers a more convincing account of the dynamic relationship between the past and the act of historical understanding. In the end, I argue that the double-edged problem of universalism versus historicism only arises when one fails to appreciate the role of historically effected consciousness within historical understanding, and so the problem is best avoided by adopting a hermeneutical, rather than an epistemological, orientation.

**Keywords:** Nikulin, Dmitri; Gadamer, Hans-Georg; Dilthey, Wilhelm; Heidegger, Martin; Anscombe, Gertrude E. M.; hermeneutics; history; historicism; historical relativism; universalism; neo-Kantianism; *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

Drawing from an impressively wide range of classical materials, Dmitri Nikulin advances a conception of history that is both novel (with respect to contemporary debates about the nature of historical knowledge) and ancient (with respect to its sources of inspiration).<sup>1</sup> Nikulin's expansive rumination on the philosophy of history succeeds in being simultaneously provocative and refreshingly learned, exemplifying the kind of *polymathia* (knowing much) that, according to the author, has characterized history from its earliest beginning. Indeed, the book's principle objective is to turn our attention back to this beginning—back, that

is, to the now seemingly strange manner in which the earliest historians practiced their burgeoning craft—in order to recover a conception of history that remains uncontaminated by the teleological, universalist and historicist presuppositions of modern philosophy. An examination of those early histories reveals certain structural features that, according to the author, provide the paradigm "for any historical oeuvre and its narrative" (CH 22).

Instead of assessing the details of Nikulin's rich and finely-woven historical scholarship, I will focus upon the philosophical fruits of this impressive philological labor, namely, the essential structural elements that form the philosophical backbone of his argument, a

<sup>1</sup> Dmitri Nikulin, *The Concept of History*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. [Henceforth cited as CH]

structure which he continually develops, deepens and deploys throughout the work. After all, if Nikulin's goal is to renounce modernity's teleological, universal, and historicist conceptions of history, then the success of his project can be measured by the extent to which these structural elements provide a plausible alternative to those conceptions. Like all books truly worth reading, *The Concept of History* is a provocation to thinking. And so I have taken Nikulin's conception of history as an invitation to think through some of the differences between his unique approach, on the one hand, and the hermeneutic approach to which I am myself committed, on the other. If, in the end, I express these thoughts in the form of a polemic between epistemological and ontological orientations, this is only so because that form has lent a kind clarity to my own reflections.

In developing his argument, Nikulin employs some new concepts (for instance, "the inner theater" and "list") as well as several familiar ones (for example, *factum*, *polymathia*, memoranda) that are granted a new and specific meaning within the context of his overall theory. Three key concepts provide the essential framework for his understanding of history—namely, the *fabula*, the historical, and *logos*. A *fabula* is a brief narrative or story of what happened, that is, "a particular and specific telling of who did what to whom, when and where" (CH 10). This story is accompanied and complemented by a longer factual list of names, things, and events, which he calls "the historical" (CH 10). The narrative can and should change, but the list stays the same, the list must be preserved (CH 173). By *logos*, Nikulin means the organizing principle that selects the factual items to be included on (or excluded from) the historical list and arranges them according to a certain syntactical, semantic, and pragmatic order (CH 99-100).

The historical is relatively independent of *fabula*, and history...is all in the details of the historical. Yet it is its structural *logos* that "decides" what to choose for a historical account or list, how to organize and thus how to preserve it in order to pass on in a history. [CH 131]

The structure of history, then, appears to involve a complex, dialectical relation between these three elements.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It must be said, however, that Nikulin could have done more to demarcate the respective functions or roles of these three elements. For example, the fact that the *fabula*, in addition to *logos*, is occasionally said to play the role of arranging the content of the list leaves one wondering whether the list is determined first by the

With this theory in hand, one can now turn back to the conceptions of history that Nikulin seeks to avoid. I take it that his rejection of teleology in history is rather uncontroversial. Contemporary belief in historical progress typically involves either the reduction of history to the unfolding of purely naturalistic laws—which thereby eliminate history altogether—or a secularization of earlier theological views of divine providence. These conceptions of teleology can be dismissed even without the help of any sophisticated theory of history, such as Nikulin's.

Nikulin's attempt to eschew both universalism (in order to preserve a kind of pluralism) and historicism (in order to preserve the idea of genuine historical knowledge) is equally commendable. However, this double-task presents a far greater challenge, not just to his work, but to any philosophy of history, since eliminating one often seems to require a tacit endorsement of the other. It is, in other words, less than obvious how one can dispense with universal history without falling prey to some form of historicism or historical relativism; or, conversely, how one can avoid relativism without positing the existence, at least in principle or as a regulative ideal, of a single, universal history. If, on the one hand, various particular histories can be—and in fact are—connected or coordinated with other histories, as Nikulin clearly suggests (CH 104), then nothing seems to prevent us from endorsing the possibility of universal history as the coordinated totality of all particular histories. If, on the other hand, particular histories are fundamentally incommensurate with one another—and we lack the means of adjudicating between them—then it seems that nothing would prevent history from becoming arbitrary and thus relativistic.

Though Nikulin never explicitly formulates the problem in precisely this way, his work proposes an interesting, though arguably insufficient solution: There can be no universal history, he writes, for there can be "no *privileged* *logos* that can be considered *the* principle of the organization, as well as of the interpretation and understanding of the historical and its lists" (CH 104). However, he assures us that this will not send us headlong into relativism. For even though "one can provide a *different* classification for the same set of entries, and thus rearrange them differently according

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*fabula* and simply tightened up by *logos*, or whether a particular *logos* mediates between a *fabula* and the historical in every instance (CH 132).

to a different *logos*" (CH 103), each individual "*logos* is precise in its selective power for a history, which means that it is not relativistic and that not just anything goes in a history" (CH 104). This suggests that once a particular *logos* is operative, the selection and arrangement of items is no longer arbitrary, but fixed according to certain discursive reasons.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that this proposal simply kicks the problem of relativism a bit further down the road: To be sure, what will count as a fact (or *factum*<sup>3</sup>) within the context of a particular historical account is no longer simply arbitrary. But what is lacking here is a criterion for deciding between rival historical accounts (that is, between accounts structured by different *logoi* of the same events). Since the criteria for getting things right are themselves a consequence of the particular *logos* employed within a given historical account, these criteria will not help us make the antecedent decision between competing *logoi*.

And so one is back in the throes of historicism—unless, perhaps there is a willingness to admit the possibility of an ever expanding and increasingly comprehensive historical perspective from which history can be told. Understanding this possibility and the conception of history that follows from it was one of the central tasks of the philosophical hermeneutics that developed in the middle of the twentieth century. In my reading, this hermeneutic approach offers the best means of steering a middle course between the extremes that Nikulin seeks to avoid. But Nikulin himself does not pursue that path, as he rules out the very idea of progressively spacious *logoi* on the grounds that this would reintroduce or depend upon a teleological conception of history: "If [and I take this as an 'if and only if'] there is no unique *telos* of and in a history, then there is no single ultimate *logos* that would disclose it" (CH 106). Put differently, no single all-encompassing *logos* is available to beings who stand within history rather than outside of it (that is, who stand at history's end). History has no end (or singular purpose) because there is always a future (and thus always more to tell).

In this context, Nikulin appears to be running up against a perennial problem, one that was originally expressed by thinkers associated with romanticism in terms of a hermeneutical dialectic between the part and whole of a text: grasping the meaning of

the particular depends upon having an idea of the whole, while the idea of the whole is in turn shaped by one's understanding of the particular. This dialectical procedure encounters special problems as soon as it is adopted by the historical sciences, since history itself is never a closed text, but an infinitely open one. For example, as Wilhelm Dilthey argued, the effort to understand the particular details of history always already implies at least some tacit commitment to the whole, and thus a commitment to what can be called a deflationary conception of universal history—a point Hans-Georg Gadamer later develops in *Truth and Method*.<sup>4</sup> While Nikulin clearly harbors suspicion toward even this deflationary account, one may doubt whether his own claims about the selective power of the *logos* could ever really relieve the historian from having to make such a commitment.

In the end, Nikulin tries to simultaneously circumvent both historicism and universalism by way of a different, though by no means unfamiliar, route—namely, by making sure that the historian has one foot firmly planted in fact while the other foot, namely interpretation, swings free. This basic strategy is attested to early on, when he articulates the difference between the *fabula* and the historical by means of the neo-Kantian distinction—canonized in the early twentieth century by Heinrich Rickert—between the science of history which concerns the realm of freedom, and the science of nature which concerns the realm of natural necessity (CH 13). The historical list is thereby conceived as

a sequence or collection of data pertaining to an event [which] can be ordered according to a universal pattern that can be also arranged and studied scientifically. *Fabula*, on the other hand, is the realm of freedom, where those pertaining to a history can keep retelling, rethinking, and reinterpreting the story that clarifies the meaning of the event in a history. [CH 13]

It is not surprising that Nikulin would formulate his project in terms of this distinction, since it was itself the product of the so-called Historical School's effort to steer their course between the Scylla of historicism and the Charybdis of universal history in the mid to late nineteenth century. The Historical School's desire to renounce the pretensions of Hegelian universalism was rivaled only by its desire to give an account of

<sup>3</sup> For Nikulin's account of historical fact or *factum*, see CH 38.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel C. Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York, NY: Continuum 1998, pp. 198-200. [Henceforth cited as *TM*]



the epistemological conditions that would render historical knowledge as being scientific in its own way (that is, in a manner distinct from that of the natural sciences, but still capable of securing its objectivity). One question that readers of *The Concept of History* will want to reflect upon is whether Nikulin's project can really make good on this neo-Kantian distinction without falling prey to the same problems that the Historical School and its neo-Kantian predecessors famously encountered along the way.

Following the interpretation of Paul Ricoeur, chief among these problems was the tendency to situate the question of historical understanding within an exclusively epistemological framework that originated with Kant's effort to explain the conditions that make natural science possible—as well as synthetic *a priori* judgments in general.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, had two disastrous consequences.

First, this tendency superimposes upon historical understanding the basic epistemological dualism of Kant's critical philosophy, whether that be understood in terms of concept *versus* intuition, or schema *versus* content, or theory *versus* data. This perspective gives the impression that the reality of the past (the raw data, as it were) is somehow a matter of purely scientific knowledge and that the historian's task involves arranging this data into a meaningful narrative that, roughly speaking, would be equivalent to an explanatory theory within empirical sciences. For the historian, then, the reality of the past is analogous to a kind of Kantian *Ding an sich*; for it remains inextricably hidden behind a veil of interpretation that rationally constructs (or reconstructs) it according to a conceptual or narrative schema. While it might be uncharitable to suggest that Nikulin explicitly endorses this epistemological dualism, two reoccurring claims in *The Concept of History* seem to underscore an implicit commitment to something very much like it. For only such a dualism could explain why (a) he tries to separate the historical (facts) from the fabula (interpretation),<sup>6</sup> and (b) continually characterizes the historian's task in terms of a reconstruction (CH 20, 36-

7, 123, 128). But, as I will argue below, to understand history is not to construct an object; nor is it even to understand the meaning of an irretrievable past on the basis of our limited construction or reconstruction of it—it is, rather, to grasp or appropriate the meaning of the past itself, as this is realized by those who live in the present.

The second problem arising from the epistemological model discussed above consists in the fact that the perspective conceals what, following Martin Heidegger, could be called the ontological conditions of historical understanding—the fact that the historian does not encounter the past as a subject facing an object, but rather as a being that always already belongs to the past and which is itself projected out of it.<sup>7</sup> As Heidegger puts it in "Division Two: *Dasein* and Temporality" of *Being and Time*, the very possibility of history has its existential ground in *Dasein's* authentic historicity, that is, its ability to retrieve (*wiederholen*) possibilities that it thereby projects into the future, and to exercise this ability explicitly and thus authentically, rather than thoughtlessly and inauthentically. On this view, history has less to do with reconstructing events that are locked in an alien and inert past than with an act of becoming mindful of and responsive to the ways in which the past remains effective in the present by constituting possibilities for the future (BT 437-8).

Writing in a less mysterious idiom, R. G. Collingwood makes a similar point about the shortcomings of Rickert's neo-Kantian model (and he does so, not incidentally, in lines that are found just a few pages after those cited so approvingly by Nikulin):

Rickert fails to see that the peculiarity of historical thought is the way in which the historian's mind, as the mind of the present day, apprehends the process by which this mind itself has come into existence through the mental development of the past. He fails to see that what gives value to past facts is the fact that they are not mere past facts, they are not a dead past but a living past, a heritage of past thoughts which by the work of his historical consciousness the historian makes his own. The past cut off from the present, converted into a mere spectacle, can have no value at all; it is history converted into nature.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, transl. John B. Thompson, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1981, pp 53-9. [Henceforth cited as *HHS*]

<sup>6</sup> "As I have argued, the historical is relatively independent of fabula, and history...is all in the details of the historical" (CH 131).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward S. Robinson, New York, NY: Harper & Row 1962, pp. 434-5. [Henceforth cited as *BT*]

<sup>8</sup> Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1946, pp. 169-70. Online access <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.168203>.

By adopting an epistemological model from the natural sciences, Rickert treats history as a dead artifact cut off from the present rather than a living and dynamic process with which the mind of the historian is already bound up. It is this ontological connectedness between the being of the historian and the being of the past that figures such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur sought to restore under the aegis of philosophical hermeneutics.

Nikulin's discussion of the so-called "ontological presuppositions" of history at the outset of the book represents something of a missed opportunity. For he is interested solely in the conditions that produce one's concern with history—namely the desire to preserve oneself against the threat of non-being, or death—and not with the ontological conditions that make historical understanding possible in the first place (CH 2). It is precisely the interrelatedness of one's concern with the past (thrownness) and the concern for the future (being-towards-death) that Heidegger sought to elucidate through the analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*.

This missed opportunity is not the result of mere oversight; for Nikulin is far too assiduous and informed a thinker to err in this way. Rather, his decision to not engage this hermeneutical line of thought is an inevitable consequence of having adopted an epistemological conception of the problem of historical understanding in the first place. In other words, Nikulin's general lack of interest in these ontological conditions stems from his particular conception of the nature of the object of history itself. Here, two contrasting conceptions of this object can be identified: According to one, it is hidden beneath a veil of interpretation, so that our understanding of the past is only ever approximate (though one might legitimately ask what this understanding is approximate to). According to the other, the historical past itself—and not just its interpretation—is always already bound up with the being of history, so that any understanding of it represents an unfolding of its truth rather than a mere approximation of it.

Nikulin's position on this matter seems fairly clear:

a *fact* told by a historian as a witness is...inevitably a construction, an interpretation according to explicit or implicit ways or rules of looking at things and their meanings. Every empirical "observation" is already theoretically loaded, presupposing a certain theoretical scheme. [CH 36]

Earlier in the text he writes: "Because history is a construction, it becomes possible for us, while still being

in history, to study history as an object that may be thematized and systematically ('scientifically') studied" (CH 20).

But while this content/scheme or fact/theory framework might be appropriate within the empirical sciences, it does not adequately capture the spirit of historical understanding. Following Gadamer, I contend that human beings are alienated from history and their historical existence in a manner quite different from the way they are alienated from nature and the objects of natural science (TM 276). Unlike the thematized object of empirical investigation—which can be held at a distance and secured through experimental repeatability—the historical past is not fixed in place, but forever in motion. In other words, the reality of the past is not limited to its immediate temporal moment, but continually unfolds throughout a history to which each historian belongs. Thus, the point of Gadamer's well-known (but little understood) concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is not merely the assertion that as finite beings humans are always already affected (and thus seemingly limited) by the past, as Nikulin seems to imply, but that these effects are themselves part of the dynamic unfolding of the meaning of the past, which we in turn seek to understand, and of which our effort to understand is an expression. Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, Rosa Parks sitting at the front of the bus—the historical effects of these events continue to unfold in a community's contemporary efforts to reflect upon them. Our ability to make sense of those realities is part of their unfolding.

One could make a similar point about the nature of historical reality by following another perhaps less enigmatic path—namely, by discussing G. E. M. Anscombe's theory of action descriptions. Of particular relevance here is the occasionally proleptic character of such descriptions, or the fact that the appropriateness of a description of an action or event will depend on what happens as a result of that action or event. Anscombe observes, "though an act is over, *many things come to have been true of it*, or there are many things it *comes to have been* as further happenings unfold."<sup>9</sup> Take, for instance, her example of a wife who is said to have injured her husband with a thrust of her knife; if the husband eventually dies from the injuries he sustained

<sup>9</sup> Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, "Under a Description," *Nous* 13/2 (May 1979), 219-233, here p. 228. [Henceforth cited as *UD*]

by the wound, then we had better say: "she killed her husband with a thrust of her knife." In Anscombe's words, "whether a certain description is true of some event [or action] may depend on what happens at other [that is, *later*] times and places" (*UD* 226). In fact, since history is rightly concerned just with those events that have lasting or widespread consequences, we can assume that nearly all events recounted in history have this proleptic character about them. Now, if one were to insist on positing the existence of something beyond these various descriptions — say, the bare particulars, the real fact of the matter, the action-in-itself (or, in Nikulin's language, the non-interpreted item on the historical list) — something that would make all other action descriptions mere re-descriptions (or reconstructions), one would be committed to a false conception of actions and events. But this insight also raises certain doubts about whether actions or events can be included on a pre-separable list alongside, say, names and objects as Nikulin's concept of history seems to suggest. Or, more precisely, it raises doubts regarding whether one could reliably distinguish between an interpretation (*fabula*) and a historical list, when the latter includes actions and events. And if we cannot do that, then the grounds upon which these important distinctions are made begin to slip away, and the so-called structure of history is in risk of collapse.

In any event, understanding history in a hermeneutical manner enables one to avoid the otherwise debilitating dichotomy between universalism and historicism, since it reveals that history's inevitable incompleteness in no way requires a commitment to some sort of relativism. This can be shown in Gadamer's rehabilitation of so-called prejudice (*TM* 277). Many prejudices are, on this view, productive rather than obstructive to an understanding of history, insofar as they are themselves the expression of historically effected consciousness — they testify, as it were, to the mutual belonging of the past and present, the connective tissue between the past and a community's understanding of it. As such, they represent an essential enabling condition for all historical understanding, rather than an unavoidable obstacle that limits historical knowledge to mere interpretations or reconstructions,

as Nikulin seems to suggest (*CH* 36). The hopeless polemic between universalism and historicism only arises when one fails to appreciate the necessary role of historically effected consciousness within historical understanding, and instead, adopts a misplaced epistemological attitude that envisions history as an object that must be thematized in order to be studied scientifically.

I have suggested that the dichotomy between universalism and historicism that Nikulin has set out to avoid is itself the inevitable consequence of an epistemological model he had inherited from the neo-Kantian tradition — a model which I have argued is far better suited to the objects of empirical science than to those of history. I have further argued that a more promising way of avoiding this dichotomy would have involved adopting a hermeneutic conception of historical understanding as it is developed in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. To be sure, this hermeneutic conception has its own set of disadvantages, such as the manner in which it appears to separate historical understanding from the disciplines that are most directly engaged in historical inquiry; a problem that led Ricoeur to suggest *Truth OR Method* as a more fitting title for Gadamer's *magnum opus* (*HHS* 60). This is not the place to take up these challenges, since Nikulin's work does not directly address them. Nonetheless, given the author's general thoughtfulness and erudition, it seems reasonable to assume that he felt those challenges were sufficient enough to justify taking a different course, one modeled after the epistemological sciences. But once down that path, it is impossible to avoid becoming ensnared by the very problems of modern philosophy of history that he sought to avoid — in other words, it is impossible to provide an epistemological solution to the problems of historicism and universalism. Since it is unfair to criticize someone for having failed to accomplish the impossible, the most I can do is accuse Nikulin for having tried in the first place. But since I have learned a great deal from his rather bold attempt to carry out this project, mine is an accusation filled with tremendous gratitude.