Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World

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Author: David Carr
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Phenomenology and its application to the writing of history have complex intellectual origins. Readers may already be familiar with the phenomenographical research method, popularized by researchers in Scandinavia in the 1970s and 1980s. The methodology lends itself readily to a variety of fields where the researcher is interested in investigating how a student, user, or client learns or interacts with a given set of tasks or body of information. The educators in Marton’s study, for example, were interested in discovering the relationship their students had with a particular body of material covered in their course. The students had all worked through the same course and were thus an excellent study group for Marton and his colleagues in exploring commonalities and differences in learning.

This said, as a historian drawing on a phenomenological approach rather than a phenomenographical research method, you need not focus on discovering how undergraduate students interact with their textbooks or participate in class discussion. As Carr defines the practice on the first page of Experience: ‘Phenomenology is more likely to ask, of anything that exists or may exist, how it is given, how it enters our experience, and what our experience of it is like. … A phenomenology of history inquires into history as a phenomenon, and into the experience of the historical. How does history present itself to us, how does it enter our lives’. The question of history ‘as a phenomenon … the experience of the historical’, then, steps back from an analysis of historical events and narratives of change over time to ask first and foremost how individuals have learned or interacted with those events and the stories that have come to be told about them.

The question of where to begin reading in the philosophy of history can be a challenge to any student of historical practice. Refining the question to focus specifically on the phenomenological aspects of historical storytelling – exploring not only events per se but also the human experience of those events – increases the difficulty! In my own current research project, for example, which began as an exploration of the narrative tactics of Irish autobiographies around the end of the 19th century, using autobiographies in Irish history, I initially thought I was asking a fairly simple set of questions about why stories – specifically the historical narratives we construct – are important enough to recur over and over again. By the time I came to writing my first conference paper of this project, my questions, informed by my reading for this review, had widened. I wanted to use a specific body of material to think about not only about why these narratives
recur, why we tell, and retell, them to ourselves and each other, but also to ask what experiences these narratives provide or stimulate that make them powerful.

Many of the canonical texts both in the philosophy of history and phenomenology spend the bulk of their time arguing with each other which makes it a little challenging to choose a starting point. If you decide to start with Paul Ricoeur – in translation in my case – then you might soon start to feel that Hayden White would have been a better choice; start with White and you might begin to feel that you should really have a working knowledge of Husserl before you can really appreciate White.

David Carr’s *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World* is the author’s latest entry into this self-referential field of philosophy of history and phenomenology. His earlier works, including *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986) and *Phenomenology and the Problem of History* (1974), also engage with the philosophy of history field as well as phenomenology and *Experience* is something of a synthesis of the extensive work Carr has done in these fields to date. As such, it may be a strong candidate for our elusive entry-point into the study of how we think historically. Carr’s *Experience* seeks to synthesize his previous explorations as well as to engage with others in the field of phenomenology and philosophy of history. Knowledge of these other researchers or even of Carr’s own previous work is not necessary for an enjoyable and informative reading of *Experience* but would most certainly add depth and richness to the reading.

While the two fields – philosophy of history and phenomenology of history – overlap and instruct each other, there are key differences. The nutshell definition might be that the philosophy of history wants to talk about how history is constructed on a theoretical level; phenomenology of history wants to talk about how history is experienced on a physical level. Neither of these subjects are entirely stable, as Carr demonstrates, pointing out to the reader the complexities of its development over time in what is itself an excellent demonstration of a complex historical argument. Creating a single theory that will account for not only why people remember the things they remember but how they remember is complex task, bringing in aspects of experience (physical, mental, and emotional), memory (ditto), and history (whatever that might be in reference to the given topic).

One of Carr’s strengths – also demonstrated in his previous works but clearly honed in his latest – is the presentation of a complex argument in focused steps. For example, in chapter two of *Experience*, he walks the reader through Husserl’s arguments on temporality by adapting Husserl’s own analogy of listening to music. The essence of an argument important for Carr’s work is presented without the reader feeling lost without a context. *Experience* deals heavily with Hegel and Husserl, not philosophers known for their transparency to the uninitiated. Carr’s ability to break down a complicated argument and present it in simpler steps is a definite advantage to his style of working. Carr calls on a wide range of prior thinkers, including not only the philosophers mentioned above, but Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Danto, and Immanuel Kant to pick some of the most prominent names from the index of *Experience*. Carr’s approach to his fellow researchers is never less than collegial, but he works hard to demonstrate points of inconsistency and disagreement in a way which will be informative to the reader.

*Experience* reads, at times, like a collection of essays, which I found to be a positive benefit. Carr provides a clear ‘road map’ both in his introduction and the beginning and end of each chapter. The chapters can be considered as self-contained discussions with loose cross-connections. This approach leaves plenty of room for the reader to make his or her own connections, providing plenty of thinking space rather than forcing the reader to adhere to a strict line of thought. Almost equally helpful – particularly to the novice in the field – is chapter one, which presents a neatly potted history of the topic: very helpful for later reference! And it may seem like an unnecessary point to make but having paper and pen – or tablet and stylus – on hand for a flowchart of chapter one would be no bad thing.

I found Carr’s work, particularly in the context of my wider reading in the field, to create a very freeing sense of possibility. As historians, we know that there is more than a single way of looking at any given
historical event – if we want proof of that, we need look no further than the approaching centenary of the Easter Rising in Dublin. A phenomenological approach to historical analysis can widen our options even further; not only can we consider what people knew, when they knew it, and who they knew it from, but how they learned to know it. Tracing the ramifications of a chosen event is a common technique in writing history: undergraduates are usually taught to cast their investigations in the form of a question, ‘What was the effect of the shelling of the city of Dublin during abortive 1916 rebellion?’ or ‘How did inhabitants of Dublin react to the shelling of their city?’ A phenomenological approach allows for an even broader consideration of the ‘knock-on’ effects of given events: ‘How did the inhabitants of Dublin experience the shelling of their city?’

Pursuing the above question, ‘What was the effect of the shelling of the city of Dublin during the 1916 Easter rising’, from a phenomenological perspective challenges us to ask not only about direct, material effects – this building was destroyed, this one set on fire, this street blocked with rubble – but, for instance, how did people living outside of Dublin, or even on the other side of the city, hear about what was happening? This kind of investigation allows for an examination of an event, an individual, a group, a topic with an effect very much like that of a lazy Susan on cake decorating: you can pick your starting point, move to the left, move slightly back to the right, lean forward and look at the top to the exclusion of the sides, or decide to push the whole thing around to the other side and start again.

To pick another example, this time directly from Carr’s work, he discusses in some detail the development of G. F. Hegel’s lectures in history from the early 19th century. It occurred to me while reading Experience that it would be fascinating to use Carr’s discussion as a framework to approach the placement of Hegel himself in his larger historical context: if he chose, as he obviously did, to discuss history in these particular terms at this point in time, what did that signify for him? For his students? For his close friends? For his higher-ups in the university? For those who read his lectures in published form rather than hearing them spoken?

Carr’s work overall, including Experience, is not for the faint of heart: his arguments are complex, multi-layered, and highly theoretical. Those already comfortable with thinking about the theory of history and history writing at a fairly high level are going to be Carr’s primary audience – but those new to the field should not be discouraged; Carr provides an excellent bibliography to suggest further reading. While Experience may not appeal to a general history-reading audience, it will be a valuable resource for almost any historian interested in thinking more widely about his or her subject.

Notes

1. See Ferenc Marton’s Phenomenography or Dall’Alba and Hasselgren’s Reflections on Phenomenography. I am grateful to Diana Wakimoto for the references. Back to (1)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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