The Future of History: Perspectives on Parahistory, Ethics, and our Relation to the Past

(an Interview with Kalle Pihlainen)

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DOI: 10.48102/hyg.vi66.621

Abstract:
This interview with Kalle Pihlainen, conducted by Christian Palocz, examines central questions in the theory and philosophy of history, with a focus on constructivist and "postmodern" approaches. The conversation explores the disciplinary status of history, its relation to objectivity, and the implications of narrative construction for historical understanding. Engaging with figures such as Nietzsche, Hayden White, and Derrida, Pihlainen reflects on the epistemological and ethical challenges of perspectivism and discusses the tension between the evidentiary research phase and the interpretive nature of historical writing. The exchange also considers the political and normative roles of historiography and its entanglement with "parahistory" –understood here as the pervasive, non-academic ways in which societies remember and represent the past. In doing so, it raises questions about whether history constitutes a coherent field with a stable object or method, and how its value must be understood in relation to other disciplines. Throughout, the interview offers an accessible articulation of Pihlainen's theoretical and philosophical commitments, while also engaging in broader reflection on the role, practice, and the future of history.

Keywords: philosophy of history; constructivism; historiography; narrative theory; parahistory; perspectivism.

e-ISSN 2448-783X

Christian Palocz: Kalle, it's a real pleasure to continue our conversations. I find myself returning to your work – articles, of course, but I've been particularly immersed again in your books recently. *The Work of History*, for instance … it really makes one grapple with the tension between the rigorous theoretical work that's happened since White, the whole constructivist turn, and how historians actually ... well, *do* history day-to- day, especially when facing the literary choices involved in writing.[1] It raises so many questions about that bridge between theory and practice. And then, reading *Historia fallida* alongside it… That book seems to almost radicalize the critique, wouldn't you say? Pushing us to question even our most basic "common sense" about the past and perhaps asking if we need to move beyond the familiar debates about representation towards thinking about history's critical role right now, or even other ways of relating to what's happened.[2] It's work that really unsettles easy assumptions. Which leads me back, I suppose, to the starting point… This fundamental question of what we even *mean* when we talk about history?

Kalle Pihlainen: Yes, that's… that's a good place to start. I try to engage precisely with that —the definition, the *value*, maybe the continuing relevance, you know, of history. And it does bring up some, let's say, difficult ideas, certainly. Ideas that might fundamentally shift how to think of the whole business of looking at the past.

CP: Indeed, your work presents positions that are, well, shall we say, provocative. One such idea is this argument you explore… that history might not be essential in the way often assumed. That perhaps literature, or philosophy, could offer … well, just as much understanding?

KP: Sure. The line of thought that questions whether history really has a specific, inherent use value… If what you're seeking

[1] Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past* (Routledge, 2017).
[2] Kalle Pihlainen, *Historia fallida* (Palinodia, 2023).

is, say, a deep grasp of the human condition, or perhaps ethical orientation –so the argument runs – a powerful novel, or philosophical text, might provide that kind of insight just as effectively… maybe even more so, without becoming entangled in, you know, specific dates, events, and the endless interpretations surrounding them. Keith Jenkins makes this point of "other imaginaries" being at least as good for our practical and ethical orientation in the world…

CP: Avoiding the … the clutter of historical specifics, perhaps.

KP: Something like that. Although, naturally, defenders of history would insist that grounding things in concrete contexts, in real consequences, is exactly its strength. But that is exactly the challenge being posed.

CP: And connected to that, this idea that you examine of historical baggage. Why is the past sometimes framed as an obstacle? It carries a rather negative weight.

KP: It can, yes. Essentially, if you look at the more contentious present-day issues – think about land disputes, perhaps, or arguments over reparations for past wrongs … okay? Very often the conflict's root resides in historical grievances, in radically different interpretations of past events, past injuries.

CP: Competing stories, competing memories.

KP: Exactly. And this baggage… the weight of those past injustices, the resentments, the conflicting narratives … it can make finding practical, forward-looking resolutions in the present incredibly difficult. Almost impossible, sometimes. People become entrenched in their historical positions.

CP: And compromise feels like a betrayal of the past itself.

KP: Right. So, it's as if the past actively holds the present captive in those situations.

CP: Your writing also touches upon Hayden White's suggestion … something about fiction potentially fostering a better understanding between people? That certainly caught my attention.

KP: Yes, that's a really interesting, maybe counter-intuitive point that I do agree with and have tried to develop. White sug-

gested, but didn't really explore in detail, that engaging with fictional narratives – because they often delve into inner lives, motivations, in a way history sometimes finds difficult – it might actually offer more insight into diverse human experiences. Perhaps more effectively than certain historical accounts focused on, you know, actions, events, external factors.[3]

CP: Which makes one wonder, if understanding human complexity is the primary aim, is adhering strictly to historical fact always the most effective path?

KP: It certainly poses that question, doesn't it? – Is the factual basis the most critical element for that particular objective? Which brings us, I think, to a fundamental point: Is history's value purely instrumental? Are we asking what it can do for us? Or is there something more … inherent?

CP: A big question.

KP: Yes. And to even begin to approach it, we need some clarity on what we're discussing when we invoke "history."

CP: Right, the term itself is elusive.

KP: Exactly. In English, "history" can signify, well, the past itself, everything that occurred…

CP: The events as such.

KP: … but it also designates the academic writing *about* the past, the discipline, the texts historians produce.

CP: A crucial distinction. So, when philosophers of history, or thinkers like yourself involved in these debates, deliberate on its value, which "history" is generally in focus?

KP: Usually, the focus is on academic history writing – the formal practice, the work emerging from professional historians. But it's vital to remember that representations of the past are everywhere, on every level, aren't they? Family anecdotes, films, monuments, public memory…

[3] See Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Northwestern UP, 2014); also see, Pihlainen, *Work of History*.

CP: All that wider sphere of engagement with the past.

KP: Well, yes … I try to use the term "parahistory" to designate this wider sphere.[4] The related concept of "past talk" – which Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly explore effectively in *Liberating Histories*,[5] for instance – certainly captures much of it too, but it doesn't distinguish that from history "proper," which is what I want to do... And philosophical analysis often concentrates on this formalized academic version. When so-called postmodern positions enter the discussion here, we generally mean viewpoints that question the large, overarching narratives, emphasizing how interpretation, how standpoint, shapes that academic history.

CP: Now, your work at times adopts a critical stance towards academic history, suggesting its primary function might be, well, to buttress existing power structures. That feels quite radical.[6]

KP: It's a strong assertion, certainly one associated with certain "postmodern" and poststructuralist thinkers whose ideas I engage with.

CP: What is the argument there?

KP: The argument, essentially, is that the *way* historical narratives are constructed – what's included, excluded, how events are framed – can, perhaps inadvertently, and at times very purposefully, serve to reinforce the status quo. By presenting a particular version of the past as *the* authoritative, objective account, academic history is used to legitimize existing societal and political arrangements.

CP: And this links to how narratives about the past inform present conduct?

KP: Absolutely. The stories told about origins often function as models, or perhaps warnings. They shape values, collective

[4] This is the topic of a forthcoming book: Kalle Pihlainen, *Parahistory and the Popular Past: Acts of Historical Production* (Routledge, forthcoming 2026).
[5] Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly, *Liberating Histories* (Routledge, 2018).
[6] See especially Chapter 3, "An End to Oppositional History?" in Pihlainen, *Work of History*, pp. 38–61.

identity, feelings of belonging, our sense of right and wrong ... History, employed thus, becomes an instrument… perhaps for socialization, but also – and maybe primarily – for control.

CP: Your work points to some stark illustrations… competing narratives around Palestine, or Tibet and China… the notion that the same historical facts can be used by different groups to support entirely opposing claims. It's… striking.

KP: It is. And that underscores how central the *selection* and *interpretation* of facts becomes. Academic history might excel at the task of research – unearthing and verifying sources…

CP: The "research phase"?

KP: Right, that's a distinction that I take from White and Jenkins both, but one that most commentators miss... It's important for being able to see the issues… to at least heuristically separate the "writing phase" – the things they're more focused on, and me too – from the "research phase." That's the work of establishing those factual details. And when it comes to writing, to turning them into a coherent story, assigning meaning, determining significance… that's where ideologies, values, the arguments one wishes to make, enter the picture.

CP: Which returns us to that rather unsettling question: Does academic history offer any utility beyond, potentially, reinforcing state control or established power dynamics? Is there a way it functions beyond that, or are we left with that critical, perhaps cynical, perspective?

KP: That idea… that history can become a dead weight, or just a tool for power… well, it connects strongly with Nietzsche's thinking, doesn't it? He was very critical, I believe, of what he saw as an unhealthy fixation on the past common in his time. He felt it could actually be paralyzing ... damaging or counterproductive and limiting ... to "life," you know? To present vitality. So … his move was quite radical, really. Instead of getting bogged down in metaphysical arguments – a separate issue – he shifted the focus entirely … and not only in relation to history but to knowledge

and truth more broadly … He was one of the "masters of suspicion" … He looked at the effects of history. How it's used, how it's abused … specifically in relation to living, acting people. And that's why his *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, is so interesting … it helps in thinking about the different ways of relating to the past.

CP: Right, focusing on the effect now, on "life" ... that's a key difference. So, if Nietzsche thought that history really holds us back, what can we do?

KP: For Nietzsche, there isn't just one mode of using history. He delineates three distinct ways we can engage with the past. First, the antiquarian mode. … This is driven by a fascination with the past for its own sake. An interest in the details, the strangeness … the texture of past times. Almost like collecting things just because they're old, and strange to us… Curiosity value.

CP: Fascination detached from present concerns…

KP: Exactly, yes… Then, the monumental mode.

CP: Monumental. That connects to the political uses, the justification of present actions you mentioned earlier.

KP: It does, partly. This concentrates on major events, great figures, heroic narratives. It focuses on inspiration, lessons from the "great men" of the past … often to legitimize present actions or aspirations. Think of national foundation myths, that sort of thing.

CP: Constructing heroes and pivotal moments. And the third?

KP: That's the critical mode. There, we use the past in a decidedly presentist fashion, frequently to challenge or even dismantle existing traditions, beliefs, injustices, by exposing their origins or inherent flaws. Ideally using history to liberate us from the past, in a sense.[7] So very much in line with the kind of emancipatory history advocated by White or Jenkins, for instance, and recently

[7] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, translated with an Introduction by Peter Preuss (Hackett Publishing Company, 1980 [1874]).

more concretely by Norton and Donnelly in the book I mentioned, *Liberating Histories*.

CP: Antiquarian, monumental, critical.

KP: And Nietzsche seems to believe that a healthy culture, or individual, needs to work with some combination of these. Crucially, he sees utility, potential empowerment, particularly in the monumental and critical modes…

CP: And here, scepticism regarding history's claims to pure objectivity becomes quite acute, doesn't it?

KP: Exactly. If we use, and abuse, history in these varied ways, for such diverse ends, then the notion of a single, neutral, objective history becomes yet more difficult to uphold.

CP: This leads towards what you present as two opposing camps regarding history. Can you elaborate on those?

KP: Right, of course … on one side, there's a side that views history as fundamentally perspectival, perhaps even relativist – meaning our grasp of the past is inevitably conditioned by our viewpoint, our values, our positionality. It's not that there's one singular Truth about the past waiting for discovery, but rather multiple, potentially valid interpretations. This perspective is sometimes labelled, often dismissively, as "postmodern" – my preference would be "poststructuralist." And it really hinges on the question of where and how meaning comes into the picture...

CP: Okay, that constitutes one camp. The other?

KP: The other is presented as a more, let's say, absolutist view. One that perhaps insists on a more fixed, objective kind of history. And it seems, to me at least, that it often does that specifically in the service of preserving existing power structures… it's funded by governments for a reason, right… or even in support of a specific national identity. This side tends to denounce the first as relativist, nihilist, and so on… Too radical… undermining "established truths" and "necessary" values.

CP: And one observes this tension quite vividly today, beyond academia, in political discourse, public debates over monuments, curricula, many instances…

KP: Absolutely. We hear people invoking supposedly immutable historical facts and values while at the same time dismissing others as "postmodern" or relativist. And increasingly also as "woke" in much the same connections… That constitutes a genuine site of contention.

CP: Is there a path between these positions? Is that the desirable direction?

KP: Finding that way… that's the persistent question, isn't it? How does one acknowledge perspective and interpretation without collapsing into an "anything goes" relativism, as the opponents present it? How to avoid rigid dogmatism but still have some standards for evidence, for argument? It's a hard balancing act.

CP: Now, your writing delves further into the postmodernist stance, distinguishing between history's research phase and its writing phase. What is the significance of that distinction?

KP: It's key to understanding the critique from constructivists like myself... It's a recognition that historians are rigorously trained in the research phase – navigating archives, verifying sources, establishing what are sometimes termed singular existential statements… basically, establishing specific facts, factual points. That person lived. That event occurred on this date. A document states this. After that... the real constructivist concern, or focus, is on the writing and construction phase.

CP: When these facts are turned into a narrative?

KP: Precisely. When those individual facts are selected and ordered, when meaning is imposed, producing the narrative… really the interpretation, the story. That's where subjectivity, perspective – ultimately valuation – inescapably enters. So, even if history writing does, on a textual level, resemble fiction – having characters, plot, narrative form – a fundamental difference in the process of the construction exists. Facts preceded and curtail what can be done – to an extent.

CP: Absolutely. And I would add that the choice of "facts" is already also a subjective act…

KP: The crucial distinction is in historians' professional commitment to truthfulness regarding the established facts. They cannot just invent evidence. They shouldn't ignore facts inconvenient to what they are studying and writing. This commitment to the evidence, what I try to call "the historian's promise," firmly constrains historical writing. It limits the narrative options compared to fiction, but it also gives history a unique value for the readers who want a 'real' account, or, at least, an attempt at that.

CP: This is connected to different views on the source of meaning. Your work contrasts an empirical or objectivist view with the constructivist one here.

KP: Yes. Exaggerating a little: the more traditional, empirical historian can be said to operate under the belief that meaning comes somehow directly from a study of facts, from "getting" reality as accurately as possible. The meanings, the significance, are thought to be *in* the past, waiting to be found.

CP: Okay, meaning is discovered.

KP: Whereas the constructivist or "postmodern" perspective I explore tends to argue that meaning isn't in any way *in* the facts themselves. It's something we *impose* onto them. We create the meaning … we invent it.

CP: We construct it.

KP: We construct it, yes. Based on our present interests, our values, the questions that interest us, the story we want to tell. The facts are the raw material, and the meaning derives from how we shape and interpret that material. The classic distinction between content and form…

CP: The example you provide is illuminating, even possessing all data about a single past day, every single occurrence…

KP: Right, the idea of all the information from Collingwood. Or in another very similar thought experiment by Danto, the ideal chronicler, who can transcribe everything…

CP: … but one still wouldn't be able to *find* anything about that day's meaning. Meaning and significance only emerge with a

question, when certain events are selected, connected, and framed within a larger narrative or interpretive structure.

KP: Exactly. The raw data remains just data. It's the interpretive act, guided by perspective, by language, by emplotments and troping, to bring this closer to White's core terminology, that transforms it into meaningful history.

CP: There your work proceeds into potentially contentious territory, drawing certain parallels, perhaps tentative ones, between these philosophical positions and contemporary political alignments.

KP: Yes, I do go there, as we've discussed on other occasions. And it's important to emphasize these are suggested resonances, not definitive categorizations.

CP: Understood. What are these suggested connections?

KP: Well, the idea floated is that "postmodern" relativism or perspectivism might be argued to align with, or at least better resonate with, certain political viewpoints often designated progressive or "woke," given its stress on multiple perspectives and its questioning of dominant narratives.

CP: Okay. And the counterpoint?

KP: And conversely, the more objectivist or empiricist stance – with the appeal to established facts and perhaps more traditional values – might be seen as resonating with more conservative, nationalist figures, maybe even someone like Jordan Peterson, who emphasize order and existing structures.

CP: But the crucial argument remains that *both* sides employ narratives and interpretations, even those professing objectivity?

KP: That's the vital argument from the critical perspective I engage with, yes. As someone like Keith Jenkins would contend, all historical accounts are ultimately perspectival, and ultimately just made up. The very claim to pure objectivity can itself function as a rhetorical strategy, a means of asserting authority for one specific perspective over others. But there's no ultimate ground to justify that authority. And of course, many of those on the empir-

icist side admit that on some level but then proceed as if it makes no difference to what they're doing … to the way they present their interpretations and arguments.

CP: Okay. This seems to lead inevitably into the complex domain of ethics. If all is perspectival, if meaning is constructed, how can any ethical framework be established? How can past actions be judged or present ones guided?

KP: That's perhaps the most significant challenge, and I try to tackle that in my work. It links some broadly "postmodern" thought, particularly poststructuralism via figures like Derrida, back to existential phenomenology and ethics.

CP: Existentialism… Sartre, Kierkegaard?

KP: Precisely. And particularly Sartre here. The link is forged through Derrida's idea of undecidability. In a world devoid of absolute, divinely ordained, or objectively demonstrable answers to ethical quandaries, the ethical burden falls squarely upon the individual… t*o* choose. To make a decision, adopt a stance, and assume responsibility for that choice, knowing there's no ultimate guarantee of being right. It's a through-line that runs from existentialism to decisionism.

CP: So, ethical conduct is less about rule-following, more about the act of choosing and accepting responsibility under conditions of uncertainty.

KP: Exactly right. That forms the core of this particular ethical position. It suggests authentically ethical action occurs only when individuals engage in the decision and make a conscious choice for themselves, rather than merely adhering blindly to rules, dogma, or tradition. It's a sort of consequentialist, ultimately individualist ethic.

CP: But what motivates such a choice? Justice? Aesthetics? Self-interest? In the absence of fixed values?

KP: There's the rub… The motivation unavoidably comes from the individual's perspective. One might argue the fundamental ethical act is simply the *choice* to attempt ethical engagement,

to grapple with the question of responsibility … of values, even while always lacking certainty. So, it entails a kind of Kierkegaardian leap … a leap of faith … something that Rorty endorses too, leaning on Kierkegaard. Choosing to affirm certain values – justice, compassion – and acting upon them, thereby making that very choice the ethical foundation.

CP: It resonates with the Socratic notion… the unexamined life… One must question and choose.

KP: There's certainly an echo. But a "postmodern" view suggests that ethics doesn't necessitate universal consensus on beliefs or objectives. It can remain highly individual. The distinction often made between ethics and morality…

CP: But doesn't that risk collapsing into total relativism? What if an individual's ethical choice is… well, harmful or abhorrent to others? That's where the question of an aesthetics of living becomes crucial—not just what we choose, but how we live, the style, care, and coherence we bring to existence itself. Ethics then isn't only about rules or consequences but about crafting a life that expresses a certain beauty, harmony, or integrity, which again reminds me of Nietzsche, and why not Foucault.

KP: That remains the persistent worry, the spectre of relativism. If all values are merely individual choices, how can anything be denied or condemned?

CP: How does your work attempt to navigate this? Does it invoke moral facts?

KP: It touches on that terrain. The very notion of moral facts is intensely debated. Do they exist? Are they universal? Community-based? Individual? Relativists typically discard the idea of substantive moral facts altogether. I think on that issue, I identify more as a perspectivist, seeing viewpoints operating concurrently at individual, community, and cultural levels, which further complicates the matter, but it allows thinking of moral facts on a minimal level, as societally and discursively determined. Which permits adopting a pragmatist stance toward them.

CP: So, we become entangled in debates around realism versus anti-realism as well.

KP: Right. And the very attempt to elaborate an ethics risks objectifying it, reducing it to yet another system, which runs counter to the emphasis on individual choice in the face of undecidability … to that kind of decisionist attitude.

CP: You also draw a distinction between perspectivism and relativism itself. What is the nuance there?

KP: Important … that's a subtle yet significant distinction. Perspectivism, and here I'm drawing inspiration from Gadamer for the terminology, might still allow for a belief in a shared horizon … a commensurate horizon … of meaning, let's say … towards which we are all oriented, albeit from different vantage points. And so, dialogue might facilitate a "fusion of horizons," an understanding.

CP: Okay.

KP: And relativism, particularly in its stronger formulations, suggests that there isn't necessarily a shared horizon or common point of reference. Viewpoints or perspectives are incommensurate. So, understanding across different subjectivities resembles something more like negotiation across radical difference, without the presupposition of a commensurate world of meanings somehow "underneath." Applied to ethics, this renders it profoundly subjective of course.

CP: Given all this philosophical complexity, then, how does the actual *practice* of history manage ethical considerations? Does your work offer any practical orientations?

KP: There I turn back towards the professional community. Even within the framework of these "postmodern" approaches to history that I discuss, the concrete assessment of historical work, including its ethical dimensions, often defaults to the community of historians itself. And I do think that some interpretations can be successfully denied if they go against the facts – and that's particularly easy with extreme revisionist histories of course … even though there's no moving in the other direction, trying to *prove* particular interpretations from facts.

CP: A form of self-regulation, then.

KP: In a manner, yes. An argument exists that the established norms and practices within the historical profession function as a sort of ethical check. While individual historians inevitably bring their own perspectives and ideologies, the community – through mechanisms like peer review, conferences, ongoing debate – generally resists interpretations perceived as grossly distorting the factual record or promoting clearly unethical standpoints, such as, for instance, Holocaust denial.

CP: So, it's less a matter of a purely philosophical resolution and more a pragmatic accommodation.

KP: Exactly. It leans towards a pragmatic approach, perhaps closer to what someone like Rorty or even Habermas would propose, despite their differences … grounded in communication, shared professional standards, and the rejection of interpretations that simply fail to meet the norms of evidence and argument operative within that specific community. It's framed as a practical, rather than a purely theoretical or ethical, response to managing the implications of any relativism or perspectivism.

CP: Alright, let's shift focus slightly. Your work revisits this concept you emphasize – parahistory. You sometimes relate it to "past talk" as well. What precisely constitutes that sphere? Is it related to operating outside the academic mainstream, or in peripheral areas? One thinks, perhaps, of discussions in many spheres in Chile … in 2023 commemorating the 50th anniversary of the military coup.

KP: No, it's not about geography or existing on the academic periphery. As you know, I'm from Finland, also peripheral in so many respects. Parahistory, or this wider domain of other "past talk", encompasses all the ways in which we engage with and represent the past outside the confines of formal academic history writing.

CP: So… effectively everything else?

KP: Pretty much. Family stories, public commemorations, museums, memorials, historical films and novels, social media discussions touching on history, political uses of the past … all of it.

CP: It's an immense field.

KP: That's true. The crucial point is that this kind of parahistory saturates our culture, our thinking. It's an overwhelming part of so many current debates, like the commemoration of the anniversary of the military coup in Chile you mentioned, and it's central to many ongoing discussions in the US and Europe concerning historical statues and monuments, reparations debates, and so on. That's all parahistory in action.

CP: So, academic history constitutes one current, while parahistory is this vast ocean of other modes of relating to the past.

KP: That's a useful image. And traditionally, disciplinary or academic history has often perceived its role as attempting to … well, to discipline this wider field.

CP: In what way?

KP: By critiquing historical inaccuracies in popular media, correcting widespread myths, striving to establish the "true story" based on rigorous academic research… essentially by acting as the ultimate authority … by claiming authority by appealing to having a better grasp of individual detail...

CP: But is that dynamic shifting?

KP: To me it seems that it is. That relationship is evolving, becoming more intricate. The public as well as all the other actors producing parahistory rely less on academic historians as the exclusive arbiters of historical truth, and historians themselves are growing more conscious of, and sometimes actively engaging with, it seems, all the diverse forms of parahistory.

CP: Which brings us back, almost cyclically, to the question of the value, the necessity, of historians as such. If historical inquiry flourishes within numerous other disciplines anyway – art history, history of philosophy, of science, of physics, of medicine, and so forth – and if parahistory is so pervasive, do we actually *need* a distinct discipline designated "history"?

KP: That's indeed the key, hopefully provocative, question. You find historical investigation embedded everywhere. Every way of

thinking and discipline has a past, and many want to study that, and there's a need for their "history," even if it's not something done by professional historians or in the ways of those historians. And even *within* history departments, the degree of specialization is remarkable. A medievalist and someone studying modern popular culture employ radically different sources, methods and methodologies. So, I raise the question of whether history in fact constitutes one unified field of study possessing a single object. Common appeals to methodology – something like "source criticism" and "close reading," or "situating humans in time" – just doesn't cut it to unite such diversity.

CP: What is implied by that?

KP: Well, history appears to study … "history," unlike, say, psychology, sociology or economics, for instance, which don't equate their discipline with an identical object named "psychology," "sociology" or "economics" … Its object, in a sense, is itself, which is somewhat peculiar, perhaps… And if its coherence rests less on that peculiar object and more on its methods of inquiry or justification, then even theory and philosophy of history could arguably be considered merely a branch of the philosophy of science. And I do partake in the scepticism about history qualifying as a science in the first place… So, perhaps to stretch the point, one might suggest thinking in terms of "sub-histories" instead – these distinct collections of specialized inquiries – as a more accurate way to describe how we actually deal with the past, rather than insisting on one unified discipline.

CP: If it lacks scientific unity and its methods are employed elsewhere, what constitutes its ultimate justification as a standalone discipline? Does your work propose one?

KP: I touch on a couple of possibilities. One, rather cynically, is the function we discussed earlier: propaganda and political utility, serving the state or particular ideologies. That constitutes an obvious, but quite problematic, historical rationale for its persistence.

CP: Okay. Is there anything less cynical?

KP: Well, yes, beyond that, I've tried to advocate a notion of "historical yearning," or a phenomenological yearning for the past. I think it aligns with the antiquarian pleasure Nietzsche writes about – curiosity about the past, the stories, the details, valued purely for their own sake. Perhaps that's a less harmful, intrinsic value. And then there's Keith Jenkins' humorous remark…

CP: Ah yes, that doing history keeps historians off the streets.

KP: Mmm. He clearly says it tongue-in-cheek, but perhaps also gesturing at the idea that it connects with a specific intellectual drive some people have. That particular yearning, as I put it…

CP: So, ultimately, pinning down a single, definitive value for history is doomed.

KP: It seems that way, at least to me, based on how I approach these things. History serves multiple functions, people see it through different lenses, and its definitions and utility are much debated.

CP: Kalle, this discussion has been very rich, and at times, quite demanding conceptually… reflecting, I think, the complexities inherent in your work too. We began exploring the nature and value of history and seem to have come up with questions instead of answers.

KP: That's a good sign, right? It's a complex subject. And the aim isn't really finding simple answers … but maybe appreciating all sides of the question. Understanding the different issues –the challenges posed to history's value, the tension between interpretation and fact, the interplay of academic history and broader parahistory– hopefully helps in finding ways to navigate contemporary debates and, maybe, reflect on our own relationships with the past.

CP: Indeed. How does one personally engage? Which of Nietzsche's modes predominates? Considering these diverse facets – utility, historical baggage, professional conventions, individual choice and responsibility – what constitutes the most crucial reason for engaging with history today? Is it pragmatic application? A deeper humanistic understanding?

KP: Yes, resolving this question of value… that's certainly difficult. I think maybe Jenkins' joke about historians being productively occupied and staying "off the streets" points to something practical, doesn't it? The way the discipline just … gives people a focus, something to channel their energies into… And yet, alongside that, or perhaps entangled with it, there's surely this other dimension… this persistent impulse, the yearning, maybe –for some people– to grapple with the past, to seek connections, to try and shape some narrative or construct meaning for their own purposes, however fragile and incomplete that always is. Where the value in that mix lies … and for different people differently, I suppose … well, that remains, I think, an open question… At least for our practices. But theoretically the question of deriving meaning from the past is a persistent *problematic*, a site of inquiry… which is why these conversations continue. And it certainly gives us something to think about.

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