Revisiting Hempel's 1942 Contribution to the Philosophy of History

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1942 Carl Hempel published the paper "The Function of General Laws in History," thus engendering much controversy while also introducing the question of historical explanation in the philosophy of history. While most commentators agree that Hempel's own account of explanation was difficult to square with actual historical practice, they also agree about the degree of his influence in prompting other scholars to consider the question of explanation.[1] By 1966 Louis Mink acknowledged the enormous impact that Hempel's paper had already made on the field: "Almost all of the philosophical literature on philosophy of history in the last decade has dealt with the logic of explanation. The locus classicus is of course C. G. Hempel."[2] When William Dray, one Hempel's earliest critics, looked back at Hempel's contribution, he explicitly praised Hempel for introducing the idea that the philosophy of history's proper goal is to rationally reconstruct historical practice by focusing its attention on the kind of explanations

[1] Daniel Little, "Philosophy of History," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2017, ed. Edward Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/history; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 398; Paul Roth, "The Full Hempel," *History and Theory* 38, no. 2 (1999): 249.

[2] Louis O. Mink, "The Autonomy of Historical Understanding," *History and Theory* 5, no. 1 (1966): 26.

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given.[3] His disagreements with Hempel's work notwithstanding, the work was influential enough to make the topic of explanation a central one within English-speaking philosophy of history.[4]

Dray's evaluation of Hempel's importance is in marked contrast with another voice, one that has been neglected, tellingly, in English-speaking philosophy of science and philosophy of history. In 1985 during a symposium at the American Philosophical Association, Paul Oskar Kristeller, the acclaimed historian of Renaissance philosophy, reflected on the debates in the philosophy of history. His judgment was harsh: "Philosophers who claim to explore the status of historical knowledge have written about general laws of history and about causal explanation. These topics may concern the philosopher of history and also the sociologist or anthropologist, but they are speculative and derivative, and at best marginal for the practicing historian or philologist."[5] Unlike Dray, Kristeller believed that the very direction of philosophical research, into an analysis of explanation, was mistaken. Kristeller was not a newcomer to this debate. In 1943 he was the first author to object to Hempel's original contribution, and he remained steadfast in his opposition for forty-two years.

The nature and significance of Hempel's contribution hinges on hotly debated beliefs about the fundamental purpose of the philosophy of history and whether it should include an analysis of explanation. As early participants in the debate with radically different opinions on Hempel's contribution, Kristeller and Dray represent two possible directions that the philosophy of history could have taken in 1942: the path of rational reconstruction focusing on explanation (initiated by Hempel, which I explore in section II) and the path of a critical-transcendental investigation of historical knowledge (introduced by Kristeller, which I explore in section III). Both directions were developed in response to a speculative and metaphysical philosophy of history that was already present in professional American philosophy (which I explore in section IV). In this paper I reconstruct what exactly was at stake for the philosophy of history in America between 1935 and 1943, and how one specific line of thought, that would later come to prevail over the others, fundamentally changed both the kinds of questions

[3] William Dray, "Explanation in History," in *Science, Explanation, and Rationality: The Philosophy of Carl G. Hempel*, ed. James Fretzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 236.

[4] Dray, 238.

[5] Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Philosophy and Its Historiography," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 11 (1985): 619. For a similar evaluation, also see: Allan Megill, "Recounting the Past: Description, Explanation, and Narrative in Historiography," *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (1989): 627–53.

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deemed relevant to the philosophy of history and the methodology to tackle them.

II. HEMPEL'S 1942 PAPER

In order to understand the nature and origins of the debate in 1942, it is necessary to bracket later intellectual developments in twentieth-century philosophy of history and philosophy of science. Everyone who has recently discussed Hempel's contribution reads it as a paper that has historical explanation as its main topic.[6] But such a reading is not illuminating from a historical point of view, for the debate over historical explanation that arose from Hempel's paper was not ongoing in 1942. One can, indeed, read it as a paper on historical explanation—this is exactly what Hempel himself does later in his career—but the intellectual climate in which the paper was originally written and received has not been sufficiently examined.

The paper's introduction and conclusion clearly show that Hempel did not intend to argue about a model of explanation for historiography. In the introduction, he states: "It is a rather widely held opinion that history, in contradistinction to the so-called physical sciences, is concerned with the description of particular events of the past rather than with the search for general laws which might govern those events. As a characterization of the type of problem in which some historians are mainly interested, this view probably can not be denied; as a statement of the theoretical function of general laws in scientific historical research, it is certainly unacceptable."[7] The explicit goal of the paper is to counter a specific position in the philosophy of history, namely that history is epistemologically distinct from the natural sciences because it does not concern itself with finding general laws that govern historical events. At the end of his paper, Hempel draws a conclusion which takes issue with that position: "It is unwarranted and futile to attempt the demarcation of sharp boundary lines between the different fields of scientific research, and an autonomous development of each of the fields. The necessity, in historical inquiry, to make extensive use of universal hypotheses is . . . just one of the aspects of what may be called the methodological unity

[6] Roth, "The Full Hempel," 252; Heather E. Douglas, "Reintroducing Prediction to Explanation," *Philosophy of Science* 76, no. 4 (2009): 448; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 394; Wesley Salmon, *Four Decades of Scientific Explanation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 25.

[7] Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (1942): 35.

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of empirical science."[8] The word "explanation" is never mentioned, neither in the introduction nor in the conclusion. The whole paper is intended to defend the methodological unity of science against some "widely held opinions."

Identifying the opposition will help to clarify Hempel's precise argument. While Hempel does not name his philosophical opponents, they can be inferred from certain passages in the text. For example, Hempel writes, "There is no difference between history and the natural sciences, because both give an account of their subject-matter only in term of general concepts, and history can 'grasp the unique individuality' of its objects of study no more and no less than can physics or chemistry."[9] Any German-trained philosopher of the time would recognize a reference to the core position of Wilhelm Windelband in his famous rectorial address of 1894 at the University of Strassbourg, in which Windelband stated that "the concern of history is always with grasping the specific, never with comprehending the general."[10] Winbelband's address was famous as a starting point in the development of an epistemology for the historical sciences in the Southwest school of neo-Kantianism. According to Windelband, the sciences had expanded extensively by the end of the nineteenth century when compared to Kant's era; the historical sciences had been added to the arsenal of scientific inquiry. These sciences, however, did not fit neatly into the Kantian epistemology, since Kant equated science with the search for general laws. Windelband sought to overcome this puzzle by expanding Kantian epistemology.[11]

In his solution, Windelband distinguished the historical sciences from the natural as two opposing ways of ordering the sensual manifold into an objective world. On the one hand, the natural sciences order the manifold through classes (*Gattungsbegriffe*), yielding natural laws.[12] On the other, the historical sciences order the manifold into types or wholes (*Gestalten*) that link a historical event or object to a universal and necessary value. To Windelband, both ways of relating objects to one another, either through universal laws or through universal values, were equally valid products of objective thought. He perceived the great task of transcendental philosophy in the twentieth century to be articulating a philosophy of universal values

[8] Hempel, 48.
[9] Hempel, 37.
[10] Wilhelm Windelband, "Rectorial Address, Strasbourg, 1894," trans. Guy Oakes, *History and Theory* 19, no. 2 (1980): 181.
[11] Windelband, "Nach hundert Jahren," *Kant-Studien* 9, no. 1–3 (1904): 10.
[12] Windelband, 11–12.

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with which to ground the objectifying procedures that enabled historical knowledge.[13]

Though Windelband's specific position on the objectifying order of the historical sciences was heavily disputed, he put the problem of a transcendental epistemology for the historical sciences on the agenda in German academic philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century. Windelband's former student, Heinrich Rickert, further developed his transcendental epistemology for the historical sciences. He devised a way of understanding how the historical sciences grasp the unique aspects of their objects. By relating an object to a value that was central in a community or institution, Rickert thought, the historian can order the mass of events of the past into comparable objects without losing their uniqueness, which she would do if she were to use a nomothetic order based on classes. Rickert called this epistemological process of relating objects to values *Wertbeziehung*.[14]

Hempel was well aware of this specific trend in contemporary transcendental philosophy. He had corresponded extensively with Otto Neurath on this matter in 1935. At the time, Hempel was living in Brussels and was in close contact with Neurath, who was staying in The Hague. Because Hempel had used the term *Kulturwissenschaften* in one of the drafts that he had sent to him, Neurath started a discussion about Rickert's and Windelband's philosophy of the cultural sciences. In a series of letters, Neurath explained their tendency to distinguish epistemologically between two types of sciences, and he lamented their position, which stood in decided contrast with the Unity of Science movement. In a letter of 2 February 1935, Neurath wrote four pages on Rickert's classification of the sciences and his bifurcation of the historical sciences and the natural sciences, calling Rickert one of "those Windelbanditen" (Windelbandites).[15] He revisited this issue in several other letters.[16] This correspondence shows that Hempel was aware of Windelband's and Rickert's exact positions. Consequently, one can plausibly assume that in the above-quoted passage from the 1942 paper, Hempel does indeed refer to the position of Windelband and Rickert, since Neurath had explained to him their position on the impossibility

[13] Windelband, 16.

[14] Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 409.

[15] Otto Neurath to Hempel, box 29, folder 2, Carl Gustav Hempel Papers [hereafter cited as CH], Archives of Scientific Philosophy [hereafter cited as ASP], Special Collections Department, University of Pittsburgh.

[16] Neurath to Hempel, 5, 6, and 8 February, 7 and 25 March 1935, Nr. 244 Vienna Circle Archives [hereafter cited as VCA], Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem, The Netherlands. Quoted by permission of the Wiener Kreis Stichting, Amsterdam. All rights reserved.

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of historical, generalizing concepts (*Gattungsbegriffe*). In the 1942 paper, Hempel intended to tackle their core idea about historical concepts and thus stress the unity of science: both the natural and historical sciences use generalizing concepts, and consequently general laws. In Hempel's account, a logical reconstruction of the historical sciences shows how they use general laws and why any distinction from the natural sciences on that basis is futile. Hempel's whole paper is organized to make this specific argument.

From the beginning Hempel argues against the Windelbandian position that "general laws have quite analogous functions in history and in the natural sciences. They form an indispensable instrument of historical research."[17] Consequently, Hempel first defines a law as a regularity between kinds of events and logically reconstructs it as a hypothetical generalization of the simple form $\forall x(Cx \supset Ex)$.[18] Throughout the rest of the paper, Hempel argues that such laws serve functions in the historical sciences, namely in explanation (sections 2, 3, and 5), prediction (section 4), causal assessment (section 7), and even description (section 8). From this he concludes that the historical sciences use general laws and that any (Windelbandian) distinction between the sciences based on the impossibility of using general concepts in the historical sciences is unwarranted.

The following passage, taken from section 7, provides further evidence that Hempel targets the Windelband-Rickert tradition, this time by ascribing to his opposition a position on value relations in historiography: "And whether an event is relevant to the development [of an institution] is not a question of the value attitude of the historian, but an objective question depending upon what is sometimes called a causal analysis of the rise of that institution. Now, the causal analysis of an event consists in establishing an explanation for it, and this requires reference to general hypotheses."[19] Hempel never states why one would consider the relevance of an event to a certain historical development to be the result of a value attitude. It is simply presented in the text as a naive position to which Hempel's own position is superior. Just before the quote he brings up a well-known problem in the epistemology of the historical sciences through the problem of a relevance criterion: "a description is not simply a statement of all the events which temporally preceded it; only those events are meant to be included which are 'relevant' to the formation of that institution."[20] Rickert's theory of relating values was precisely designed to overcome this central problem

[17] Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," 35.
[18] Hempel, 35.
[19] Hempel, 46.
[20] Hempel, 46.

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in the philosophy of history: the historian can select which event or object from the past is relevant by relating it to a value of the historical period or institution under consideration.

Hempel thus brings up Rickert's position, but only to stress that a universal hypothesis can also function as a solution to the same problem: once an event can be related to a universal hypothesis through a logical inference, it is relevant. This is in line with the overall strategy of the paper: to show through logical reconstruction that an epistemic distinction between two types of science is philosophically unnecessary, because universal hypotheses can serve the same function in both kinds of science.

Hempel repeats this strategy when he argues against yet another famous concept in the German debate on historiography. In section 6 Hempel brings up the presumed epistemic role of the method of empathetic understanding. As in the rest of the paper, Hempel does not really clarify what epistemological purpose it is supposed to serve. He only summarizes the method in the following way: "The historian, we are told, imagines himself in the place of the persons involved in the events which he wants to explain; he tries to realize as completely as possible the circumstances under which they acted, and the motives which influence their actions; and by this imaginary self-identification with his heroes, he arrives at an understanding and thus at an adequate explanation of the events with which he is concerned."[21] Hempel then states that such a method is only a heuristic device that enables the historian to form certain psychological hypotheses about the historical actors. Such hypotheses can then be subjected to further empirical testing.[22] Again, it is hard to understand Hempel's reasoning or motivation without also understanding the ghostly opposition to which he aims his attack. In German philosophy, empathetic understanding was known as *Verstehen*—this notion was especially linked to Wilhelm Dilthey, a philosophical opponent of Windelband and Rickert in the German debate over the historical sciences. How Dilthey differed specifically from the Windelband school, or what Dilthey specifically meant with *Verstehen*, is not relevant for this paper. What is relevant, however, is the fact that Dilthey's *Verstehen* was introduced as a distinctive feature of the epistemic practice of the historical sciences in opposition to the natural sciences. And at least one aspect of Dilthey's notion of *Verstehen* was exactly this self-identificatory procedure in the historian's imagination.[23] Similar to his

[21] Hempel, 44.
[22] Hempel, 44.
[23] Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in die Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. Bernhard Groethuysen, vol. 7, *Wilhelm Diltheys Gesammelte Schriften* (Verlag von B. G. Teubner, 1927), 220; Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 351.

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argument against Windelband and Rickert, Hempel does not engage with Dilthey's actual position. He simply states that such empathetic understanding does not stand in opposition to the use of general laws in history that was brought out in his own logical reconstruction. This way of arguing, again, fits the overall strategy of the paper.

We can conclude that Hempel's 1942 paper counters some dominant positions in German philosophy of historiography by arguing that general laws have similar functions in both the historical and natural sciences. This is evident from the introduction, the line of argument produced, the kind of positions that Hempel argues against, and the conclusion. So, why have so many people found it natural to read Hempel's contribution as a paper on explanation in history?

First, the word "explanation" is mentioned 104 times in the paper. Second, the paper contains the first version of what will later become known as the deductive-nomological model of scientific explanation.[24] Third, Hempel already seems to suggest that the deductive-nomological argument scheme is applicable across the sciences: the example of a cracked radiator to illustrate the explanatory argument hints at this.[25] Two important aspects of an actual theory of explanation are still absent, however. Hempel never states what role explanation in general is supposed to play in the sciences—for example, as an answer to "why" questions. Neither does he separate explanation and description as two different aims of science. These two crucial aspects will only be added in Hempel's and Oppenheim's 1948 paper, "Studies in the Logic of Explanation."

Explanation is not a rich concept in the 1942 paper: it is shorthand for the idea that the sciences need to order events into patterns, and general laws are the best way to logically articulate this procedure. Consequently, Hempel believed that this order should be logically reconstructed as universal hypotheses of the simple form, $\forall x(Cx \supset Ex)$. The German debate over the historical sciences concerned a similar point: how do you order your historical data into concepts and is this order different from the one in the natural sciences? Windelband and Rickert had claimed that general concepts and the laws in which they operate were not good logical articulations of the crucial ordering procedures in the historical sciences. Hempel's paper is intended to show that a formal reconstruction of general laws could be applied fruitfully to the historical sciences. Consequently, Hempel's argument is entirely set within a dispute over the appropriate analysis of the order of historical data.

[24] Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," 36.
[25] Hempel, 36.

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III. HEMPEL'S FOIL: PAUL OSKAR KRISTELLER

At this point, we begin to see how Hempel's 1942 paper relates to its historical context based on evidence internal to the text and Hempel's correspondence with Neurath. Let us now consider the first ~~response~~ that was written in response to it by another German philosopher: Paul Oskar Kristeller. Like Hempel, Kristeller was born in 1905 and trained in interwar Germany. Kristeller took philosophy classes at Heidelberg between 1923 and 1928, where he was instructed by Heinrich Rickert and Ernest Hoffmann, among others. Interested in the history of philosophy, particularly ancient philosophy, Kristeller would later pursue classical philology in Berlin, working with leading figures such as Werner Jaeger and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf. In 1926 he spent a semester at Marburg to become acquainted with Heidegger's philosophy. Specifically Kristeller took two classes with Heidegger, Basic Concepts in Ancient Philosophy and Exercises on History and Historical Knowledge.[26] In 1928 Kristeller finished his doctoral dissertation on Plotinus under Ernest Hoffmann at Heidelberg. After Kristeller completed his education in classical philology in 1931, Heidegger agreed to oversee his habilitation project. He encouraged Kristeller to work on Marsilio Ficino. In 1933, while Kristeller was investigating some manuscripts in Florence for the final stages of his project, the National Socialists rose to power and quickly enacted laws that prevented people with a Jewish background like himself from continuing an academic career in Germany. Fortunately, Kristeller was well connected in Italy, and after a year as a German teacher in Florence, Giovanni Gentile obtained a position for him at the Scuola Normale Superiore at the University of Pisa. Kristeller used his exile and new job to roam Italy in search of forgotten Renaissance manuscripts. By 1938, however, racial laws had followed Kristeller to Italy. Again, he was forced to leave the country and find another academic position. Arriving in New York in January 1939, Kristeller had the opportunity to lecture on Plotinus at Yale for one semester, and was then offered a position as lecturer for one year at Columbia University, which led to a subsequent career at that institution.[27]

[26] "Abgang Zuegnis Marburg," 17 April 1926, Kristeller Papers [hereafter cited as POKP], box 77, folder 3, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

[27] Kristeller and Margaret King, "Iter Kristellerianum: The European Journey (1905–1939)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1994): 907–29; Hans Obermayer, *Deutsche Altertumswissenschaftler im amerikanischen Exil: Eine Rekonstruktion* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), chap. 7.

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Through his training and experience, Kristeller was by 1939 an exponent of German academic historical philosophy. On the one hand he was educated in the problems of historical knowledge by some of the most influential people in the field, in particular Heinrich Rickert and Martin Heidegger. On the other hand, he was meticulously trained by the best scholars of his age to use the precise tools of classical philology in interpreting philosophical texts of the past. By 1939 he was, moreover, experienced in searching for, editing, and interpreting new manuscripts. Kristeller was a philologist, historian, and philosopher all at the same time, molding historical philosophy into a science of texts.

In the New York of the early forties, Kristeller's expertise and erudition did not go to waste. The newly founded *Journal of the History of Ideas* (henceforth the *JHI*) published his first English paper in 1940. His colleague in the history of philosophy at Columbia, and also an officer of the *JHI*, John Hermann Randall, Jr., began sending manuscripts to Kristeller for assessment. This led to his swift appointment to the editorial board of the journal in 1943. In a letter dated 22 May 1943, Randall explicitly notes that the journal wanted Kristeller to join the board as a reward "for his multiple, valuable referee contributions."[28] Kristeller was a versatile force, capable of handling everything in between history and philosophy. He could referee papers on post-Kantian developments in German philosophy, and assess the novelty of a paper on Greek tragedy.[29] At Columbia University, he was also able to lecture on Kant, Hegel, recent continental philosophy, and the history of Renaissance and ancient philosophy.[30]

Between 1940 and 1944 Kristeller contributed four pieces to the journal, all on the history of Renaissance philosophy. In 1943 he engaged in an epistemological debate as well, by contributing to a philosophical discussion on the epistemology of the historical sciences in the—also New York-based—*Journal of Philosophy* (henceforth, *JoP*). With Lincoln Reis, Kristeller co-authored "Some Remarks on the Method of History," a reaction to Hempel's 1942 paper, which had also appeared in *JoP*. Lincoln Reis was in 1943 a graduate student at Columbia University, working with Kristeller. He would later occupy a position at Bard College. Why precisely Reis co-authored the paper with Kristeller is unclear. Its content, however, reflects both the epistemological background of Kristeller as a neo-Kantian philosopher and his scholarly experience. I will read it in that context, since it is

[28] John Hermann Randall, "Letter to Kristeller," 22 May 1943, box 46, folder 1, POKP.
[29] Kristeller, "Letters to Randall," 16 April 1951 and 7 December 1951, box 46, folder 1, POKP.
[30] Kristeller, "Seminar notes on Continental Philosophy/Hegel," 1952–1953 and 1960, box 115, folder 6, POKP.

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difficult to assess how much Reis actually influenced the content of the paper.

Kristeller and Reis's opening paragraph makes it clear that their main target is Hempel's paper: they cite Hempel's contribution first, and then refer to other papers with a "cf."[31] Kristeller and Reis state that their goal is to counter the opinion that historians should draw general inferences from their facts and, consequently, aim to form general laws;[32] it is merely "lip service to the ideal of science" to say that history as a social science should follow the natural sciences in their search for general laws, and this does not guarantee the application of the ideal to actual historical method.[33] Consequently, Kristeller and Reis "stress that function of history which deals with the description and reconstruction of specific, unique, and concrete events rather than with the formulation of general laws, which, of course, always would suppose a plurality of like instances."[34] According to Kristeller and Reis, the historian should aim for some kind of generality, but not in the same way as the natural or social scientist: she should look for the possibility of comparison between various local settings in time wherever possible, but not aim at regularities between kinds of events, or predictability through laws.[35] Thus, the introduction clearly targets Hempel's analysis, and rehearses some of the basic points in the Windelband-Rickert tradition.

The centerpiece of their argument, to be found in section 2 of their paper, is the complexity of ascertaining facts or events from the past. Hempel assumed that the historian is capable of verifying events from the past.[36] Kristeller and Reis respond that a historical fact is never directly given, but is rather the result of inferences and reconstructions based on source materials. These inferences are of a complex fourfold nature. The historian has to collect the data, select which data are relevant as evidence for the specific historical inquiry, evaluate her sources critically, and finally reconstruct those aspects of the past that cannot be inferred from the sources.[37] This fourfold procedure was not a new idea: Kristeller and Reis refer to several contemporary, standard methodologies of historiography written

[31] Lincoln Reis and Kristeller, "Some Remarks on the Method of History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 9 (1943): 225.
[32] Reis and Kristeller, 226.
[33] Reis and Kristeller, 225.
[34] Reis and Kristeller, 227.
[35] Reis and Kristeller, 228.
[36] Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," 38.
[37] Reis and Kristeller, "Some Remarks on the Method of History," 235–38.

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by Langlois and Seignobos, Bernheim, and Droysen.[38] According to Kristeller and Reis, a logic of the historical sciences should analyze the procedures and methodologies that enable historians to transform textual data into facts and evidence. It should not impose an abstract norm, like the search for general laws, onto historiographical research, since such a norm is external to historiographical practice.

Hempel's treatment of empathetic understanding and the use of the imagination by the historian is also challenged in the article. During the final, reconstructive stage of historical inquiry, the historian uses her imagination to fill in the gaps. This use is, however, part of the epistemic process and grounded in the empirical inquiry itself. Kristeller and Reis write, "The historian can not be satisfied with summing up the fragmentary evidence he has. He is necessarily driven to round it out as well as he can, since his purpose is full knowledge. His most important means for this task are analogies, both from his knowledge of other historical facts, and from his immediate experience."[39] So the use of imagination should be understood as an analogical inference based on other empirical evidence. These analogies enable the historian to ascertain facts, and also drive his further research on the source material. There can be no separation of heuristics from empirical verification. Kristeller and Reis write, "Collecting source materials and data requires understanding and criticism, and that a kind of interpretation is actually inherent in the very process of fact-finding."[40] Thus, at no step of the inquiry does the historian "indulge himself in wild phantasies."[41] This assessment of the use of the imagination in history is directly opposed to the idea of empathetic understanding that Hempel had introduced as mere heuristic preparations for actual empirical verification.

In section 3 Reis and Kristeller intend to refute what they call the "positivist" idea of history as a science aimed at laws, and the "romanticist" idea of history as poetry. In their view, the positivists have correctly emphasized the requirement to use facts in a historical narrative, but they have neglected that interpretation of the sources is necessary for acquiring facts: "In pretending to describe the facts and only facts, [the positivists] have ostensibly rejected the responsibility for understanding these facts, but since they actually can not do without some kind of understanding they have often exchanged a frank and good interpretation for an implicit or bad

[38] Reis and Kristeller, 235.
[39] Reis and Kristeller, 237.
[40] Reis and Kristeller, 236.
[41] Reis and Kristeller, 237.

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one."[42] They explicitly understand this as a lesson drawn from Kantian epistemology: "facts without order, discrimination, or interpretation are nonsensical."[43] Such order, however, is not similar to a nomological order in the natural sciences. History cannot aim for general laws, or general causes of an event; at best it can only concern itself with the causes of particular events. There are several reasons for this. First, the historical sciences lack the possibility of controlled replication. Historical events simply don't recur enough in similar ways to set up natural experiments.[44] Second, a historical event can be characterized in many different ways—there can be no uniformity imposed on the description of a single event. At best, the historian can relate specific events to each other based on the significance of the one for the other. Aggregating events, enabling one to acquire information about them uniformly, is simply out of the question.[45] For the historian, the investigation of causes should, consequently, be considered as the inquiry into significant relations between particular events. And this is the proper kind of order for historiography.

Contrary to Hempel, Kristeller and Reis believe that anyone who tries to claim something beyond the particular events of the past is in the process of forming a metaphysics, a philosophy of history. The range of possibility for such a philosophy of history can be narrowed down by empirical investigation, but this range can never be narrowed down entirely through empirical research.[46] Kristeller and Reis conceive of two philosophical approaches to history. On the one hand there is the logical investigation of historical method, analyzing its specific modes of inference and verification. Such logical analysis is not a rational reconstruction of historical texts through formalization, as in Hempel's paper; it is transcendental, inquiring about the conditions necessary to transform data into historical knowledge. On the other hand there is a philosophy of history that aims to clarify how history stands within the great scheme of knowledge and reality as a whole.[47] The search for general laws belongs to the latter. By introducing this duality they have relegated the position of the young and upcoming exponent of logical empiricism to the most speculative, non-empirical aspect of philosophical inquiry into history.

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[42] Reis and Kristeller, 240.
[43] Reis and Kristeller, 240.
[44] Reis and Kristeller, 241.
[45] Reis and Kristeller, 241–42.
[46] Reis and Kristeller, 244.
[47] Reis and Kristeller, 245.

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IV. UNCOVERING A FORGOTTEN BACKGROUND

Kristeller's reaction to Hempel confirms the initial interpretation of what was at stake in the latter's paper, namely a theoretical disagreement with Neo-Kantian philosophy over the use of laws in history. It also points to a wider historical background, since it explicitly connects Hempel's paper to other papers that had recently appeared in the *JoP* and the *JHI*.[48] These papers show that while there was no debate over explanation in science or historiography among American academics in the 1930s and 1940s, philosophers and historians were consistently struggling with one particular question.

Between 1935 and 1943 the *JoP* published seventeen articles devoted to the philosophy of history. As a comparison, between 2008 and 2016 there were no publications on the philosophy of history in the *JoP*. These contributions all shared one common question: how to conceive the relation between philosophy and historiography. In 1935 Eugen Rosenstock-Hüssy, another German philosopher trained at Heidelberg who had found refuge in the United States, lamented the fact that modern history had lost its harmony with memory and tradition.[49] No longer did the historian aim her practice at healing the memory of a group. Instead, she was now "limited to rendering services to science alone."[50] He attributed this limitation to the scientification of history by Rickert and the Neo-Kantians,[51] and he concluded that one must overcome this epistemological betrayal of the true natural rights of history by recovering its proper function as healer of memory.[52] In 1936 the neo-Hegelian German philosopher Richard Kroner, who would migrate to New York in 1940, emphasized the necessity in philosophy to use history for understanding life itself, and the idea of man. A purely naturalist theory of life and man falls short. Instead one must study how man, through the process of history, has realized the idea of man.[53]

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[48] Frederick J. Teggart, "Causation in Historical Events," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 1 (1942): 3–11; Philip P. Wiener, "On Methodology in the Philosophy of History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 12 (1941): 309–24; Morris R. Cohen, "Causation and Its Application to History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 1 (1942): 12–29; Maurice Mandelbaum, "Causal Analysis in History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 1 (1942): 30–50.

[49] Eugen Rosenstock-Hüssy, "The Predicament of History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 4 (1935): 93.

[50] Rosenstock-Hüssy, 98.

[51] Rosenstock-Hüssy, 99.

[52] Rosenstock-Hüssy, 100.

[53] Richard Kroner, "Philosophy of Life and Philosophy of History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 8 (1936): 210–12.

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Such a message can also be found in a 1937 contribution by Dorothy Walsh of Bryn Mawr College: history can serve "a deep need for knowledge of [man's] own nature and that of his fellows."[54] For Walsh, history is both an autonomous theoretical practice, and also the beginning of a deeper reflection on man as a creative and active being. This message was similarly reflected by the Dilthey scholar Bonno Tapper from Iowa State University in 1937: in understanding historical and cultural processes, physicalism fails; consequently, one must understand these processes in the context of a spirit that objectifies itself in a living tradition.[55] In a similar vein, Sterling P. Lamprecht, a professor at Amherst College, argued that a philosophy of history needs to emphasize the non-determinist aspect of human agency.[56] For Lamprecht this also applied specifically to the history of philosophy: as a kind of metaphysics, the history of philosophy removes parochialism from philosophy and enables one to "move in an infinite universe of discourse which contains all possible frames of reference."[57]

The idea that history had a broader impact on a philosophical self-understanding of man and his ideas was clearly in vogue. Arthur Lovejoy took up the idea in his own contribution to the philosophy of history in 1939, just a year before he founded the *JHI*: "The historian's, and especially the intellectual historian's, general and perennial problem is, as I have already intimated, the problem of human nature and human behavior."[58] Lovejoy, however, emphasized that this ultimate aim is limited by evidentiary material that is "not biased by a fixation upon distinct, present problems."[59] Philip Wiener countered the "rationalist" and "organicist" tendencies in the philosophy of history by arguing for a thoroughgoing naturalist empiricism. For him there are no eternal ideas or organic unities to be uncovered by history.[60] The proper philosophical inquiry into history is limited to four questions concerning the historian's method of ascertaining evidence, the inference of relevant antecedents to events, the quest for

[54] Dorothy Walsh, "Philosophical Implications of the Historical Enterprise," *The Journal of Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (1937): 64.
[55] Bonno Tapper, "The Problem of Historical or Cultural Reality in Contemporary Thought," *The Journal of Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (1937): 65–73.
[56] Sterling Lamprecht, "Philosophy of History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 8 (1936): 204.
[57] Lamprecht, "Historiography of Philosophy," *The Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 17 (1939): 460.
[58] Arthur Lovejoy, "Present Standpoints and Past History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 18 (1939): 484.
[59] Lovejoy.
[60] Wiener, "On Methodology in the Philosophy of History," 312.

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causes, and the search for larger tendencies that cover large spans of history.[61] Like Lovejoy and Randall, Wiener was a historian of philosophy based in New York, specifically at the City College. Two years before Wiener's contribution, Sidney Hook, another New York-based philosopher, had defended a naturalist interpretation of history against what he called "dialectic" theories, covering both Spenglerian ideas of the West and dialectic-materialist theories.[62] Hook concluded that the rationale of the scientific method—"the quest for verifiable hypotheses, the deduction of consequences, experiment under controlled conditions, or where this is not possible, careful use of comparative method of agreement and difference"—should not be abandoned in history.[63] As we have already seen, drawing the boundary between empirical historiography and metaphysical philosophy from a Kantian perspective was also Kristeller and Reis's goal.[64]

All these contributions were attempts at delineating the proper scope and aim of the philosophy of history, and such discussion naturally involved the problem of how to understand historiography at the epistemological level. The problem of selection was a central issue: the historian needs a valid, objective criterion to select which events from the past are relevant. In her 1937 contribution, Walsh lamented that "it is a mark of complete misunderstanding of the historical enterprise to deplore the selective character of historical discourse."[65] Similarly Lovejoy claimed that the selective procedure in historiography was a truism: the historian always has to select,[66] and Wiener, in his defense of naturalist empiricism, emphasized that selection is a part of the evidentiary logic of historiography.[67] Randall also noted in a contribution to the debate that the historian has to sift his infinite raw material to ascertain significant facts.[68] Sidney Hook even uses the Rickertian notion that values organize the materials of history as a valid idea against the illegitimate dialectical method that always portrays a value as an absolute, "telic" goal.[69] Thus, when Hempel brought up the problem of selection in his paper, the issue was already a part of the broad, ongoing discussion, in which it was also associated with Heinrich Rickert.

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[61] Wiener, 312–13.
[62] Sidney Hook, "Dialectic in Social and Historical Inquiry," *The Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 14 (1939): 365–78.
[63] Hook, 378.
[64] Reis and Kristeller, "Some Remarks on the Method of History," 244–45.
[65] Walsh, "Philosophical Implications of the Historical Enterprise," 61.
[66] Lovejoy, "Present Standpoints and Past History," 479.
[67] Wiener, "On Methodology in the Philosophy of History," 313.
[68] John Herman Randall, "On Understanding the History of Philosophy," *The Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 17 (1939): 467.
[69] Hook, "Dialectic in Social and Historical Inquiry," 374.

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Another aspect of the discussion was the role of generalizations in historiography—a problem that was, of course, central in the German debate. In the American context there was general skepticism expressed toward the notion of historical laws. Lamprecht had noted in 1936 that statistical correlations between historical events could never reveal the particular agencies involved.[70] In 1939 Randall similarly emphasized that historiography was always concerned with the particular and the unique.[71] According to Randall, whenever structures, laws, or invariant relations were concerned, they were the subject matter of general social science, not history.[72] Philip Wiener did not exclude the possibility of forming generalizations in historiography, but he noted the enormous difficulties for performing such empirical research given the impossibility of isolating factors and suitably comparing events.[73] Hook also attested to the principled possibility of acquiring comparative frequencies, but stressed the need for "a vast statistical study of cultural dependencies which no one has ever adequately undertaken."[74] This shows that the role of general laws was already extensively debated in the *JoP* before Hempel's paper.

When Hempel arrived in New York in February 1939, he would have been quickly made aware of these ongoing debates. In his diary entry of 4 February 1939 Hempel noted that Ernest Nagel had introduced him immediately to the New York Philosophy circle, which Hempel also calls the Nagel-Hook circle, a group of philosophers who regularly met to discuss their most recent ideas.[75] The central organizers of the group were Nagel himself and Sidney Hook. Attendance varied from meeting to meeting, but New York-based philosophers like Philip Wiener, Jeraud McGill, and William Malisoff all participated.[76] It is in this context that Carl Hempel was invited to give a talk on history in 1941, which would subsequently be published as the 1942 paper. Hempel himself could not recall what made him choose the particular topic.[77] In a way, it was a peculiar topic for a man who had no real interest in historiography and lacked any training in that discipline. The topic was, however, of central concern to the group of

[70] Lamprecht, "Philosophy of History," 200.
[71] Randall, "On Understanding the History of Philosophy," 462.
[72] Randall, 468.
[73] Wiener, "On Methodology in the Philosophy of History," 314.
[74] Hook, "Dialectic in Social and Historical Inquiry," 376.
[75] Hempel, diary entry, 4 February 1939, CH 2.1.1, ASP.
[76] Hempel, diary entry, 18 March 1939, CH 2.1.1, ASP.
[77] Richard Nollan and Hempel, "An Intellectual Autobiography: Carl G. Hempel," in *Science, Explanation, and Rationality: The Philosophy of Carl G. Hempel*, ed. Fretzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20.

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philosophers that held these meetings. I could not ascertain whether Randall was ever present at the meeting of the New York Philosophy circle. He was, however, editor of the *JoP* at the time, working in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia. He shared both positions with Ernest Nagel. In correspondence with Karl Popper during 1941, Eva Hempel reported that her husband was not isolated at all. Regarding the circle, she wrote that "almost everyone passes through it at some time or other."[78]

Hook, Wiener, and Randall had all recently published on the philosophy of history. All three had defended a naturalist interpretation of the relation between history and philosophy: to them history could never be interpreted as an intellectual domain where one finds eternal values. In their view history is first and foremost an expansion of an empirical research practice into the human past. Through their articles they took issue with metaphysical views on history. In this sense, both Hempel's and Kristeller's articles proceeded along similar lines, as reactions against a speculative and metaphysical philosophy of history. In this respect they also testify to a shared intellectual agenda between New York-based naturalists and European logical empiricists in the 1930s.[79] Kristeller's reaction stemmed from a competing European philosophical tradition, namely Southwest neo-Kantianism, which also sought to exclude a metaphysical view on the history of the world. However, while Hempel's logical reconstruction of the use of laws in history pointed toward a formalist approach in philosophical analysis (reconstructing a scientific language into a formal scheme), Kristeller's transcendental investigation into the conditions of possibility of historical evidence introduced a Rickert-like position. This new opposition introduced a significant distinction which would come to play an important role for the network of New York naturalists. It is a distinction between philosophers who wanted to use formal methods of logical reconstruction for philosophical analysis and philosophers who opposed these methods. Though this distinction became very overt in the network of New York philosophers in the 1950s, it had already manifested itself in the discussion between Hempel and Kristeller.[80] This can be also be seen in the exchanges between Kristeller and another European émigré, Edgar Zilsel.

[78] Eva Hempel to Karl Popper, 8 February 1941, CH 31.2, ASP.
[79] George A. Reisch, *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 82.
[80] Andrew Jewett, "Canonizing Dewey: Naturalism, Logical Empiricism, and the Idea of American Philosophy," *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 1 (2011): 91–125.

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V. BETWEEN HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY: EDGAR ZILSEL

Hempel was not the only philosopher from the Unity of Science movement who was involved in debates over historiography in New York at that time. Edgar Zilsel, another regular attendant of the New York circle with whom Hempel was personally acquainted, had been working on the topic of laws in historiography for ten years. Zilsel was a historian of science and original member of the Vienna circle. In 1938 he had fled the Austrian regime and arrived in New York, where he received a Rockefeller Fellowship to work on the historical origins of modern science.[81] Zilsel and Hempel met regularly in New York between 1939 and 1943, both personally and professionally. In Hempel's diaries of 1939–40 and 1942, he mentions seven occasions on which he met with Zilsel in private.[82] And, in the previously mentioned letter to Popper, Eva Hempel also noted Zilsel among those regularly present at the New York circle meetings.[83]

In 1941, the same year that Hempel gave his talk on laws in history at the New York circle, Zilsel wrote on the epistemology of historiography in *Philosophy of Science*. Similar to Hempel's position, he defended the search for general laws in historiography, explicitly against Windelband, Rickert, and what he called a "method of understanding for the humanities."[84] Unlike Hempel, Zilsel did not use formal logic to reconstruct this norm. He was only interested in the practical possibility of this research. Zilsel perceived the obstacles to finding empirical associations in history not to be theoretical as the German neo-Kantians claimed, but rather to be practical: "Many scientists must establish a common program of research and cooperate according to it. By collecting and comparing the material with philological accuracy historical laws will be discovered at last not by general methodological discussions like ours."[85]

Zilsel also applied his epistemological position to his historical work. In 1942 he sent a paper on the methods of humanism to the *JHI*. It was preliminary work for a statistical analysis of the relation between the administrative class and humanistic scholarship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries across several European regions. The chief editor of the

[81] Edgar Zilsel, *The Social Origins of Modern Science*, ed. Diederick Raven and Wolfgang Krohn (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), xxii.
[82] Hempel diaries, CH 2.1.1/3, ASP.
[83] Eva Hempel to Popper, 8 February 1941, CH 31.2, ASP.
[84] Zilsel, "Physics and the Problem of Historico-Sociological Laws," *Philosophy of Science* 8, no. 4 (1941): 576–77.
[85] Zilsel, 579.

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journal at that time, Randall, sent the paper to Kristeller. His referee's report offered a detailed scholarly analysis of the paper, correcting many statements and giving advice for the general argument. Kristeller wrote back to Randall: "I respect Mr. Zilsel as a person and as a scholar, although I do not always agree with his opinions. It is hence with some embarrassment that I must tell you that I was not favorably impressed by this last paper of his."[86] The paper would never be published. Two elements of the report are particularly interesting. In his manuscript, Zilsel laments that contemporary philology and historiography primarily focus more on single facts than on general laws—thus being further removed from the spirit of modern science. Kristeller replies: "I disagree with your remarks about the methods and task of modern historiography and philology."[87] Also, in reaction to the preliminary tables that Zilsel had prepared for statistical research, Kristeller offers a rebuke: "Statistics can prove something only when they are based on consistent criteria of selection. The list is actually incomplete and arbitrary. What are the sources?"[88] Kristeller's report is dated 26 December 1942, four months before the publication of his own rebuttal of Hempel's paper on the use of general laws in historiography. Just as Zilsel's paper was a manifestation of Zilsel's epistemology, Kristeller's referee's report revealed his own theoretical objections to the search for statistical tendencies in intellectual historiography. According to Kristeller, the abstract norm of looking for general laws was not meaningful for the practicing historian. Consequently, in his report, Kristeller repeatedly emphasized the particularity of thinkers within their contexts and the various reasons why they could not be compared to each other easily.

Whether Kristeller ever met Hempel or even attended the New York circle is unknown. All three scholars, however, operated within the same intellectual network around Columbia University, regularly published in the same journals, and continued in their writing the debate on the use of general laws in history that had been ongoing in Germany during their scholarly upbringing. Later in life Hempel may not have recognized how he came to write on history in the first place. However, between his arrival in 1939 and the publication of his article in 1942, the New York philosophy scene abounded with discussions on historiography. Zilsel, Randall, Wiener, Hook, Lovejoy, Kristeller: all these philosophers were involved in

[86] Kristeller to Randall; 26 December 1942; box 105, folder 1, POKP.
[87] Kristeller, "Remarks on Zilsel's 'The Methods of Humanism,'" in *The Social Origins of Modern Science*, eds. Raven and Krohn (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 67.
[88] Kristeller, 70.

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debates about historiography, and about its relation to philosophy and the natural sciences.

VI. SHIFTS AND RUPTURES: 1942–1943

Let me now return to my opening question. What was at stake in Hempel's contribution? First and perhaps most importantly, it was the manifestation of a philosophical method that would come to play an important role in professional American philosophy: the philosopher should reconstruct a scientific language within the formal framework of modern logic. None of the previous contributions to philosophy of history in the United States had manifested this methodology. But Hempel's example was quickly picked up by Morton White, a recent graduate in philosophy from Columbia, who responded in 1943 to Kristeller and Reis's rebuttal of Hempel.

White read their paper as an argument distinguishing history from the natural sciences based on the logical operation of generalization.[89] White believed that such a distinction cannot hold: proper historians use generalizations in their writing all the time and these can be reconstructed as instances of $\forall x(Cx \supset Ex)$. Kristeller and Reis, however, never denied historians the use of generalizing sentences. When they discussed the logic of historiography, they understood it, along neo-Kantian lines, as a transcendental logic. It was about the relation between sources and inferred facts, and how this relation required the introduction of an order: the historian can only infer facts from sources after an order has been imposed on the sources.

White's answer is informed by another understanding of the role of logic in philosophy: historians use generalizing sentences; consequently, in a philosophical analysis of their knowledge there should be universally quantified statements as well. Hempel's logical reconstruction of history hinged on a similar point: one can reconstruct some writing in history as universally quantified sentences of the kind $\forall x(Cx \supset Ex)$. The philosopher is required to account for these sentences in his logical analysis: doing epistemology is uncovering the formal aspects of knowledge. Kristeller and Reis did not share this notion of formal analysis through rational reconstruction. For them logic is not a reconstruction in a formal scheme; it is an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of knowledge, an analysis of the transformation of the given into knowledge of the world (what must be imposed

[89] Morton G. White, "A Note on the Method of History," *The Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 12 (1943): 319.

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on data for it to say something about the world). Consequently, they do not see how White added anything new to their debate with Hempel: "we were encouraged by the fact that he [White] actually defends the position attacked by us and thus confirms our conviction of the need to state our thesis."[90]

Whereas Hempel's paper had implicitly engaged with the older neo-Kantian approaches to historiography, White's reply to Kristeller and Reis fails to address their worries in any way. It is the first sign of a process that would result in the disappearance of the transcendental approach in later philosophical contributions discussing historiography. It is revealing to know that Kristeller's 1943 reply would be completely neglected in later debates on Hempel's 1942 paper.

The disappearance of the Windelbandian problem left open what kind of philosophical questions one could ask about the historical sciences. Here, Hempel's paper saw its most visible contribution. It suggested the centrality of a philosophical concept that had not yet received much analytic attention, namely "explanation." In Hempel's and Oppenheim's 1948 paper, "Studies in the Logic of Explanation," explanation became a central concept for understanding scientific activity in general, and thus a prime object of analysis for the philosophy of science as a discipline. This in turn was refracted into an analytic philosophy of history that in the 1950s and 1960s focused its debate around "historical explanation." Thus, when Dray looks back at four decades of analytic philosophy of history and lauds Hempel's 1942 paper, he testifies to these shifts that radically changed the methodological and conceptual norms for a philosophy of history. And when Kristeller laments the path of the philosophy of history in the twentieth century, he also attests to these shifts, but evaluates them differently, since it is his methodological and conceptual voice that became lost in the disciplinary norms of the philosophy of science and the philosophy of history after the Second World War.

Ghent University.

[90] Reis and Kristeller, "A Reply to Dr. White," *The Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 12 (1943): 319–20.

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