BOOK REVIEW

The exemplifying past: a philosophy of history, by Chiel van den Akker, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, € 85,00 (hardback) ISBN 978 94 6298 6619

Chiel van den Akker's 2018 *The Exemplifying Past: A Philosophy of History* is an ambitious attempt to break new ground in developing a philosophy of history that builds on the ideas of narrative and retroaction central to the earlier work of Arthur Danto, Louis Mink and Frank Ankersmit. It is a book that should be of great interest to all concerned with the philosophical underpinnings and status of historical knowledge and understanding. One of its advantages is having packed a dense and detailed argument into a volume of only 150 pages – a commendable achievement.

Van den Akker's argument is based on certain fundamental insights: that our knowledge of the past largely comes in the form of narratives as opposed to mere chronicles, i.e. lists of events construed only in terms of the moment at which each event occurs; that narrative is not just a rhetorical device for telling good stories, pace Hayden White, but a cognitive instrument in itself; that retroaction, i.e. seeing and describing past events in the light of later ones is legitimate and essential to the whole enterprise of doing history. The main question, then, becomes this: What are the consequences of these insights for the ontology, epistemology, and practice of historical inquiry?

Because narrativistic retroaction means that we see more in a past event than was there at the moment of its occurrence, we can longer say that our historical descriptions mirror past reality. If that is so, what is that historians are doing exactly? What kind of truths, if any, do they provide? Do they amount to discoveries or inventions? Van den Akker gives us a new theory of the distinctiveness of history's kind of knowing and history's kind of object – a theory based on the novel notion of *exemplification* (borrowed from the philosopher, Nelson Goodman, but put to very different use here). In a nutshell, it is not that narratives mirror past events, whereby the events serve as evidence for the correctness of the furnished narrative; rather, past events exemplify the narratives in which they figure. This is a challenging claim which I will come to below. Another way to put van den Akker's theory is this: Historians do not just tell us what happened in the past; rather, by seeing in the past more than was there at the time in the minds of those involved, historians themselves are the ones who 'make history'.. Van den Akker goes far to the other end of the spectrum from what one might call an empiricist realism. He takes what might one call an irrealist or constructivist position.[1] Though I will offer some criticisms of its excesses, it is clearly an innovative and valiant effort to defend that position.

I will first summarize the argument as it proceeds through the six chapters of the book. Then I will discuss and criticize certain steps in that argument, focusing especially on Chapters 1, 3, 5 and to a lesser extent Chapter 2.

Chapter 1 is a short introductory chapter. It states and briefly discusses the largest themes of the book. Its title identifies three of its key ideas: retroaction, indeterminacy, and seeing-in. Retroaction, a phenomenon first made salient in Danto's 1965 book, with its discussion of so-called 'narrative sentences' (e.g. 'Petrarch opened the Renaissance') that describe an event in a way dependent on things future to that event. As van den Akker writes, this means that we inevitably and justifiably 'see in' a past event more than was there at that point in time, i.e. more than was in the minds of the agents back then. Van den Akker contends that this retroactive aspect entails that the historical past is indeterminate. Below I will raise doubts about this inference. Here too the notion of exemplification makes a brief appearance, but it is only fully unpacked in the third chapter.

The point of Chapter 2 is to show that the problem of other minds and the problem of periods are two different problems. Van den Akker follows Donald Davidson's analysis of understanding other minds (understanding what others mean by what they say and do) as a truth-conditional analysis of their beliefs supplemented by a principle of charity. According to van den Akker, understanding periods, however, goes beyond understanding their beliefs and other mental states since retroactive description is appropriate and even called for. Van den Akker also brings in here Davidson's famous argument against radically different conceptual schemes and against the very distinction between scheme and content, i.e. between a reality given to us and a way of organizing or conceptualizing that reality. Van den Akker endorses and relies on this Davidsonian position as well.

Chapter 3 gives us the heart of van den Akker's theory. It builds on Davidson's scheme/content rejection maintaining that there is no pre-given content for historians independent of the schemes and narratives they bring to bear. This point is close to a conclusion urged by Louis Mink according to which narrative truth is not reducible to the aggregate of truths of singular propositions about singular events and, as explained in Chapter 5, such propositions are not detachable from the narrative substance in which they are embedded. This is another point that van den Akker takes to establish a certain indeterminacy of the past. The question arises, then, as to what narrative truth is, a puzzle that van den Akker says Mink was unable to solve. Van den Akker takes narrative truth seriously, distancing himself from Hayden White's view of narrative as rhetoric, and attempts to stake out a pragmatist theory of truth that sets aside notions of justification and evidence as well as any kind of truth plain and simple that rises above the idea of being claimed to be true. This too is expanded upon in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 addresses the concept of representation. Do narratives represent events? What is representation? Van den Akker discusses the notion of representation whether as resemblance, expression, metaphor, or replacement. The discussion is most focused on the shortcomings of Ankersmit's

notion of representation as replacement. In the end, van den Akker wants to urge that we eschew, in the end, these concepts for the notion of exemplification.

Chapter 5 attempts to pull all the threads together by means of a full presentation and deployment of his concept of exemplification. It brings in a point, briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, concerning the centrality of selecting what is significant in the past, especially in hindsight. It offers up the bold formulation that 'historians make history'. Van den Akker also places his position among the wider landscape of theories. His is, in a sense he suggests, a Platonist theory not an Aristotelian one. By this he means that narrative substance is not observed in the events themselves but brought to them based on what is implicit in them once described in hindsight.

Chapter 6 treats Arthur Danto's philosophy of art his claim that the history of art comes to an end at a certain point, to wit, with Andy Warhol's Brillo Box. Van den Akker is concerned here to show how this type of claim can be made compatible with Danto's philosophy of history, how it can be made sense of more generally and how it in the end converges with (indeed, exemplifies) Van den Akker's own theory of history. Intriguing as it is, I will have to set this chapter aside in the present essay.

While I agree with van den Akker's starting point according to which retroaction and narrative force us to leave behind any picture of historical knowing according to which it mirrors the past, I have some reservations about a couple of points along the way. My most important criticism, however, will have to do with his final position on ontology and epistemology. Put concisely, van den Akker's final position acknowledges the independent reality of past events only as an original cause but denies that it plays any role in checking the truth status of our knowledge claims. It is irrealist in denying that there is anything at all that might put pressure on our versions of the past. I would argue, rather, in favour of a kind of pluralism – a term and idea absent from van den Akker's book – according to which there is a past behind our versions of it that constrains which versions are true, even if that past is always mediated by our ways of knowing it. In my view, there is a plurality of true versions though no one version is the right or the privileged one. Let me, then, try to express my reservations and criticisms one at a time.

Their terms versus our (retrospective) terms. In Chapter 2, van den Akker contrasts understanding other minds with understanding periods. Van den Akker says that he really means not periods as such, but periods other than our own. I was confused at first by this contrast. For one thing, other minds inhabit and shape other periods. More importantly, it is not just our understanding of periods but much else that retrospectivity allows for and alters. I think the contrast is better understood as understanding others *on their terms* versus understanding others on our terms, or more exactly, *on our terms* insofar as they are i) made knowable retrospectively and ii) of historical significance. This second way of understanding is not limited to periods or even, as van den Akker also explains, large social movements and social change. [2] The contrast is a good and an important one, though Davidson's theory does not do any real work in justifying it and though it may be slightly mischaracterized. Still,

van den Akker is right that retroactive narrative brings in a new angle on past things and that it does so legitimately because we can see more in the past than the agents back then saw.

The Scope of Retroactivity. When does retroactivity lead to our seeing the past differently than the self-understanding of the original agents? As we have just seen, this occurs when we see the past in terms of periods that they could not have foreseen. Van den Akker also comes to devote discussion to other cases such as historical claims about social change and collective subjects (pp.104ff). These are prime instances of going beyond contemporary self-understanding. Yet it is important to see that retroactive description is not restricted to just these cases. It applies to the single actions of single individuals as well, for example in the following cases: 'Petrarch opened the Renaissance' or "His remarks inadvertently accelerated hostilities leading up to the declaration of war. It goes too for all actions with unintended consequences. The point is that singling out periods, social change, collective entities might be misleading since historically significant retroaction is all over the place and legitimate, whenever we look back at the past.

Scheme versus Content. One might be inclined to say that as time moves forward, new vantage points allow us to use new, unforeseeable concepts and conceptual schemes to describe one and the same content, a given collection of past events. Van den Akker does not want to see things this way. He adopts the argument put forth by Davidson in his paper 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in which Davidson argues that i) radically alternative conceptual schemes cannot exist given that they are either unintelligible or not truly radically alternative and ii) that impossibility leads to the collapse of the distinction between scheme and content. Van den Akker takes this point as having been established. Yet others, including myself, believe that even if i) has a certain force, which depends on thinking that translatability erases all salient differences, ii) does not follow from a principle of verifiabilty and on i). Davidson's argument against the scheme-content distinction targets conceptual relativism as well as the underpinnings of certain foundationalist versions of empiricism. It shows that there is no sensory input accessible to us that is scheme-independent. But what really follows from this? It shows that sensory input cannot be an independent check against our knowledge claims. But it does not follow that there is nothing sensed, or no sensory input or that it cannot serve as some sort of test on our knowledge claims. For the theory of history, we should not conclude that there is no past that can serve to disprove our claims as well as our organizing schemes about the past. To insist that evidence of past events can serve as a content that provides a check on what we say about the past is a realist, not a relativist commitment, and one which we need to honour.

How does van den Akker account for the diversity of beliefs about the same things given his denial of different schemes and same content? Having rejected schemes because of the denial 'that there is an uninterpreted reality outside all schemes' (p. 45), he says that '[i]t does, however, makes sense to talk about different points of view [which] are different sets of beliefs which only become apparent against the backdrop of many shared but unmentioned and unquestioned beliefs'. (p. 46) The difference between different points of view and

different conceptual schemes is not, then, that one involves beliefs and concepts, while the other does not. Both do. Nor is the difference that one organizes reality, and the other does not. The difference, rather, is that different conceptual schemes require that no shared background beliefs, while different points of view have a shared background. But this is merely stipulated. It seems to me mistaken for Davidson and van den Akker to assume or to stipulate that different conceptual schemes can have no shared background beliefs or to assume that different points of view necessarily share the same background. I find this solution to the problem unhelpful. Points of view, no less than conceptual schemes, also contrast with something that they are points of view on. Consequently, the distinction between our activity and the subject-matter towards which it is directed is not dissolved, as it should not be.

Indeterminacy of the past. If retrospectivity is legitimate and central to historical knowledge, does this mean that the past is 'indeterminate'? Van den Akker thinks so. Thus, in Chapter 1, he writes:

> "One reason why the past is indeterminate is that new concepts and newly acquired sensibilities may motivate us to re-describe past actions. Since such re-description change what someone in the past did, the past is indeterminate ... Perhaps someone would object that re-descriptions do not alter the past itself but merely alter our way of talking about it. But since all action is action under a description, newly available descriptions do change what happened in the past". (p.14-15)[3]

A page later, he adds a second reason: 'Another reason (for the indeterminacy of the past) is that historical *narratives* make it clear why some event is *significant* in terms of its connections with later events and in terms of what historians *see in* them'. (pp.16, p. 30 where the word 'significant' is replaced by 'important'). I think that the weakest case for indeterminacy is a change in what we find significant. Historians may find certain aspects significant now in a way they did not before, but this does not entail that those aspects of the past were undetermined, just that they were neglected or misconstrued. Still, van den Akker's first reason, retroactive redescription is a stronger case that requires further examination.

I would suggest that there are two different reasons for redescribing the past: one is because it has changed as a result of its having new relational properties, the other is its having changed because we have come to possess new descriptors. Examples of the first kind, call it property change, include Jones's planting of a rose becoming a planting of a prize-winning rose. The same things go for a past action coming to have the new property of causing a war. There is no new descriptor but a past action comes to have a new property due to its relation to a later event (winning a prize, the commencement of war). There is a sense in which this might entitle us to say that the past was and is indeterminate or nonfixed just because it has taken on new real (relational) properties. The second kind of change, call it descriptor change, is different. Thus, if we come to call a person in the long-ago past, a feminist, avant la lettre, nothing about that figure has changed, she or he was a feminist all along, we have only come recently to

recognize that fact because of the availability of a new descriptor. I would suggest that descriptor change does not entail a change about a past event or action, but only an importantly new way of describing it. In this case, there is no indeterminacy or nonfixity of the past, though there is an openness or indeterminacy about how to describe it. This is what underwrites pluralism.[4] So, there is a rather limited sense in which the past is indeterminate in the sense that it is never fully determined what relational properties it will come to have. But its indeterminacy is limited. New descriptors for the past do not in themselves entail any indeterminacy in the past. Indeed, there is much about the past that is determinate and not at all up for grabs. This is because, on the other side of description (a realm that is, by definition, undescribed and indescribable) and, leaving out new relational properties, the past has been fully determined. This is what stops us from being entitled to describe it however we like.

Historians make history. For this reason, I think van den Akker goes too far when he says that historians make history. Historians, faced with an enormously complex and unarticulated past, select a subset of events, put them into words and introduce an order; in short, they make narratives. But the past is not reducible to our narratives and interpretations. Historians redescribe past events insofar as past events take on new relational properties and insofar as new descriptors become available. Some of these descriptors are coined by historians, but many, or most come from the wider culture. But even when an earlier figure comes to be redescribed in a new way (say, as a feminist) and even that descriptor was first coined by a historian, it is not the case that historians made it a fact that the earlier figure was a feminist (they were that all along), they only made it a fact that we can see the earlier figure as one. In other words, historians make history qua historia rerum gestarum, but not history qua res gestae.

The non-detachability of narrativized events. I believe that van den Akker's exemplification theory is motivated by two different though related reasons: first, retroactive redescription and second, Mink's theory of ingredient conclusions and its non-detachability claim. I want to turn now to Mink's insight. Van den Akker puts it in this way:

'Mink argues that the conclusions (historical theses) of historical narratives are ingredient conclusions that cannot be detached from the events as they are represented in those narratives. This is what demarcates the writing of history from other scientific disciplines, where conclusions are detachable from the represented empirical content'. (p. 110)

The non-detachability results from the fact that the events are understood in the very terms set forth by the narrative itself. I would submit that both Mink and van den Akker are mistaken to think that history and science are fundamentally different in this respect.[5] As has become widely accepted in the philosophy of science, to some extent, 'all observation is theory-laden' meaning that the phenomena or data themselves are understood in terms of theoretical assumptions and concept-formation. This is directly analogous to Mink's non-detachability claim. Mink and van den Akker are correct to say that this presents a problem. Can one still take the events (the phenomena or data) as separate from the narrative thesis (or theory) they are meant to confirm or disconfirm?

Apparently not, or not straightforwardly so. Does this mean that one should abandon any notion of confirmation and disconfirmation, as van den Akker's exemplification theory urges? This is not the strategy in the practice or philosophy of science, nor do I think it should be the strategy in the practice or philosophy of history

Exemplification. This theory says that rather than thinking that historical events offer independent evidence for the truth or falsity of narrative theses, we should think that historical events exemplify narrative theses. Events can and do exemplify narrative theses, at least when the theses are coherent and plausible, and the events illustrate them. Moreover, the events do not inherently have the property of exemplifying the thesis until a narrative thesis is already in place that gives us the wherewithal making it possible to see the event in that particular way. Thus, Petrarch could only be seen as being the first modern man once a narrative thesis about modernity precedes it. Should we then say that events can only illustrate or exemplify narrative theses and that they never confirm or disconfirm them? Should we say that narrative theses cannot at all be confirmed or disconfirmed but that only the individual facts can be tested? Consider the narrative thesis that European colonialism was overall a net benefit for the peoples of Africa. One can certainly find events in history that exemplify the thesis. But the thesis might very well be false and should be tested in any case. To eschew the idea that narrative theses no longer admit of confirmation and disconfirmation or evaluation in terms of truth and falsity gives an unduly broad license to those who want to furnish narrativistic claims about the past. There is good reason to think that the relation of exemplification cannot stand on its own. It needs to be paired with old-fashioned notions of confirmation and truth in the robust sense (in van den Akker's words, semantic rather than merely pragmatic truth).

Van den Akker's *The Exemplifying Past* has identified a hard issue in the philosophy of history, rooted in retroaction and the non-detachability of events from narrative theses. It has proposed a novel and interesting theory to solve it that it defends vigorously. It will certainly help readers to understand the implication of narrative and retrospectivity more clearly. While I cannot agree with some of its central conclusions, the book is sure to stimulate debate and point in interesting new directions.

Notes

1. By empiricist realism, I mean here that the idea that the past is ready-made and fixed and that historians only mirror it by means of finding and collating the data. By irrealism or constructivism, I mean here the idea, at its most extreme, that there is no independent past in any sense and that historians make it in telling it. See van den Akker on this contrast at p. 19, note 14.
2. In fact, later in the chapter, van den Akker makes this clear when he contrasts "under the description of witnesses" to "under the description of historians"

(p. 49). Of course, it is not just professional historians who redescribe the past retroactively. Lay people do it as well.

3. He cites G.E.Anscombe as having established this point, but Anscombe established something different, namely, that in deciding whether an action is intentional, it depends on under the description under which it is captured. Not all actions are actions under a description since some actions go undescribed. Even those actions that are described are not equivalent to any one or more ways in which they happen to be described.

4. Consider, however, the case of "Petrarch opened the Renaissance". Here it is a case of both property change and descriptor change. The new property of the action is that Petrarch's action began a certain movement. The new descriptor is "the Renaissance."

5. Van den Akker also mentions that Danto saw a similar divide between history and science on this score. See p. 110, note 23. Danto, writing in the 1960s prior to the full impact of the post-positivist turn in the philosophy of science, was also assuming an unrealistically foundationalist idea of science.

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