

**'The necessity of the historical imagination'**  
**University of Brighton Millennium Lecture**  
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**by Sir David Watson, Director of the University**

*In the aftermath of the Rodney King video, the O. J. Simpson trial, and Schindler's List, what is to count as history, and how can it be recounted?*

Publisher's blurb for Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: cinema, television, and the modern event* (1998)

I feel very privileged to have been asked to contribute to this important series. I am also grateful that I have been specifically stood down from having to offer my usual sort of party piece about the University of Brighton; although I shall return in a slightly different way to the question of higher education. Instead, Anthony Cane (the Harvey Goldsmith of this particular enterprise) has allowed me the luxury of returning to my disciplinary roots, and to reflect on how for me they help to make sense of both the *fin de siècle* and the challenge of the new Millennium.

I propose to tackle this assignment by combining some theoretical speculation with three very different cases. The first part of what I have to say is something of a methodological confession. The second, longer, part is an outline of three very different problem areas on which I have brought to bear my methodological commitments, my substantive concerns, and (as I am sure many of my critics will say) my residual confusions. I shall conclude by offering both a definition and a defence of the "historical imagination".

A methodological apologia

In almost every context where I am asked to state my profession I like to say "historian." This is what I was trained to be, very intensively, as is the British style through undergraduate studies and the American practice in graduate school (incidentally, a combination I am happy to recommend). It is also a profession that I have continued to practice, even while much of my time has been seized by an alternative descriptor - more persuasive on the passport and for the bank manager - that of "university administrator." In fact I have a rather old-fashioned view of the appropriateness of this dual identity. I am very proud of the way in which all of the senior staff of this very "new" university have maintained their commitments to teaching, research and scholarship, in contrast to widespread and strident views about the inevitability of the "new managerialism."

It is, of course, no longer possible to be just an historian (if it ever was) as the internecine war of sub-disciplinary approaches and specialisms is currently going through one of its most colourful and controversial periods. Like Richard Evans, the author of the wonderfully well-judged *In Defence of History* (1997), I believe these conflicts to have been more liberating than enervating, and I have enjoyed contributing in a very minor way. Like Evans, I am also somewhat in the middle of the road in terms of the personal outcome. He and I are both (I think - these are not his terms) "weak positivists" and "non-dogmatic theorists." We are both aware of the relativity and provisionality of historical evidence and interpretation, as well as of the value of theoretical insight, yet also committed to the importance of reaching, defending, and where necessary modifying our positions. In that sense the product of the historical imagination is, for us both, real and, until improved or refuted, valid. I cannot improve on Evans' peroration at the end of *In Defence of History*:

*So when Patrick Joyce tells us that history is dead, and Elizabeth Dees Ermauth declares that time is a fictional construct and Roland Barthes announces that all the world's a text, and Hans Kellner wants historians to stop behaving as if we were researching into things that actually happened, and Diane Purkiss says that we should just tell stories without bothering whether or not they are true, and Frank Ankersmit swears that we can never know anything at all about the past so we might as well confine ourselves to studying other historians, and Keith Jenkins proclaims that all history is just naked ideology designed to get historians power and big money in institutions run by the bourgeoisie, I will look humbly at the past and say despite them all: it really happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical, find out how it happened and reach some tenable though always less than final conclusions about what it all meant (Evans 1997: 253).*

Disciplines have, of course, waxed and waned in the academy, and as the warm-up person for over thirty professorial inaugural lectures in the last eight years, I am also aware of the dangers of what might be called the "myth of disciplinary centrality". This allows every scholar to look at the world and its problems exclusively through the subject-based values and priorities in which he or she was trained or has assumed. I would contend, however, that history is the best of the "solvent" disciplines. There are very few problems raised within other disciplines that cannot be illuminated by the historical approach.

What such methodological speculation comes down to at the end of the day is a struggle for "authenticity." Scholarship is about personal integrity in reaching intellectual conclusions, only then followed by persuasiveness. In this sense the traditional divide between the arts and the sciences breaks down. I have always enjoyed introducing my students in the humanities to the life and work of the Nobel prizewinner for physics, Richard Feynmann. In 1986 Feynmann was a member of the government-appointed panel charged with discovering what happened to the tragic flight of the US shuttle *Challenger*. He found the problem. In doing so this is how he described his approach to science and truth:

*The only way to have real success in science, the field I'm familiar with, is to describe the evidence very carefully without regard to the way you feel it should be. If you have a theory, you must try to explain what's good and what's bad about it equally. In science, you learn a kind of standard integrity and honesty (Feynmann 1988: 217-18).*

This maxim is, I think, generalisable across the academic world, despite Feynmann's immediate protestation that "in other fields, such as business, it's different." Alasdair MacIntyre has a similar formulation in terms of philosophy, expanding it to cover the issue of how we evaluate the theories of others.

*.... it is one of the essential virtues for a major philosophical system that it will be stated in a way that renders it maximally vulnerable to refutation from its own point of view.... Philosophical imagination enables us to inhabit temporarily a diversity of systems other than our own, and thus to participate both in the criticism of rival systems and of our own as though we were external critics; and the development of a philosophical imagination is a central part of a philosophical education (MacIntyre 1993: 78).*

Both perspectives are certainly true of good and honest historical inquiry.

#### Using the historical imagination: three cases

Contrary to popular belief, most professional historians, throughout their careers work on not one but a number of problems; sometimes sequentially, sometimes simultaneously; sometimes similar, sometimes very different. My own mentor, Bruce Kuklick of the University of Pennsylvania, author of award-winning and groundbreaking books on the history of American philosophy and religion, has also published a wonderful social history of a baseball stadium. I have used his example as an excuse for professional engagement with a wide range of historical and quasi-historical problems.

The principle of selection is, of course, always personal. In my case I feel very similar to the comedian Eddie Izzard when he was asked in a *Guardian* interview why on earth he had decided to put on his one man show in Paris, in French - a language he hardly knew. He explained that he "likes to confront things that frighten him." (*Guardian* 20 October 1997).

#### Case A: the very recent history of UK HE

The most recent, indeed current, project I want to describe is that of making sense of the national and international growth in higher education over the last third of a century. This is a hugely important issue in contemporary history, with wide social, economic and cultural ramifications. As a topic in contemporary history it also poses special problems: about the reliability of participant testimony; and about the independence and objectivity of the observer, in this case myself as a deeply implicated actor.

It also hits immediately a major stumbling block in much of the professional as well as the semi-professional discourse about educational policy and practice: that of overcoming prejudice with facts. Sir Ron (now Lord) Dearing identified this as one of his chief surprises as he stepped into the minefields of the National Curriculum, the 16-19 qualification framework, and finally, the whole of higher education with his chairmanship of the recent National Committee of Inquiry.

*...if I reflect on the last four years, I would comment, looking respectfully and in awe of those engaged in education, that policies need to be informed by evidence rather than conviction. That we need to develop a greater pre-disposition to listen, especially to unwelcome evidence (Dearing 1998: 8).*

The specific question I have attempted to address is "what happens when higher education grows?"

Two striking (and connected) features of modern society are the exponential growth of science and of higher education. Both show significant steady growth from the middle of the nineteenth century and then a sudden spurt after World War 2.

Empirically, there can be no doubt that internationally we are seeing a convergence on "mass" systems of higher education and away from "elite" systems, as set out most authoritatively by Martin Trow (Scott 1995: 2). Briefly, Trow saw elite systems as enrolling up to 15% of each age cohort, mass systems as enrolling up to 40%, and universal systems enrolling over 50%. On this basis internationally we have hardly any remaining systems that could safely be described as elite, and none which are yet genuinely universal (if you measure graduation rather than enrolment).

Certain characteristics of the recent development of higher education appear to be generic if not universal. The major one, as already discussed, is the pressure for expansion, for economic as well as personal and cultural reasons. More deeply however, it is possible to identify certain features that are almost inexorable concomitants of expansion: a challenge to the "distinctiveness" of higher education as an intellectual or epistemological enterprise; concerns about the maintenance of standards; greater "instrumentality" all round - on the part of students and their sponsors, teachers, and other stakeholding "consumers" such as employers; debate about institutional status - both "stratification" and the acceptable "limits of diversity"; and controversy about how the increasing costs of ever-larger systems should be met, focused especially on the identification and "charging" of the beneficiaries.

The recent history of the UK system has developed its own angle or "spin" on each of these.

On distinctiveness the UK has made the firm policy decision (principally through the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act) to move professional and vocational higher education into the mainstream. It has also elected to build up and expand its historical strengths in continuing education and continuing professional development. This has led to calls for the blurring of the boundaries between all types of post-compulsory education, and between further and higher education in particular. Interestingly, the Dearing Committee resisted this, and clung to a more traditional vision of the essence of higher education - especially in self-reflective and self-critical practice. The kind of dialogue between staff and students, as more or less experienced participants in a process of learning, are felt to be equally applicable to professional and vocational pursuits at the higher levels as to traditional academic subjects (NCIHE 1997: Chapter 8).

This links with the questions about standards. Here the UK story gives an interesting counterpoint to some of the gloom-sayers. Expansion has clearly not used up the pool of people with what Lord Robbins called in his report of 1963 "the ability to benefit" from higher education. The positive evidence from degree outcomes and from peer assessment is incontrovertible. It is, however, countered by a largely anecdotal and emotional series of charges that, in another evocative phrase, "more means worse" or "dumbing down." Such charges often confuse issues about the quality of life within increasingly financially pressed institutions, and about the changing map of knowledge in the modern world, with those of the real performance of the system in a changing environment.

Changed content does indeed link with increased instrumentality, and student-led demand does indeed reflect a swing to greater vocational and career sensitivity on the part of students. This is, of course, rational behaviour. In the more elite, restricted system of the past, graduates achieved market salience simply by having a degree, especially from a prestigious institution. In a world where a third of new

work-force entrants are graduates, the nature of the degree and its immediate purchase on the requirements of employers is obviously more central. Equally, the logic of social investment implies the development within work of more effective use of better-qualified people. This is at least one answer, painful though the period of adjustment may be, to questions about graduate under-employment.

Larger systems also raise questions of institutional status. Purely market-driven systems quickly produce and then embed rankings and a rigid pecking-order; other systems rely much more on the state to fix and maintain strata of institutions (usually by policing the academic/professional divide). The UK experiment has been about collective responsibility for the limits of a plural system of institutions, very much in line with its own historical development, although this has left us with an apparently very muddled pattern of institutions.

Finally, there are the questions of funding, on which I do not want to dwell too long because in 1999 you are well aware of the policy framework. Internationally we are now dealing with the aftermath of governments' attempts to secure what they invariably regard as a more even-handed basis for contributions by the beneficiaries of higher education (i.e. students and their sponsors). One interesting exercise, which I have begun but not concluded, is to monitor the extent, nature and effect of protest against this shift in various societies (by counting, for example, the number of "days lost" within national systems as a result of student protest). So far, at least, the UK is well towards the passive end of the scale (Neave 1998).

Simultaneously, the UK system has had to face peculiar or relatively "exceptional" features of its own history and context that have clearly influenced the outcomes in our own case.

First there is the huge and continuing influence of class and economic stratification. The most recent surge of expansion in higher education, which gave us what Richard Taylor and I have called the post-Baker system (as opposed to the post-Robbins system), has made huge differences in the internal population of universities in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and even disability. But there have been only the tiniest inroads into working-class under-representation (Watson and Taylor 1998: 3-9, 27-29).

Secondly, we are experiencing the benefits and disbenefits of what is called in the sphere of economic history "first phase industrialism". In the UK we have contributed to creating the model of the university that is internationally recognised. But we can also observe this model being subtly and imaginatively customised in other national contexts, including in ways apparently not available us as the pioneers.

This reflects, of course, a political and a social culture that is both institutionally conservative and suspicious of experimentation - especially with public money. Thus it is all the more surprising that what change has taken place has been accompanied by so little internal turbulence. Making sense of these developments has seriously tested contemporary historians and social theorists, and they have been largely found wanting.

First, there are the Marxist fundamentalists, who see it all in terms of a species of false consciousness and social control. A powerful statement of this position can be found in Mike Rustin's critique of "flexibility in higher education." In this, modularity, new management, and the market are claimed to reduce the educational experience to a "process of banalisation and homogenisation of everything, so that whilst consumers can choose freely between the goods available, all the goods available are really the same goods" (Rustin 1994: 199). In the US, the sociologist George Ritzer has called this the "McDonaldisation" of higher education - a neat irony in that McDonalds is one of the global corporations that has established its own "university" for employees.

Then there are the liberal emancipationists, who see it as a type of Fabian ameliorism. I have to confess that there is a strong streak of this in the Dearing report, in the Lifelong Learning movement, and in my own work (Watson and Taylor 1998).

Perhaps most influential are the post-modern impossibilists, who believe that the traditional game is shot, and that the university is now a socio-cultural anachronism, at least as theorised by its inhabitants. You can find a mild centrist version of this in Peter Scott, especially his influential book *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*. For Scott, the fate of universities is tied up in "the epistemological crisis of the late twentieth century." Its trajectory is determined by the centrifugal forces of modernisation in

general: "the extension of the higher education 'franchise,' the decline of collective solidarities, the ungendering of society, the reworking of graduate careers, the growth of symbolic goods, the acceleration of high technology" (Scott 1995: 177, 179). To map the wilder epistemological reaches of this view, however, we have to follow Professor Ron Barnett. His recent inaugural lecture at the Institute of Education was entitled *Realizing the University*, and began with the modest challenge that "the Western university is [emphasis in original] dead." By the end, however, he has given it a kiss of life: "The university now has the task of multiplying the frames by which we seek to comprehend the world and it has the task of enabling us to live with some degree of peace with the radical uncertainty to which the university itself has contributed" (Barnett 1997: 1; 21).

One place emphatically *not* to go for resolution, or even primary understanding of these issues, is the academy itself. There is a major paradox in terms of the lack of penetration of these theoretical and analytical perspectives into higher education itself, which otherwise would pride itself on being a source of objective critique. Academics on academia, as opposed to academics within their subjects, seem almost entirely incapable of either theoretical self-knowledge or empirical understanding of their role and that of their institutions within a wider society. Regular pathologies include the following: blind-spots and selective memory (for example, most members of the academic community would now regard the UK Open University as one of their most distinctive contributions - at the time of its birth they fought it tooth and nail); a curious kind of hyperbolic internal populism (as in the doomed attack on external peer review of teaching and research quality over the past decade and a half); and a kind of naive detachment (as in the recent controversies over grants and fees). This is one thing that has not changed as higher education grows, and why the careful exercise of the historical imagination - especially to establish the evidence concerning elements of continuity and elements of change - is vital.

#### Case B: pragmatism and American public philosophy

For the second of my cases I want to return to a series of problems that began to involve me during the professional apprenticeship of my post-graduate study. The issue is a central question for the history of ideas and can be put simply: how does technical philosophy become socially significant? I have approached this problem through cross-national comparative study, but also in the context of one national cultural history - that of the United States. Again there is an autobiographical angle: the work has assisted me in the still incomplete quest for a personal understanding of American culture. Another way of putting the question is "how (and why) does American public philosophy work (apparently so much better than in the UK and across the rest of Europe)?" Why is it that the United States has succeeded in sustaining a culture wherein serious thinkers engage directly, and effectively, with public opinion, and *vice versa*?

American history and American social science, notably since the observations in Alexis De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in the 1830s, has strongly fixated on American "exceptionalism", especially the consequences of the successful "new start" of their Revolution and Constitution. Seymour Martin Lipset has provided the most recent and rounded account of these differences:

*America continues to be qualitatively different. To reiterate, exceptionalism is a two-edged phenomenon; it does not mean better. This country is an outlier. It is the most religious, optimistic, patriotic, rights oriented, and individualistic. With respect to crime, it still has the highest rates; with respect to incarceration, it has the most people locked up in jail; with respect to litigiousness, it has the most lawyers per capita of any country in the world, with high tort and malpractice rates. It also has close to the lowest percentage of the eligible electorate voting, but the highest rate of participation in voluntary organisations. The country remains the wealthiest in real income terms, the most productive as reflected in worker output, the highest in proportions of people who graduate from or enrol in higher education and in postgraduate work. It is the leader in upward mobility into professional and high-status and elite occupations, close to the top in terms of commitment to work rather than leisure, but the least egalitarian among developed nations with respect to income distribution, at the bottom as a provider of welfare benefits, the lowest in savings and the least taxed (Lipset 1996: 26).*

Elsewhere in *American Exceptionalism*, as well as in his other writings, Lipset notes that "in much of the writing on the subject, American exceptionalism is defined by the absence of a significant socialist movement in the United States" (Ibid., 23). In one of my first attempts at a professional contribution to

the history of ideas, I attempted to show how an imaginative reconstruction of the American intellectual tradition helps to explain this important phenomenon (Watson, 1981).

American politics are both admired and criticised elsewhere in the world for their apparent escape from the ideological battles usually associated with the European categories of "left" and "right" originating in the French Revolution. Non-American political commentators are often frustrated by how difficult it is to overlay a simple template of "radical" and "conservative" on particular controversies and issues.

None the less, American politics were not "born free" in quite the way that some commentators admiring the apparently fresh start of the Constitution would like to claim. There are powerful eighteenth century "liberal" commitments built into all of the founding documents of the Republic, especially the Bill of Rights. Equally, and in spite of these explicit founding "freedoms", the religious basis of many of the communities present at the creation has powerfully influenced the way in which the states in particular have conducted their affairs.

The strongest link that can be claimed between the practice of American politics and the history of philosophy concerns neither liberalism nor religious doctrine but the twentieth century emergence of pragmatism.

The development of pragmatism as a philosophical doctrine was the work of three very different men.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was a brilliant, but finally reclusive and publicly impenetrable philosopher who first proposed the pragmatic maxim in a series of papers given at Harvard in the 1870s. His technical formulation was as follows:

*Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of the conception of the object.*

In ordinary language this implies that an idea's meaning rests in the possible consequences of acting upon it.

Peirce was appalled by the highly effective way in which his friend and personal benefactor William James (1842-1910) appropriated the concept. James, brother of the novelist Henry James, is arguably America's best-loved popular philosopher, as well as having been one of the founders of modern psychology. In his hands pragmatism became a call to action, cast in quasi-religious terms, as in his essay "The Will to Believe".

It was, however, in the hands of John Dewey (1859-1952) that pragmatism entered the mainstream of political thinking, stripped of its metaphysical and religious overtones, which were replaced by an overwhelming confidence in the capacity of modern science. Dewey, who worked himself primarily in education, in Chicago and New York, inspired a generation of social scientists and policy analysts to adopt a version of the pragmatic test and inevitable progress which he called "experimentalism" or "instrumentalism". For him, science and democracy were harnessed together in a mission that should free democracy from the other-worldly errors of the nineteenth century.

Several historians, including David Hollinger and Alan Ryan, have noted how between the late 1930s and the 1970s, when confidence in large-scale social science also began to wane, Dewey's ideas directly influenced "the class of managers and bureaucrats assigned the task of supervising American public affairs". In other words, they comfortably met another test set by Alasdair MacIntyre (whose essay "Are Philosophical Problems Soluble?" I alluded to earlier) of a set of professional doctrines that were seen to resolve social problems.

How did pragmatism achieve this? Over the years I have suggested at least six ways in which it did so. First it eschewed the language of ideology, and indeed any philosophical references beyond the task at hand. As Dewey wrote: "commitment to inevitability is always the result of dogma – intelligence [his word for science] does not pretend to know except as a result of experimentation, the opposite of preconceived dogma." Secondly, this idea was held simultaneously with that of a progressive design.

Thirdly, Dewey and his followers managed successfully to secularise the essentially religious vision of both Peirce and James. Fourth, they were, if only briefly able to elevate social science to a level where its practitioners were able to claim equal significance with the natural scientists. Fifth, they caught the wave of confidence in “professionalism” and the training of social scientists for an interventionist social role, and finally, they fed off a mid-twentieth century moral tone that tended to suppress minority dissent and political opposition (Watson 1995).

This last feature represents the fatal flaw, although more recently there have been some interesting attempts to revive the original religious and moral themes in pragmatism, as in the work of Cornel West, the most celebrated black social theorist working within the academy. In a number of public political pronouncements West has attempted to establish an activist "prophetic pragmatism" with special resonance for black intellectuals.

Fully to understand this special feature of American exceptionalism – the public role of technical philosophy – requires then a mode of analysis imaginatively combining politics, philosophy and institutional history; no single element is adequate by itself.

### Case C: Hannah Arendt and explaining the Holocaust

The final problem I want to share with you is one of the most challenging issues in modern cultural inquiry. I still find the Holocaust "unthinkable". So in a literal sense did Hannah Arendt. At the beginning of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she asked some very simple and dramatic questions "What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened?" I have struggled, as an historian, a teacher, and a human being, with precisely these questions (Watson, 1992: 37).

In the lead essay for the book edited by Vivian Sobchack, reassuringly entitled *The Persistence of History*, from which I quoted at the beginning of this lecture, the most eminent living historiographer, Hayden White, ruminates on the fate of the historical event in the face of both modern communications technology and the modernist tendency in criticism and interpretation. In the course of his exposition he identifies a special category of “holocaustal events.”

*Some of these “holocaustal” events – such as the two World Wars, the Great Depression, a growth in world population hitherto unimaginable, poverty and hunger on a scale never before experienced, pollution of the atmosphere by nuclear explosions and the indiscriminate disposal of contaminants, programmes of genocide undertaken by societies utilizing scientific technology and rationalized procedures of governance and warfare (of which the German genocide of 6,000,000 European Jews is paradigmatic) – function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group’s capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects (White, 1998: 20).*

For many of White’s readers this conclusion is not only a counsel of despair, but also deeply offensive. (He has since tried to explain that what is really at issue is not so much the loss of “meaning” of, for example, the Nazi holocaust, as that of achieving its “representation without aestheticization” – a problematic around which the discipline of Holocaust Studies has been built. See Jenkins, 1998: 78-79.)

It is hard today to recall what a significant figure the German exile Hannah Arendt was in political philosophy and political theory from the 1950s through the early 1970s. In addition to the Cold War reputation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which subsequently foundered chiefly as a result of its attempted elision of Nazism and Stalinism, she achieved notoriety as a result of her report of the Eichmann trial (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*), and a rather more measured academic reputation through her works *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. All of these are relevant to her determinedly secular attempt to understand what had in fact occurred in the course of the Nazi genocide. Theoretically, they are now of only minor interest in the canon of political theory, while she has been rather more aggressively (and unfairly) written out of the history of Jewish, and more especially Zionist thought,

mostly as a consequence of the offence caused by the Eichmann book. I notice, for example, that despite her major contribution to political debate about the foundation of the State of Israel, she is not even mentioned in the over 700 pages of Sir Martin Gilbert's recent *Israel: a history* (Gilbert, 1998).

Her decline is also explicable by the fact that her major intellectual project ended in failure, or at least incompleteness. I have defined this project as the search for "philosophical detachment in the twentieth century, leading on to questions not only about how to assign responsibility for individual and group actions but also about how an individual qualifies himself or herself to judge these actions" (Watson, 1992: 15). I base this interpretation mainly but not exclusively on an analysis of her unfinished *The Life of the Mind*, which her friend and literary executor Mary McCarthy published in 1978, three years after her death.

We can deduce Arendt's purpose in setting out to write *The Life of the Mind* from its structure. The first volume, *Thinking*, is an essay on "thoughtlessness" and the resulting hypothesis that thought may help to condition us against evil and evil-doing.

*If...the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we should be able to 'demand' its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be* (Arendt, 1978: I, 4, 13).

The second volume, *Willing*, is about the conditions and obligations of freedom: "a will that is not free is a contradiction in terms" (Ibid. II, 14). Both were intended to be preliminary to the discussion of the faculty of *Judging* in a third volume of which only fragments remain.

Arendt scholars have spent much time and effort in trying to complete her chain of thought. As a result, there seems to be little doubt that for her the final goal was a moral (and hence for her "political" role for judgement in which all of her previously articulated values such as love, imagination and communicability could play their part (Watson, 1992: 109-17). The importance of the attempt for the purposes of this lecture is that it flies in the face of the modernist and postmodernist tendency to abandon meaning in favour of "representation". Faced with the political and moral catastrophes of the twentieth century, Arendt sought to secure a platform from which to understand what has happened to us (what she called "thinking what we are doing"), the detachment which this implies, and the qualifications to assign responsibility and to judge.

In this sense her project was not dissimilar to that of the young historian Daniel Goldhagen, in his highly controversial book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Goldhagen finds his explanation of the Holocaust in a deep-rooted anti-semitic pathology in German culture. Arendt's judgement is more philosophical than psychological. For example, she writes movingly about the philosophical responsibility exercised by non-participants, who often risked death through this exercise of choice.

*The non-participants, called irresponsible by the majority, were the only ones who dared to judge by themselves, and they were capable of doing so not because they disposed of a better system of values or because the old standards of right and wrong were still firmly planted in their mind and conscience but, I would suggest, because their conscience did not function in this, as it were automatic, way. Their criterion, I think, was a different one: they asked themselves to what an extent they would be able to live with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and they decided to do nothing not because the world would be changed for the better, but because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves* (Watson, 1992: 47)

If Arendt's project failed, for some of the reasons I have outlined, it was an heroic failure.

## Conclusion

What I hope that my methodological "confession," as well as the description of three very different examples of historical work, has revealed is the role both of imagination and of intellectual self-discipline in each of these endeavours.

Nietzsche would have classified these tendencies as opposite poles, as "Dionysian" and "Apollonian," but in fact misread the role of imagination (from the Greek *phantasia*) in previous western philosophy. Rather than its conventional representation as contributing to one side only of an oscillation between reason and instinct, between rationality and irrationality, between science and poetry, the "imagination" as a faculty has from time to time and in different ways served both. This is the primary insight of the French scholar J. M. Cocking's posthumous collection *Imagination: a history of ideas*. He shows how from Plato onwards imagination could act as what Francis Bacon called a "messenger" not only from the senses to the mind but also between reason and a broader "understanding", and between judgement and action. The outcome is an extraordinarily open and generous conclusion.

*Imagination has come to mean, among other things, the freedom of the mind, and this can be exercised in innumerable ways without necessarily becoming separated from logic and empirical observation. There is a conceptual imagination, a moral imagination, an imagination of the heart; there is, thank God, a ludic imagination, a playful imagination which helps us to bear the responsibilities of all the rest* (Cocking 1991: 280-81).

Mary Warnock has a similar conviction in her *Imagination and Time*.

*...we cannot keep knowledge and understanding in a separate compartment from liking and disliking, seeking and avoiding, fearing and loving, in a word from values. Both are equally dependent upon imagination* (Warnock 1994: x).

To return to historical and cultural study, this means that imagination issues into an exercise of both disciplined and empathetic study. In this sense its historical application is similar to such devices as the literary scholar's concept of "prefiguration" (a test in interpretative practice of an instinct, lead or prior conception [Kramer 1989]), or the social scientists' use of grounded theory (where the theory emerges from immersion in the evidence rather than as an *a priori* hypothesis [Strauss and Corbin, 1997]). I hope I have convinced you of the necessity of such historical imagination as we seek to understand where we have been before the advent of the Millennium.

A "final final" word is perhaps in order on the significance of the Millennium itself. Historians are very fond of periodisation, finding for example interpretative comfort in simplistic characterizations of decades (like the "roaring twenties" and the "swinging sixties"), or analytical satisfaction in bursting traditional boundaries. Eric Hobsbawm has made much of how the "long nineteenth century" from the French Revolution to the first World War preceded the "short twentieth century": from the first World War, and its most influential outcome in the Russian Revolution, to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the apparent end of the Cold War at the end of the 1980s (Hobsbawm 1994).

It is perhaps no accident that all three of the "problems" posed to the historical imagination that I have shared with you tonight have come from this same "short" twentieth century. At least one is very contemporary indeed, and would have violated the last government's view that you cannot "do" history until a decent interval has passed (Kenneth Baker thought it was twenty-five years). As I hope to have persuaded you, I disagree, and I share Hobsbawm's view that:

*[t]he destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up lacking any organic relation to the public past of the time they live in. This makes historians, whose business it is to remember what others forgot, more essential at the end of the second millennium than ever before* (Hobsbawm, 1994: 3).

Since we are at Grand Parade, I will leave you with an image, and also explain its appearance on the poster for this evening's event. The German-Jewish writer Walter Benjamin was much taken with a painting of Paul Klee, which he bought in 1921. It was titled "Angelus Novus", and Benjamin renamed it the "angel of history" in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Arendt was a friend of Benjamin's, and after his tragic death (he committed suicide when his escape route to Spain was temporarily closed), she brought his papers out of Germany and oversaw their publication. She borrowed the image in several of her own essays. "This", writes Benjamin as translated by Arendt, "is how one pictures the angel of history."

*His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Arendt 1970: 165).*

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