

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CHICHESTER

**An accredited college of the
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HISTORY

Doctor of Philosophy

**TOWARDS REFLEXIVE PRACTICE: AN ASSESSMENT OF
THE POSTMODERN SCEPTICAL CHALLENGE TO
EMPIRICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Peter Frank Brickley

October 2004

**This thesis has been completed as a requirement for a higher degree of the
University of Southampton**

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ABSTRACT

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This research is concerned with aspects of the long running debate about 'What is History?' It focuses on the recent postmodern sceptical challenge to traditional historiography by Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow and Beverley Southgate and the rebuttal of that challenge by empirical historians such as Richard Evans, Arthur Marwick and Perez Zagorin.

The problem with this controversy is that its grounds are narrow. The exchanges have polarised around a particular postmodern treatment of scepticism, arguing for and against whether present empirical methods are capable of providing adequate explanations of the past. What I hope to contribute to this debate is a broadening of its frame of reference to a more general question of how historians might respond to wider questions about the nature of knowledge in the face of apparent epistemological uncertainty. I am using the concept of 'aporia' to express this sense of ultimate uncertainty about the possibility of true, objective, knowledge. The study takes seriously the scepticism of both positions - empirical as well as postmodern - and it does this in two ways.

First, it places contemporary empiricism into an historical context that includes the empiricism of sophists and pyrrhonists of the ancient world, of Hume in the enlightenment, of Comte and J. S. Mill in the nineteenth century and more recently the radical empiricism of American pragmatism. This part of the study concludes that empiricism has long been associated with philosophical scepticism to the extent that it can be regarded as a legitimate and traditional, if sometimes unselfconscious, response to aporia. Thus scepticism can be thought to be integral to this approach to knowledge, not corrosive of it. Attempts by contemporary empirical historians to overcome the postmodern challenge by arguing for objective certainty in history, are therefore unnecessary and inappropriate. Similarly, postmodern critiques of empirical historiography that simply direct attention to the existence of aporia, rather than discuss forms of response to it, demonstrate a weakness in their analysis of empiricism.

Second, the study contextualises this controversy within a broader debate about how other groups of historians are currently responding to issues of aporia. It notes how some contemporary Marxist historians, for example Patrick Joyce, are opening a fruitful dialogue with poststructural linguistic theorists, developing interpretative concepts of a cultural kind that are thought to function more flexibly than traditional ones.

Overall the research concludes that the negativity of the postmodern critique, which seems to suffuse much discussion of historical theory and methods, is not a necessary outcome of such explorations. A broader view, taking into account how empiricism has functioned in the past, and how it is evolving in branches of the discipline, shows the possibility of more positive, reflexive approaches to scepticism and to the role of interpretation in the making of historical knowledge.

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Introduction

Section I

This study attempts to clarify certain problems that have arisen in my experience of teaching history at undergraduate and pre-degree level. It derives from the period between the late 1970s and the 1990s – that is from when the ‘What is history?’ debate was still firmly influenced by the Elton Carr exchanges through to the present controversy between postmodern historians such as Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow and Beverley Southgate, and those representing traditional empirical historiography, such as Richard Evans, Arthur Marwick and Perez Zagorin. The research is concerned with the philosophy of history in the sense that it focuses on what might count as contributing to historians’ understanding of history, but it is also historical in that a large part of the work takes the form of a history of ideas. What follows in this introduction is first, an identification of the central question and thesis, second, an indication of the background and assumptions informing the project and finally a sketch of how the argument of the study is supported within the main body of the work.

What is aimed for in this research is the identification of common ground between a range of historiographical positions. The intention is to provide a practical contribution for historians, and history teachers, to enable them to make sense of, and work with, the present configuration of ideas about the discipline. However, ‘practical’ here does not mean pedagogy in the narrow sense of classroom practice, nor is the study about the history or politics of history teaching. Instead, through an examination of the sceptical dimensions of several approaches to historical knowledge, I hope that the work will enable a broader conception of history to be

held, than seems possible at present. This is not to try to erase debate by flattening out differences, but to establish a common basis for operational discussions to take place between historians holding different account of the discipline; between, specifically, empirical historians, those working in a Marxist tradition and poststructuralists. In doing this it will be suggested here that what is needed is a broadly constructivist approach to history. But what is not required is another ‘New History’, as Alun Munslow (2003) has argued, in which earlier views are denounced as ‘wrong’ and rejected in favour of newer ones. Instead of this traditionally combative style, a more naturalist conception of the discipline is envisaged. This is taken here to be one in which it is accepted that ideas about how historical knowledge is acquired are no different, at root, from ideas about how humans gain any other form of human knowledge, and that a multiplicity of approaches can coexist, as ideas change and develop over time.¹

The debate on which this project is focused can be contextualised within a longer on-going concern by historians about what is involved in making sense of the past; a concern that stretches back into the nineteenth century and beyond. More specifically it is a debate that can be associated with key exchanges between Geoffrey Elton and Edward Carr during the 1960’s (Carr:1964;Elton:1969). The apparent simplicity, and the enduring influence of that core controversy between Elton and Carr - about whether historical knowledge is made in the present or found in the past – can be thought sometimes, even now nearly forty years later, to have overshadowed the complexity of a larger discussion to which it was related. At different times this broader debate has included approaches to history deriving from empiricism, Marxism, realism, pragmatism, feminism and ethics as well as, more

¹ There is of course more to naturalism than this simple statement, and this will be discussed at length further in the study.

recently, those from postmodernism and poststructuralism.² Those categories have inevitably included sub-divisions of standpoint, resulting in a rich and varied debate which continues into the present³.

Within such a discourse few historians can be unaware of the emergence in the last seven years or so of a controversy – a sometimes distinctly acrimonious one - led by a group of postmodern historians who have challenged the theoretical perspectives of those adhering to traditional empirical historiography. It is a controversy which in recent years has been carried on in a number of leading British and American history journals⁴ and which has given rise to exchanges of view, typical of which has been that between Richard Evans in defence of History (1997) and Keith Jenkins's Why History (1999). In brief what is at stake here is the extent to which postmodern approaches to knowledge might be considered relevant within accepted practices of academic history and centrally whether historical practice as it has been known until now, can continue to function in conditions described by the challengers as postmodernity.

This research centrally engages with the issues raised by this current postmodern/empirical controversy and it does so for several reasons. The first of these – and perhaps the most important – is that the core question about whether traditional history has an adequate epistemology is clearly an important one which

² It is notoriously difficult to identify essential constituents of postmodern thought and especially so in seeking agreement on similarities and differences between variants such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, pragmatism and the 'linguistic turn'. However, this study takes the work of Derrida (1976), Foucault (1977&1980) Lyotard (1984), and Rorty (1989) to be exemplary of a postmodern genre. Differences between these and other postmodernists will emerge in the course of the study.

³ In the case of Marxism, for example, these include the broad descriptors of 'Orthodox' as distinct from 'Western', but also the variants within; for example, those of Stalinism, Leninism, Gramscian, Althusarian or Thompsonian, to mention just the more prominent applications of Marx's thought to historical practice.

⁴ For example, between F.R. Ankersmit (1989 &1990) and Perez Zagorin (1990) in *History and Theory*, between Arthur Marwick (1995) and Hayden White (1995) and others in *The Journal of Contemporary History*.

relates to earlier challenges and sites of dispute within the debate⁵. It is, moreover, a point on which there has been a measure of agreement between Evans and Jenkins in that they both see the rise of postmodern approaches to knowledge as a major phenomenon. They also agree that the discipline of history is facing a crisis at the end of the twentieth century. The difference between them however is that Evans, along with Arthur Marwick and others, believe that the threatening crisis becomes real to the extent that historians are influenced by the postmodern critique. Jenkins on the other hand, and his circle of postmodern historians, argue that it is precisely the refusal of traditional empirical historians to accept the ideas of postmodernism that is the cause of its alleged crisis (Evans:1997:3-4; Jenkins:1999: Intro). It is true that some historians have regarded the whole general position of postmodernism (Butler:2002) and the particular insights of poststructuralism (Wolin:2000) as now waning in influence, but it is the case that studies in support of this postmodern critique of history continue to be published (Jenkins:2003;Munslow:2000,2003;Southgate:2003). Of course debate and dissension is germane to intellectual endeavour but there is little evidence that the postmodern account of history is making any headway in influencing mainstream historians and the situation appears to be that of stalemate, if not that of incipient schism.

At the same time - and this is the second reason for examining that particular controversy - the 'traditional against postmodern' exchanges do not exhaust the totality of the broader debate within history. There is a significant number of historians whose contributions to the debate are not encompassed within the

⁵ These include for example many and various Marxists challenges beyond that of E.H.Carr – some directly methodological, such as Anderson:1976 & 1983;Cohen:1978; Kiernan:1983; Ruben:1979; Stedman-Jones:1971 or from branches of the discipline, eg. the Thompsonian social historians – but also criticism of traditional practice from developments in historical pedagogy, as will be discussed in the next section of this introduction - (eg. Jenkins &

Evans/Jenkins differences or those of their supporters and neither side here appear show much interest in understanding why that might be. It is interesting to conjecture that, were one or other of these contenders to gain ascendancy over the other, the supposed 'peripheral' historiographies could be in danger of being effectively written out of British historical practice altogether. At the very least, there is the possibility that, like the Elton Carr differences of the 1960's, the vigour with which the traditional/postmodern exchanges have been conducted can obscure the issues of an equally important broader debate.⁶ The reality however is that historians in this broader debate appear to be continuing to make interesting and useful explanations of the past, seemingly free from concern, either that postmodern – or similar - ideas should be shunned to ensure the purity of the discipline or that postmodernity implies anything more than an adjustment of existing practice.⁷ It will be seen that some of these historians are working on the borders of other disciplines and have gained fresh methodological insights from those associations. Others can, to a greater or lesser extent, be described as working in a Marxist tradition while a further group are clearly drawing upon a reading of poststructuralism different from that of the postmodern challengers in this controversy. Common sense suggests that the existence of a substantial number of historians who cannot be characterised as a part of either side in the major current controversy within history, rather calls into question the legitimacy of that

Brickley: 1986 a&b,1988 a-f,1989). The point is simply that later critiques may have significance for earlier, seemingly obsolete ones.

⁶ Obviously no discussion of the forms of knowledge of one country could carry on without reference to those of a host of other cultures, communities and countries and this study is no different from others in this respect. Thus reference is made to works, ideas and critiques originating at different locations in the western world in almost every section of the piece. Nevertheless, for clarity and for depth within the limitations of the project, this study focuses most directly on historical practice in the United Kingdom and works from other countries are considered with that intention in mind.

⁷ This group of historians will be considered more closely in the main body of the study and others will be discussed there, but a brief survey of the field would include works by Address: 1998; Arnold:2001 Arthur & Phillips:2000; Bevir:2000a&b; Bourdillon:1994; Feldman&Stedman-Jones:1989; Ferguson:1998; Gray:1989; Jordanova:2000; Joyce:1980&1991; Loftus:2002; Lunn&Day:1999; Thompson:1995; Tosh:1991 and Wilson:1993.

controversy as being representative of the discipline, or of the notion that history's epistemology is in crisis. And yet still the bitter exchanges continue (eg. Marwick:2001) as though theirs – their articulation of either postmodernism or traditional empirical practice – constitutes the whole range of historiographical possibility. There would therefore appear to be a need for an examination of not only the parties to this controversy; ie. the challengers, and defenders, but also of those who stand within the debate but outside this controversy.⁸

It is difficult to form a comparison between what theorists of history say about the methods they think should be followed by their professional colleagues and what they actually do themselves, in their own work. What is interesting – and is the third reason for focusing on this particular controversy – is that there is no clear pattern here. It will be seen that it is simply not possible to describe the participants' ideas in terms of their historical writing. The significance of this is that what is important is what these historians say about the subject, rather than what they do. Indeed there is a precedent here. It will be remembered for example that for all Elton and Carr's differences at the level of theory, their actual historical writings were remarkably similar to each other. This is not to say, however, that an Elton or a Carr would make the same sense of, say the Russian revolution, but that is a theoretical issue, not a practical one. On the page their work would look similar and their writing procedures comparable. Nevertheless, whatever the merits of the traditionalists⁹ in terms of their own practice – and it will be clear that there are some – what is arguably unacceptable on the part of these mainstream historians is the seemingly

⁸ For clarity I am using the term 'controversy' throughout the study to indicate the particular exchanges between the postmodern challengers and the empirical defenders (ie. Jenkins and Evans et. al.) and the expression 'the debate' to refer to the broader discussions that will be considered initially in Chapter One.

⁹ For clarity this group of historians –Evans, Marwick et.al. will be referred to as 'mainstream empirical historians' for most of the study. It will be apparent however that their claim to centrality and to be the only possible voice of historical empiricism, is misplaced.

routine and casual dismissal of any suggestion that historical thought and practice could or should gain insights from philosophers and theorists from outside the discipline, or discussions beyond the practical. The point Keith Jenkins has made repeatedly about the weakness of history in comparison with theory in other disciplines, is regarded here as a sound one and it has been one of the starting points for the thinking that has led to this research (Jenkins:1991:2). What follows from this is that the discussion of this project is of argued importance, not in relation to a practical prescription for a certain kind of historical writing or method – although there are some clear practical principles which do emerge from it. Rather the research is angled towards identifying ways in which history might be conceived, how it is thought to relate to other forms of knowledge within our culture, how generically reliable a form of knowledge we might think it to be and how our understanding of it can cohere with new as well as with traditional accounts of knowledge. If the conclusions of the study prove to be of use to historians, it is likely to be in the relevance of these conceptions for the more pedagogic dimensions of the debate where ideas about the discipline are to some extent formed – from where, indeed, the initial thrust for the study came.

The fourth main reason for thinking that this particular controversy will repay examination is that it has been conducted with a curious degree of certainty on both sides. This is strange since, as it will be seen, both the mainstream empiricists and the postmoderns claim to be the party of subjectivity, offering epistemologically open-ended accounts of the past. Evans is particularly dismissive of postmodernism. He approvingly quotes Arthur Marwick in asserting that postmodernist ideas are a ‘menace to serious historical study’ (1997:7) and he himself speaks of postmoderns as ‘intellectual barbarians at the disciplinary gates’ who are ‘loitering with distinctly hostile intent (p8). For his part Jenkins has been declaring since 1996, (when he switched his view from a previously positive stance

about the role of postmodernism in historical explanation (1991:25)) that, since postmodernity - is 'precisely our condition: it is our fate' (Jenkins:1995:6) – he insists that we can learn nothing from history 'other than that which we have put into it' (1999:3). He argues therefore that we might as well simply 'forget history' and lead lives within grammatical formulations which have no reference to a past tense articulated in ways which are, as it were, "historically" familiar to us (Jenkins:1997a:57).

Jenkins's certainty is all the more odd for being somewhat at variance with the views of some of his fellow postmoderns. While they share his pessimistic stance towards knowledge in the conditions they call postmodernity, they stop short of calling for an ending of the discipline of history.¹⁰ A question thus arises as to how far the views of Jenkins and Ermarth are reliably postmodern and whether such a judgement is significant in the broader debate.

It is clear that despite the evident polemics there is more to this controversy than is at first apparent. The understandings which can be made of it and of the constituent arguments, are not exhausted by the participants' own descriptions of them. It is possible to arrive at a quite different account of how they interact, other than the one which Evans and Jenkins make – or which is made for them by their supporters. The response which these two historians make to the process through which postmodern

¹⁰ Within the application of postmodernism to history there is a range of expression; for example, that of Frank Ankersmit (1989), Tony Bennett (1997), Robert Berkhofer, Jr. (1997), Alun Munslow (1997a, 2000,2003) and Beverley Southgate (1996b,2000,2003), all of whom, in various ways, have argued for a reconstituted, more thoroughly reflexive historical discipline and some of whom offer accounts of the discipline not dissimilar to those of the non-combatant group. These postmoderns can to an extent (an extent which is discussed more fully in the main body of the study) be contrasted with proponents of a stronger version of historical postmodernism, such as Elizabeth Ermarth's (1992) 're-timing of time' and Keith Jenkins's (1997a&b,1999,2000,2003) 'end of history' argument. As with generic postmodernism, their ideas have met with fierce resistance. Significant players in the opposition to historical postmodernism being in addition to Marwick and Evans, the historians Gertrude Himmelfarb (1987), Gabrielle Spiegel (1990), Lawrence Stone (1991) and Perez Zagorin (1990&1999).

ideas could begin to be assimilated into disciplinary norms is illustrative of this point. The result is the opposite of what might be expected, ie. that empiricists assume a reality that corresponds more or less directly to their findings and that postmoderns are playful relativists. For all his polemical objection to postmodernism Evans sees the need for the discipline to evolve with the changing times and he deplores attempts of historians such as Geoffrey Elton to raise a 'disciplinary drawbridge' against ideas from non-historians (1997:8-11). What he sees happening is that postmodernism is being gradually assimilated into the discipline and, as it is slowly being accepted by historians, it is being modified – quite naturally in Evans's view. He places postmodernism in a context which includes, what he suggests have been earlier claims, by for example, Rankeans, cliometricians, psychohistorians and early social historians. These, he says, have argued in their turn that all previous ways of doing history were 'redundant, biased, useless or false' but, they have nevertheless, one after another, settled down to become proponents of sub-specialisms 'coexisting happily with all other sub-specialisms' (1997:201/3) Jenkins, on the other hand, clearly laments, even as he accepts, that this is what is taking place; that Evans

replays the old strategies of divide and rule, "us against them" and "some of us against others of them": the really barbaric are kept out, while the more moderate and usable are let in to bolster the ranks. It is the typical assimilationist gesture so beloved of conservatives, and it permeates the whole of Evans's text (1999:97).

It is interesting here and important for this study that it is Evans – as a supposed 'certaintist' 'lower case' historian, to use Jenkins's own terms - who as an acknowledged representative of traditional empiricist historians is here readily

accepting that the exposure to challenge, which is implied in the assimilation of new ideas into an existing discipline, is likely to change not only the challenging ideas but also those of existing practices. Thus whether Evans notices it or not – and the evidence is somewhat ambivalent – both he and those historians like him appear to be working more with constructivist assumptions about the nature of knowledge than with the realist, objectivist, epistemological stance attributed to him (and them) by postmodernists in general and by Jenkins in particular (Jenkins: 1991:28, 1995:8-10 & 1999:100). At the same time, Jenkins himself shows a quite different set of assumption than the ones he is noted for supporting. Evans has already pointed out an inconsistency in Jenkins's actual, rather than advocated, approach to knowledge, ie.

Given the stress laid upon the shifting nature of concepts by postmodernists, and the emphasis given to the indirect, contingent or even arbitrary or non-existent correspondence of words to reality, the dogmatic and apodictic tone of Jenkins's declaration that postmodernity is an indisputable fact of life seems strangely out of place, coming as it does from a self-confessed proponent of such ideas (Evans:1997:13).

That this definition of postmodernity by Jenkins was perhaps no one-off slip by him seems evident from his negative reaction here to the suggestion by Evans that postmodernism could possibly evolve through being accepted by historians. Postmodernism, for Jenkins, seems to be a fixed category which can be understood, accepted or employed only as Jenkins would have it understood. Clearly all might not be as it seems in a characterisation of postmodernists (represented by Jenkins in relation to himself) as 'generous, quasi-transcendental, cross-discursive, playful and radical and who can be compared with traditional empirical historians (represented

by Jenkins in relation to Evans) as ‘practical, technical, “serious men” of the flat-earth variety’ who are ‘suffering very badly from the “effects of gravity” ‘ and who preside over a ‘mean-spirited, often arrogant and dismissive discourse’ (Jenkins:1999:95).

It is the central aim of this research to avoid both of these positions, of Evans and Jenkins, and to argue that not only is it possible to conceive of history as being constructed by historians – which in their various ways both Evans and Jenkins effectively accept – but that such construction is no bar to history’s being of value as a discrete form of knowledge. This is evidenced by the group of historians outside of the controversy, whose work testifies to the existence of one or more other ways forward, beyond that of rejection or pessimism.

Section II

What is at stake here is not, as is so often thought, a question of whether history – or indeed any form of knowledge – can or cannot provide objective knowledge. The issue is rather, a struggle over how a broadly accepted sense of an open-endedness in knowledge should be understood and expressed¹¹. Within this view it will be suggested that an historically sound basis exists to say that in the western intellectual

¹¹ The expression ‘open-endedness’ has been deliberately chosen for its vagueness; to avoid the use of a more philosophical term that would, of necessity, carry with it a particular view of ‘open-endedness’ and which, at this stage in the explanation, would have complicated – pre-empted – the way it is intended to be used in this study. The issue is discussed in the opening section of Chapter Two.

tradition there has always been an assumption that knowledge is – in principle at least - open to ongoing interpretation.

However this is an assumption that in different times and in different cultures has been articulated and handled in different ways and what is being argued in this study is not that empiricism is the same as, or can be reduced to, the postmodernism of this controversy, for it is not, and there is no wish for it to be so. Postmodernist's conception of history in this controversy – even in the more moderate postmodern accounts – suffers from a sense of negativity; one that regards interpretation as less than wholly satisfactory. This will be seen in the challengers' own explanations but also through the work of Beverley Southgate in the early modern period. His postmodern treatment of sceptical themes in the western tradition is noticeably pessimistic as distinct from that of other historians working in the same field.¹² Indeed it is possible to see a sense of progress in empirical accounts of knowledge which is largely missing from postmodernism. The gradual accumulation of more or less reliable accounts of different aspects of the world has been an important part of empiricism since the renaissance,¹³ but arguably this is a different way of saying the same thing - that empiricism is simply positive in its approach to knowledge.¹⁴ As an issue this is more apparent than real, for postmodern historians do not critique their empirical colleagues' optimism (in believing that the human condition is improving), simply because they object to the optimism. Rather they claim that the optimism is not justified, or they attempt to establish that it rests on a notion of pre-existing reality. It is a difference in the use of knowledge between these positions which is being contested rather than in basic epistemology, as will be discussed in

¹² Eg. Popkin:1963,1966,1979&1999.

¹³ And, to put it plainly, this has been the basis of our modern world of knowledge and human capacity within it.

¹⁴ This view relies somewhat on David Bebbington's account of progress as being a secularisation of the Christian view of history (Bebbington:1990) What is not accepted is

Chapters Three and Four.¹⁵ Empiricism and postmodernism make use of a common scepticism, but they do not handle it in the same way. In fact empiricism hardly acknowledges the existence of it at all, and it is this that has given rise to the charge by postmoderns of realism. This research attempts to improve on this situation by identifying resources from within the western intellectual tradition - that is, from the established historical record - which will enable empirical historians to account historically for their practice, in a different way. Hitherto, the sceptical dimension to empiricism is something that mainstream historians have admitted to - usually when under pressure from postmodernists - but which they do not utilise. As a result it is treated, often by both sides, as the province of postmodernism. It is argued here that if empirical historians were prepared to redefine the empirical approach to knowledge in terms of a structural relationship with scepticism, their position in relation to a range of challenges could be significantly strengthened. This is important, for what is perhaps at stake now is that within a cultural context in which interpretation in all forms of knowledge has become increasingly important, empiricism and postmodernism are competing for a dominance of expression.¹⁶

It is in such an intellectual context that Jenkins's stance here can be understood as being something more than simply irascibility on his part. His insistence that postmodernism be understood as postmodernists would have it understood now,

that a sense of progress in history entails, of necessity, a metaphysical or realist account of knowledge.

¹⁵ Karl Popper's falsificationism (1968) is a good example of the way empiricists have worked with, rather than been stopped by, their awareness of philosophical uncertainty; although this is not a defence of his position against alternative accounts, notably those of Imre Lakatos (1970) or Thomas Kuhn (1970). Popper clearly saw knowledge as progressive but at the same time viewed it as based not on certainty, but on uncertainty. The starting point for gaining understanding of the world was unimportant. What mattered was whether accounts of knowledge would cohere with other accounts ie. whether or not they could be falsified. Conversely it can be shown that even radically pessimistic postmoderns such as Keith Jenkins believe that if their view prevails, what will be left of history will be better than what was there before; more honest etc. It would seem then that, whether in stronger and weaker forms, a sense of progress is, like the deployment of scepticism, common to both sides.

rather than accept that its meaning be watered down through a process of assimilation, does make sense in terms of his own project. It will be argued, there are important consequences resting upon which interpretative model the historical community chooses. This is not, it will be seen, because empiricism assumes the existence of an impossible grounding objectivity and postmodernism, a radical subjectivity, but rather the opposite. Empiricism in historical practice may stand in need of a degree of adaptation to present social conditions, but it is – potentially at least - an approach which is comfortable with the idea of knowledge as being uncertain. There is much evidence available that several of the main players in this controversy - the empirical side – do see empiricism as a human strategy for making communicative meaning where it is obvious that no absolute objectivity is possible or indeed desirable. On the other hand the postmodernism of this controversy, demonstrates an anxiety about truth. It is an anxiety held to such an extent that the absence of certainty in knowledge – an absence that is easy to show – is taken by them to herald the beginning of a new historical epoch. Some moreover go on to call for an astonishingly radical programme of methodological and disciplinary change including the relinquishing of the human means of making sense of the past.

Within this analysis it is argued that despite appearances to the contrary Jenkins, and his group's use of postmodernism, can be associated with an approach to knowledge that is effectively metaphysical.¹⁷ This is not to say that he, and they, are wrong to do so, but rather that the epistemological pessimism which results from it is alien to the more positive stance of mainstream empirical historiography and from both Marxism and some readings of poststructuralism. It will be suggested that the negativity which

¹⁶ The context envisaged here is that of 'mass society'. This is discussed more fully in the main body of the study.

¹⁷ The term 'metaphysics' is taken here to refer to an approach to knowledge that, in an apparent desire to gain some firm epistemological ground, attempts to reach (or to assume the importance of trying to reach) for a degree of certainty beyond what seems to be available to the senses, or what can be derived from them.

can be seen to be – to a greater or lesser degrees – at the heart of this version of historical postmodernism, can be thought to be a consequence of its tending to regard ordinary, everyday, messy and uncertain history as somehow less satisfactory than a posited (but unachievable) objectivity. Again, however, this characteristic is not common to all usages of postmodernist thought and poststructuralist approaches to knowledge. These versions of postmodernism, like empiricism and Marxism, have the potential of providing an effective basis for historical knowledge.¹⁸

So far it is perhaps clear that what is being sought in this study is not a collapse of one side of the controversy into the other – either way around – so much as a means of drawing empirical, Marxist and postmodern/poststructuralist practice closer together into a more effective discourse. If there is a collapse it is of the controversy into the debate. What is aimed for is an explanation of history that allows for differences but which is capable of functioning within a community of knowers. This is taken to refer to a situation where members can be secure in an awareness that their approach to knowledge may be somewhat different from those of other historians but that at the level of epistemology, their accounts cohere with each other sufficiently for them to be able to communicate with each other within the discipline.¹⁹

¹⁸ Indeed it is the case that ideas on either side of the controversy are not set in stone and some of them have changed during the period this study has been written. A clear example of this is the softening of tone to be found in Alun Munslow's latest work *The New History* 2003 where his critique calls for little more than a shift in outlook on the part of mainstream historians.

¹⁹ It is easy to equate this desired position with that of the 'meta-narrative' that Lyotard famously critiqued with his definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity to meta-narratives' in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). The difference however is that in the conception of history argued for here, it is perfectly reasonable for it to be held 'incredulously'. Indeed I entirely accept Lyotard's point - there is no need whatsoever for any account of history or historiography to be held as 'true'. To function paradigmatically, such a conception need only be coherent across the range and area of its applicability. This will of course be discussed further.

It is perhaps helpful here to sketch out briefly my earlier involvement within the debate – working within postmodern critiques of traditional historiography – before those critiques developed into this controversy. Like the majority of historians in the broader debate, and having its origins in the teaching of the discipline, I support the encouragement of a critically reflexive historical practice as a means of participation in a history conceived of as a community of knowers;²⁰ and as a consequence of that, I believe that knowledge of a historian's perspective is as important as the facts of the content. As a historian working a Marxist tradition Ludmilla Jordanova makes the same point, although more politically. She is, she says, arguing 'for the importance of knowing an author's position'. Since 'for the entire time I have been doing historical work, politics has loomed large in every aspect of it...although there is much about any writer that can never be known...readers still need to know, more or less, where an author is coming from' (2000:xiv). I have long endorsed Jordanova's position here; it is, moreover, one that both empirical and postmodern/poststructuralist historians are capable of holding, within the specificity of their approaches to knowledge.

Thus, holding a broadly Marxist historical position in the early 1980's I worked in collaboration with Keith Jenkins in trying to combat some of what we saw at the time as being an unhelpful enthusiasm in school history for the so called 'skills' approach to historical knowledge, at the expense of an awareness of methods. The title of our first joint article, 'From Skillology to Methodology', written in 1986 for A Level history teachers, sums up the argument of the time. It was an attempt to refocus teachers towards a need for the historical content they were working with to be engaged with, self-consciously, against the then prevailing orthodoxy that just any content would do - that the important thing in the teaching of school history was the skills that were being developed. Our leftist sensibilities were outraged that under

²⁰ Where knowledge is the result of an active construction, on the part of the knower.

the guise of a radical-seeming ‘New History’ banner school practice was moving from a traditional ‘given’ historical content – the old grand narrative – directly to a model in which there was no longer any role for the questioning of the selective process which produced its content. A difficulty at the time was that we were witnessing the fragmentation of the Marxist class criterion (a sign of its success in a way, perhaps) into the now familiar multifaceted historical criteria of ‘class, gender, ethnicity’. A shift of our ‘brand’ from Marxist to what we loosely (to start with anyway) called postmodernist was deliberate, and in part a response to that process. It simply seemed an easier – less restrictive – methodological home.²¹ From here we continued a fruitful collaboration for some ten years, arguing for reflexivity in the teaching of history. Influenced particularly at the time by the poststructuralist deployment of Saussurean linguistics (Gottdiener:1995; Sheriff:1989 & Sturrock: 1979 & 1986), the early writing of Lyotard (1984), New Historicism (Veaser:1989) and Richard Rorty’s postmodern version of pragmatism (Rorty:1980,1982, 1991a&b & 1992) we used postmodernism’s scepticism as a means of arguing that the element of judgement in the creation of historical knowledge should be open and accountable.²² We were active in developmental work for an A Level history research project²³ and although unable to claim it as a successful outcome to our work, it was gratifying to see that the kind of interpretative practice which we had been trying to get accepted by teachers, became written into the National Curriculum for History in schools (attainment target Two at the time) as a requirement for all history lessons. Indeed one of our joint papers of those years seems still to be regarded as relevant (Phillips:1998:231).

²¹ Perhaps it is just hindsight (although a formative one) but our postmodernism of the time rested easily on our Marxism. The notion of a break between modernity and postmodernity was associated (like Harvey’s in 1990) with changing conditions of mass society. For us, reflexivity was a tool in our Gramscian armoury. And of course – and this will be returned to in the main body of the study – there were models available, for example Baudrillard and Foucault, to encourage a slide from Marxist influenced work to postmodernism. (I am aware of course that the issue of whether Foucault was ever a Marxist as such, is controversial).

²² See Jenkins & Brickley:1986a &b;1988a,b,c,d&e;1989;1990a&b;1991.

²³ The Nuffield funded project ETHOS, based at the University of Exeter.

This collaboration came to a gradual end in the middle 1990's when the group of postmodern historians I was involved with began to read and re-read our postmodern texts in a different, more negative, manner. There was a greater reliance at this time on Derrida and Baudrillard than hitherto. 'Argument', in the sense of the marshalling of evidence to help change minds, along with any form of clear written communication and attempts at synthesis, were increasingly regarded as suspect practices, appropriate only to uncomprehending and outdated historians who were unable to move with the times. Those types were, as Elizabeth Ermarth wrote more generally, but effectively expressing the mood of the time, as boringly 'regular as bad breath' (Ermarth:1992:51). This seemed to me rather like a replay of the stultifying effects of the emphasis on 'skills' in history and the change resulted steadily in a lessening of our intellectual association as we went out separate ways. Keith Jenkins went on to play a central role in the present postmodern history controversy – arguing from poststructuralism that history cannot continue in postmodernity - and I have maintained the original position. This is one committed to the view that reflexivity, whilst not a panacea²⁴ is nevertheless a sound way forward for the discipline, whether it is articulated within empiricism, Marxism or via poststructuralist insights.²⁵ What was needed it seemed to me, was a return to the arguments about values and politics in history, but in a way that respected not only the newer accounts of knowledge – specifically poststructuralism – but also the utility of a basic empirical method.

²⁴ The Thatcherite 'revolution' for example showed how the self-aware use of theory is by no means the exclusive property of the political left. The benefit of reflexivity is seen as being at the level of strategy – at forcing disclosure and at avoiding mystification. There is no sense of it being employed in any supposed 'pure' form. Culler's discussion of Derrida's concept of invagination, provides a caution against overweighted expectations in the use of the concept. (Culler:1983).

²⁵ See Brickley:1992;1994;1997;1999a&b.

It needs to be said here that Jenkins may well not really believe that historians are going to give up making sense of the past at his behest, however enticing the argument. As Culler reminds us, it is a feature of the poststructuralist genre to work, not from within the 'accepted procedures of a particular discipline, but from the persuasive novelty of their redescriptions.' It is quite reasonable to accept this and to recognise the validity of a role in a challenge that aims to 'make strange the familiar and to make readers conceive of their thinking, behaviour and institutions in new ways (Culler:1983:9). It would be hard to object to this – to thought experiments of the Jenkinsean kind - but there is a limit to the extent that the words on the page can be discounted as simply the means to a discursive end. If the challenge itself is to mean anything at all, it must be worthy of a response to what has actually been said, however outrageous, or unrealistic, that challenge may seem. I agree with Keith Jenkins that the argument of the postmodern side in this controversy – and his in particular - is an important one that has significance for the broader debate in the way that historians, and history student, may think about their discipline. It deserves a better response than it has yet received from mainstream empirical historians and the intention of this study is to attempt to provide it.²⁶

Section III

It has to be admitted that a degree of disenchantment with the usefulness of poststructuralism (as a broad methodology of postmodernism) set in for a while after the mid 1990's and, believing at the time that Marxism's emphasis on class over gender and ethnicity rendered it outdated, I found myself turning in part towards examining the possibilities that might still exist under the sign of empiricism. Two

²⁶ 'Better' here means better for the continuation of the discipline as an inclusive discourse, as will be discussed in more detail within the study.

perspectives developed from this. The first was an empirical discovery of a ubiquitous scepticism structurally associated with empiricism in the narratives of the western intellectual tradition, but also, I realised that there was more in poststructuralism than had been represented in the controversy thus far.

Poststructuralist perspectives do not necessarily entail nihilism. These realisations mutually reinforced each other and it occurred to me that, in their different ways, both sides in the controversy were carrying binary assumptions that prioritised certain, objective knowledge over that of uncertainty – scepticism.

In the case of the traditionalists, their objectivism was sceptical on the margins (and this is what made them so difficult a target for postmodern critiques). Conversely the challengers (especially Ermarth and Jenkins), were demonstrating a degree of certainty about their scepticism – ie. that it really was a problem, even though they claimed it was one that they welcomed. I wondered what the result would be if their prioritisations were reversed. What, for example, would mainstream empirical history be like if it could function with a genuine, openly accepted sense of uncertainty; and what would remain of the postmodern challenge (within the controversy) if it were comfortable with the idea that scepticism was a normal, functional part of the making of historical knowledge? At the same time my studies of scepticism in the western historical tradition suggested to me that the theme was capable of playing a heavier role in these discussions than had happened so far.²⁷ From these speculations came a working concept of ‘aporia and response’ which, when applied to the positions of both sides in this controversy, can be seen to

²⁷ Hitherto, work in this area has been mostly confined to finding examples of scepticism in the historical record and of showing its relevance to ideas within the historical context. However Richard Popkin and Beverley Southgate have, in differing ways, begun to break out from this pattern and this study has relied significantly on their work (Popkin: 1963, 1966, 1979, 1999, 1992; Southgate: 1981, 1987, 1989 & 1995). The issue is explored within Chapters Two and Three.

produce something of a deconstruction of its claim to centrality.²⁸ In short such an analysis arguably points a way forward towards the kind of tentative, methodologically reflexive historical practice that can already be found in the accounts of the discipline of some poststructuralist and Marxist historians, as well as in some empirical historiography. For all their differences, the core understanding of the discipline that is being - or could be - carried by those participants in both the broader debate and this particular controversy, is that historical knowledge is a human construction which is capable of being understood and discussed like other aspects of human intercourse.

To show this, the study compares how, in terms of this concept 'aporia and response,' empirical and postmodern approaches to history – ie. the controversy – relate to positions within the broader debate, specifically Marxism and poststructuralism. The result is a somewhat unequal three-part structure. It is unequal because the more difficult task is show the possibilities inherent in scepticism, for a traditional empirical historiography. The theories of the broader debate – those of Marxist and postmodern/poststructuralist positions - already have well developed usages of scepticism and the discussion of them can therefore proceed more straightforwardly, in this project.

Thus after an initial chapter which develops some of the points raised within this introduction, two chapters focus on the possibilities inherent in forms of empirical historiography and which are exemplified in those historians of the broader debate. A single chapter then notes the clear opportunities that exist within Marxism and postmodernism, by drawing on aspects of poststructuralist thought. Finally the

²⁸ Perhaps stretching the tolerance level of iterability to its limit, the term 'deconstruction' is being used here in the sense simply of exploring the way definitions interact with each other, as distinct from mounting a critique against an alleged inaccuracy of a previous definitional pattern.

conclusion brings together the threads of the research, showing how reflexive practice can be thought to be the disciplinary glue which is able to bear the weight of disparate practice within history.²⁹

Three sections form Chapter One. In the first of these, examples from some of the existing exchanges of the controversy are analysed, indicating aspects of the weakness of present mainstream empirical practice. In particular a lack of concern about the criteria it uses to handle facts about the past is noted and how it often appears that neither side engages satisfactorily with the other. It is suggested that these difficulties are associated with an undeveloped sense of scepticism by empirical historians in the formation of their historical awareness. The Second section considers the main thrust of four of the postmodern challengers. It summaries how Elizabeth Ermarth (1983,1992,2001a&b) and Keith Jenkins (1991,1995,1997a&b,1999,2000,&2003) in particular, but supported in part by Alun Munslow (1997a,2000&2003) and Beverley Southgate (1996b,2000& 2003) have argued that empirical history has become impossibly dysfunctional in conditions of postmodernity. Weaknesses of their own account of the discipline are identified, including examples of incoherence, inconsistencies and historical inaccuracies.³⁰ More importantly, the discussion moves on in a third section to argue that the existence of historians who are continuing their practice – Marxists, poststructuralist and empirical historians drawing on methodologies of other disciplines – is perhaps

²⁹ To be clear, the term 'reflexivity' is used here to denote an awareness by historians of the reciprocal nature of historical knowledge-making. This is that the understandings of the past, that are made in the present, influence that present. They then go on to inform perspectives which in turn condition further knowledge of the past. It is this process that is described in this study as 'the construction' of history. Clearly, from any position that sees the process of history as working in this way, the perspectival aspects of historical study are as important as more traditional evidential considerations.

³⁰ The term 'inaccuracies' is not intended to raise any historically epistemological issues at this stage. It refers merely to inaccuracies in relation to settled and accepted understandings about the past. I certainly accept that any charge of inaccurate history is open to challenge and I would want to distinguish the use made of it from that of broader, or more abstract and all-encompassing accounts of the past that are, by their very breadth, less able to be judged simply accurate or inaccurate.

the clearest evidence that better explanations await those who would seek to rethink historiography, beyond the blanket denunciation of these postmodernists and the 'business as usual' dismissal of traditionalists.

The second chapter defines the terms central to this part of the study – especially empiricism and scepticism – and it examines how traditional mainstream historiography can make more effective use of the argued sceptical dimension to human knowledge. It thus steps out of the discussion within historical practice and establishes a methodology for focusing on the ubiquity of philosophical openedness in the western tradition. In brief, what it is important in studying epistemology in history is not the existence of aporetic awareness, as argued by postmodernists. Rather it is the response to it which has been made by different people and groups, over time and place, that provides the historical dimension. From this position the chapter focuses on the pre-modern period and in particular on the ideas of the Sophists and Pyrrhonists. It offers evidence of a connection between scepticism and empiricism drawn from the growing body of scholarship in this area of the history of philosophical scepticism.³¹ It is argued that at different times in the classical pre-medieval period, and in different places, response to an awareness of human epistemological frailty has taken different forms of expression. Thus it may well be that Ermarth, Jenkins et. al. can differentiate their approach to knowledge from that of various historical forms of scepticism. It would indeed be surprising if mass technological society of the Twenty First Century were to give rise to the same kind of epistemological closure as that of classical Athens or the medical philosophy of First Century Alexandria. The main point here is that there is evidence that western societies have long had experience in dealing with the seemingly aporetic

³¹ It relies primarily on the work of Kerferd:1981; Stough:1987; Hookway:1992; Annas & Barnes:1994; Forster:1989; Frede:1987; Hankinson:1995; Weintraub:1997 and Popkin:1999.

nature of reality. This focus on the history of philosophy seems to have been forgotten by the traditionalists in the controversy.

Chapter Three maintains the analysis, extending it into the modern world. It examines the work of some major contributors to the enlightenment project, eg. David Hume's deployment of Pyrrhonian sceptical empiricism, the sceptical positivism of Auguste Comte and the English empiricism of J. S. Mill. Finally it brings the discussion into the present³², arguing that outside of history, many philosophers working in this tradition of empiricism are maintaining, or have rediscovered, a sceptical awareness of aporia comparable with the sceptics of the classical world.

Chapter Four returns to history as a practice and reflects on how it might be possible for empirical historians to make use of this sceptical narrative of the western tradition. To do this it establishes first that the empirical 'defenders' in this debate can associate themselves with the western tradition of empiricism studied here. It looks at several influences on the development of western empirical historiography since the mid-nineteenth century, and argues that empiricism has not been affected in any fundamental way by major influences on it; ie. by either Rankean metaphysics, Butterfield's Christian approach to knowledge or Marxist science. Then, through a case study by way of example, the discussion focuses in more closely on those historians who are demonstrating the possibility of an alternative to the choices within the controversy. Thus as a case study it looks at how historians working in the Marxist tradition, and influenced by E. P. Thompson's controversy with Louis Althusser in 1978 (1995), developed a methodology which has shown itself to be

³² This is a necessary but difficult task since the empirical tradition has fragmented in the twentieth century under the same pressures that have produced the phenomenon of postmodernism. Nevertheless an outline of a trajectory of ideas is attempted here, drawing

compatible with both empiricism and with the more positive aspects of the postmodern challenge.

The chapter continues this examination of alternatives by considering the potential for history which, despite the difficulties of the current postmodern challenge, might be thought to be available from poststructuralist writings. First, the discussion clarifies the issues by considering how poststructuralism has been used by Keith Jenkins in the pursuit of a negative, unconvincing account of knowledge. It then points to ways in which some of the aims of the challengers (ie. their emphasis on overtly self-aware closures) can be achieved by an alternative reading of poststructuralism. It notes how, after Thompson, Marxist social historians - specifically Patrick Joyce - have enabled Marxist historiography to benefit from the assimilation of certain poststructuralist insights. From this it employs Hilary Lawson's treatment of reflexivity to argue for a broad tentative response to the insights of poststructuralism – one in which critical self-awareness and tolerance of difference seem to be the most obvious conclusions to draw from the discourse.³³

Finally, and in drawing together the issues here, the conclusion summarises how empiricism, Marxism and poststructuralism are capable of coming into a coherence to enable an inclusive discourse of history to develop. Of course, for this to happen, a degree of pluralistic tolerance is necessary, but it will be seen by this stage perhaps that such an aspiration is not simply naive optimism. It will be concluded that each approach to knowledge has, through its nuanced relationship with aporia, a different form of closure. For example empiricism relies on experience, the discussion of which it regards as largely unnecessary. Marxism has narrowed the closure of

initially on Ayer:1940,1956,1971,1976; Bevir:1994,1999,2000; Burnyeat:1980,1979,1983; Habermas:1984,1987; Quine:1969; Russell:1961 & Williams:2002.

experience to a specifically identified aspect of it, which it deploys as a paradigm. Poststructuralism, through its speculations upon the epistemological consequences of language as a closure, finds itself able to close the possibility of endless regress its concept of 'reflexivity.' Considered in this way, the similarities between these three positions can be seen to be epistemological and thus fundamental, whereas their differences are merely contingent and thus able to be accounted for, as well as understood and at times hopefully resolved.

³³ Important here are Belsey:2002;Culler:1983;Hahn:2002;Howells:1999;Norris:1987 and Derrida himself: for example, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* 2001(although of course after Barthes no special emphasis can be attributed to Derrida's own account of his writings).

Chapter One: A Case for Historians to Answer? The Controversy and the Debate

The purpose of this chapter is to add detail to the general points made in the introduction about the controversy and its position within the ongoing debate about the nature of history. The discussion shows that there is a need for a better account of historical knowledge than the one being struggled over in this present controversy; between, that is, those who claim to speak for the discipline, in maintaining its traditional procedures, and their postmodern challengers.¹

The first section of the chapter picks up on aspects of the controversy itself, in particular on some of the exchanges between Arthur Marwick and Hayden White, between Perez Zagorin and Frank Ankersmit and more recently between Zagorin and Keith Jenkins. Two things become immediately apparent from the selection brought to this section. The first is that the controversy cannot be simply about whether or not traditional empirical historiography demonstrates a correspondence theory of history that seeks for objective truth because, repeatedly, upholders of traditionalism show that they, like the postmoderns, recognise a sceptical dimension in their accounts of historical knowledge. It is not being argued here that empirical historians really are postmoderns, or vice versa. Nevertheless a recognition of what they share is a step in the process towards bringing these, and other groups, into a single communicable focus.² At the same time even a brief look at the way either side handle this scepticism shows that there is a sophistication

¹ The descriptors 'postmodernist' and 'poststructuralist' will continue to be used interchangeably to describe these historians. However, these terms will increasingly be refined and differentiated from each other as the study progresses.

² Such terms as 'communicable focus' are of course suggestive of Habermas's 'theory of communicative action.' There are certainly similarities, but I do not mean to suggest the existence any kind of Habermasian ideal type of communicative group being involved. What I am referring to, by using this term, is simply a group of historians enjoying sufficient common ground between them to enable fruitful discussions to take place.

in postmodern approaches to interpretation, that is simply missing from mainstream empirical practice and this would suggest that, at least at a prima-facie level, there is a case for traditional historiography to answer.

The second section focuses more closely on the work of three of the more prominent postmodern historians and challengers; that of Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow and Beverley Southgate. It suggests that whatever the merits of a postmodern approach to history - and there are certainly some - there are problems with the way the issues are treated by these theorists. A common factor in the work of these postmoderns is the negativity that they hold towards interpretative knowledge as though it were in some way second class and comparable with an ideal certainty. This pessimistic approach to epistemology has been perhaps the main obstacle to the achievement of a degree of commonality between empirical and postmodern historiography. The intention in this section is to note that the postmodern challengers offer no easy answer to the weakness in mainstream practice demonstrated in the first section.

A third section then broadens the gaze and looks at other contributions to the 'nature of history' debate and suggests that the existence of this broader discourse is clear evidence of other possibilities beyond those of the controversy. It is argued in this section that whether from issues of actual historical practice or from political perspectives more overtly expressed than hitherto by the combatants, there are grounds for believing that the danger of a fundamental split within history, along the lines of a postmodern versus traditional empiricism, can be avoided.

Overall it will be suggested in this initial chapter that it is the unwillingness or incapacity of traditional historians to handle its sceptical dimension as effectively as do either the

postmodern challengers or these alternatives groups, that is the area that most needs to be addressed in any attempt to construct an inclusive discourse of the discipline.³

Section I

From the many professional empirical historians, and other commentators, who engage from time to time with others about the nature and methods of history⁴ the ‘defenders’ in this controversy have, in a sense, defined themselves by the prominence and in some cases the vehemence of their response to the postmodern challenge. Thus I am identifying the empirical side of the controversy as being represented most prominently by Geoffrey Elton, Richard Evans, Gertrude Himmelfarb (1987&1992), Lawrence Stone, Gabriel Spiegel (1990) John Vincent (1995) and Perez Zagorin (1990 &1999). On the postmodern side, in addition to the historians mentioned already, are F. Ankersmit (1989,1990,1995&2000) and Hayden White (1973:1978 & 1995). This is a far from exhaustive list but it perhaps gives a sense of the genus of historians taking part, from which these indicative examples have been drawn.⁵

The first point to be made is that one of the more obvious features of the exchanges between traditional and postmodern historians is that they seem often not to be directly engaging with each other. Ankersmit, Jenkins and White appear not to recognise Marwick and Zagorin’s justifiable protestations that they, and those for whom they speak, do not carry on the kind of historical practice attributed to them by postmodernists. At the same time empirical historians such as Zagorin and Marwick tend to take as given, the

³ And that is the reason why this aspect of the project has been accorded a larger share of the study space than that of either Marxism or poststructuralism.

⁴ For example Mary Abbott (1996), Jules Benjamin (2001), Peter Burke (1992), William Dray (1980), Gordon Graham (1997) and Burnes & Rayment-Pickard (2000).

criteria they use when making historical knowledge.⁶ Despite this, empirical historians are nevertheless working with the same constructional perspective as the postmoderns, rather than the realist/correspondence theory perspective, which postmodern historians have attributed to them. Indeed it is possible to see a remarkable degree of agreement between the antagonists, about their respective foundations for historical knowledge. But the evidence seems to be ignored by both sides, with the result that the controversy remains located unsatisfactorily on the terrain of philosophy and epistemology and the implications of the exchanges, that is to say the values and politics, are left relatively unexamined. Both sides accept that knowledge is, at root, a human construction, but their debate is really not about whether empirical historiography carries philosophical assumptions of naïve realism. The point at issue is not – or at least are not primarily – about whether one or other side think there are unproblematic truths about the world, existing complete with their linguistic descriptions, independently of knowers. Rather it is about the attention paid by either side to the ways interpretation might be understood to function.⁷ In short what underlies their differences is politics, but both sides have expressed their differences as epistemological.

In Arthur Marwick's polemical critique of postmodernism in the *Journal of Contemporary History* (1995) he gave an interesting and unexpected explanation for his oft-repeated assertion that history functions in a similar way to science; that is that scientists

⁵ There is inevitably to some extent an overlap between empirical 'defenders' of the discipline and those who, it will be seen, who have engaged with Marxism. Stone and Spiegel are examples of this.

⁶ See also Richard Evans's treatment of this matter, 1997b:147

⁷ Realism, like postmodernism and empiricism can be a slippery term, used variously. For example in the exchange between Jenkins and Zagorin in 1999/2000, both of them used 'anti-realism' to mean something akin to idealism. This would make realism little more than a not very helpful catch-all term for any position other than idealism. In contrast to this, and more in keeping with its general use within the debate 'realism' will be used to indicate the belief in a world existing, complete with meanings, independently of human minds.

write up their researches and in doing so control the machineries they deploy, knowing their work will be subject to the scrutiny of cold-eyed colleagues (1995:9).

He suggested that this mechanism operates as a form of professional control which ensured that works of history

will be subject to the competition of the intellectual market place; eventually a balanced well-substantiated much scrutinised account will pass into our textbooks (1995:10).

This is an interesting comment made by Marwick because postmodernists have generally regarded traditional historians to be believers in a correspondence theory of truth ie. in the existence of an independently existing objective past, the uncovering of which, directly and through the evidence, (in all its already existing nature before we as historians start to work on knowing it) is the appointed task of historians (Munslow:2000:4 & 81). Indeed it might be thought here that Marwick was claiming that the role of institutions is one in which they legitimise particular theories of correspondence with reality. However, when placed into a larger context of similar statements it becomes clear that here was potential evidence of a constructivist account of knowledge. Marwick makes no claim to be able to reach a 'reality' beyond those that historians make of the past.

This was not exactly how Hayden White saw it when he responded to Marwick's paper. It is true that White could himself have made the above point about correspondence, but in fact he did not. He appeared confused by Marwick's argument. In a context of sharp exchanges in which Marwick had described postmodern historians as 'metaphysical interlopers' and White called Marwick's ideas 'bizarre and uninformed', Marwick's assumption of a potentially constructivist account of history became simply a weapon with which he could be berated. Despite some preliminary, and rather grudgingly-given

praise, saying that Marwick's point here was 'interesting' and 'potentially radical', White quickly moved on to speak of it as an example of Marwick's incoherence; it was 'at odds' with his general position – 'a demon' which Marwick had imputed to postmodernists (White:1995:236). And all this was seemingly unconscious of the fact that, apart from a slightly different emphasis on the political, what Marwick argued here bore a strong similarity to what Jenkins had claimed constituted a postmodern definition of historical knowledge. ie.

History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ...that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) ...whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum (Jenkins:1991:26).

Having criticised Marwick for holding a postmodern-like constructivist position, White then attributed to him a crude realist one, and criticised him for that too. White asserted that

postmodernism tends to be sceptical of all notions of essences, leery of the kind of authority that Marwick claims for historical knowledge (White: 1995: 234).

The statement seems not to have recognised that Marwick's claim for historical knowledge in fact argued for the very opposite of essentialism – that a piece of history

does not form a single self-standing account, which is automatically to be taken as an authoritative, all-encompassing statement, a secure piece of knowledge. On the contrary, it is merely a contribution to knowledge, immediately open to scrutiny, analysis and criticism by fellow historians (Marwick:1995: 23).

Similarly, White misread Marwick's account of the relationship between science and history, claiming that Marwick has argued that history is an empirical science. Not surprisingly White was able to show the weakness of such a claim. The difficulty for White's case, on a less committed reading, is that although it is true that Marwick, in company with many historians, considers history to be one of the social sciences, he was careful to draw a line in relation to natural science. To this history is merely to be compared, not conflated. Lest there should be any misunderstanding, he further cautioned, 'I have no wish to overdo the parallels between history and the natural sciences – there are enormous differences...' (1995:11).

For White it was as though this statement had not been made. White seems to have just assumed that Marwick was working with a realist notion of science and because Marwick had made comparisons between science and history, this imputed realism must apply to history too. In fact, Marwick had tried to make it clear that his view of history is one in which historical knowledge is not something complete and given, but rather it is one in which the product is always open to further interpretation - interpretation based on sources which are 'politically and conceptually loaded, biased and imperfect, in all sorts of ways' (1995:29). Clearly history was, for Marwick, an open-ended project. It would have been hard to understand how he could have made such a point were he really to have held to a correspondence theory. Moreover, his account of it bore a remarkable similarity to White's own; ie.: 'as I understand it postmodernism simply brings under question the

authority of “the past” as a font of social wisdom and moral propriety’ (White:1995:234). Indeed, for all his criticism of Marwick’s position White does tacitly accept that his own and Marwick’s versions of historical practice do share a basic approach to knowledge. He agreed, as did Marwick, that history is: ‘a construction by historians, comprised out of the data or evidence contained in the primary sources (White:1995:243).

What is interesting is that this was no simple victory for Marwick, for at this point in his critique White shifted the focus of his attack to what is the real difference between them – and it is not one of realism against relativism or even of closed against open modes of knowledge-making. Rather it relates to their differing concerns with how historical interpretation should be controlled or handled – in other words the ‘closure’ (of the logically never-ending chain of possible interpretations). White saw this as being the way

a historian’s account of his or her subject is constrained by the conventions of language, genre, mode (for example, narrative), argument and a host of other cultural and social contextual questions (1995:244).

This is certainly pertinent, for nowhere in Marwick’s account of history is there a sense in which he has shown any importance to achieving an understanding of the ways in which interpretations are constructed intellectually. Indeed he seems to be inclined to shy away from such discussion. Like Evans, his emphasis is always on the practical aspects of interpretation; for example the handling of primary sources (1981: 144-146). His discussion of a recognisably nineteenth century ‘mental set by historians’ (p21), shows that he is not entirely oblivious to the idea that the historians’ mental attitude, through which the practicalities operate, is a constituent of the history produced. It is just that he seems not to regard this as important and it has not therefore been factored into his

explanation of history. The result of this in his exchange with Hayden White was that he was not able to respond to White's compelling argument that history

is not merely a matter of telling the truth about the past, not even the truth as seen from a specific perspective, or making sure that one's facts are straight. It is much more a matter of imagining both the real world from which one has launched one's inquiry into the past and the world that comprises one's object of interest (1995:241).

To this one might add that the recognition of such imagining occurs through, amongst other things, an awareness of the constructing nature of the field of secondary sources within which an historical perspective is developed. Marwick's historiography is the weaker for this lacuna in his thought.

There are of course further areas for fruitful discussion here, which have not been touched on by either Marwick or White. For example there is the question of whether the feature of repeatability in science is suggestive of a correspondence theory of 'last instance' there. Interestingly however neither party raised this issue, and that is perhaps further evidence of their common epistemological base.⁸ Similarly, nowhere in his article 'Response to Arthur Marwick' does White directly address the political issue – the point that by not acknowledging ways in which 'the historian's language transforms the "object" of study into a "subject" of a specifically historical discourse' (p.243) Marwick et. al. are not acknowledging the constructive effect of values either. The point is made

⁸ One need only recall, in geology, of the slow acceptance of the theory of plate tectonics, in the face of the readily available evidence in its favour, to appreciate the importance of disciplinary institutions in the construction of scientific knowledge, however repeatable is experimentation, in practice.

implicitly by White. It needs however to be made explicit (as it was in Marxist critiques) if the difference between the positions is to be capable of being settled.

Similar assumptions about the grounds for historical knowledge become apparent through a consideration of Perez Zagorin's opposition to postmodernism as he has articulated it in two major articles published in *History and Theory*. The first of these, 'Historiography and Postmodernism; Reconsiderations', was published in 1990 and was a response to an earlier paper in the same journal by F. Ankersmit. The second paper 'History, the Referent and Narrative; Reflections on Postmodernism Now,' published in 1999, covered remarkably similar ground although it involved a more wide-ranging critique of postmodernism, focusing specifically upon the arguments Keith Jenkins has offered and on those postmodern contributions to the debate which Jenkins collected in his *The Postmodern History Reader* (1997b). Both articles have been responded to, by their respective targets – indeed the exchanges continue - but the discussion here only lightly touches on these responses, for the concern in this section is not with every twist and turn of the debate itself so much as with the assumptions displayed by Zagorin.

Certainly Zagorin opposes postmodernism and this opposition can be seen in both of these papers. He opens the first by pointing out that historians have been 'decidedly critical of it' (1990:263) and he ends by commenting that Ankersmit's postmodern view 'seems woefully impoverished' (1990:274). Similarly in the 1999 paper he begins by comparing – unfavourably – postmodernism with pragmatism (1999:1&2) and closes with the view that postmodernism is 'founded on a mistaken conception of the nature and function of language.' However throughout both papers Zagorin has shown repeatedly that, like Marwick, he holds an epistemologically open, constructivist, account of knowledge. And to be clear what is taken here as constructivism is a position shared with postmodernism (Munslow:2000:53) in which knowledge is characterised by the view that it is the community of knowers which in some way (be it through language,

concepts, methods, procedures or the focus of study etc.) validates or otherwise grounds knowledge.

Nowhere is Zagorin's position more obvious than in the reason he gives for the basic unacceptability of postmodernism as a methodology for history. Zagorin agrees with Marwick that what is importantly wrong with postmodernism (apart from what he sees as weaknesses in the philosophy of language, for example) is that its proponents have not been able to convince sufficient numbers of working historians of its value to them. It has, he says, failed to 'accord with some of the strongest intuitions and convictions that historians bring to their work' (1999:24). Zagorin has repeatedly returned to this view and clearly believes that it is appropriate to judge postmodernism by the extent to which it has attracted support from working historians. This is consistent with his empirical stance that since it could never be known whether any particular approach to knowledge was a fully accurate means of making sense of the past, (because as all sides agree, it is not possible to get back to the past to check) general acceptability and perceived utility become crucial criteria. What is significant here is that it shows that Zagorin, like Jenkins, is working with an assumption that history is a construction of historians – it is what historians agree that it should be. After all Jenkins said himself in *Rethinking History*, 'the past has gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work' (Jenkins:1991:6) .

Clearly Zagorin and Marwick are in agreement with Jenkins's view here and are drawing attention to the fact that some aspects (at least) of the account of knowledge, expressed by White, Ankersmit or Jenkins has, for whatever reason, not been seen as convincing to many historians. Obviously it is not what they want to take 'to work' as a description of their approach to historical knowledge. There is no entailment for historians to accept this postmodern critique, since both sides agree that there is no absolute true, right or accurate way of doing history beyond that which seems sensible to the majority of

practitioners at any one time and in any one place. This could not, arguably, be a more unequivocal indication of Zagorin's constructivist assumptions about the nature of the discipline. It is indicative too of the need for a better, more persuasive, reason to be brought to the debate, if traditional empirical historians are to be prepared to modernise their practice.

Zagorin effectively side-steps a great deal of the postmodern challenge to traditional historiography by simply accepting it and agreeing that: 'the point is not whether it is possible to obtain a total conception of world history or the historical process, for it almost certainly is not' (1990:273). What we take to be firm historical knowledge is for him only ever a form of sedimented interpretation. For example;

If an historical interpretation comes to be widely accepted, it may even cease to be the subject of debate and take its place as an established part of our understanding of the past. Of course this may not last. The subsequent emergence of another interpretation may force it to undergo renewed challenges which throw it into question and perhaps displace it (1990:269).

What is particularly interesting here is the closeness of this account to that of Stanley Fish, whom Keith Jenkins includes in those postmodernists whose 'ample imaginaries' will help us 'forget history'. (Jenkins:1999:12). For example:

Asserting the textuality of history and making specific historical argument have nothing to do with each other. They are actions in different practices, moves in different games. ... The belief that facts are constructed is a general one and is not held with reference to any facts in particular; particular facts are firm or

in question insofar as the perspective (of some enterprise or discipline area of enquiry) within which they emerge is firmly in place, settled; and should that perspective be dislodged (always a possibility) the result will not be an indeterminacy of fact, but a new shape of factual firmness (Fish:1989:308).

Like Fish, Zagorin is happy with the idea that the question of whether objectivity is possible is quite separate from the issue of whether it can be employed as an aim and in a regulatory category. Zagorin regards history as being able to provide in 'some non-absolute yet valid sensea true representation and understanding of the past' (1999:11). He spells out and lists exactly what is implied in his use of these terms. Thus history;

does not pretend to know or tell everything,- is always a selective.

It is a reconstruction of the past, from a great manifold of facts, a selection dictated by the subjects, problems and questions the author proposes to deal with. It is written from a point of view. In its statements is susceptible of disproof, embodies comments and judgements relative to controverted questions. It does not profess to be a mindless and mechanical transcript of reality, but an attempt at understanding (1999:12).

In rejecting Ankersmit's charge that empirical historians are antiquarians he stresses that history is never for its own sake. It 'must, by implication be always to show, to understand.' (1990:273).

Zagorin, importantly and unlike Marwick, has not argued for the primacy of primary sources. He has made it clear on almost every page of both papers that he considered history to be an interpretative discipline. Therefore there could be no possibility of

historians acquiring knowledge of the past directly from the evidence of primary sources, in any unmediated realist way. Rather he claimed that primary sources are a necessary and important part of the business of making sense of the past and are not invalidated by the need and existence of interpretation. What he argued – and this is not incompatible with the generality of postmodern accounts – is that knowledge-claims must be able to be justified; that common practice is such that ‘historians know that they may be called upon to justify the veridicality, adequacy, reliability of particular statements, interpretations and even of their entire account’ (1990:272). Thus although only implicitly made, Zagorin’s justification is, like that of Jenkins, ultimately a social and therefore a political one; ie. that historians must ask what the foundation of history is and what purpose it serves, or should serve, in culture and society (1990:273).

However, it is possible to see a weakness of explanation here, in Zagorin’s empirical approach, for it simply does not compare with the richness of Jenkins’s earlier political analysis (1991:Ch.1), or the excitement of Ankersmit’s linguistic understanding of interpretation. Zagorin’s form of expression is bland. Compare for example Ankersmit’s argument that: ‘the nature of the view of the past is defined exactly by the language used by the historian in his or her historical work’ (Ankersmit:1989:145) with Zagorin’s equivalent, ie. his mere statement of pluralism: ‘history will always find differing accounts and interpretations of the same subject’ (1999:12). Given that Zagorin is no less explicit in his acceptance of the interpretative dimension to history than say Marwick, it is reasonable to begin to conclude that this blandness - this lack of self-awareness and of sophistication in explanation - is a feature not just of Zagorin’s work but of the empirical mode in general, in so far as these two historians can be thought to exemplify it. Thus it may be that quite apart from a mutual lack of understanding between their positions, traditional empirical interpretation is simply less effective than that of postmodernism.

A caveat is necessary here, for Alun Munslow – unlike White and Jenkins – has made a distinction between different approaches within mainstream empirical historiography and he does appear to accept the point being argued here. He separates out from his own spectrum of mainstream historiography those historians who he regards as being ‘representational’ or realist from those he sees as constructionists (2000:5 & 6). In fact he provides a useful discussion of constructivism (or as he has redescribed it, ‘constructionism’) within mainstream history (1995: Ch5) and this will be returned to later in the study. Ultimately though, Munslow’s distinction is a superficial one in that it merely shifts to a slightly deeper level his assumption that what he calls representation or realist, (ie. the belief in an real objectively existing world which stands apart from interpreted knowledge and can be discovered by empirical methods) is fundamentally the same as constructivism in that they are both really representational: ie. ‘Both reconstructionists and constructionists read the documents...for the reality they reflect’ (2000:8).

It has been indicated here that an understanding of the differences between the opposing sides in this debate can be found at a level of detail within the larger argument – that is to say that the issue is about how there is an epistemological closure in the making of historical knowledge rather than whether there is one. It does appear that mainstream empirical historians downplay differences between practitioners which might have arisen from differing intellectual assumptions of a value-laden nature. Whether they do this in innocence of its political implications, or whether it is a deliberate strategy to avoid having to explain their often privileged ‘voice’ is a difficult question to answer. The point however is that, thanks to the Marxist and the broader postmodern/poststructuralist critiques of history, this strategy (or innocence) is no longer regarded by many historians as acceptable and, as this study will show, it is not necessary either. At the same time these historians are assiduous in insisting that historical explanation is an ongoing open-ended enterprise, and they do seem genuinely surprised that their postmodern opponents

do not recognise this. Postmoderns, for their own part, (Jenkins's recent 'end of history' argument apart) take it as given that the practice of history is ongoing etc., but in addition to this they stress strongly that the intellectual context of knowledge-making in our time implies new minimum standards of historical explanation. They vary somewhat on what these might be from, for example, White's and Ankersmit's linguistics to Jenkins's politics - but a common factor is that they must involve historians being able to account for how and why they interpret particular pieces of evidence as they do. However, despite the sophistication postmoderns bring to their reading of the interpretative process, their own lacuna is that they seem not to want to recognise that the nature of their contribution to on-going changes in historical methodology is merely one of detail, rather than of fundamental essence, as they claim. To put it simply, they overstate their case.

The constructivist facet of mainstream historiography can be seen, with greater or lesser emphasis, across the gamut of methodological opinion. Although as postmodernists are keen to point out, there are still residues of Rankean rhetoric to be heard on the defending side of the debate, it is interesting that the arguments of either camp do not include detailed accounts of whether those residues, those references that is to a knowable past, amount to anything much more than simply working assumptions⁹. In short, beyond Christopher Lloyd's contribution to the Marwick/White exchange (Lloyd:1996) there is no theoretical realist account of history offered by empirical historians within the current controversy and there is no proper critique of historical realism made by postmoderns. In fact there is hardly a defender of empirical practice – however narrowly conceived – who has not readily accepted that the debate has moved on since Ranke (eg. Elton: 1969: 167). Realism is no longer – if it ever was – a live issue in the discussion about historical epistemology.

⁹ Ranke's work is considered in more detail in Chapter Four.

On the other side it is apparent that the postmodern position has a dimension to it which mainstream historiography lacks: that is that it pays attention to the actual mechanics of interpretation, whereas empirical historians appear to consider it enough merely to explain what patterns they see in the past, leaving it to historians who follow them, to modify or amend what has been claimed, as they think appropriate. In other words empirical historians tend to conceive of open-endedness as a function of the ongoing debate itself, while for postmodernists (at least for those who still think history worth engaging in) this quality is achieved through the operation of a more thoroughgoing epistemological self-awareness. This is expressed by Southgate as the importance of historians 'knowing what they are doing and why' (1996b:135) and by Munslow as a stress on 'the nature of representation, not the empirical research process as such' (1997a:178). This changing nature of the epistemological closure is the core of the debate in history and it is a core which can be understood historically, and within this culturally and politically, rather than as a philosophical issue as the postmodern challengers have claimed.

Section II

Even within the confines of this controversy, the historians considered in this section - Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow and Beverley Southgate - do not represent the whole of the postmodern challenge, as the introduction noted. They do however regularly contribute to the growing body of work on the postmodern critique of mainstream practice and they are therefore indicative of that genre¹⁰. It is argued in this section that it would be unwise for historians to accept the critique of their discipline as it is currently expressed by these

postmodernists for, welcome though their critical self-awareness is, there are difficulties associated with their critiques.

Of the three postmodern critiques examined here, Keith Jenkins's argument for an ending of the project of history, is very much the most important. It is a reading – a rather pessimistic reading - of poststructuralism allied to an argued reliance on the pragmatist postmodernism of Richard Rorty. The validity of this approach will be considered in Chapter Four. I have mentioned already my earlier work with Jenkins. In terms of his publications this collaboration extended up to his introductory account of postmodernism in *Rethinking History* 1991.¹¹ To put it simply, the problem I have with his critique is that it has changed from being a welcome criticism of empirical historiography's lack of self-awareness to being a substantially unworkable and unconvincing account of the discipline.

In the first and third chapters of *Rethinking History* (1991) Jenkins offered a compelling analysis of the practice of history and called upon historians to develop a more reflexive methodology. *Rethinking History* is a primer aimed at A Level and first year undergraduate students. It is also explicitly a polemic intended to provoke wider discussion of a perceived need for a better understanding of the nature of the discipline. His message was well received by the target group and their teachers throughout the 1990s and the book has been widely translated. What Jenkins did was to shift the debate from a previously narrow emphasis on the technicalities of source handling to encompass a wider criterion of historical knowledge; one which advocated an awareness by

¹⁰ Recent relevant work has included: Jenkins: 1991,1995,1997 a & b, 1999 & 2003; Munslow:1997a & b,2000 & 2003; Southgate:1996 a & b,2000 & 2003. See also Elizabeth Ermarth's literary approach to a critique of history: 1983,1992,2001a & b.

¹¹ To be precise, apart from the historical narrative in Chapter Three, I accept what Jenkins argued in that work - and indeed I played a part in its formulation (as he acknowledges in his preface).

historians of the values which drive their own decisions and those of others in the operation of the techniques of history making.

He was at that time optimistically positive about postmodernism in its relation to history, maintaining that

a relativist perspective need not lead to despair but to the beginning of a general recognition of how things seem to operate. This is emancipating. Reflexively you too can make histories. (1991:25/26)

Sadly this seems to have been the high point of his own enthusiasm that postmodernism has the ability to reform and modernise history, because from there onwards, through several publications, Jenkins increasingly despaired of postmodernism's emancipating possibilities for history until, ironically at the point when a new Routledge journal was established to discuss the ideas inaugurated in *Rethinking History*, he wrote in its first edition that perhaps we should just 'forget history; maybe we can now lead lives...which have no reference to a past tense.' (1997:57). Thus the relativism of history - that emancipating factor of eight years before - had now become the actual cause of history's demise - that 'it is now clear that "in and for itself" there is nothing definitive for us to get out of it other than that which we have put into it' (1999:3).

At the heart of his reasons why we should abandon history is a 'some/all' confusion. The evidence he produces against historical practice is made specifically against those of nineteenth and twentieth century historiography, (those he calls 'upper' and 'lower case' history) but his solution is to abandon history in its entirety (2000:199)¹². It is as if -

¹² It is tempting to read Jenkins as rejecting only certain objectivist versions of empiricism. Unhappily his theory of the 'capsizal of the lower case' would seem to militate against such a

ironically reminiscent of Geoffrey Elton (1969: Ch.1) - he will not recognise any practice from before the nineteenth century as history and therefore cannot conceive of any new historical practice worth undertaking, beyond that which is already in the orbit of current, nineteenth and twentieth century, thought. Curiously, Jenkins's position has recently moved yet again. In *Refiguring History* (2003) he appears to have withdrawn slightly from the historical nihilism of 1999, but on close reading it becomes clear that this withdrawal is more apparent than real; the grounds for his position are simply changed. Nevertheless the argument of both positions – 1997-9 and 2003 – is worthy of closer examination than is possible in this initial chapter and I shall be returning to it in the context of the discussion on alternative readings of poststructuralism in Chapter Four.

In holding back from Jenkins's more extreme position Alun Munslow and Beverley Southgate's work is more immediately amenable to mainstream historians and certainly they both make productive contributions to the controversy, putting emphasis on potentially significant issues which Jenkins has not addressed. Two examples are focused on here: that of constructivism in mainstream historiography in the case of Munslow and of the western tradition of scepticism, in Southgate's work. In their treatment of these issues, however, some difficulties are evident.¹³

Munslow's handling of constructivism in historical methodology (what he calls 'constructionism') has some initial similarity with the points made in the first chapter. For example he accepts that the mainstream empirical historian Lawrence Stone has

convenient reading (1997:Introduction). On the other hand, since he has muddied the waters somewhat in his *Refiguring History* (2003) it is always possible that in the future he may claim to have been speaking rhetorically. If that should prove to be the case, it would be a welcome development. In the meantime his account should not be conflated with Fukuyama's *The end of History and the Last man* (1992) where the emphasis is on history in a Hegelian sense rather than as disciplinary practice.

¹³ In making these points I do not wish them to become a polemic with Munslow and Southgate. I consider that they are making valid and useful contributions to the ongoing debate about the nature of history. My criticism is merely that there are, arguably, more effective forms of expression to be found in exploring similarities between these approaches to history, rather than by going over yet again differences which have already been thoroughly explored within the debate.

argued that ‘the truth is unknowable’ (Munslow:1997: 90) and that Appleby, Hunt and Jacob - also from the empirical/postmodern middle ground - see truth coming from ‘the conflict of ideas “among diverse groups of truth-seekers”’ (1997: 94).¹⁴ Munslow also draws on what is no doubt common ground with all historians of ideas, namely that, in our age - the turn of the century - it is possible to look back to a lengthy period in which there was a good deal less critical self-awareness evident in knowledge-making than there is now (1997:40). It is however in his delineation of constructionism from both deconstructionism and reconstructionism that Munslow’s account is different from the position of this study. Broadly, and for the purposes of this chapter, we can regard Munslow’s use of the term ‘deconstructionism’ as the equivalent of postmodernism and of ‘reconstructionism’ as philosophical realism. Munslow quite rightly notes that, despite their constructivist assumptions, mainstream empirical historians do not generally accept the epistemological primacy accorded by postmodernists to linguistics - the so-called linguistic turn - and he assumes from this that constructionism must be therefore be a covert form of reconstructionism. Constructionists (from here on I shall use the more widely accepted term, ‘constructivism’ except for quotes) are, he says, really ‘practical realists’ who

while acknowledging the culturally provided nature of knowledge,
still insist on the sanctity of the source (evidence) as offering
an adequate correspondence to what actually happened in
the past (1997:99).

It is strange that Munslow should make this claim because the evidence he provides in its support - from C. Behan, McCullagh, Appleby et. al., Marwick and Geoffrey Elton (1997:Ch.3) - shows the clear opposite. These historians, at least in the extracts chosen

¹⁴ He notes too that A.J.P. Taylor holds the view, ‘along with Karl Marx, that when historians write history, “our version, being set into words, is itself false.’ (1997:92)

by Munslow, do not believe in the existence of a 'true' and 'objective' world if these terms mean a world in which meaning is 'given' to humans in a singular and unmediated manner (significantly Munslow does not clarify his own use of these terms). To consider briefly in turn each of the examples which Munslow offers; he accepts that for McCullagh what passes conventionally as truth is really simply the view of 'the majority of educated speakers of the language in which it is written' (1997:37). This view, famously shared with Marx's concept of superstructures, hardly constitutes a charge of 'conservatism' (1997:44). Munslow's own quotes from Appleby, Hunt and Jacob include the admission that historians 'happily concede "the tentativeness"' (1997:38) of historical knowledge. Had Munslow extended his analysis of Appleby et.al. to a few more paragraphs following the point from which he drew his quote he would have noted that these historians went on to argue that their definition of what they term 'practical realism' 'never denies that the very act of representing the past makes the historian (values, warts, and all) an agent who moulds how the past is to be seen' (Appleby et.al: 1994:249). It is really difficult to see how Munslow can sensibly suggest that such a view of historical knowledge can be described as 'correspondence theory' (1997:99). Marwick's constructivism has already been discussed but, apparently supportive of the reading argued for in this chapter, Munslow makes him say that: 'history is a human activity carried out by an organised corps of fallible human beings [acting] in accordance with strict methods and principles' (1997:39). He thus shows the very opposite of what he claims.¹⁵

The point here is that Munslow does not seem to realise that, far from providing evidence of philosophical realism as it is generally understood (ie. as positing the existence of a real independently existing world to which human knowledge corresponds), he is actually showing that the works of these central figures of the mainstream empirical historical

¹⁵ Munslow treats Geoffrey Elton in the same way, Munslow:1997:42.

community are clearly carrying evidence of constructivist assumptions in their approach to explaining historical thought.¹⁶ They may not have very 'good' constructivist accounts. There may be much that might be said against them and they may well carry various - perhaps unwelcome - political significance. Moreover these may be more or less overtly held, but for all that, these mainstream professional historians do all see knowledge as being a human construction of one sort or another. Their closures may not carry the same social or cultural significance as that of the linguistic turn, and admittedly many may carry elitist conceptions of their professionalism. But even from the evidence Munslow deploys, these historians can be seen to share with postmodernists (or with Munslow's deconstructionists) the same epistemology, in the sense that they all accept that knowledge is not given to humans as singular, true or unmediated, by a real world.

In his latest work, *The New History* (2003), Munslow has softened his earlier strident tone and he focuses now more firmly on change, arguing that, rather than empiricism being simply wrong, it is merely outdated. The title of his book is indicative of a more formative approach being taken and, indeed, in parts his argument has become closer to the position being advanced here. The difference however is that his underlying conception of empiricism (or the empirical-analytical, as he terms it) is still one that sees mainstream historiography as realist. Certainly a resolution of this difference remains a task to be addressed before a 'New History' is likely to gain general acceptance within the historical community.

As David Andress rightly points out, Beverley Southgate's work represents an improvement on that of his fellow postmoderns in that Southgate sees that the current (supposedly postmodernist) problem of knowledge 'was ever thus' (Andress:1997:320). In fact Southgate is one of the few historians working within a postmodern framework

¹⁶ And this is entirely independent of whether they are aware of it, or prepared to acknowledge it, in their writings.

who recognises that the evidence of widespread philosophical scepticism in the western tradition can be thought of as significant in a resolution of the postmodern challenge. He is also more positive about the prospects for the future of the discipline (Southgate:1996b:125). In identifying the prevalence of sceptical thought in western societies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Southgate provides valuable secondary evidence (1981:1987:1996a).¹⁷

Southgate's work provides historians with the possibility that there might be an alternative postmodern explanation for the present propensity towards interpretation, without the necessity of accepting Jenkins's claim that the discipline of history is facing epistemological meltdown. His strength is that he joins the growing number of other, non-postmodern, scholars who, in recent years, have begun to question the ubiquity of objectivity in the western tradition and who have seen scepticism as an historical factor in the West's intellectual development.¹⁸ The problem with Southgate's contribution is that his view of the western tradition as being thoroughly sceptical does not cohere with his optimism for the future of the discipline, for his understanding of scepticism is, unlike that of Annas & Barnes et. al., a thoroughly negative one in that he sees it simply as evidence of a postmodernity to come.

Southgate shares the postmodern conception of empirical, scientific, approaches to knowledge as being in 'crisis' and that this situation is connected with a 'wider intellectual anarchy' resulting from changing ideas in 'linguistics and philosophy' (1996b:4). From the outset, in *History: What & Why?* (1996b) he demonstrates the 'either/or' mind set characteristic of the other postmodern historians discussed here. Thus for him adherents to what he calls 'science's outmoded structure' (presumably he refers

¹⁷ This will be examined in Chapter Three.

¹⁸ These include Southgate:1981,1987, 1989; Annas & Barnes:1994; Hankinson:1995; Sharples:1996; Frede:1987; and Popkin:1999.

here to empiricists: he does not say) are to be regarded as ‘old fashioned ancients’ and are posited against others (presumably postmodernists) who ‘have more fashionably conceded defeat and surrendered any hope of reaching “truth”’. Elsewhere in the same work he adopts Munslow’s position of assuming that empirical history is a version of philosophical realism: that the only question is

whether there is assumed to be a correspondence with a past reality, or whether what is presented is just an internally consistent system constituted from and for a specific point of view (1996b:8).

This reading of a present which can be understood only as a choice between realism or epistemological anarchy is carried into an historical account of scepticism as being incipient postmodernism. Thus, for Southgate, Francis Bacon’s seventeenth century critique of scholastic learning is indicative, not of a re-emergent empiricism in post medieval Europe, but of a proto-postmodernism (1996b:8) and his use of the word ‘just’ in the above quote follows from his not having seen that scepticism can be as easily linked with empiricism as with postmodernism (as indeed the next chapter of this study will show). Were he able to form a more broad understanding of scepticism in the western tradition he would have seen that a case can be made for knowledge as always having been essentially an ‘internally consistent system’, but not ‘just’ one, as though something more were possible. As it is, his account is not itself internally consistent, for it is juxtaposed with another, rather more conventionally postmodern one, in which postmodernity is seen as something new, able to confront a ‘long history’ of realism in philosophy and in history (1996b:12-13). Unfortunately the evidence he brings forward to support the existence of such a history is, like that of Jenkins and Munslow, open to serious question.

For example, in a breathtaking sweep through the western tradition, he refers to historians as far apart, chronologically, as Lucien of Samosata of the second century BCE and J.H. Plumb and ex-HMI John Slater, in the present, as evidence that a correspondence (realist) theory is endemic in historical methodology (p 13). Each of these examples is problematic. It is true, as he says, that Lucien is recorded as having maintained that historians' writings should be free of distortion, false colouring and mis-representation, but he is also said to have argued that historians needed 'insights from life experience' and that although 'they may well have a touch of poetry, (they) must "not resemble highly seasoned sauces"' (Breisach:1994:73), which presents somewhat less than obvious evidence of philosophical realism. In the case of Plumb, his acceptance of Ranke's then widespread influence (ie, 'what really happened') is indeed evident in the introduction to his *The Death of the Past* (1969), and Plumb returns to the point in his conclusion, but it would be a mistake to conflate references to a history which should be meaningful to the historian and his/her contemporaries, with a realist one, in the way it has been defined here, for elsewhere in his work Plumb makes it admirably clear that for him 'history is not the past': that an understanding of the past which is not self-conscious, is 'always a created ideology with a purpose' (1969). A fully self-conscious history is 'an inherent destructive force for all dogmatic assertions' (Plumb:1969:104) he maintains, reminiscent of Jenkins's own treatment of the same theme in *Rethinking History* (1991). More significant is Southgate's use of John Slater, for although the latter certainly did write the words referred to by Southgate, Slater was making the point that he disagreed with that view! His whole position was, and is, antithetical to that view, as even a cursory study of his writings and lecture transcripts easily shows (Slater:1989, Lee et.al.:1992): for example, 'our views of the past, what we select to study and teach, and our interpretations of it, are profoundly, if not wholly, affected by our circumstances' (1989:10).

Interestingly, like Alun Munslow, Southgate has become noticeably more upbeat about postmodernism and history in his latest work, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or*

Freedom (2003). In his conclusion to that work he sounds positively modernist,¹⁹ approvingly quoting Mary Midgley, arguing that historians should act ‘as if’ the external world were real (2003:170-1). Whatever we call it, and however welcome a development in his thought it is, such sentiments rest uneasily on other perspectives that he offers, in the book. For example, he applauds Keith Jenkins’s ‘end of history’ argument as ‘tough-minded postmodernism’ which is not taken up by the profession because

It’s unrealistic to expect everyone to have the capacity to become Nietzschean supermen, who are able to live without the escapes and refuges that others find so necessary. (2003:56).

Southgate does not make clear who he thinks is the superman, whether it is the theorist who supposedly alone realises the epistemological sublimity of the world, or whether it is the principal figures in the discipline who perhaps set the tone and trends for their lessor colleagues. Either way the impression is given that for most, the role of the historian is akin to that of a ‘walk-on’ extra.

Fortunately, the striking certainty of these postmodernist historians – their ‘either/or’ conceptions of the world, that is ‘either objective truth or crisis’ – and their attendant pessimism, is not reflected in the broader debate, and it is to some examples of this that I now turn.

Section III

As attention is lifted from the narrow confines of this controversy, the futility of the polemics between Marwick, Evans, Zagorin et. al. and Jenkins, Munslow and Southgate

¹⁹ Or we could, with Anthony Giddens, call it high modernist (1991).

becomes more evident. The wider debate is constituted by a vast array of contributions and this brief survey hardly does justice to its richness and diversity. Nevertheless the extent of this debate does not necessarily imply that it is without shape (or unable to be structured). What I want to point to here is that aspects of it – whether from the borders of the discipline, from Marxism, from other usages of poststructuralism or from the historical writings of the contenders in the controversy – are able to be seen in terms of two common factors. These are, first, a positive attitude towards the idea that history is a construction and second, the existence of varying degrees of critical self-awareness. It is these features that have been important in my coming to believe that the argued centrality of this controversy, with its acrimonious and potentially schismatic disputes, is capable of being supervised.

The first point to be made – a simple, stipulative, point – is that the way the discipline is organised, ie. in terms of what counts with historians as an appropriate approach or a valid type of source, is the result of human decision-making and thus even before individual historians start work, they are part of a cultural and political ‘construction’. It is possible to see from this that the resultant form that history takes in terms of its practice and content, can be thought to be as value-laden as any other social formation. In other words, what looks like a technical matter, in making sense of the past, can be understood on closer examination to be political and normative, to some degree at least. This is self evident but it has significance in the way we may understand changes that have taken place in historiography in recent years, and which can be seen as the context in which current changes are taking place.

For example, In recent years there has been an expansion of the descriptions that are attached to ‘history’. The word ‘history’ is no longer sufficient without the addition of a qualifying term. So instead of just history, there is now social and economic history, military history, world history, local history, history that understands the past through the

use of film and so on. In each case the descriptors effectively act as selecting mechanisms to define what is to be focused on in examining the past. We are so used to the existence of these varieties of history that we do not think of them as ‘interpretations’ of the past. Often these ‘branches’ of the discipline call for specialised skills and knowledge and draw on new types of sources, some of them originating in other disciplines. Thus computer programmes, films and videos, balance sheets, literary works etc. join more traditional sources as part of the stock of history. It has been argued – and I think rightly – that historical sources should in general be thought of as distinct from the evidence that is built upon them (eg. Jenkins: 1991:47/8). At the same time, change in the kinds of sources accepted by communities of historians cannot be wholly a technical matter, for there must also be a normative dimension. This is because changes in sources used are likely to be evidence also of change in ideas about the ways that groups of historians think it appropriate for the past to be understood, in the present. After all, questions about ‘scarce resources’ are an ever-present reality in any human endeavour, and history is no exception.

Broad tacit agreement on this point can be found in Tosh’s sociological treatment of ‘the raw materials’ (1991:Ch2) and in Marwick’s recognition of the social and political context of the increasing range of primary sources in the twentieth century (1970:Ch3). More to the point, interestingly similar evidence for the general acceptance of the political nature of changing methodologies of history can be seen in the gentle irony in which John Arnold pointed out recently in a newspaper book review, that Jonathan Clarke had given as an example of a ‘dangerous postmodern book’, Hobsbawm and Ranger’s reader, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983).²⁰ Given an increasing

²⁰ *The Times Higher* January 23 2004, page 29. To this example could be added John Vincent’s analysis of the historiographical debate as reaching its culmination with the ‘radicalism’ (as he sees it) of the Annales School (1995:111-116) and Gertrude Himmelfarb’s depiction of the ‘new’ history as being social and economic – as though that branch of history had not been the subject of undergraduate programmes in Britain since the turn of the twentieth century and in the mainstream of practice since at least the 1930s (Himmelfarb:1987 & Tosh 1991:92).

democratisation of historical knowledge-making in conditions of widening education and communications, and given also that changes are generally made because people think they constitute improvements, it is reasonable to suppose that the expansion of sources and approaches to the study of the past, might have led and be leading to the potential for strengthened social emancipation. Even if this does not occur, the possibility may well be anticipated with distaste, or even feared by some. In this sense then it is quite understandable that conservative historians (with either a large or small 'c') may cavil at changes to historical interests and methodologies in the same way that they may also, and often do, object to social changes and to developments in patterns of social support for weaker members of communities.

This might seem all rather obvious and banal, but the point for this section is that by adding descriptors such as 'Annales,' 'cultural,' 'mentalities,' 'international,' 'local,' 'women's,' or 'economic & social' to programmes of history, traditional approaches to the discipline are thereby narrowed, refined and brought into different, more appropriate, foci. These branches of history, so-called, can be thought to be functioning, at a macro level, as reflexive means of 'doing' history. It is not to be wondered at that then, that conservative historians have associated these disciplinary developments with postmodernism and have generally opposed them. In doing so they can be thought to be guarding history against importations from other, perhaps less well 'policed' disciplines, or other branches of history than their own. Peter Burke's reader *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (1992) offers a useful introductory survey of those disciplinary, borderline, approaches, referred to here and Lynn Hunt (1989) does something similar for cultural history. Wulf Kansteine discusses the importance of historians and others bridging the gap between academic history and its use by the media (1996). Likewise Louise White offers an important perspective on how, within oral history, memory itself legitimates a version of events, and in so doing transcends traditional concepts of truth

and falsity (2000:13&18).²¹ So, with or without the recognition or acquiescence of traditional empirical historians it is possible to see that the condition of the discipline - in what its practitioners accept as history – is a methodologically overt, if regrettably not often a self-aware, statement of its current interpretative stance towards the past. I think this is an indication too that an aim of promoting reflexivity as an organising principal in making historical knowledge is not a naïve aspiration. In a sense it exists already.

If then what is needed within history within a micro level, is a reflexive model of knowledge to match the political nature of the discipline as a whole, perhaps it is unnecessary to go further than a consideration of historians who are working in the general area of class, and especially those influenced in their work by a Marxist tradition of history. This genre of explanation already functions as a self-consciously aware – to a degree a reflexive – approach to the past. These historians may not necessarily ‘flag up’ their selective principles specifically as reflexivity, or even as Marxism, but what defines them for the purpose of this section is that they make clear by a variety of means their criteria for selection in making sense of the past. To use the term ‘Marxism’ is not of course to assume that all historians working with the concept of class are Marxist or this group is a fixed, unchanging, entity. Despite, for example, widespread beliefs that western, Gramscian, Marxist historiography would disappear from the academic scene along with the failure of Eastern European communism, the upbeat tone of Harvey J. Kaye’s summary narrative of *British Marxist historians* (2000) is thoroughly justified. As Kaye says, this tradition of history has changed, in that it has developed an appreciation of:

²¹ See also here Helena Pohlandt-McCormick’s discussion of the politics alongside the epistemological issues of oral history from ‘below’ (2000) and also Alice Kessler-Harris on American Studies (2001). Paul Smith’s *The Historian and Film* (1976) especially Jerry Kuehl’s chapter, ‘History on the public screen II’ is useful in noting the extent that conceptions relating to other disciplines can be regarded as more important than traditional historical working assumptions, in these ‘borderline’ histories.

the common people in history not simply as economic agents, that is, as labourers and material providers, not simply as political agents, that is, as rebels and insurgents, but also as cultural agents, that is, as valuers and visionaries. In short, peasants, artisans and workers – not only philosophers and theorists – have contributed to the making of our modern conceptions, relations and practices of liberty, equality and democracy.

(2000:288)

There is no doubt that Marxist historiography within social history has altered over the past forty or so years. This is not the place to chart this change except to note that since the exchanges between E. P. Thompson and Louis Althusser in the 1970s, one particular shift has been towards a more cultural form of analysis of class. Chapter Four examines the consequences of Thompson's seminal intervention against Althusserian Marxism in this respect and will address at the same time some of the more important theoretical positions that have been taken up from this genre in relation to postmodernism.²² Marxist historians and those working with the category of class, have not in the main treated postmodern themes with the pessimism that is characteristic of the challengers in the controversy, even though they share postmodernists' recognition of the uncertainty principle in the making of historical knowledge²³. On the contrary, notwithstanding postmodern worries about the functioning of history in postmodernity, the discipline has flourished in areas relating to culture and 'history from below.' In this section some of the principle historians involved here can be seen examples of how the problems of the controversy can perhaps be avoided. In short the solution will be seen to be that by valorising reflexive practice and respecting aporia, historians have no need of notions of

²² I include here especially the, for me, rather inspirational contribution of Patrick Joyce (1995,1998,2001& 2002). But see also Alex Callinicos (1976 & 1989) and of course Fredric Jameson (1993).

absolute objectivity in order to make historical knowledge and no need of pessimism either.

Thus Robert Gray's work on 'the languages of factory reform in Britain c.1830-1860' examines interconnections between work, culture and community within the period, in relation to 'the constituent role of language' (1987: 145). Similarly, and illustrative of 'modern' Marxist social history, is David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones's view that to study class at the close of the Twentieth century was to do so

without a settled sense of a hierarchy of determinations ...for experience, class or social determination ...each of these notions is capable of yielding strong but partial illumination. But they cannot be employed, straightforwardly as organising principles, in the way which many historians once believed. (1989:6)

This change in the genre is evident, and will be discussed in Chapter Four, in relation to several works of Patrick Joyce and to his stance towards postmodernism (1980,1987&2001). The notion that methodological uncertainty necessarily weakens historical explanation can be seen, through Joyce's work, to be now a thoroughly problematic view. Similarly, and as an example of this positive approach, the subtlety of Donna Loftus's treatment of the free market is testament to a less objectivist approach to the past in this historiographical area (Loftus:2000&2002). These comments barely scratch the surface of changes which have, in their turn, sustained the more active learning, student centred, approaches to pedagogy that have been growing since the 1980s. Importantly resonating with those pedagogic developments has been the interactivity of community history projects such as that of Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day

²³ I realise of course that this is a controversial point, but the issue too will be addressed in Chapter Four.

(1999) allied to the more general thrust of 'history from below' such as the History Workshop movement.²⁴ In the same way, the permeation of interactive principles of empowerment as core concepts in museum management has become so extensive it has passed from the seminar room into the regular practices of museum management.²⁵ Common to these examples of how knowledge is handled is an optimistic practical stance towards issues of subjectivity and the partiality of knowledge.

Broadening the gaze somewhat, there is abundant evidence that many historians are working with epistemologically open-ended assumptions about the nature of history. For example, at the level of the undergraduate primer, although there has been some virulent opposition to postmodern issues (eg. Black & MacRaild:2000), along with some damning with 'faint praise' (eg. Warren:1998) and some historians who have ignored the phenomenon entirely (eg. Abbot:1996) there have also been some outstanding examples of how historians are not unsettled by arguments about the partiality of knowledge. Thus John Tosh (1991), working within an empirical framework and Ludmilla Jordanova (2000), a Marxist, have shown how through reflexive practice the insights of poststructuralism can begin to be integrated into mainstream practice. And at a more theoretical level there are several historians currently working in these areas, showing the irrelevance of the struggles within the controversy. Adrian Wilson (1993) for example offers a workable, practical means of achieving methodological awareness building, as he says, on E.P.Thompson's argument for historical logic. Joyce Appleby et.al. similarly work towards the same ends, arguing that

we see no reason to conclude that because there is a gap between

²⁴ This was founded in 1967 by the socialist historian Raphael Samuel.

²⁵ See for example Hooper-Greenhill's *Museums and the shaping of knowledge* (1997, but also 'The space of the museum' 1990) and S.E. Weil's 'Rethinking the museum and other meditations' (1990 via Awoniyi:2001). Typical of current usages of interactivity are Richard Sandell's 'Museums as social institutions' (1998) and Richard Prentice's 'Experiential cultural tourism: museums and the marketing of the new romanticism of evoked authenticity' (2001).

reality and its narration (its representation), the narration in some fundamentals sense is inherently invalid. Just because narratives are human creations does not make them all equally fictitious or mythical. (1994:235).

Of course 'fictitious' can carry several meanings but what one concludes from a closer reading of Appleby et.al depends on how their account of 'Practical Realism' is regarded (1994:247); that is, whether the emphasis is seen as laying on the terms 'practical' or 'realism'. For now it is necessary only to note that this is yet another example of historians refusing to either dismiss postmodern-like accounts entirely or to succumb to the pessimism that has often accompanied them.²⁶

In the teaching of history, school history for example, the model of knowledge deployed in history lessons has been transformed in recent years. I believe largely due to the National Curriculum, which has changed the way historian teachers talk about their subject, the prevalence of the arguably problematic skills approach to the teaching of history has given way to more nuanced means of expressing and handling sceptical issues with children.²⁷ Examples of these abound in school teachers' own accounts of their teaching strategies and are supported by, for example, teacher educators such as James Arthur and Robert Phillips (Arthur &Phillips:2000; Phillips:1998).²⁸ Phillips draws on

²⁶ For further modified versions of realism, see also Christopher Lorenz's work, (1994, 1998 &2000). Along the same lines, although perhaps closer to the defenders' position within the controversy, is Roy Lowe's argument that postmodernism obliges 'us' to work through more clearly how we assume that certain pieces of evidence from the past translate into historical interpretation (Lowe: 1996).

²⁷ It has to be said here that valuing changes resulting from the National Curriculum for History is not an argument for that curriculum's introduction or continuation. A broader view may lay quite different consequences - of motivation, of creativity - at its door.

²⁸ Evidence for this can be found in almost any edition of *Teaching History*. A good example is the work of Andrew Wrenn whose pedagogy encourages pupils to think out historical solutions and explanations for themselves before they are exposed to historians' accounts. In this way children come to see the explanations in text books, not as given facts, but as other accounts of the past to be considered and weighed against their own, even if, (as is obviously highly likely) in the end they have to accept the historians' accounts as more authoritative etc. The point is that the

Henry Giroux's politically charged reflexivity as a basis for enabling students to see outside the dominant interpretations of text books; to enable them to think in alternative terms (Giroux:1992). For Phillips, as for Giroux, the partiality of knowledge is no impediment to history, for the element that enables it to function is in fact 'position' or the value-laden nature of the historians' gaze.²⁹

Moving away from direct issues of pedagogy, a number of historians can be seen to have put to use different insights drawn from poststructuralism – specifically from Foucault, Derrida, from Lyotard or Rorty – but who have not drawn the negative conclusions of these postmodern challengers, and significantly have not held the same confrontational stance towards mainstream historiography either. For example Mark Poster sets out avowedly to 'lower the level of polemics' and simply to argue that 'a more open attitude to recent cultural trends might benefit the discipline' (Poster:1997:41). He usefully (although controversially) chides Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, who he regards as wishing to hold on to truth claims, that poststructuralism is not destructive of meaning. Rather, he suggests, it represent a positive move in terms of understanding ie.

the strategic hermeneutics of Foucault and Derrida are not designed to discredit discursive truth but to fortify it by removing legitimising, foundational gestures that undermine its credibility. (1997:58)

Similarly Kerwin Klein uses the distinction between the notion of master and local narratives to stress the importance of the latter against the former, arguing that there is more to this distinction than the articulation of a principle, denying the veracity of the 'master' and dismissing its 'local' other as subaltern. 'Master narratives' he points out,

result aimed for is an awareness that all historical knowledge is created in the present and, in principle at least, capable of being critiqued (eg. Wrenn:1998:). See also Brickley (1994).

are simply those that hold positions of dominance. The distinctions between local and metanarratives are contingent rather than axiomatic. ...No special way of telling can guarantee that today's local narrative will not become tomorrow's narrative master. Virtually overnight, the chanting of subaltern protest may modulate into the crack of the historical whip.

(Klein:1995:297)

Thus the pessimism which moves from Lyotard's defining gesture of scepticism³⁰ into the forbidding of 'large stories' in postmodernity, 'threatens to burden our new tales with the bad, old metaphysics we claim to have escaped' (Klein:1995:277). David Shaw too has read poststructuralism in an enabling manner. He sees agency as being enhanced rather than denied by considerations of language in history. For example he argues that to speak of discourse does not militate against agency for it is important to take 'seriously the space between a word or phrase and using it.' This is because, he says, however much speech is fitted into wider systems of meaning (discursive formations) those meanings are not arbitrary. 'Rather they are contingent, developed historically and constantly, through the mediation of people as speech agents' (2001:6/7).

I do not wish to give the impression that I see these historians as just managing as it were, to keep the project of history going at all costs in the face of a sceptical postmodern challenge. On the contrary it is possible to see in the deployment of postructural insights, some of the conceptual excitement that has long been basic to other disciplines. For example David Andress, John Arnold and David Carr speak of the possibility of the same critical engagement between the past and the present (no longer merely E.H.Carr's

²⁹ See also Malcolm Chase's similar work in *Studies in the Education of Adults* (2000).

³⁰ I refer here of course to his famous statement of 'incredulity' (Lyotard:1984:xxiv)

‘dialogue’) that in art history is experienced between the observer and the painting. I am referring here to the sense that the positioning of the observer by the artist’s use of perspective and picture plane, determine how the painting impinges on the observer, and this affects their perspective which in turn produces further meaning in the picture and so on, in a dynamic way.³¹ It seems to me that something quite similar is being expressed by David Andress in the use he makes of the concept ‘a sense of ethical engagement’ between historians in the present and the world that they seek to understand (1998:242) and indeed that David Carr is saying the same thing in terms of ‘a structural conflict of realities’ (2001:167). Likewise John Arnold points to what is perhaps an unnecessary concern at the inevitable silences of the past, where in fact

instead of filling those historical gaps with our own busy concerns, might we not let those medieval silences infect our present discourse? Might we, in fact, invite the dead to interrogate us? (2001:229)

Elsewhere, in a discussion of horror films he stresses the importance of the effect of the historicised past on the present, (1998:42) concluding thus that ‘the past is a dangerous place’ where it is perhaps less that we consume it as we are consumed by it (1998:46/7). David Lowenthal similarly has argued that far from being a problem, and one that is corrosive of historical knowledge, the lack of a fixed past is a boon, for it enables a continual interaction which ‘fuses past with present.’ He went on to say that through our interpretations of the past ‘we change ourselves as well; the revised past alters our own identity (1985:410/411).

³¹ Charles Harrison’s art history primer provides a good explanation of this sense that ‘the true complexity and fascination of art – when it is exercised at the highest level at least – lies not in the quantity or lifelikeness of its detail. It lies in the inventive use of its form and composition. It is this that solicits the imaginative collaboration of the spectator (Harrison:1997:45).

Encouraging too for those who would seek a dialogue that unites the controversy with the debate, is the way that such a dialogue is already beginning to take place. For example, Geoffrey Roberts and Frank Ankersmit – clearly on opposing sides in the controversy – are both to be seen in dialogue with, or within the influence of, Mark Bevir’s constructionist account of the discipline (Ankersmit:2000; Bevir:1994,1999&2000a&b; Bevir & Ankersmit:2000 & Roberts:1997:251). For Roberts and Ankersmit, in their view it is the very purposefulness of the historians’ selections among the openness of the past that represents the conditions of possibility for historical practice.³²

Finally, in moving away from these encouraging examples of the broader debate, towards a conclusion of this initial chapter, I should like to glance briefly on the practical work - the historical writing - of some of the combatants to the controversy for it can be seen here that the things are not entirely as one might expect. It is reasonable to think that the writings of the postmodern challengers would be models of reflexive self-awareness, with traditional empirical historians’ work more factual and with little awareness of perspective. Interestingly the reality is not quite as tidy as that.

Alun Munslow’s approach to his *Discourse and Culture, The Creation of America 1870-1920* (1992) is exactly as one might have expected. It opens with a clear statement of his view of history as ‘a cultural and literary artefact’ and the first chapter makes clear Munslow’s awareness of position. Moreover this is carried over into the main body of the book, a series of biographical essays, such that the reader is conscious of the methodology being an integral part of the history itself. Keith Jenkins, by contrast, has written little beyond snippets of history linked with his philosophical and

³² As part of this phenomenon, and as illustrative that Ankersmit’s stance is not simply an aberration within the postmodern challenge, see also the unmistakable optimism of the postmodern

historiographical focus, but then, given his stated account of the utility of history, this can hardly be a cause for criticism.³³ However, surprisingly, Beverley Southgate's approach to historical writing is little different from that of Arthur Marwick.

It is true that much of Southgate's work preceded his active involvement in questions of epistemology by quite some years. Articles written in 1981 and 1987, perhaps unsurprisingly show little awareness of methodological issues of an epistemological nature beyond a general acceptance of pluralism. Later, in 1995, in his essay 'Pyrrhonian Postmodernism: Ancient Roots of an Historiographical Crisis,' he offers a position that is more methodologically self-aware. Southgate opens with a useful discussion of historical scepticism, but after the first three pages it slides into an account of what he considers 'happened.' Unlike Munslow, Southgate demonstrates no further awareness of the constructedness of his text. I do not wish to suggest that there is anything especially lacking in such a methodology; it would be good if all historians were as reflexive. The point however is that Marwick does the same. In his *A History of the Modern British Isles, 1914 – 1999* (2000) Marwick, like Southgate, opens his work with a statement of his - pluralistic - epistemological position and then gets on, like Southgate, with the business of telling his readers what happened. With such concert in their practice the intensity of their putative difference in theory, is both surprising and ultimately unconvincing.

Remarkable, too, is Richard Evans's work, for the reflexivity in his practice outdistances both Marwick and Southgate. True, this does not apply to his earlier writing which, like that of Southgate is fairly unambiguous, but this changes over time. In his essay 'The German Bourgeoisie', within the collection he edited with D. Blackbourn (1991), he uses the kind of tentative language that is suggestive of an acceptance of 'belief' on the part of

historians whose work he and Hans Kellner have gathered in their reader *A New Philosophy of History* (1995).

the historian, as integral to historical knowledge. More overtly in 1997, in *Re-reading German History From Unification to Re-unification 1800 – 1996* Evans is as reflexive as any of the postmodern challengers. For example he starts by deliberately choosing an ambiguous title for the work. He goes on to explain that the bulk of the material is an extended examination of historiography of the subject, not the subject directly (p.vii). He then accounts for his approach by acknowledging the crucial importance of perspective in historical knowledge, ie:

It is precisely this interplay between the objective constraints of history, the disciplinary and methodological contexts of writing and research, and the political beliefs and perceptions of the historian living in a particular present-day context, which makes the study of how historians have dealt with the German past during the period of reunification so fascinating. (1997b:viii-ix)³⁴

My purpose in drawing on these few examples of the historical writings of the main players in the controversy is to make the point that a successful outcome of this study cannot simply be to mediate between one or other side's actual practice. It is not as simple as that. Although my interest in the subject was awoken by practical concerns, it has become apparent to me that the discussion is as little about practice as were the exchanges between Carr and Elton, or Carr and Issaiah Berlin or A.J.P.Taylor

³³ Certainly it does not merit the kind of censure received from Arthur Marwick (2001:257).

³⁴ There really are no shortages of examples to illustrate Evan's reflexive practice. It would be possible to compare Evans and Munslow's respective treatment of E.H. Carr's work, for example, for they have both recently written review articles in this area. Astonishingly, it is Munslow, whose analysis woodenly sits upon an array of barely explained 'historical facts' about the nature of the postwar period, many of which appears to be derivative of Jenkins's *On What is History From Carr and Elton to White and Rorty* (1995), while Evans's analysis maintains throughout, an historical scenario as a possible explanatory context to Carr's work (Munslow:1997; Evans:2001). Similarly Evans's propensity to respond to his critics in 'follow-on' publications makes for a lively environment that arguably emphasises the constructed nature of the discipline. An example of this is his response to the criticisms made of *In Defence of History* (1997).

(Evans:2001:xix-xxiv). It really is, primarily at least, about 'the nature' of the discipline. It is about, for example, what historians and others might think about it, and how it relates to changing generic notions of knowledge. It is only as an outcome of this, that practice is important. It will indeed be concluded that there are some implications for practice, especially for pedagogy, but those arguments are subordinate to these broader issues about the nature of history.

The question that remains now, is how this examination should proceed in seeking its end of identifying a common conception of historicity across the debate as a whole. There are three areas that need discussing. First the issue of whether mainstream empirical practice genuinely does incorporate an epistemological open-endedness, is important. Second, in the face of some postmodern dismissals of Marxist history as unconvincing metaphysical belief (Jenkins:1997), it is necessary to examine its continued theoretical relevance and third, the apparent colonisation of poststructural insights by the pessimism of this postmodern challenge requires assaying. I am turning first to looking at empiricism, as constitutive of mainstream traditional historiography, partly because this is the more difficult task but also because it has the more serious problem. Indeed whenever the postmodern challenge is simply dismissed rather than engaged with, by empirical historians (eg. O'Brien:1999 or Croll:2003) the discipline – as a form of knowledge – is weakened, the debate as a whole is further dichotomised and more subtle contributions on both sides (eg. Haskell:1998 & Tucker:2001) pass unnoticed.³⁵ Thus in the next chapter I examine the relationship between empiricism in general and philosophical scepticism.

³⁵ I do realise that Tucker defends a position other than what he himself regards as empiricism but with the definition of that term outlined in Chapter Two, Tucker's position can be comfortably counted as empirical.

Chapter Two: Scepticism and Knowledge in Pre-Modernity

The discussion of this study now broadens its compass by temporarily leaving the 'What is History?' question and focusing on the generic empirical approach to knowledge that is embodied within traditional historiography. In this chapter and the next, an account is given of the importance of philosophical scepticism in the western tradition, as an intellectual resource that is available to both traditional empirical historians, and to their postmodern challengers.¹ It is shown here that the epistemological uncertainty which in their unequal ways empirical and postmodern historians both claim for their practice, is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, empiricism has been closely associated with sceptical approaches to knowledge to the extent that the kind of aporetic awareness evident in the historiographical controversy has long been a central constituent of western empirical knowledge.

In taking a serious interest in scepticism, this study is not alone. As long ago as the mid 1980's, Charlotte Stough noted the existence of 'an increasing number of scholarly works on the discipline of scepticism of late' (Stough:1987; 217) and indeed since that time it is possible to see a marked interest by historians in histories of philosophical

¹ The use of the term 'western tradition' here, and elsewhere in the study, is being used to indicate a broad swathe of understanding about the past - largely a European past - which, although constantly in a state of contestation and change, can nevertheless be identified as something approximating a literary canon. However, to go further and regard it as co-terminus with Lyotard's 'meta-narrative' (1984:xxiv) would be to underestimate the degree of interpretative flux constitutive of the concept.

scepticism.² Similarly Annas and Barnes opened the introduction to their translation of Sextus Empiricus, the second century AD sceptic, by observing that

It is only recently, after a time in which Plato and Aristotle have dominated the study of ancient philosophy, that we have returned to the former perspective, a perspective both wider and more just, in which Scepticism and the other philosophical movements which flourished after Aristotle have regained their salience (Annas & Barnes: 1994:ix).

Richard Popkin too makes it clear that he sees his work as contributing to a trend in which much of the history of philosophy is now being recast by historians of philosophy in terms of its relation to sceptical ideas (Popkin: 1999: xix).³ But at the same time this is not an argument in support of the sceptical position as such. To do so would be to begin to slip back towards one or other of the entrenched standpoints of the postmodern controversy. To consider scepticism as it has been, and still is, treated outside of the controversy – ie. by philosophers and historians of philosophy – is to see that it is possible to discuss such issues without the polemics that have characterised the historical controversy so far. It becomes clear that what is important is the existence of a widespread concern and debate about sceptical issues, and how they might be thought to have affected the construction of knowledge. The more these ideas are explored, the less relevant seems the ‘either/or’ certainties of both the traditional historians and the postmodern challengers.⁴

² For example Annas and Barnes (1984,1987), Michael Frede (1987), G. B. Kerferd (1981), Beverley Southgate (1981, 1989, 1996, 2000), Richard Popkin (1966, 1979, 1999) and R. W. Sharples (1996).

³ I am not suggesting that this scholarly work has yet had much direct influence on modern historiography nor, apart from Beverley Southgate’s work, on the postmodern challenge. It is a lack which I hope this study will begin to help remedy.

⁴ Examples of the treatment of scepticism by analytical philosopher include: Alcoff:1998; Audi:1998; Bruechner:2003; Hammersley:2003; McArthur:2003; Marshall:2003; Mayal-

Although there is no doubt that there are outright opponents of the sceptical position who see it as a mistaken and aberrant account of knowledge (for example, Grayling:1985, Hookway:1992 and to a lesser extent Weintraub:1997), invariably studies of either side end in conclusions that are so hedged around and qualified that in practice it appears that the debate seems simply not to be securely capable of resolution in terms of the 'true/false' or 'right/wrong' categories in which the postmodern/empirical history controversy has been cast by both sides. I start this chapter with the belief that historians can benefit from a glance at how philosophers and historians of philosophy have handled the same issue - of uncertainty in knowledge. Thus, in this chapter it is argued that scepticism has long been integral to conscious, rational knowledge, and especially to different historical forms of empiricism, rather than a phenomenon that can be posited against it.

Of these two chapters, the first sets up the narrative through a discussion of definitions of relevant terms and by an empirical analysis of how a sceptical awareness can be thought to have lain at the core of philosophical thought in the classical, pre-medieval world. The second then builds on this position by focusing on several important empirical figures whose work developed from enlightenment humanism and it goes on to examine how their contributions have affected recent and continuing empirical thought.

Within this present chapter the first section discusses how the expressions 'empiricism' and 'scepticism' are used here and considers some of the implications of this use for the model of knowledge being deployed in this part of the study. The following four sections draw upon some of the more well known philosophies of the western tradition,

from sophism in fifth century Athens to pyrrhonism in the second century CE, and I argue that scepticism can be understood as being integral to these philosophies to the extent that empiricism is concomitant with scepticism as an account of the possibility of human knowledge. In two senses these chapters are central to a critique of the two main positions in the postmodern history controversy. The first of these is that they question the radical nature of any postmodern challenge to history that relies solely on a discovery of a sceptical core to historical knowledge. The second is that the ubiquity of sceptical themes in the western tradition prompts the use of a model of knowledge that focuses on the responses that philosophers have made to epistemological open-endedness rather than solely on the open-endedness itself. It arguably follows from this that a way forward by traditional historians faced with a sceptical postmodern challenge to empirical practice is to look again at the very considerable resources available to it from scepticism. It may well be that empiricism can never equal the sophistication of poststructuralism in the handling of these issues. Nevertheless, a better awareness of the available evidence of how empiricism might be thought to have connected with scepticism, over time, may go some way to bridge the gap and to provide a basis for useful debate between empiricism, marxism and poststructuralism.

Section I

As with many debates in both philosophy and history, much turns on definitions and here is no exception. To consider just several of the more accepted accounts of the term 'empiricism'; it could be used as a form of logical positivism where nothing is considered to be knowledge unless it is capable of being verified. Or it would be possible to go further, as does for example John Cottingham in his study on rationalism,

to restrict empiricism to the claim that ‘knowledge derives ultimately from sensory experience’ and that this can be differentiated from rationalism, which by contrast stresses ‘the role played by reason’ (Cottingham: 1984: 6). The difficulty with the first of these positions, ie. positivistic empiricism, is that with the abandonment of the analytic/synthetic distinction in the post war period verification has become problematic. The weakness of the second, the strict ‘sensory experience’ criterion, is that, if an emphasis is laid on ‘sensation’ rather than ‘experience’ it becomes too easy to show that such empiricism has little explanatory power. For example Cottingham justifies his claim by saying:

Some rationalists condemn the senses as an inherently suspect and unreliable basis for knowledge claims; others, while conceding that sensory experience is in some sense necessary for the development of human knowledge, nevertheless insist that it can never be sufficient by itself (1984:6).

Cottingham does concede however that: ‘It is probably fair to say that the average “intelligent layman”, particularly in the English-speaking world, has whether consciously or subconsciously, absorbed a strongly empiricist outlook concerning human knowledge’ (1984:7). This seems a sensible point and a possible way forward and it accords broadly with R. S. Woolhouse’s approach in his 1983 work, *The Empiricists*, that the ‘inclusion of certain philosophers as “empiricists” is to a considerable degree, a matter of convention’ (p.3). This is taken here as a starting point in the use of the term. Thus it is reasonable to include as empiricists in this account, philosophers who have been so considered in the western tradition, as well as those who have regarded themselves as employing an empiricist stance.⁵

⁵ For the purposes of this study I am disregarding the now barely still relevant account of empiricism and rationalism as being dichotomously opposed, *pace* Cottingham,. I regard that

Narrowing down this rather broad definition, I have used John Locke's emphasis on experience, as distinct from sensation, as the active factor that prevents the theoretical possibility of a never-ending process of empirical interpretation. This enables the inclusion of a dimension to models of knowledge-making which the singularity and individuality of an emphasis on 'sensation' does not capture. It works by allowing that the experiences of others, and those of previous investigations, do count in any particular act of knowing. Similarly multiple experiences can interact through, for example, compression into languages, concepts, perspectives or pre-dispositions.

There is also a role for the *a priori* in the understanding of empiricism employed in this chapter, but not in the sense that Cottingham makes of it. I take it to mean that previous knowledge, perspectives and dispositions etc. do themselves act *a priori* upon received experience in the process of making new knowledge. On this account therefore empirical knowledge cannot be wholly objective, neutral or innocent, for it is always 'already' positioned or otherwise implicated in the process of selection that has given rise to the knowledge in question – it is always, as it is popularly termed, 'value laden'. This understanding of the *a priori* is not one based upon 'given' metaphysical entities, or notions of a 'real' world which correspond with the sensations received and it is an understanding which is clearly antithetical to positions reliant upon revealed religion. A better analogy is that of Wittgenstein's use of 'hinge propositions' that reflect the need or operational beliefs, around which knowledge is formed (Moyal-Sharrock:2003:128/9).⁶

formulation as no longer helpful and I accept Richard Popkin's position that 'other paradigms are offered that may be more helpful or useful for our present-day philosophising and concerns' (Popkin: 1999: xix). In holding to this I rest to some extent also on Giorgio Tonelli who has argued that 'rationalism and empiricism are not mutually antagonistic categories and neither were they for much of early modernity (Tonelli:1971).

⁶ Moyal Sharrock argues that Wittgenstein's position here is better described as 'logical pragmatism' (2003:128) and that it implies that foundations do not have to be metaphysical (p.127). More broadly Thomas Kuhn (1970) makes a similar point by his use of the concept

The second area of uncertainty relates to the need for clarity about exactly what the sceptic is expressing doubt about. R. J. Hankinson illustrates how the closer one looks at a philosophy such as scepticism, the more complex is the process of definition. He argues that several different types of scepticism can be identified. There is a strong version, he argues, that can be regarded as ‘realist of sorts’ (Hankinson:2003:15). On the other hand pyrrhonian scepticism – that exemplified by Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in the second century CE is less a position or a philosophy than a description of an intellectual condition which seems to follow from a particular line of open-ended thinking. This line is a reductive one that notes that for every possible statement made about the world there can be posited an equal and opposite statement such that it can seemingly never be known whether there are foundational criteria and thus objective truth, or not. Of course it would be perfectly reasonable to call this line of reasoning a philosophy – and indeed it is regarded as a philosophy in this study – but the point that Hankinson is making is that pyrrhonists would not think it appropriate to argue for it or to advocate it as a position.⁷ It is simply a description of what pyrrhonists think happens when knowledge statements are attempted. Were they to attempt to argue that their position was true and that others should adopt it, they would of course have fallen into the kind of dogmatic certainty they were concerned to escape from; it thus makes no sense to argue that there is no certainty in knowledge.⁸

Hankinson uses the following nomenclature to differentiate types of doubt that can be found embedded within philosophies. What he calls ‘E’ (epistemological) Scepticism,

‘paradigm.’ I use the expression *a priori* (with a lower case ‘a’) to indicate this kind of necessary, stipulative, starting point in the creation of empirical knowledge.

⁷ This is a point that Michael Frede made - convincingly - in 1987. Charlotte Stough has similarly supported Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes in their reading of Sextus Empiricus as being able to ‘follow his impressions *without* holding any beliefs, because he takes no position about the reality of things’ (Stough:1987:220).

⁸ I use the expression ‘performative contradiction’ to describe this paradox.

relates to scepticism resulting from statements saying simply that there is no evidence for a particular claim or statement about the nature of something. It is, in Hankinson's usage, a form of tough-mindedness or resistance to gullibility. This is an everyday usage of the term scepticism and this discussion is not really concerned with that. More importantly he uses the expression 'O' (ontological) Scepticism for a stronger case; 'an attitude in which one refuses to affirm, but (crucially) does not yet deny, the existence of something or the truth of some proposition' (p15). This structural uncertainty results from Sextus's reductive reasoning noted above and it is broadly the kind of scepticism with which the discussion of this chapter is concerned. Finally, Hankinson regards as negative dogmatism, a kind of sceptical argument which insists that there really is no truth to be found; a form of reversed realism (Hankinson:1995:13-16).⁹

Summarising somewhat from the multiplicity of possibilities raised, Hankinson offers a definition of pyrrhonist scepticism which he draws out from a point made by Sextus Empiricus himself, namely: 'the natural result of any search for something is that the searchers either find it, or they deny that it can be found and profess it unable to be grasped, or they keep on searching' (Hankinson:1995: 13). In terms of epistemology the first situation would occur with dogmatic objectivists. The second would result from dogmatic (reverse-realist) sceptics and the third, from pyrrhonists. Thus Sextan scepticism has at its heart a degree of neutrality about its own doctrine. It would keep on searching because it could never accept that there were grounds to say finally either that it (truth) was found or could never be so. It professes neither that this is a good thing nor bad, neither certain that knowledge is possible, nor uncertain. In this it is very different from the postmodernism of the history controversy, which is certain that knowledge of the past is compromised by scepticism, and it differs too from modern traditional empirical historiography which in its normal operations ignores the issue

⁹ I take this to be the kind of certainty about scepticism that Richard Evans has noted in Keith Jenkins's work (Evans:1997a:13).

almost entirely. What is clear is that if Sextan thought can be shown to be important to empiricism within the western tradition, an awareness of an epistemological horizon to human knowledge will not imply, as an entailment, the kind of problematic stance towards knowledge that suggests the impossibility of the historical project.

This importance that Hankinson places on uncertainty in the articulation of scepticism is supported by a number of scholars by, for example, the distinction made by David Macarthur between 'disjunctive' scepticism and what he regards as the more traditional 'argument from illusion'. Macarthur argues that the former (which equates with Hankinson's Sextan scepticism) does not imply any lack of human rationality whereas the latter (broadly a redefinition of the stronger 'realist' scepticism) assumes that irrationality is the inevitable consequence of epistemological uncertainty (2003:179). Alan Marshall provides a similar account of scepticism (2003), as had Michael Frede as well as Charlotte Stough, in 1987, some years before Hankinson's project. Similarly, ample evidence exists in Sextus's own writings for such a reading, as is discussed in Section V of this chapter.¹⁰

Hankinson's categorisation is useful but in itself it does not wholly capture the complexities associated with the concept. For example there are issues of definition relating to the way that scepticism can be thought to have changed over time. In his work, *Hegel and Scepticism* Michael Forster draws on the support of Hegel's observations on the history of thought to argue that pre-Christian (sextan) scepticism became, in the post-renaissance modern world, much more closely associated with a worry about a lack of foundation for the human condition than it had in earlier times.

¹⁰ See also Jonathan Barnes's highly critical review of Alan Bailey's argument that Sextus Empiricus should be read as having promoted irrationality (Barnes:2004). It has to be admitted that Bailey is not alone in reading Sextus in this way. Stefan Ramaekers's otherwise helpful article on scepticism (2002) also takes no account of the work of Frede, of Annas & Barnes or of

Richard Popkin has offered a plausible explanation for such an historical shift. This is that the use of classical scepticism ‘in the religious debates of the time became a way of undermining each side’s claim to having a certain and adequate criterion of religious knowledge’ (Popkin:1999:330). Thus the existence of a supposed ‘certain’ form of knowledge, ie. religion, became perhaps a yardstick against which secular thought was felt to have to compete.¹¹

The method upon which the historical analysis of this chapter rests is substantially indebted to the extensive and sustained study of scepticism by Richard Popkin. He recognised in 1992 that in thirty years of writing on the subject he had come to see that there was still much more work to be undertaken in this area – that, for example, eighteenth century scepticism was ‘far more complicated than I previously thought’ (1992:280). What he meant by this was that there were many more sceptics in that period, and more strands of scepticism, than he had previously realised when in 1963 he wrote that Hume’s was almost a lone voice in that approach to knowledge (1963: 1321).¹² It is within that same trajectory that this chapter is located; that is, that there is more to scepticism than has been generally recognised; specifically there is more than simply the identification of sceptics. Indeed it is this identifying of sceptics in the western tradition which now enables a slightly different conception of scepticism to be formulated; one which enables us to see how sceptical thought has interacted with other approaches to knowledge.

Stough, nor indeed of the powerful evidence of Sextus himself. As a result, Ramaekers concludes, like Bailey, that Sextan scepticism is a form of irrationalism.

¹¹ As Tonelli has pointed out, rational thought in early modernity was concerned with the investigation of the limits of knowledge, which project was inextricably concerned with the sceptical outlook (1971:218).

¹² What makes Popkin so useful here is not just his experience (he is associated with some 30 book length works in the history of philosophy), nor his many collaborations, nor indeed the testimonies to his work (eg. Watson:1988 & Rosenbaum:2002) so much as the fact that even his critics acknowledge his work to have ‘significantly altered our understanding of the history of philosophy’ (Kenshur:1994:99). Helpfully - in the sense that it provides a element of common ground - Beverly Southgate concurs with this view, that thanks to Popkin ‘we can now no more ignore scepticism than, for example, Hermeticism or the rise of science; and (that) any study of scepticism is bound to build on Popkin’s foundations’ (Southgate:1981:357).

The problem which Popkin, Tonelli and others have found is that the more one looks, the more scepticism one finds. The discussion of this chapter supports that contention by focusing on the work of the sophists, Plato and Aristotle and on the pyrrhonists. Moreover by looking at Plato and Aristotle, philosophers noted for their hostility to scepticism, it is possible to see that a form of scepticism functions within their accounts of knowledge too – despite their seeming antipathy towards it. What a sceptically sensitive approach to western thought makes it possible to see is that there has been an enduring awareness by many philosophers in the western tradition that, outside of revealed religion, the understanding of adequate grounds for the possibility of knowledge was something that had to be worked at – constructed even – rather than simply received passively or found, objectively, in the world. It is one in which it is the response to sceptical aporetic awareness which is important, not the scepticism itself.

This brings the discussion to the fourth and perhaps most important point to be made. This is that scepticism may be thought to exist in two distinguishable yet connected ways; first as a philosophy or approach to knowledge and second, as awareness of aporia¹³ – ie. as an awareness of a sense of uncertainty about what is certain in human knowledge. It can be seen that in several philosophies; even in those patterns of thought not conventionally associated with scepticism, it is possible to detect an awareness on the part of the philosophers that, unaided by any supra-human entity, knowledge which is both certain and objective, appears to be unachievable by humans. Further, that such an awareness is followed by some positing by philosophers of how aporia might be handled in practice.

¹³ Until this point in the study was reached, when it has become appropriate to discuss ‘aporia,’ the term ‘openendedness’ has mainly been used in its stead. The vagueness of this expression has been helpful in that it is not associated with any particular philosophy and has not therefore skewed the discussion in terms of yet another philosophical expression that has then to be explained in relation to the generic sublimity which is captured by ‘aporia’.

The constructions which philosophers have made in response to aporia have been many and various; at one end of a spectrum those theorists we generally call sceptics (sophists, pyrrhonists etc.) have been quite happy to live day to day with it. That is their response. At another end others have resisted what they have seen as the implications of aporia, and theirs is a more complex form of response. It is difficult to know in any detail the reasons behind such resistance. It could be because it is believed that good order and discipline in communal life is possible only if humans are able to reach some form of certainty. It may be simply a psychological linkage being made between uncertainty and insecurity. These are questions of a general nature which are peripheral to the main argument here, that is for whatever the reason, the common element at this certaintistic end of the spectrum is a clear recognition of aporia, a rejection too of the sceptic's response to it and the positing of further categories of understanding, almost as epistemological 'repair patches'. These responses have included tautologies, deities in the case of Christianity or practical grounding-type concepts such as platonic forms. Throughout the rest of this study the term 'metaphysics' will be used to describe responses to aporia of this kind.

It is worth noting here that in the same way that aporia can be seen in accounts of knowledge not ordinarily associated with scepticism, so too can epistemological certainty (ie. this version of metaphysics) be seen in sceptical arguments. For example the concept of aporia and response goes some way to explaining the epistemological negativity that can be seen in the present work of Keith Jenkins, and other postmoderns. Some clarification is needed here because 'metaphysics' is a term so widely used, so often attributed to a writer's opponents, that it can sometimes be thought to be in practice a pejorative term. No such meaning is intended here. It means simply that

these postmoderns appear (somewhat unexpectedly) share aspects of the metaphysical response to aporia as described here.

It is true that they do not employ grounding concepts as ‘repair patches’ like those who resist the implications of aporia. And certainly they are likely to agree with sceptics such as sophists, pyrrhonists and empiricists that grounding concepts, or any kind of epistemological strategies, can never really bridge the abyss of aporia. However, unlike those at, or towards, the ‘easy acceptance’ end of the spectrum of possible responses to aporia, this kind of postmodern thought cannot seem to let go of the idea that notions such as certainty, absolutism or objectivity are important. They therefore conclude that there exists a serious epistemological problem in the modern, or as they regard it, the postmodern world where personal and group perspectives are more in evidence within many disciplines.¹⁴ Their response to aporia is the claim that there is a crisis of knowledge – such a crisis, in the case of Jenkins, that history as a form of knowledge is no longer worth attempting. Empiricism, by contrast, can be thought in this model to be located towards the more ‘accepting’ end of the spectrum. This is the reason why present day empirical historical practice can be seen as epistemologically open-ended and therefore remains largely untouched by the postmodern announcement that objective knowledge is impossible to achieve. Empiricism, in relying on sense experience modified by reason, can be thought to be a response to aporetic awareness, whether or not empiricists acknowledge it and indeed, whether they even realise it.

But, however satisfying it might be in showing how the concept of aporia and response can produce insights that appear to be coherent and useful; in terms of the aim of this study, these speculations are just that – speculations that cannot be proven and are essentially circumstantial. Jenkins’s argument for the end of history has been mounted

¹⁴ ‘Group’ here refers of course to perspectival allegiances such as class, gender, age or ethnicity.

upon robust argument drawn from poststructuralism and it is on that ground that it needs to be engaged with. This issue is addressed in Chapter Four.

In the meantime, it is now possible to see why it may be that postmodern attempts to explain, warn or otherwise critique the empirical response has so far met with little success. This is in part because postmoderns have generally not recognised what they share with empiricists, namely aporetic awareness. They have therefore misdirected their critique (in history at least) towards announcing aporia rather than in addressing traditional historians' tardiness in admitting that empirical methods are merely a particular response to aporia. For its part, traditional empirical historical practice appears to have 'forgotten' its structural connection with aporia. The rest of this chapter, and the next, narrates an historical account of empiricism that can be used to make good that lack.

Finally in clarifying the terms used here, three more points need to be made. First the expression 'closure' is useful. It is deployed here to indicate that what is important in understanding the relationship between sceptical and non-sceptical positions is not whether the philosophers concerned do or do not believe in the possibility of objective truth, but what their response is to the very wide acceptance that it is not seemingly possible to reach objective truth in any obvious manner. Thus 'closure' refers to 'response' rather than to an attempt to 'ground' a view into an absolute or objective certainty. Some closures may involve claims to objectivity but the term itself refers to the process of handling aporia, not to the content of that process. Second, the term 'sceptic' is usually reserved for those for whom that response is accepting of the problem of knowledge implied by the use of the concept 'aporia' and 'aporia' itself more strictly relates to the awareness of open-endedness rather than its consequent cognate response. Finally, the cautionary point needs to be made that aporia is difficult

to talk about with any degree of precision, for in so far as it is thought to be an epistemic horizon, if its precise nature were known, it would no longer be aporia. Indeed that has been exactly the problem with the postmodern challenge, and which has been responsible for some muddying of the waters, ie. that the postmoderns have assured the historical community that they understand precisely what is implied in an awareness of aporia and what without any doubt, should be done in response to it. All that can sensibly be said is that a sense of aporia, or an aporetic element of some sort, appears to be a position common to many philosophic explorations¹⁵ whereas responses to it vary across time and place.

Put like that, it might be thought that this method of approaching scepticism in history amounts to very little – and indeed that may be the case, for this area of debate would seem by its apparent nature to be tentative and rather speculative. Although that might seem a fair point, ‘all or nothing’ patterns of thought are insidious; because it is an area of human experience that is uncertain, this does not carry an implication that nothing can usefully be said, only that it needs to be said in a tentative manner. Moreover, and with this caution very much in mind, I believe that the overt acknowledgement of initial aporia by knowledge-makers across a range of philosophies, provides sufficient common ground for the enterprise of ‘the response’ to be seen as an aspect of human endeavour that can be understood in terms of its specificity, ie. historically. In this sense philosophies in the western tradition¹⁶ can be seen as providing a succession of responses to awareness of aporia. To repeat this crucial point; to the extent that they can be thought to be simply human responses ie. not able to be proven in any absolutely certain way, their nature as human ‘constructions,’ is suggestive of a need for them to be discussed sensitively, tentatively and with tolerance. They are after all, by this

¹⁵ I am not here arguing that this is a universal phenomenon, for to do so would need an examination going well beyond the aims and therefore scope of this study.

¹⁶ Nothing beyond the need to contain the discussion to a manageable proportion is implied in the use of the term ‘western tradition’ at this point.

model of knowledge, all attempting to do the same thing – to make sense of a seemingly aporetic world.

Section II

It is not only the postmodernists who have taken for granted the principle that the philosophy of the western tradition has been understood as a history of objectivity. Some historians of ideas have done the same. John Gray's view that 'the central intellectual tradition of Western culture was and remains foundationalist and representationalist' against which 'scepticism is best thought of as a variation' (Gray:1997:160) is not untypical.¹⁷ To such historians the suggestion that the philosophies of classical Athens can be seen to be as much about relativism as objectivism might seem an uncomfortable one.¹⁸ There is however clear evidence that during the celebrated 'golden age' of Athens an awareness of aporia was widespread among philosophers. Moreover it can be seen that some of the more important of the debates between them were not simply arguments about whether humans could reach truth or not, but were more concerned to establish an appropriate response to that seemingly inescapable condition – aporia.

¹⁷ Similar sentiments, especially about scepticism's assumed lack of validity, can be found, for example, in Hugh Tredennick (1959:7/8), Alistair MacIntyre (1967:18) and C.C.W. Taylor (2000:72).

¹⁸ This is not to say that the idea of sophists being relativistic has gone without challenge either, even from historians more sympathetic to the sceptical argument. Richard Bett has argued that of the sophists, only Protagoras can fairly be regarded as a relativist and that sophism in general is simply scepticism (Bett:1989:151). His argument should be treated with some caution however. It is a somewhat marginal account; one that posits relativism as a form of reverse dogmatism (in the style of Hankinson's taxonomy) but also as oppositional to 'scepticism' which he sees as being a position without closure. Despite this, he does somewhat contrarily accept Jonathan Barnes's conclusion (although without Barnes's thorough justification) that what ultimately unites the sophists was a sense of empiricism (Bett:1989:169; Barnes:1971:47). A more moderate account of differences between, say Gorgias and Protagoras, (although one still relying on Bett) is given by Paul Woodruff; see below.

It is of course likely that scepticism did not start with the Greeks. Protagoras's early education was undertaken in Persia and he appears to have already worked out his sceptical position long before arriving in Athens (Forster:1989:75 & Russell:1961:93).¹⁹ Traditionally however Athenian sophism is the quintessential scepticism of the western tradition, and the first in that narrative. Their humanistic open-endedness is legendary and as the field of scholarship indicates, the issues raised by the sophists remain important to forms of present day thought.²⁰ But what is not quite so obvious is that there are several different versions of sophism; it was no tight philosophical school. For example Gorgias's position was by far the most dogmatically sceptical of the sophists ie. '(i) that there is nothing, (ii) that even if there were something it would be unknowable and (iii) that if it were knowable it could not be made evident to others (Woodruff:1999:305) whereas, with his famous claim that 'man is the measure of all things,' Protagoras's thought shows a definite constructivist turn of mind (Long:1999:12). What also has been less obvious to historians is that the traditional view of the sophists as merely promoters of 'argumentative trickery' (Taylor:2000:72) requires for its cogency a discounting of the ample evidence that their sceptical position was not an ivory-tower epistemology developed at a distance from everyday life, but rather the reverse. Even a brief examination of the context of sophistic thought enables a case to be made that their scepticism was integral to their knowledge of the world and to an active participation in civic life.²¹

¹⁹ It has also been argued that a degree of scepticism existed in eleatic philosophy (Kerferd:1981:94). W.K.C. Guthrie on the other hand, has placed greater emphasis on 'contemporary Ionian scientists' and the natural philosophy of Democritus as formative influences on the sophists. (Guthrie:1971:47&8).

²⁰ This point is made by Richard Bett:1989, David Corey:2002, Carlo Frierio:1998, Michael Gagarin: 2001. Similarly G.B.Kerferd explains the 'the modernity of the range of problems formulated and discussed by the sophists in their teaching is indeed startling...the degree to which sense-perceptions are to be regarded as infallible and incorrigible, and the problems that result if such is the case' (Kerferd:1981:1&2).

²¹ Paul Woodruff's paper, 'Rhetoric and relativism: Protagoras and Gorgias' in A.A.Long's reader (1999) is a helpful discussion of the philosophical differences between these sophists and between sophism in general and Plato's view of them. It highlights that what is important for

It is this integrated use of scepticism that makes sophism important for this chapter for it is possible to see Athenian sophism as providing an epistemological foundation for a secular civic life; one which is really quite familiar to us in the twenty-first century. A study of their responses to aporia provides a sharp and effective corrective to present-day empiricists' timidity in asserting their aporetic awareness or to those postmoderns who conflate, as Barnes puts it, 'no reason to believe P' with 'not p'.²²

Most importantly the sophists were comfortable with the idea that whatever truth was, it was not something that could be discovered once and for all. This stance is evident not only in their attitude to knowledge but also to the way they lived their lives. The sophists were methodological and saw the teaching of rhetoric and other skills of argument as important. True, such teaching was also lucrative, as many have pointed out, but their emphasis on argumentation also cohered with their epistemological position. If there is no truth to be discovered outside of the human condition, and if all we have in the end is knowledge which is a construction made by humans in the form of argument aided by rhetoric, then it is arguably important to know how that knowledge is constructed. But their interest in the application of aporetic awareness was not limited to rhetoric, as has sometimes been assumed by historians such as Tredennick or Taylor. Paul Woodruff for example argues that it was Plato himself who narrowed the understanding of sophism into merely an association with rhetoric and relativism. Woodruff makes the point that:

this is misleading, for among the subjects taught by sophists
 were oratory, ethics, political theory, law, history, mnemonics,
 literature, mathematics and astronomy...as well as metaphysics

this section of the chapter is not the 'correctness' or otherwise, of the accounts expressed – that is to say, the philosophy of sophism – so much as the utility of sophism in Athenian society.

and epistemology. Their message that progress came through technological and political developments advanced their frankly self-serving claim that education was among the greatest public goods. (Woodruff:1999:291)

Clearly the epistemological open-endedness of sophism did not lead to a debilitating passivity. Protagoras for example was quite prepared to argue that one opinion can be better than another even if it were not possible to establish that one was more true (Russell:1961:94). And it has been pointed out that sophists began using the so-called socratic method of debate to arrive at conclusions, however tentatively they were held, well before Socrates (Kerferd:1981:33).

Finally, but importantly for this discussion, one response of sophism to aporia was a deep engagement with the civic life of the polis. Sophists were for example close associates of Pericles during the period in which democracy flourished in Athens (Coleman:2000:45-6) and Protagoras was active in politics. He is said to have written the laws of Thurii in 444/3BC (Russell:1961:93).²³ It is easy to see the reason for this interest in matters of constitution and democracy. If 'man' really is the measure of all things then it might be thought to follow that men and women's views should be the basis of political actions, for from where else might come the knowledge of how people should live together in communities? Thus to the idea that Sophism was the first empirical humanism in the western tradition (Guthrie:1971:9; Tarnas:1996:29) could be added the possibility that it has also been the theoretical face of democracy.²⁴

²² This is a position that Jonathan Barnes describes as 'puerile'. For a more thorough, and less polemic, discussion of some of the main possibilities and options which the Athenians thought followed aporetic awareness, see Woodruff:1999:Ch.14.

²³ For more recent confirmation of the reliability of Russell on this point, see also Corey:2002:193.

²⁴ For clarity of explanation I am leaving a consideration of the naturalistic aspects of empiricism, and thus of scepticism, to Chapter Three where it is more pertinent. Similarly the intention here has been to avoid straying into a discussion of Ancient historiography. I am therefore not following up on interesting, although potentially controversial, references in the

There is however a problem in simply accepting sophism as a model for the deployment of scepticism. To understand effectively its means of handling aporia, it is necessary to take some account of the opposition that was ranged against it. Plato's critique of sophism is, along with Aristotle's, perhaps the most important of these for Plato held the view that the sophists' individualism was corrosive of democracy's ability to take the longer or broader view in politics and in morality generally. This clearly has implications for any approach to knowledge, such as history, that rests on an acceptance of aporia.

Section III

Given the centrality of Plato's work for subsequent philosophy – and not least the influence it had on the formation of Christian thought – it is hardly surprising that there are differences in the way he is understood. There is space here for only a brief comment on a subject which has generated a notable profusion of literature from many disciplines. Nevertheless whatever one thinks about the success or otherwise of his account of knowledge, or its possible political implications, a case can be made that aporia is integral to Plato's position rather than, as is so often assumed, crudely contrary to it.

scholarship of this period; for example, to the connections between Herodotus's moral scepticism and the sophist position, in relation to the *nomos* and *physis* debates (Woodruff:1999:301) or the lack of epistemological causation (as distinct from discovery of 'hidden motivation' of the courtroom kind) in Thucydides's work (Vagetti:1999:278).

A starting point in making sense of Plato's engagement with scepticism would be to say that he found himself unable to accept the sophists' easy acceptance of aporia and that he countered it with a response which relied on a notion of truth. What is entailed by that concept of truth is however problematic. Cottingham for example regards it as the basis of what he takes to be the rationalist project in western culture (Cottingham:1984:16/17). Rather similarly C. C. Taylor reads Plato's Socrates as refuting Protagoras' 'hollow' and 'unfounded' view of knowledge with his own, which is 'the true conception of the task of philosophy'; the replacement of genuine philosophy for its counterfeit (Taylor:2000:76 & 71). Hugh Tredennick regarded Plato quite simply as 'a prophet' and his doctrine of forms, the intellectual equivalents of 'facts' (Tredennick:1959:9 & 15). Perhaps because of the use made of Plato by neoplatonism, Christianity and other (often elitist) movements, this rather fixed or even mechanistic understanding of knowledge, in evidence by Cottingham, Tredennick and Taylor, is by no means a rarity in the western tradition. Unfortunately neither is the associated assumption that if there is not absolute certainty in knowledge then a debilitating scepticism is the only possible alternative.²⁵ Against such readings of classical philosophy it is possible to see in Plato's work evidence of an attempt to come to terms with aporia and to improve on what he saw as a demonstrable weakness of sophism, ie. its self-interested individualism.

Plato's aporetic core is not difficult to see. The whole thrust of his work is consistently towards an attempt to cope with the obvious inability of humans to be able to reach certainty of knowledge from the phenomena of the world and from normal human

²⁵ For a clear example of this position in present day scholarship see Carlo Frigerio 1998. Frigerio's account is interesting in that he makes no distinction between aporetic awareness and its response. Moreover, his account of scepticism in the western tradition does not include pyrrhonism. Thus he fails to connect empiricism with scepticism, ie. empiricism as a response to aporia. For him as for Plato, the question is between an absolutely objective truth or a hapless relativism. Thus he shares Plato's distrust of the sophists and he similarly regards postmoderns, and poststructuralists as redivivus sophists (p.8). On the other hand because he can see the impossibility of certainty and therefore the need for some degree of grounding, he belatedly

discourse. Were there to be any doubt about this, it is dispelled by Plato's own words, in the *Phaedo*, where he makes it clear that he, as much as the sophists, recognises the aporetic nature of the human condition, viz.

And above all those who spend their time dealing with antinomies [logoi antilogikoi] end as you well know by thinking that they have become the wisest of men and that they are the only ones who have come to understand that there is nothing sound or secure at all either in facts or in arguments. (Cited by:Kerferd:1981:66)

Kerferd notes – rightly – that the full significance of this passage ‘has not always been understood by scholars’. The importance of it is, he says, that:

...both Plato and the practitioners of antilogic (the sophists) are agreed on this one point, the antilogic character of phenomena. The only fundamental point on which Plato is going to take issue with them is their failure to understand that the flux of phenomena is not the end of the story – one must look elsewhere for the truth which is the object of the true knowledge (Kerferd:1981:67).²⁶

We have seen that the sophists did not themselves regard the flux of phenomena as the end of the story for it had implications for their attitude to life as well as knowledge. The point here is that Plato disagreed, not about the existence of *aporia*, but about what should be an appropriate response to it.²⁷

turns to empirical science...seemingly unaware that this strategy has been around, and much employed, for many centuries.

²⁶ Certainly Plato is no sophist, and no sceptic in the sense that he was ‘accepting’ of *aporia*, but his awareness of it as a phenomenon, is unmistakable.

Similarly, on the perennial question about the relationship between the ideas of Plato and Socrates (that is the 'real' Socrates not the literary one), there is a sense of cogency in W.K.C. Guthrie's explanation that Socrates' own aporetic awareness was likely to have been passed on to Plato. Thus in the early literary works of Plato the literary Socrates was made to thrash around with little in the way of a response to aporia different from the sophists until the later dialogues (of which Meno is perhaps the first) when Plato developed his own ideas. That is, when he worked out his response – ie. the Forms and re-incarnation, and these were then attributed back to the later (literary) Socrates.²⁸

In attempting to understand what Plato meant by his own response – the doctrine of Forms (or Ideas) - the question which seems immediately to impose itself is why should Plato object so strongly to the sophistic solution to aporia.²⁹ The quick answer – that it was a political one – although not unreasonable, is insufficient in itself. The 'political' account goes thus; that Plato, as an aristocrat, objected to the sophist political response of democracy and especially the sophistic practice of selling (teaching) political skills of rhetoric and argument for cash. Here, as Janet Coleman points out, it is possible to imagine an aristocratic response to be one which deplores the belief that the kind of excellence that merits high office should be able to be taught in isolation from more fundamental questions about the possession of personal qualities (Coleman:2000:46).³⁰ It is true that historians have long seen links between education and democracy (Breisach:1994:Ch.2) and have posited the possibility of tension between old (character based) and new (intellectual) approaches to education in Athens at this time

²⁷ See also Jane O'Grady (1997:xvii) who makes a similar point.

²⁸ The difficulty of knowing the historical Socrates as distinct from the literary one has been so widely discussed that little may be gained by returning over this old ground, except to add Robin Waterfield's frank acceptance that his own work on Xenophon does not really help since Xenophon was as prejudiced in his treatment of Socrates as was Plato (Waterfield:1990:22).

²⁹ Plato's antipathy to sophism is fairly well established, but Jonathan Barnes provides ample evidence of it (Barnes:1979:146/7).

(Hare:1982:30). But the weakness in leaving the analysis at this point is that it was far from obvious that the aristocracy was in principle opposed to democracy. Plato himself is said to have had ‘the deepest distrust of what today would be called the profit-motive and of the political influence of private wealth’ (Lee:1987: xxv). Also as Bertrand Russell pointed out in the 1960s, unlike in our modern world in the west, political democracy itself ‘was associated with cultural conservatism, while those who were cultural innovators tended to be political reactionaries’ (Russell:1961:91). It seems likely that there was a deeper reason for Plato’s position than simply an aristocratic distaste for democracy. A more fruitful area for investigation is to think that he saw weaknesses in the sophistic response to aporia.

In fact there is evidence of a serious problem with Sophism. The same individualism which tended towards the establishment of democracy also militated against it, and not simply because it unsettled existing practices. There was seen to be a larger difficulty, as MacIntyre has described, and of course as Rousseau’s ‘general will’ sought to avoid. This is that the easy sophist acceptance of aporia could be thought to provide no criteria to guide individual people in developing their own ideas to be different from the norms of their community. MacIntyre points out that if knowledge was simply whatever an individual or a group of individuals thought at any one time, what would stop political insight and wisdom from degenerating to the lowest level of rhetorical immediacy? (MacIntyre:1967:16). Worse than this, it has been thought that sophism gave rise in practice to anti-democratic ideas as well as to democratic ones, a point that was recognised by historians of the period (Mayor:1912:27). Critias and Alcibiades for example – both students of Socrates and both avowed sophists – were seriously opposed to democracy on the grounds that if there is no certainty, then there should be nothing to prevent the taking of power by the strongest. Indeed this is a view not

³⁰ On the other hand, in his recent paper ‘The case against teaching virtue for pay: Socrates and the sophists’ (2002:197) David Corey points out that Xenophon has suggested that Socrates did

unlike that expressed in a later age by Nietzsche. Critias was an important figure in the life of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian war, becoming the leading member of the oligarchical government; the so-called Thirty Tyrants. In his introduction to Plato's *Gorgias* Walter Hamilton summarises a fairly general view of Plato's career at this time and provides a likely insight into his motivation. Thus Plato's

innocent expectation of a period of pure rule under the oligarchy of the Thirty, some of whom were his friends and relatives, quickly turned to horror at the wickedness of their proceedings, and, though he had again contemplated entering politics at the restoration of the democracy in 403, his disillusion became complete and permanent when the restored democrats condemned and executed Socrates (Hamilton:1960:15).

In such circumstances – and bearing in mind the scepticism of Socrates in the early dialogues – it is easy to see how Plato's own response to *aporia* developed as it gradually did, away from that of the sophists.³¹ In making sense for ourselves of what Plato offered his contemporaries it is possible to see that he was perhaps trying to express ideas which we now, in the twenty-first century, take for granted. It is this aspect of his work that has significance for an understanding of scepticism in the period.

not accept pay for his teaching, because he wanted to maintain his personal liberty.

³¹ In attempting to peel away likely motivations for Plato it must be accepted here that this alleged 'problem' with sophism is as likely to have been a further justification constructed by Plato to mask his undeniably elitist politics, as much as it could have been genuine. For example, Barnes has argued that Critias's credentials as a sophist, in the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* mould, are in some historical doubt. He was, Barnes points out, Plato's uncle and 'a man of black fame...cruel, cynical and overbearing' and, evidenced by a fragment of his play *Sisyphus*, he was an advocate of what has become associated with Nietzsche ie. a view of laws and religion as being simply props for the weak (Barnes:1979:149).

Jane O'Grady is right to caution us not to fall into the misconception that Plato's Forms were simply concepts, for as she rightly says, he intended them to be 'objective, existing irrespectively of whether we exist' (O'Grady:1997:xviii). Obvious though this point is, what precisely is meant by it is however open to some discussion. Certainly there is no evidence that Plato had available to him the concept of 'concept' and it is possible to sense this as a lack (by our own standards, of course) when in his explanation of his idea of forms he struggles with, for example; 'it is the beautiful that makes all beautiful things beautiful' or 'by bigness big things are big, and bigger things bigger' (O'Grady: xix). As MacIntyre comments, 'to say..."Height is high" is clearly not to speak with a clear meaning' (MacIntyre:1967:43). Nevertheless it is possible to make the case that Plato's approach to knowledge has integrated within it the aporia about which he is so famously circumspect. It may be uncomfortable (and perhaps unduly speculative) to go further and attribute to Plato's method descriptions more suitable for the Twenty-first Century, ie. that he can be understood as a constructivist. However, O'Grady's point that in the Phaedo, that 'Plato argues that what same-named things had in common was outside of themselves' (p.xviii) is certainly suggestive of that kind of approach to knowledge. It may simply be however that the objectivity of which Plato speaks is intended to mean objective in relation to the individuality of the sophist approach.

In fact historians have noticed that Plato's position is not entirely one in which truth comes before everything. MacIntyre suggests that his account of knowledge carries a confusion in that he conflates geometry (which he employs as an epistemological standard) with matters of conduct, eg. 'to treat justice and good as the names of Forms is to miss at once one central feature of justice and goodness – namely, that they characterise not what is, but what ought to be' (MacIntyre:1967:50). In other words truth is subservient to what Plato thinks is desirable in a community.

Janet Coleman provides an example of this when she says that Plato's political programme of the Republic is embodiment of what that 'desirable' community – ie. the truth – should look like. She points out that in this later work he had moved on from his earlier more openly aporetic position – expressed by the Socrates of the early dialogues – where Socrates sought knowledge 'insisting that he had none' (2000: 72). In the Republic, she says, Plato makes a case for a more elaborate epistemology and therefore includes 'a philosophy of education, a philosophy of science, a philosophy of language, a philosophy of religion and a philosophy of art' (p 72). Here, Coleman argues that for the mature Plato, what is important (and what constitutes the true good, as distinct from the sophist's narrow self-interest) is that:

Reason will therefore be shown to have a new function, to take the emotions seriously and to keep desire in its proper place, in order to ensure, both in the individual and in the polis, psychological and, therefore, political order. Reason and those capable of it now must have the kind of political power that governs a collectivity of selves in the interests of each and all' (p73).

Clearly the political turmoil which accompanied the defeat of Athens to Sparta had left its mark on Plato's thought. This predominance of 'the political' is important because it underlines the further point that in Plato's response to aporia, contrary to his protestations, 'the good' really is not supremely independent of the everyday world; it is allied to 'the better' and is to a considerable extent – an unexpectedly considerable extent – rooted in the needs and doings of humans. It is not 'elsewhere' as one might expect in, for example, a realist epistemology. Plato's Forms do not refer to a 'real' world which can be described and accounted for, such as the ideal worlds of Berkeley or Hegel. On the contrary, the common feature of the Forms, as even Aristotle found, was that there was no adequate explanation of what precisely they were in terms of entities

being objective and transcendental. Certainly they were intellectual but that description cannot be a final one. MacIntyre notes how Plato himself saw that there were radical problems in his theory of Forms which, as MacIntyre discusses, Plato never brought to a conclusion (MacIntyre: 1967:53/54). However, with the benefit of both distance and hindsight, and mindful of the considerable debate that there is on the subject, it is perhaps nevertheless possible to make sense of Plato's position by seeing in it some quite distinctly humanistic associations. That is to say that truth for him is not so much a construction of the Gods as of the human mind, but not of anyone's mind; only of those who by a mixture of learning and experience can be trusted to produce a truth which is likely to be good – as he Plato would see it – for the community as a whole.

Hare for example has noticed how there is a development in Plato's work, evident in *Timaeus* and *The Laws* in which 'mind had a place in explaining how the world works' and that this grows in prominence (Hare:1982:14). O'Grady puts flesh on that point by focusing on what she sees as a slippage of logic by Plato. She suggests that his own explanation of the Forms follows the same 'sleight of hand' as can be seen in the ontological argument for the proof of God, ie. that 'since our idea of God is that of an all-perfect being, and since to exist is more perfect than not to exist, God must necessarily exist'. In Plato's argument she sees it as being essentially the same ie. that 'just as the ontological argument "proves" that our concept of God necessitates his existence, so our ability to use a general term for many particular things necessitates a reality of which those particulars partake' (O'Grady: 1997: xviii). In both cases there is a subtle and logically unwarranted shift from the 'human' to the 'abstract'.

Indeed, even in the simile of the cave, (even though it is a simile) the seeing of the world as it 'really' is, is carried out by a human – that is a human who develops the interpretation (as we would term it) that it is the sun that 'is responsible for everything that he and his fellow prisoners used to see' (Book vii 516c in Lee:1987:255-264).

Here again Plato is respectful of the same human condition of aporia as were the sophists, when he says, 'that at any rate is my interpretation....the truth of the matter is, after all, known only to God' (517b).

Thus it would seem that although it might be hasty to go on from this to think that Plato was reaching for something which today we would call perspectivism – that is an account of knowledge which draws for part of its veracity on the strength of established views of things – there has been enough evidence here to substantiate a lesser claim that were it not for Plato's recognition of aporia he would not have needed, nor been able to, have organised his position as he did. Far from being the cause of an end of scepticism in the western tradition, Plato is better understood as simply offering a response to aporia which is different from that of the sophists and through which he attempted to address problems he thought were ignored by them. In this sense – and leaving to one side the political implications of his clearly conservative, elitist position – it is possible to conclude with Janet Coleman that he offered a conception of knowledge which was more inclusive than the alleged individualism of sophism in the sense that it has at its heart an attempt at a collective dimension (Coleman:2000:82-83).³²

Section IV

Whatever the validity of Whitehead's famous comment that the western tradition is but a series of footnotes to Plato, there is no doubt that this emphasis on a conception of knowledge as being something more than simply individual opinion, once gained through the dissension of the sophists and Plato in their competing response to aporia,

³² This is not of course to have to agree with Plato's own view of which groups should constitute that collective.

has become an enduring component of the west's understanding of its own intellectual history and, in relation to Aristotle, to the development of what has come to be regarded as empiricism. For many years this empiricism has been associated with historically with Aristotelianism, but as Annas & Barnes have argued (1994:Intro.) current sensitivity to sceptical issues has now made for a broader focus, one which places Sextus Empiricus on a par with Aristotle as a co-originator of empiricism. Despite this argued shift from undisputed pre-eminence Aristotle's thought remains essential to an understanding of one of the primary forms of empiricism. This section expresses that form in terms of 'aporia and response' to enable it to be comparatively discussed not only with sophism and pyrrhonism but also with Plato's thought.

From such a viewpoint, and on first impression, Aristotle's response to aporia may be thought to be a clear improvement on that of both the sophists and Plato. His repudiation of the more arcane aspects of Plato's Forms is a defining feature of his work.³³ Certainly historians have noted that despite his overt opposition to the sophists – an opposition which consisted more of dismissal than argument (Barnes:1996:60) – Aristotle's own response to aporia bore a marked similarity to their approach to knowledge (Press:1999:72-74), namely that knowledge was reliant on sensory experience. Janet Coleman takes the view too that Aristotle's differences from Plato outweigh the similarities (Coleman:2000:115) and Jonathan Barnes draws on evidence from Nichomachean Ethics to suggest that the notion of truth to be found there bears some similarity with a humanistic model. He points out that Aristotle's account of truth is that it is accumulative and that 'no one can attain it in a wholly satisfactory way' (1996:17) and moreover that he, Aristotle, had in practice regarded knowledge as being what is left of reputable opinion after due examination (p16). Similarly, Barnes comments that there is something to be said for the now widely accepted view that

Aristotle was himself never a system builder in any real sense; that in his own modelling of knowledge, his thought was ‘tentative, flexible, changing’, such that his philosophy could be described as ‘essentially aporetic’ (Barnes:1996:36-7).

In particular it is possible to see in Aristotle’s thought that his empirical methodology could be a practical response to aporia. The danger of reductive individualism, which Plato deplored in the sophists, is handled by Aristotle – with the syllogism in mind one might say ‘inventively’ through the use of logic. It is not necessary to share his claim that logic led to universalism to see that logic is a means through which common understandings between communicants can be reached. What is often ignored in current critiques, or deconstructions, of Aristotle (for example, Goodheart:1991:113) is that for all his talk of universals Aristotle was no realist.³⁴ Although for him new knowledge is empirically achieved by means of sensations, he accepted that sensation is not in itself knowledge and cannot function without the addition of human experience (Coleman:2000:120, Barnes:1996:58-9). This is important for when that point is factored in, allied with the use of logic, it is possible to see how empiricism can be both effectively open-ended and yet in practice also be closed, ie. capable of producing knowledge in the sense of shared meaning. Thus whatever else Aristotle’s idea of knowledge was, or claimed by him to be, it is clearly capable of being read in the present as having included within it an element of constructivism.

Having said this, there is nevertheless a problem in regarding Aristotle as providing the whole of the model of practical knowledge – specifically of science – on which our

³³ For a current example of how Plato’s ‘forms’, as a response to aporia, are thought to be compared with Aristotle’s emphasis on observation; eg. ‘the genus absolutely does not exist apart from the species of a genus’ see Marcos:2004:2.

³⁴ E. Paparazzo’s investigation of different approaches to concepts of ‘surface’ within the ancient world (in his study of philosophical bases for electron spectroscopies) indicates the extent to which Aristotle’s thought was non-realist. He notes for example how Aristotle regarded planes or surfaces as existing in part theoretically, rather than physically as real substances. (Paparazzo:2004:1-5).

modern empirical methods are based. In arguing for that pre-eminence, Barnes' enthusiasm for Aristotle's achievement points the way to a repudiation. Barnes claims that 'our modern notion of scientific method is thoroughly Aristotelian' and he goes on to claim that: 'the point needs emphasising, if only because Aristotle's most celebrated critics Francis Bacon and John Locke, were both staunch empiricists who thought that they were thereby breaking with the Aristotelian tradition' (Barnes:1996:86). It would seem that the 'historical record' is not quite as unambiguous as Barnes thinks, for Woolhouse has noted how our model of science is descended 'also from the newer conception of "natural philosophy", which people like Bacon, Hobbes, Gassendi and Locke, developed in reaction to the Aristotelians' (Woolhouse:1988:6). Richard Popkin provides evidence to support the point, which is that this 'newer conception' was the result of the growing knowledge and influence of the work of the pyrrhonist thinker Sextus Empiricus. Bacon, for example, studied the writings of the pyrrhonist sceptic Michel de Montaigne to reach a version of pyrrhonist empiricism (Popkin:1999:330) and Locke's education at Christ Church, Oxford in the 1650s, under the tutorship of its Dean John Owen, was steeped in the philosophy of Bacon (Copenhaver:1999:282).³⁵

This is not to attempt a denial of the magnitude of Aristotle's achievement so much as to recognise the strength of opinion by historians that perhaps ultimately his approach to empiricism can be viewed as another version of Plato's response to aporia, ie. that it rests on an abstraction, albeit only in the last instance. Russell's conclusion is typical. This is that 'the change that Aristotle makes in Plato's metaphysics is, it would seem, less than he represents it as being' (Russell:1961:179). Press, and Barnes both make similar cases along the lines that Aristotle's insistence that knowledge is knowledge of causes and that these are guaranteed by the concept of an unmoved mover. This, they

³⁵ For the purposes of this study it is unnecessary to argue for the primacy of the pyrrhonists against Aristotle, in a reconfigured empirical tradition. It suffices simply to establish that the work of Sextus Empiricus had an influence on its development. This is treated in more detail in the next chapter.

point out, necessitates Aristotle's God as being 'the explanatory principle of a world of eternal species of moved movers' (Press:1999:73). Certainly, for us anyway, the practical side of empiricism seems to work without the universalist dimension and it is tempting to think that Aristotle, like Plato, was expressing in terms available to him (in Aristotle's case in terms partly deriving from Plato) the kind of communal, but not universal, epistemological closure to aporia with which we today customarily employ in our knowledge-making.

Section V

What has generally come to be regarded as pyrrhonism, that is largely the extant writings of the Alexandrian medical philosopher Sextus Empiricus of the first/second century AD, is a development of sophism in direct descent from the renewal of interest in scepticism of the hellenic period. Difficult though it is to be certain about intellectual lineages as Charlotte Stough's discussion of the issues shows (Annas:1987:217), Haren, Sharples, Hankinson, and Mayor in earlier years, have charted how pyrrhonism was formed in dialogue with the dogmatic scepticism of the third and fourth academy.³⁶ In seeking avenues of influence upon Pyrrho, Richard Hankinson connects him with sophism by noting commonalities in the logical structure of sophism and Pyrrho's position (and those of Sextus Empiricus some five hundred years later). But he also draws upon the – admittedly sometimes questionable – evidence of Diogenes Laertius (as does Long:1999:74-91) to suggest that the characteristics of pyrrhonism originated

³⁶ It would be possible - although perhaps unnecessary – to locate pyrrhonism more widely in a discourse deriving from Aenesidemus's revival of a loose tradition stretching back via the works of Carneades (214–129BC), Arcesilaus (316-242BC) to Pyrrho of Elis (C320BC). See also Haren: 1992: 29, Sharples:1996: 9-10 & 29-30, Hankinson:1995:52,59,117,123,143/4 & Mayer:1912:146.

from Pyrrho's travels with Alexander in India.³⁷ For the purpose of this study then, pyrrhonism can be seen as an historical - and an improved – version of sophistic scepticism.

Through much of the period between the death of Aristotle and the eclipsing of scepticism by Christianity, scepticism (that is 'scepticism' in the sense that its response to aporia was an accepting one) had to distinguish its position from the then more dominant 'philosophies of consolation' (Popkin & Stroll:1993:18, Russell:1961:268) ie. epicureanism, cynicism and stoicism. These philosophies had an aporetic awareness in the sense that they believed – in their various ways – that the human condition was incapable of providing knowledge of how happiness and the good life could be secured – not least in what historians uniformly describe as being 'troubled times'. The responses, which that awareness brought forth, respectively, were those of hedonism, the renunciation of wealth and the general disregarding of material conditions. Pyrrhonism shared some of these values in that its conception of 'the good' resembled, for example, the epicurean and stoic (and perhaps Indian in origin) value, or aim in life, of quietness, tranquillity and unperturbedness (ataraxia) (Hookway:1992:5).

What marks out pyrrhonism from other forms of scepticism of the classical world, including that of sophism, is the nature of its aporetic awareness. Not only did pyrrhonists (whether of the original Pyrrho or that of Sextus Empiricus) believe that humans were unable to gain any certain knowledge of the world or of the human condition but they also believed that even this statement – that truth was not possible – was uncertain (Sextus Empiricus: *Outlines of Scepticism*: Bk. I 13/14] via Annas & Barnes:1994: 6). This left them in an interesting position. It might be thought that they were in an entirely untenable situation – if one can know nothing, what then can be

³⁷ A discussion of the Indian connection is beyond the scope of this study but an interesting comparison between the approaches to scepticism of Sextus Empiricus and Zhuangzi, a Chinese

said? In practice, it has to be answered, that quite a lot is possible. First, pyrrhonism carved a space for itself distinguishable from the ‘dogmatic’ scepticism of what was also then called ‘academic scepticism’, that is the scepticism of Philo of Larissa c. 160 –83BC). This was regarded by pyrrhonists as a form of ‘metaphysical realism’ (Hankinson:1995:116/117) and it is interesting that from a pyrrhonist standpoint, sophism can be thought to be susceptible to this charge. The second thing that pyrrhonism did through its particular articulation of aporia was to render itself immune to the accusation of incoherence, which is so often levelled at sceptics. It is arguably only ‘dogmatic’ versions of scepticism which can be charged with this, ie. with both asserting and denying the possibility of knowledge at the same time. Pyrrhonism avoids the problem by asserting nothing – by not engaging in beliefs of any kind. Charlotte Stough makes the point clearly.

The pyrrhonist’s position is that even the most obvious things one assents to, propositions that both Stoics and their Academic critics would call ‘evident’, turn out on analysis to be non-evident, since they embody theoretical presuppositions to which one is committed in believing them (Stough:1987:220).³⁸

The recognition of this, and that for every possible statement about the world there can be an opposing one is not the same as nihilism, as Christopher Hookway notes.

daoist from the late fourth century BCE, can be had from Paul Kjellburg’s paper 1994.

³⁸ Stough’s insight can be relied upon. Despite the lack of complete unanimity in the matter (I have already mentioned this lacuna in the work of Bailey and Rameakers) Stough is supported by Frede, Barnes and Annas, as previously noted. It would be possible to add several more references to this point (Algra:2003:74 & Flathman:2000, for example) for it is crucial to an adequate understanding of the intellectual resources available within the discourse of scepticism. There is the unfortunate case of Carlo Frigerio, whose analysis of poststructuralists as modern sophists is set within a whiggish history of scepticism that moves directly from Protagorus to Derrida. His account ends with a late need to recreate in present day science, empiricism as an epistemic closure. In effect he is having to return and recreate the western empirical tradition.

The consequences of this is 'epoche': ie. suspension of judgement.

It does not lead to the negative dogmatism of asserting that the question has no answer or even of claiming that truth is forever hidden. The Pyrrhonist continues to enquire, admitting only that the question is still open and that we do not yet know how to answer it (Hookway:1992:5).³⁹

Several points immediately follow this thorough aporetic awareness. The first of these is that belief may have been repudiated, but that is not the same as saying that knowledge is not possible and this point has been accepted by many historians who have worked on pyrrhonist writings (eg: Michael Frede:1987: 209,253 – 260, Annas & Barnes' translation of Sextus Empiricus' Outlines of Scepticism: 1994: 9, 69, 205, Hankinson: 1995: 252-3, 277, 281, 299-300, 304, Long:1999:74-91, Russell: 1961: 247/8). Second, the sceptic, like any other person must live in the world and be affected by what goes on there. As Sextus himself put it 'we live in accordance with everyday observances' (via Annas & Barnes: p. 9). Third, both Frede and Hankinson have noted how the position of the medical empiricists, on behalf of which Sextus appears to be an advocate, was put into centrality in pyrrhonism. Frede sums it up well: 'to put the matter in a nutshell: the Pyrrhonian follows what appears to him to be the case without committing himself to the view that what appears to him to be the case actually is the case' (Frede: p252).

Sextus makes this possibility of a moderately held empiricism; what Hankinson call 'etiolated belief' (1995:277) abundantly clear. For example:

This exists as a clear example of the difficulties of that can result in ignoring pyrrhonism or misreading its influence on empirical approaches to knowledge.

³⁹ Keimpe Algra again, makes the same point (Algra:2003:74). It has to be accepted that Hookway takes a rather critical view of *epoche* as a principle for living one's life, but that is of course another matter. The point is that he recognises the phenomenon (Hookway:1992:Chs. 1&2)

A sceptic is not, I think, barred from having thoughts, if they arise from things which give him a passive impression and appear evidently to him and do not at all imply the reality of what is being thought of – for we can think, as they say, not only of real things but also of unreal things
(via Annas & Barnes: p. 69).

Appearances are, as Long says, the criterion for action, rather than a criterion of truth (1999:89/90) and although evidence for it is vague, there seems to be no reason why pyrrhonists should not employ logic, though of course they would do so without the accompanying claims of universalism made by Aristotle. It is thus arguably possible, in this secular, non-foundationalist epistemology, to see elements of what is claimed for postmodernism ie. awareness of aporia, but also to see that pyrrhonism's response is recognisable in our own age; that is, in the easy acceptance of an open-ended empirical approach to knowledge which informs the generality of disciplinary methodologies in the modern world.⁴⁰ It is understandable that historians of ancient philosophy, in the enlightenment as much as in the present, should have valued pyrrhonism as a possible model of empirical knowledge, for when placed alongside the competing claims of Aristotle, it can be thought to have an advantage. For example Aristotle brought together, not simply sophism and platonism, but two different, and essentially incompatible, types of closure; ie. that of a constructivist empiricism and of an essentialist universalism. The work of Sextus Empiricus elegantly avoids this inconsistency. The vigour of this philosophical discourse is evidence of the continuing

⁴⁰ This is not however to say that Sextus Empiricus necessarily saw himself as an empiricist in the modern sense, nor would he have been likely to have recognised his work as approximating to any of the varieties of postmodernism. That degree of congruence is not a requirement of this discussion.

importance of scepticism to philosophical debate and of pyrrhonism within the discourse of epistemology.⁴¹

It is also the case that the particular stance towards aporia of pyrrhonism is different from dogmatic scepticism and is less likely to fall prey to the problems of performative contradiction (Williams:1999:142/3) – indeed as Robert Fogelin comments ‘any sceptic with his wits about him avoids negative dogmatism’ (Fogelin:1999:171).⁴² It is not difficult to see the attraction of analytical philosophy as a means of responding to the historical controversy, for the depth and sophistication of its treatment of these issues contrasts with the comparatively simplistic comments of both sides in the controversy. However I do not intend to take the path of philosophy as such. My purpose here is different. For the philosopher, the nature of possible responses to aporia are important – paramount even. To consider and discuss competing claims is precisely (in the sense of arguably) the business of philosophy. Historians generally have different interests. This is not the place to get into a discussion about the merits of Ranke’s famous dictum about judgements on the past, but changing patterns of responses to aporia are clearly what the historian of ideas are concerned with, and that is the intended direction here. Thus ultimately the aim is to enable a broadened debate in historiography to be enriched by additional responses rather than narrowed by arguments for one response against another as it so often has been hitherto.

So, stepping back from the detail now, the discussion of this chapter shows that by taking as a starting point, not arguments for aporia itself, but responses to it – ie. historical conditions for the possibility of knowledge - it is possible to see how previously-considered disparate approaches to thought can be brought into broad

⁴¹ See Michael Williams 1999 and some of the debate consequent on Gettier’s famous short paper ‘Is justified True belief Knowledge?’ 1963 [orig.] here 2000; for example Zagzebski:1994 & Greene & Balmert:1997.

⁴² See also Richard Foley’s discussion of this aspect of scepticism, 2000:182/3.

coherence. In this chapter such a method has enabled platonic forms and two versions of empiricism to be discussed in terms of their historical commonality – that is in terms of their epistemological closures rather than in terms of right or wrong. This is not however to reduce all philosophy to epistemology, nor to conflate or oblivate differences of political significance (although these have not been explored in this part of the study). But the method enables a softer, more flexible and a more tentative way of understanding the sceptical basis of modernity. This may be a fresh approach to discussions about truth in history within the controversy – indeed even within the debate – but as it has been shown here, a model of knowledge as ‘response to aporia’ is by no means unknown within analytical debate.

It is necessary now, within Chapter Three, to carry this approach to knowledge-making on into an analysis of several of the more important strands which have been associated with the development of modern empiricism. The aporetic nature of philosophies can be seen in historical modernity and as such, continues to provide opportunities and examples through which aporia might be handled intellectually in the present.

Chapter Three: Scepticism and Knowledge in Modernity

This chapter continues into modernity the focus on empirical thinkers, and it argues that the structural connection between scepticism and empiricism that was discernible in the ancient world, can be seen too in this period.

However, this is not to say that is Chapter Two with different content. The closer proximity to the present of the works being examined, has produced several differences. Specifically it has been necessary to consider whether to include within the scope of this focus, relevant contributions from the German intellectual tradition.¹ I have decided against doing so. This is not because that tradition is unimportant. On the contrary, the German tradition of thought is central to an historical understanding of continental philosophy from which much poststructuralism is considered to have originated.

However this is not a general history of western traditions of thought, nor of scepticism, nor even of the origins of postmodernism. My aim of working towards a discursive bridge within and between the historical controversy and broader debate is not supported here by broadening the discussion into those areas so much as by demonstrating the ubiquity of scepticism within modern accounts of empiricism. That is therefore the primary focus in this chapter.

Another difference from the last chapter is that, as the analysis shifts closer to the present, and despite apparent evidence to the contrary, it is possible to detect a greater acceptance of scepticism in the closures of these strands of thought. Two features of the field of scholarship appear to be associated with this.

¹ I am referring here to the genre of thought known variously as continental philosophy (Critchley:2001 & West:1996), the Kantian sub-tradition (Cottingham:1984;Dent:1934 & Politis:1993), the western idealist tradition (Brubner:1997 & Rosen:1995) and the romantic tradition (Beck:1996 & Berlin:2000).

First there has been less overt discussion of aporetic issues within empiricism until very recently, as the influence on empiricism of American Pragmatism has come to be felt. The subject appears to have been taken somewhat for granted, especially during the nineteenth century. There can be any number of reasons for this 'forgetfulness' and political expediency is an obvious possibility that has already been noted. Whatever the reasons, the existence of an aporetic core within theoretical accounts of modern empiricism can readily be seen. A re-emphasis on aporia and the responses that can be seen to it, enable the differences between versions of empiricism to be seen as contingent rather than fundamental. For example there would appear to be an unbridgeable gulf between logical positivism and postmodernism, and indeed between the former and empiricism, without the common ground of aporia, through which their responses can be brought into a comparative focus as contingent responses. As responses it is clear that there can be no final once and for all arbitration about their relative merits, for any such attempts are likely to fail against an aporetic 'centre'. This therefore conditions – ie. softens – the kind of discourse that it is appropriate to have about their differences from each other.

The second feature is that when some contemporary empirical thought is viewed in this way – ie. through the model of aporia and response, it does appear that a case can be made for a structural connection between empiricism and some forms of postmodernism, stronger than has been argued for in this study so far. To be clear, I am not suggesting that they are the same. To do so would need - at least - to ignore their very obvious differences in the degree of optimism or otherwise in which each considered the possibility of knowledge, in the light of aporia. However, some readings of both empiricism and postmodernism (not necessarily those of either side in the controversy) do demonstrate some striking similarities.

The analysis of this chapter is based upon the work of the increasing number of scholars who are studying the sceptical themes evident in Europe from the late sixteenth century to the early eighteenth. In brief their focus has shown how pyrrhonist thought re-emerged in western Europe at this time.² They have demonstrated how pyrrhonian scepticism – first re-published in early modernity in 1536 – was used in the struggles of the reformation and that out of it came a modified, or ‘mitigated’, sense of scepticism (Popkin: 1999:332). Popkin for example argues that it was the ideas of Sextus Empiricus that informed the view of a wide cross-section of early modern thinkers that the kind of thorough but non-dogmatic scepticism of pyrrhonism was capable of providing sufficient certainty for human knowledge to take place. For example, he points out that the Jesuit Father Marin Mersenne, who attended the college at La Flèche where Rene Descartes later studied, argued as early as 1625 that scepticism could not be refuted but that ‘it did not prevent people from having adequate ways of dealing with problems’ (Popkin:1999:332). Popkin shows how this mitigated scepticism had developed through the ideas of Montaigne, Bacon and La Vayer and later through Gassendi, Galileo and the association of the theosophist Jan Amos Commenious with Descartes, until it became thoroughly suffused within early modern assumptions about the world (pp329-336) .

It is important to note here that what is implied is that it was not – or at least not wholly - the Aristotelian model of knowledge (with its underlying metaphysical assumptions) that structured modern thinking but, also the thoroughly sceptical position of Sextus Empiricus. Ironically it was the ‘extremism’ of the pyrrhonist argument which allowed for the possibility of mitigated scepticism. It is pyrrhonism’s thorough-going non-dogmatism which logically permits knowledge to be held, as long as it is held tentatively, because as

² See Richard Popkin’s study of scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza (1979) and his *Pimlico History of Western Philosophy* (1999) See also Schmitt:1988) which includes work by Beverley Southgate. It should be said here that despite the criticisms made of Southgate’s explorations of postmodernism, his contribution to the knowledge of scepticism in this period (esp. 1981, 1987, 1989 & 1995) is central to an understanding of the influence of pyrrhonism in the modern world.

Sextus Empiricus argued (and as was noted in the last chapter) it can never be known whether what one thinks is true really is true and therefore it is perfectly feasible to simply believe it to be so until proven otherwise. That position is not open to those theorists whose epistemology requires the existence of a deity, nor of sceptics, or indeed those of the postmodernists, who argue that aporia implies that knowledge is not possible. It is on this subtle but crucial distinction that the conditions for the possibility of modern empiricism has rested.

Beverley Southgate summarises the assimilation of pre-Christian scepticism during the early modern period by pointing out that:

..by the mid-seventeenth century there is considerable evidence for such scepticism having profoundly affected the status of natural philosophy, or science. Instead of providing a revelation of 'truth' about the essence of the natural world, science is thenceforth seen rather as offering a hypothetical explanation for observed phenomena (Southgate:1996a:78).

Southgate goes on to note how this account of science was accepted by practising scientists such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton. It is possible thus to see that, at least for Southgate as well as for Popkin, the intellectual climate which pre-figured some of the philosophy of the enlightenment was one in which the recognition of aporetic awareness was held to a greater or lesser extent consciously, and that early modernity can be

characterised by a growth of new responses to it.³ If this general claim can be seen to be supported through the work of some of the main architects of modern empiricism (for example, David Hume, Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill) then it can be argued that, in its ‘mitigated’ form scepticism has been essential part of modern empiricism. The ground is thereby laid to argue further that by adopting conscious awareness of this, present day empirical historians are able to connect with a long tradition of thought in which the empirical method itself - of relying on the senses and the sense that can be made of it - can be seen as a rational response to a perception of aporia.

A caution is necessary here for there is something of a contradiction in Southgate’s work. Although at times he can be shown, as here, providing historical evidence for scepticism to be thought integral to empiricism, Southgate does not himself go on to see aporia as a component of philosophies other than postmodernism, and especially not of empiricism. In fact often his explanation of scepticism in the seventeenth century is that it is not a constituent of knowledge at all, whether ‘mitigated’ or not. It is then seen by him as merely an ‘antecedent of our own millennial postmodernism’ (200:104). Nevertheless, his evidence of sceptical thought in early modernity is helpful to the analysis of this chapter.

The enlightenment then is the starting point for this discussion and within it Section I focuses on the work of David Hume. Hume’s use of pyrrhonism is the central formative influence on later versions of empiricism and thus on our present patterns of thinking. The subsequent sections of the chapter follow up on this influence by looking at the aporetic

³ See Southgate:1981,1987,1988,1989,1995&1996a; Popkin;1963&1992;Laursen & Popkin:1998; MacDonald:2003&Tonelli:1871.

⁵ The bulk of this account of Hume’s thought rests upon his work *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1748 after it became clear (in Hume’s eyes at least) that his principle work *A Treatise of Human Nature* published in 1739-40 had been a failure; ‘it had’ he said fallen ‘deadborn from the press’ (Hume:1776 via Hendel, C.W. [Ed.] 1955 1977 impr. :p4). I am aware of course of the competing merits of *A Treatise* against *An Inquiry* and that an interesting discussion of this has surfaced from time to time (Huxley:1879:Ch1, Mossner: 1969:22, Gaskin:1993:xv, Flew:1997:Ch1). Nevertheless I have been guided here by Hume’s own consistently held view that *A Treatise* was a work of immaturity in that he had ‘gone to the press too early’ (1977:5) and that *An Inquiry* expressed more adequately his philosophy (Flew:1997:1).

core of Comtean positivism, together with English (that is Millsian) empiricism, and these are then contextualised with later empirical philosophy.

Section I

As an influential philosopher of the enlightenment David Hume has few competitors. Solomon and Higgins's conclusion is typical - that he was 'the clearest example of solid, self-scrutinising enlightenment thinking(his work being) a thoroughgoing skepticism, the likes of which had not been seen since the ancients' (1996:196-7). It is perhaps Hume's atheism which makes his contribution to the enlightenment so central. As Frank Kermode says, the power of the church remained lethal in the eighteenth century (Kermode: 2002:19) and it is sensible to suppose that not all atheists permitted their position to be known. Indeed Gaskin points out that Hume himself was ambivalent about being labelled an atheist despite having thoroughly undercut religious belief in his own work (Gaskin:1993:xiii). Whatever his real view, it is his public face – his published work – with which this study is concerned and there is no doubt that Hume's writings were atheistic. What is important is that as a consequence of such a stance he did not have available to him the concept of an omnipotent God as an epistemological closure, as had his predecessors Descartes, Locke and Berkeley. Thus Hume's account of knowledge required a more explicitly secular closure. In the event it was one that formed the paradigm model for empirical thought, and which has relevance still in the present.

There is an initial problem in regarding his work as being located within the prevailing pyrrhonian version of sceptical thought. Despite the tenor of the times and despite also Hume's widespread reputation as a sceptic, he himself made it clear that far from abjuring knowledge, as the pyrrhonists are generally thought to have done, he was on the side of science and in particular in favour of bringing science to the study of societies.⁴ Moreover

he directly criticised Sextus Empiricus's pyrrhonian thought in favour of the rival - so-called - academic philosophy associated with Carneades (Hume:1955:54 & 168-70). Strangely though, Hume accompanied this criticism of pyrrhonism by using Sextus Empiricus's insights himself in arguing his case, a case which would not have been open to him were he really to have been an 'academic' sceptic (Hume:1955: Section XII Pt. II pp164 – 169). The obvious explanation here – that he was simply mistaken about the nature of ancient scepticism – is barely credible given the extent of scholarship on pyrrhonism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Neither is it likely of course that Hume deliberately misused the writings of Sextus Empiricus to enhance his own account, although it has to be said that as long ago as 1879 Thomas Huxley noticed that in developing his own version of mitigated scepticism (ie. his own response to aporia). Hume deployed 'a caricature of Cartesian doubt' (Huxley:1879:Part II Ch I).

Whatever the answer to this puzzle – and to a degree Hume's motives are unimportant to the purpose of this chapter – what needs to be seen is that his empiricism, which will be shown to be the basis of our modern empirical outlook, had incorporated within it a workable version of the scepticism of antiquity. If we look beyond the surface of Hume's distortion of pyrrhonism we can see that his account of knowledge works in almost exactly the same way as that of Sextus's. It is in Section IV of *An Inquiry* (Parts I & II) that Hume lays out his awareness of aporia. At first he expresses himself in language reminiscent of the sophists and the academic sceptics. Thus he speaks with some certitude about a human inability to discover ultimate cause(s): 'these ultimate springs and principles are totally shut up from human curiosity and inquiry' (1955:45). Here Hume appears to differ from Sextus's ubiquitous doubting. But such difference is more apparent than real, for in the detail of Hume's account can be seen another view of knowledge, and it is one which is distinctly pyrrhonian.

For example they both deploy infinite regressions to argue that certainty in knowledge appears not to be possible. Sextus uses it in relation to his core observation – his ‘chief constitutive principle’ – that ‘to every account an equal account is opposed’ (Outlines of Scepticism BK.I, Section xi, para. 12 via Annas & Barnes:1994:6). To choose between these statements a further claim needs to be made which in turn can be countered by another account equal etc and so on. Thus in Sextus’s view any definitive statement about the world can be made only because the claimant has stopped reasoning too soon. What is so important about this approach is that it is not only an argument for scepticism but is, at the very same time, a theory of how knowledge can be thought to take place. That is, that in our everyday life we do stop the reasoning before infinity; we do it every minute of the day – indeed we have no real choice in the matter - and the realisation that we could if we wished press the questioning for ever, does not stop us from making interim, ie. tentative, empirical, statements (ie, knowledge) all the time.

Hume argues in a remarkably similar manner. Like Sextus he is concerned only with broad claims about the nature of the world, especially the notion of foundations or ultimate causes. In Part I of Chapter IV of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Hume via Hendel [Ed.]: 1955:pp 40 – 53) Hume shows through a discussion of moving billiard balls that effects of causes seem not to be discoverable from the causes. Moreover a multitude of causes can give rise to any one effect and therefore it makes no sense to isolate one cause above others, for if asked to justify this isolation, the question would simply start off another isolation of a further cause, and so on. Hume concludes that it is the circumstances ie. experience, rather than any real knowledge of causes, which gives rise to the isolation of particular causes. What he means here is that what counts as a cause ie. the particular factors that the ‘knower’ isolates, or selects from the total available factors, is dependant on circumstances.⁵ He explores this further in Part II of the chapter,

⁵ A well known example of this in relation to history might be that a historian will necessarily focus (consciously or otherwise) on certain of the multitude of facts that are available in any view of the

posing the question of what might be the foundation for experience. Hume concludes, Sextan fashion, that each solution to this question gives rise to a further question as equally difficult to answer as the first such that ultimate causes or foundations just seem unknowable.

In their response to this aporetic awareness, both philosophers again offer the same form of closure. Sextus's approach is to accept that believing one has certainty in knowledge results from the establishment of a 'too early' settlement of the regression question and that this becomes embedded into what he calls 'everyday observances'. He identifies four of these, viz:

...guidance by nature, necessitation of feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise. By nature's guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. By the necessitation of feelings, hunger forces us to food and thirst to drink. By handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad. By teaching of kinds of expertise we are not inactive in those we accept (via Annas & Barnes:p9).

Clearly Sextus could live his life alongside dogmatists without too much interference from his sceptical theories. For Hume it is exactly the same. In Chapter V of *An Enquiry*, 'Skeptical Solution of these doubts,' Hume makes the same point as Sextus.

past to construct his or her explanation. This selective process may take the form of the choice of words (and therefore concepts) used. It is not difficult to see that different historians, at different times and places, and for different purposes, or indeed in different disciplinary or academic settings, may well focus on different of the available factors and thus produce different 'causes'. Since it not possible to see a cause *in* the past, historians have no ultimate means of knowing whether their particular reading of the past is the 'real' one, history is, as almost all historians agree – with Hume – that history is a discursive practice. Indeed it is this sceptical core that permits the possibility of human knowledge, of the past or the present.

Nor need we fear that this philosophy, while it endeavours to limit our inquiries to common life⁶, should ever undermine the reasonings of common life and carry its doubts so far as to destroy all action as well as speculation. Nature will always maintain her rights and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever (1955: 55).⁷

By whatever terms Hume's position is understood, whether as scientific naturalism (Flew:1997:205) or as mitigated scepticism (Popkin:1999:332) its awareness of aporia is, like Sextus's, an understanding of how knowledge might be thought to be obtained. Hume then goes on in Chapter V of *An Enquiry* to offer his famous argument – his response to this aporia - that experience is known through the observance of custom and constant conjunctions. Thus for him we intuit a cause by observing the same constant, ie. consistent, effects flowing from it. In other words the whole of our world – that is both natural and human society – is known in the same way, through empirical experience moderated by human intellectual speculation. 'Knowing' here means, as in pyrrhonism, holding tentatively to particular understandings of experience until, or in case, something better (more suitable) becomes apparent.

⁶ As distinct from metaphysics.

⁷ John Wright has made much of Hume's reference to nature, arguing for example that it betrays realist assumptions (Wright:1983). I see no advantage in becoming embroiled in this projectionism/realism controversy. This is because it seems to me that Hume's use of 'nature' refers to knowledge found empirically and that it is similar to the sense of 'natural law' that Sara MacDonald argues originated with the sophists (MacDonald:2003). Also, I accept Daniel Robinson's view that Hume's scepticism thoroughly swamps any realist assumptions he may have had (ie. there might be a real world but we appear not to be sure etc.) (Robinson:1998:67). For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see Kail:2001. The term 'projectionism' is being taken here to be much the same as 'constructivism' in the sense that a theorist's beliefs, position etc is 'projected' on to the raw data, to produce knowledge.

A measure can now be taken of the intellectual distance between Sextus Empiricus and Hume on the one hand and our present day overt emphasis on interpretation (or perspectivism or epistemological pluralism, however we conceive it), on the other. Neither pyrrhonism nor Humean empiricism appears to have travelled what now seems to us to be an obvious 'extra mile' to take account of how the idea of 'the appearances of things', on which they both so strongly rely, might strike different people differently in different circumstances. A theoretical provision for it certainly exists in their responses to aporia but it remains in outline only.⁸ It is not difficult with hindsight to critique Hume. He was of course a theorist of his time and class.⁹ The point for this study is not to judge the appropriateness of Hume's response to aporia but to register the fact, that like the major philosophers of the ancient world, his work was aporetically aware.

Section II

It is known from Hume's autobiographical essay *My own life* (1776) that he suffered from a recurring concern with what he feared was a lack of public interest in his work (1955:pp3 – 11). Both Gaskin and Rudé agree that his influence on religious thought or on philosophy in those early years was not great (Gaskin:1993:ix, Rudé:1972:216) and Popkin has noted that it was only after he had been attacked by Reid and Kant that this began to change (Popkin:1999:461). Although his influence might have been slow to start, there is ample evidence that once it took effect it was extensive.¹⁰ These next two sections look at scepticism after Hume by focusing on two of the more important strands of empirical thought in the western tradition: Comtean positivism and English (Millsian)

⁸ This of course was Kant's point of departure with Hume.

⁹ For example see Jeffrey McDonough's discussion of Hume's account of memory (McDonough:2002).

¹⁰ Hume was famous for not responding to critics as James Somerville has pointed out (Somerville:1998). It would be useful, although beyond the scope of this study, to speculate about the significance of this in assessing the early influence of Hume's position.

empiricism. These have structured – and indeed they still structure – our broadly empirical western notions of how knowledge is gained. In each case it can be seen that at the heart of these varieties of empiricism lies the same awareness of aporia which we have seen earlier in the western tradition. It can also be seen that the practical response to aporia which these approaches deploy – their closures – mirror closely the pyrrhonian/Humean position. Their responses rely on non-foundational human experience as a means of controlling the logically endless potential for interpretation which is implied in an awareness of aporia.

Comte's thought seems to be out of favour with historians at present. This is unfortunate because although his account of knowledge may not be as persuasive as it once was, Comtean positivism remains relevant for an understanding of the twentieth century and the present. This is partly because of its structural connection with mainstream empiricism and pragmatism but also because of the common ground Comtean positivism has shared with Marxism (Fletcher:1974:246-249). Certainly an engagement with sceptical issues in Comte's work is central to the needs of this study and it will be argued here that he can be seen to have held an essentially Humean approach to knowledge. It is true that he spent little time discussing the epistemological doubts with which Hume and Sextus Empiricus were concerned. This may be one of the reasons why so many historians of this period have apparently misread his position, but whatever Comte's apparent lack of interest in epistemology, he has thoroughly accepted the philosophical stance of empiricism. It is as though for Comte the issues of the enlightenment no longer needed to be discussed simply because he, along with Mill (and also subsequently most western empiricists), was working within an acceptance of them.¹¹

11 This is a well established position (eg. Andreski:1974:10, Fletcher:1974:7 & Ferre':1988:viii). Comte may have denied his intellectual debt to Saint Simon (Andreski:7) but as he himself made clear, his work was substantially rooted in the enlightenment project (Comte via Fletcher:1974:99, 183 &198).

There has been a considerable degree of contention – potential and actual - arising from Comte's work. From within the controversy, Munslow thinks that Comte believed knowledge to have been formed entirely from observation without the mediation of selecting, cohering or organising thought on the part of the knower (what Munslow calls 'impositionalism') (Munslow:2000:54 & 187). Similarly Beverley Southgate, in company with Richard Rorty, makes Comte believe that 'objective truth' was wholly possible (Southgate:1996b:23 & Rorty:1999:30-31).¹² More broadly, the view of him as a correspondence theory realist is depressingly widespread (eg. Bhaskar:1979:167 & 204, Cahoon:1996:7 & Oakshott via Grant:1990:113). This is particularly to be regretted because the evidence against such a view of Comte is substantial and readily available. Even in historians from widely differing perspectives (such as Collingwood: 1961:126-7 & 222-3 and Crowell:1999:668-9) similar generalisations can be found. The more mendacious of these have tended to exaggerate the shortcomings in some areas of Comte's work making the whole of his contribution seem worthless (Berlin:1974:168) or even vaguely sinister (Sartre:1985:265 in Cahoon:1996). More thorough, primary, scholarship however offers a different, more convincing perspective.

Even without Comte's own acknowledgement of the importance of Hume's work, (in 'Philosophical considerations on the sciences and savants' via Fletcher:1974:183) his position was self evidently Humean. Like Hume he abjured all metaphysical abstractions. He was an atheist and fiercely empirical. He went beyond Hume in justifying his position, not by reference directly to traditional sceptical argument as Hume had done, but by a historical account of knowledge (Comte's famous stages) which sought to valorise empirically the enlightenment period, of which he saw himself still a part (in 'A brief appraisal of modern history' via Fletcher: 1974:99). Where Hume had called for a science of human society, to account for the multifaceted appearances that is reality, Comte can be

12 Several further examples can be added here. (Appleby et.al. 1994:67, Murphy:1997:190 & Gray:1995:65)

regarded as having answered that call and to have provided some of the detail about how it might actually work. In so doing he is widely regarded as having begun the modern discipline of sociology. Thus, were there to be no further evidence brought forward, it would still be possible to suggest that intellectual institutions of modernity have imbibed the scepticism of antiquity through Comte and Hume.

Comtean scholars generally accept that it is necessary to be selective in judging which parts of his writings have value, for as Andreski acknowledges, Comte was inclined to ‘pontificate on all kinds of specific issues on which he was hopelessly wrong’ (Andreski:1974:10). Nevertheless, Comte’s aporetic credentials are widely recognised. Fletcher is typical when he argues that in no sense can Comte be regarded as a determinist, or that he promulgated a reductive account of science (Fletcher:1974:21). He was first and foremost an empiricist, a relativist and speaker for his own, rather than for all, time (Fletcher:1974: 20 & 24). Early in his philosophical career Comte made it plain that his writing should be understood to be rhetorical; that his use for example of terms such as ‘perfection’ did not imply that he thought that ‘absolute excellence’ was possible (in ‘Considerations of the spiritual power’ via Fletcher:1974:232).

In his major work *Cours de philosophie positive 1830 – 1842* (drawn on here in Ferré:1988, henceforth ‘Cours’) Comte is unmistakable in showing his awareness of aporia. From the outset, the importance he attached to history ie. ‘no idea can be properly understood apart from its history’ is suggestive of a relativistic approach to knowledge (Cours:1). More particularly, and again at the outset of his argument, he explains that in what he calls ‘the positive state’ (the historical period he calls positivism ie. his present) there is no longer a search for complete truth:

recognising the impossibility of obtaining absolute truth, [it]
gives up the search after the origin and hidden causes of the

universe and a knowledge of the final causes of phenomena. It [the search] endeavours now only to discover, by a well-combined use of reasoning and observation, the actual laws of phenomena – that is to say, their invariable relations of succession and likeness (Cours 2).

A similarity here with postmodern statements is discernible, but so too is the reference to ‘relations of...likeness’ clearly an antecedent of Ferdinand de Saussure’s relational linguistics of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Comte wanted there to be no misunderstanding about his account of knowledge and he repeated his statement of aporia immediately after the above passage. ‘The explanation of facts, thus reduced to its real terms, consists henceforth only in the connection established between different particular phenomena and some general facts’ (Cours 2).

Thus he shows that human knowledge can never simply correspond with notions of an extra-human objective ‘reality’. Knowledge of scientific laws is for Comte, as it was for Hume before him and for empiricists after him, the result of empirically-known regularities upon which some reliance might be thought to be had. On the question of the objectivity of science Comte was equally clear.

Everybody, indeed, knows that in our positive explanations, even when they are most complete, we do not pretend to explain the real causes of phenomena, as this would merely throw the problem further back; we try only to analyse correctly the circumstances of their production, and to connect them by normal relations of succession and similarity (Cours:8).

The similarity between Hume's criterion of closure of 'constant conjunction' and Comte's 'normal relations of succession and similarity' is clear. In the example he used to illustrate this point – the Newtonian law of gravitation – he shows that for him scientific laws explain the phenomena of the world only 'as far as they can' (Cours:8). Questions about the nature of causes should, he said, be rightly abandoned 'to the imagination of the theologians or the subtleties of the metaphysicians' (Cours:9).¹³ If we should be in any doubt that Comte was a sceptical empiricist of the Humean kind, this must be dispelled by his naturalistic account of human (social) science, which regarded as an illusion the idea that the human mind could ever achieve 'direct contemplation of itself' (Cours:20). Ironically he sounds remarkably like a present day postmodernist when he argued that:

the thinking individual cannot cut himself in two – one of the parts reasoning, while the other is looking on. Since in this case the organ observed and the observing organ are identical, how could any observation be made? (Cours:21).

Comte's methodology follows from this sceptical view. Although it is clear from the quotations used here already that his was an empirical stance; it was not a naïve realist one. As Fletcher says, 'Comte thought of positive science as a questing, imaginative, hypothetical study exactly as modern philosophers of science do. Indeed, they say little – if anything – more than he' (Fletcher:1974:25).

¹³ There is a good deal more to this issue than this discussion has space or direct need for. Chris McClellan offers a useful treatment of the subject, showing the similarities between Comte's empiricism and that of the early 19th century French scientist Georges Cuvier (2001:1-29). It would be an interesting line to follow since it illustrates one of the precise points at which Aristotelian notions of final causes were purged from Western European empirical science, and it goes someway to explaining too, Comte's abiding interest in connections between sceptical empirical epistemology and its application by practising scientists.

On the crucial question (certainly for historians) of whether facts speak for themselves Comte is clear that his empiricism is one in which there is an interconnection between facts and the perspective which gives rise to their selection. He says:

If it is true that every theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theory. Without such guidance, our facts would be desultory and fruitless; we could not retain them; for the most part we could not even perceive them
(Fletcher:1974:25).

In practice this means, for Comte, having an awareness of one's starting point. Without this 'neither inductive nor deductive procedures would help us...even in regard to the simplest phenomena, if we did not begin by anticipating the results, by making a provisional supposition' (Fletcher:1974:25). So far it is hard to see how Comte could be criticised as a theorist of the enlightenment. His response to aporia is the epitome of a modern critically aware empiricist. But of course there is more to Comte than this and some of it is indeed, at least superficially, hard to reconcile with the idea of Comte as a sceptical empiricist.

One of these areas of difficulty is his use of history. The point has already been made that it is indicative of a relativistic frame of mind, since in a historicist account of knowledge (ie. one which sees historical time as moving through stages) truth or certainty tends to be judged relative to the age in which it occurs. However a corollary of this might be that in holding a firm position about the nature of reality, Comte could have laid himself open to a charge that he was demonstrating doctrinaire or metaphysical assumptions. But such a response would have to contend with several counterpoints.

First, the exact same charge could be levelled at any theorist, since no starting positions can be proven, and if it could it would still be necessary to justify that choice of proof and so on. Second, as Andreski points out there is nothing very special or very radically new about Comte's sense of history. 'The law of three stages boils down to the idea of progress from superstition to science, upheld by all enlightenment writers of the eighteenth century' (Andreski:1974:12). Third, Fletcher takes the view that Comte never believed in 'clear-cut,' distinct, historical stages for he saw each of his historical systems co-exist 'in the heart of society'(Fletcher:1974:29). And, fourth, these stages can also be thought to be simply the starting hypotheses which we have already seen that Comte (along with non-foundationalists in general) believes to be necessary for the production of knowledge.

Another possible problem with Comte's sceptical credentials was his repeated use of terms such as 'necessary' and 'laws' which could give rise to charges that he had metaphysical assumptions. It is clear however from his explanations of how he saw knowledge work, ie. from the extracts quoted above, that the closures to which he was referring were simply empirical regularities.

Probably the most difficult of his closures for historians to come to terms with is his recommendation that the control of knowledge should be lodged in the hands of a body of secular priests managing a system of 'spiritual humanity' (in 'Considerations on the spiritual powers' via Fletcher:1974:220). It is easy to dismiss this part of his philosophy as being a decline into incoherence as a result of ill health, late in life. By re-editing Comte's early essays Fletcher has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the positivist use of religion was conceived and justified early in Comte's writing career and it must therefore be engaged with, in any effective understanding of his work.¹⁴

¹⁴ And not least because there is some evidence that Mill supported Comte's ideas here, at least in principle. (Hamburger:1998:73).

In fact there is little substance to this problem once the importance of intellectual control is addressed. It will be recalled that an almost a defining feature of ideas in England and France during the early years of the nineteenth century was a fear (at least by the bourgeoisie and monied classes) of a repetition or spread of revolution. It was a fear that regarded the relative, if limited, freedoms of enlightenment thought as having contributed to what was seen as the tragedy of the French Revolution and that unrest was brought on by 'negative and critical principles' causing 'the collapse of traditional modes of authority and the organic nature of the social bonds' (Swingewood:1984:33). Here Comte was very much a man of his time and although his constructivism was never in any doubt, Comte was by no means sanguine about who should do the constructing. He was clear that it should be those with education and experience of the world. As he said himself, spiritual humanity was urgently needed to avoid intellectual anarchy and to promote public morality (Fletcher: 1974: 220-221).¹⁵

From Comte's position of atheistic empiricism, it was not open to him to support the communitarian processes of social bonding or control offered by Christianity, but it was not entirely without sense to attempt to achieve comparable ends by borrowing its organs and bending them to a secularised version of religion. There is considerable support in the secondary literature for such an account of Comte's use of religion. Niall Ferguson has noted how Herbert Butterfield had argued – albeit somewhat disapprovingly since he was himself fiercely Christian – that:

much enlightenment thought was merely “lapsed Christianity”
with “nature” “reason” and other nebulous entities simply
taking the place of God. Doctrines of progress were clearly

¹⁵ Similarly Hamburger quotes him as arguing that 'philosophical action must prevail today over political action,' that those with 'superior minds must...reserve themselves for philosophic analysis ...on which the forward march of the ultimate regeneration of the human elite depends' (1998:73).

secularised adaptations of Christian doctrines though supposedly based on empirical foundation (Ferguson:1998:26).

Similarly, Francois Asouvi uses Destutt de Tracy's work of 1796¹⁶ to point to the changes which had occurred in philosophising in the post-enlightenment period. Whereas previously debate had taken the form of speculation about causes and origins – that is, concepts of Aristotelian and Christian thinking – it now began to give way to a new type of philosophy, which Destutt de Tracy had called *ideologie*. By this term, Azouvi tells us, Destutt de Tracy meant that it replaced old religious metaphysics:

Ideology is the discipline concerned with the formation of our ideas on the basis of sensations, their formation, transformations, and application to the moral, political, legal spheres.the new philosophy examines phenomena with the aim of demonstrating how they generate each other (Azouvi:1999:568).

Destutt de Tracy was able to see this happening as early as the end of the eighteenth century and in this kind of context it is hardly to be wondered at that Comte and others in his circle of Saint-Simonian politics thought that there was a role for a thoroughly transformed, secularised, Christianity which might function as a form of epistemological social and political closure.

¹⁶ This is Destutt de Tracy's *Memoire sur la faculte de penser* (Notes on the faculty of thinking). Azouvi goes on to say that it is mainly because of Destutt de Tracy that ideology came to be known in the United States. He maintained a steady correspondence with Thomas Jefferson beginning in 1806, noting that Jefferson translated one of Destutt de Tracy's works.

It is difficult to leave Comte's role in the development of modern empiricism at just these brief comments for there is no doubt that present day historiography has barely done justice to his contribution. Fletcher puts it more firmly when he points out that many critics are 'deriding that of which they have read only a caricature' and that despite Comte's 'idiosyncrasies' and 'extremes' 'No one has more succinctly laid bare the many-sided nature of the dilemmas that are still alive in our experience, and still form the substance of our problems' (Fletcher:1974:4).

More particularly for the purposes of this study it is necessary to note that Comte's awareness of aporia, his empirical response to it and, as John Skorupski argues the essence (rather than the actuality) of his spiritual humanity, can be found in the writings of J.S.Mill. Skorupski opens his study of Mill by recognising that for all his problems Comte: 'did convince him [Mill] that the leading role in social science would be played by a historical sociology which pictured society as a functional organic 'consensus' of all its aspects cautiously evolving through time' (Skorupski:1998:18). It is therefore to Mill's social or as Skorupski sees it, organic, closure and through this towards a very present day view of empiricism, which the discussion of this chapter must now turn.

Section IV

John Skorupski acknowledges at the outset of his study of J.S. Mill, that although Mill took a rather hostile attitude to Hume, whom he saw as pretentious:

the philosophy and politics associated with Bentham from which Mill sprang, shares important doctrines with Hume. Bentham generously acknowledged Hume's influence in

leading him to a clear distinction between the normative and the factual (Skorupski:1998:7).

Bentham, James Mill and John Stuart Mill all share with Hume an adherence to associationism.¹⁷ Moreover, Mill placed followers of Reid, together with Kantians, in what he variously called the 'intuitional', 'transcendental', and 'a priori school' – to which he opposed his own school of 'experience and association'. (Skorupski:1998:7).

The connection between Mill¹⁸ and Hume goes deeper than mere influence. Structural similarities can be detected. For example Mary Warnock has pointed out how a broadly utilitarian position was first articulated by Hume,¹⁹ and that Bentham readily admitted that he (and by implication the Mills too) had followed in Hume's footsteps (Warnock:1962:14,16, 23). The same can be said for Mill's relationship with Comte. In his main work on Comte's thought Mill shows just how close they were. He did not rest with describing Comte's arguments but added examples to support them, just as though they were collaborators (Mill:1866:16-17). Indeed there is some evidence to suggest that they actually were collaborators. The friend and intellectual associate of Mill, Alexander Bain, has recorded how, not only did Mill organise financial assistance for Comte but Comte assisted Mill with the formulation of Mill's logic and helped him shape his political philosophy (Bain:1882:72). Moreover later, when their friendship had cooled and Mill became critical of Comte, Mill did not change those ideas which he had shared with Comte (Bain:1882:72). Indeed Mill was careful to make it clear that his differences with Comte were about style rather than about substantive epistemology; about traits of personality

¹⁷ 'Associationism' refers here to Hume's closure of constant conjunctions – his theory that causes are known through the empirical observation of consistent associations of effects (Hume:1955:Ch5).

¹⁸ unless otherwise specified 'Mill' refers to John Stewart Mill.

¹⁹ This is hardly to be wondered at for in the absence of absolute moral certainty what could be more sensible than to follow broadly one's own, or one's own community's, interests.

(Mill:1866:15,27,31,131,137-9), rather than a conflict between for example individualism and collectivism, such as existed between Comte and John Grote (Bain:1882:75).²⁰

It perhaps hardly needs saying that like Hume and Comte, Mill's influence on mainstream western empirical thought has been profound. Less well known has been his influence via pragmatism on American (Quinian) postmodernism. This has been acknowledged by no less significant a figure in that genre than Richard Rorty (Rorty:1989: xiv, 45;1980:119, 148-9,160,235,270,308; via Cahoon:1996:585).²¹ Certainly Mill's pre-eminence is widely accepted, whether at the popular level, where his simple method of difference and similarity lies at the heart of his logic, or in his more naturalistic writing where his social and political thought has been so enormously important (Kitcher:1998:58 and Mcloskey:1971:7).

Mill's aporetic awareness is unmistakable. He argued for example that 'the good' could never be proved and that we must rest content with 'acceptance' (Mill: Utilitarianism via Warnock:1962:255). Mill's account of logic was one in which logic did not attempt to reach certainty or absolute truth; it was really no more than a guide to our thinking (Mill:1930:3&5). Similarly, science for Mill was thoroughly sceptical and he believed that to look for any kind of original certainty was to seek for metaphysical explanations (1930:4). Like Comte he emphasised that he was speaking only for his own time and circumstances – not laying down truths for all time (p4-5) – and that the criteria for the rules of logic which he was proposing came from empirical experience (p6). In fact Mill

²⁰ Joseph Hamburger has drawn on Oscar Haac's translation of Comte's correspondence with Mill (1995) to argue that their relationship was a particularly tight one. Hamburger notes that what began to separate them was their differences over whether their atheism should be publicly acknowledged (Mill refused to do this) and differing views about the role of women in society (Mill argued strongly in support of gender equality). Gradually however, after the initial loosening of their collaboration other differences – eg on financial matters – began to grow in importance. The point is that these factors do not relate to their shared epistemology.

²¹ Rorty is supported here by Haber: 1994: 83 and Skorupski: 1998: 4.

argued for a form of nominalism (almost a 'linguistic turn') long before it became fashionable after Saussure's work at the turn of the century.²²

Mill's closure – his response to aporia – takes the by-now normal empirical criterion of experience based upon perceived regularity. This was no simple gesture, for Mill regarded not only the canons of logic and the truths of science but also those of mathematics to be based on human experience (Mill:1930:147, 214). But his contribution to empiricism went even deeper than simply this recognition of experience as being the central basis for knowledge. Mill extended his work into explaining how experience might work at the everyday level of social policy and morality. This refers of course to his famous intervention into Humean and Benthamite utilitarianism. His contribution to utilitarianism is said to have combined romanticism with the enlightenment project (Critchley:2001:42,45). Whether or not this was the case - and there has been some suggestion that he was merely distancing himself from his father's influence (Sabine:1963:706) - the distinction he made between higher and lower pleasures transformed utilitarianism. This is so because it released the theory from the limitations of the much criticised Benthamite 'pleasure calculus'. At a risk of making utilitarianism all things to all people (McClosky:1971:70-71), Mill's redefinition of pleasure enabled it to function as a modern mass epistemological closure. Since Mill's contribution made pleasure within utilitarianism something akin to 'interests' or 'motivations' rather than 'hedonism' 'the greatest good for the greatest number' became a support for a humanistic approach to life. Thus instead of believing that humankind's purpose on earth was to further God's will, the point of human existence – in the absence of a point – became one in which humans sought their own, or their society's own, perceived best interests. In this sense we are all utilitarians now. Mill himself expressed the democratic implications of utilitarianism in an individualistic manner. For example his concept of the 'tyranny of the majority' (Mill:1962:126-140) limited democracy to a position that could be thought

²² See also Richard White (2003:213) for further evidence of this.

subservient to the maintenance of private property rights and thus to existent power structures. But of course utilitarianism could equally well support a communal ethic and in twentieth century socialism there has been a demonstrable attempt to do so.

The distinction Mill made between higher and lower pleasures might be thought to have brought his criterion of experience to a resounding halt, as the notion of being able to tell the difference between higher and lower anything, let alone something as nebulous as pleasure, presupposes some objective means of measurement. Mill's own explanation has emphasised that danger since he stressed that 'higher' pleasures would be chosen by those who had experienced both levels. In fact a close reading of Mill's actual point in *Utilitarianism* (via Warnock:1962:259) shows that it is not so much the case that people who have experienced both forms of pleasure will automatically value one over the other, although given Mill's narrow social circle we could easily understand why he might have thought so. Rather the more general criterion which Mill was recommending was that assent to standards should be sought from those people who have experienced both higher and lower pleasures, rather than from those (from the majority, in Mill's own society, it has to be said) who might have experienced only the lower ones. Thus in seeking to maximise experience as a means of assessing the competing claims of needs and pleasures, Mills keeps utilitarianism well within his overall closure of experience and indeed in the process shows that he sees it as having a social/cultural base. This is a refinement of experience which begins to be really quite recognisable as a criteria for knowledge in the twentieth/twenty-first centuries.²³

²³ Iona and James Tarrant (2004) offer an insightful reading of Mill's utilitarianism in which the essentialist 'pleasure' principle of Bentham's utilitarianism is contrasted with the more genuinely 'utilitarian' (as they term it) 'preferences' criterion of Mill's version. They argue, convincingly, that Mill's utilitarianism provides an argument for the value of broad liberal, over narrow vocational, educational objectives since the former enables students to develop their existing preferences as against merely developing skills. The point for this study is that the notion of a hierarchy of preferences is compatible with aporetic awareness whereas that of pleasures, with its more objectivist connotations, is not.

Although both Mill and Comte applied the insights of modern empiricism to the needs of nineteenth century society, Mill showed himself to be rather more successful than Comte at this. While Comte's thought remains controversial Mill's approach to knowledge has become so accepted that, one hundred and fifty years on, it has become almost common sense. This is not to say of course that Mill's work escaped controversy entirely.²⁴

Utilitarianism in particular has attracted a massive literature. His empirical scepticism too has been criticised. Typical of this was that of W.L. Courtney, one of Mill's contemporaries and a self avowed metaphysician. His criticism was that since Mill's epistemology was essentially sceptical it could not, by definition, achieve knowledge (Courtney:1879:1, 24,45).²⁵ Whatever the merits of this charge – and of course from a sceptical position, this was not a telling criticism – there is no doubt that Mills's outlook was empirical.

Throughout his whole programme, whether in relation to science, mathematics, logic, the nature of philosophy, causation, his concept of philosophical necessity,²⁶ utilitarianism, the role of women in society or even how to determine what it is that is to count as pleasure, Mill's criterion for knowledge was human experience. Utilitarianism was reason (Deleuze via Pearson:1997:54) and connotation everywhere determined denotation (McClosky:1971:17). It appeared to Mill there was nothing to be known beyond this and therefore nothing could ever be certain in human affairs. As William James pointed out, even after the insights of utilitarianism had been applied to a problem, it might still be necessary to agonise over a decision (James via Putnam:1997:100). To seek to go beyond such a sceptical base was for Mill, as it had been for empiricists back to Sextus Empiricus, indicative of an involvement with mystifying metaphysical ruminations. As Mills said

²⁴ For example the apparent contradiction in Mill's account of liberalism, between his emphasis on freedom of the individual in the West compared with his very different attitude towards people in the Third world has been critically examined by Richard White, who concludes that it is necessary to differentiate between lapses by the individual theorist and the broader coherence of their writing. Thus here Mill is seen as simply erring in terms of his own work, which in fact supports multiculturalism despite the individual views of its creator.

²⁵ Resonance between such a critique and that of the postmodern historians is all too clear.

²⁶ This is his argument that if we have all of the circumstances relating to a human problem then we can work out what a person's response to it will be. The objectivist associations here are dispelled by Mill's clarification that this 'necessity' has no more strength than that which experience provides (Mill:1930:547-8), that empirical laws in social science are only generalisations (p.592).

himself, 'It appears then that we need experience to inform us in what degree and in what cases, or sorts of cases, experience is to be relied on' (A System of Logic:1930:209). It is hard to imagine a more experiential position than this.

Section V

Important though Mill's thought still is,²⁷ the aims of these two chapters on empiricism will not have been achieved unless it can be shown that empiricism remains aporetic in the present day. In one sense this is not difficult; examples abound, and indeed some have already been given in these chapters to show that a significant number of present day historians of philosophy are aware of the sceptical core that exists in empiricism. But in another sense the sheer ubiquity of aporetic awareness now, makes it difficult to do justice to the task. My intention therefore is to confine this discussion to two areas. First I want to trace the evolution of an illustrative strand of empiricism from Mill to a point where it can be directly compared with one version of postmodernism and second, in order to broaden this illustration, I shall sketch briefly some of the more prominent examples of how empiricists appear to be successfully handling aporia.²⁸

The connection between Millsian empiricism and American Pragmatism – between especially the 'classical' pragmatism of William James and John Dewey - has already been noted. Richard Rorty points out that 'James not only dedicated Pragmatism to John Stuart Mill, but reiterated some of Mill's most controversial claims' (Rorty:1997:84). James himself confirmed this when, he explained the title of his text *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1996:ChII, pp.39-91). His pragmatism (and that of Peirce with whom he collaborated) was first and foremost empirical in that 'it is a philosophy of plural facts like

²⁷ See Glover:1990 for an example of how utilitarianism remains a live - and lively – philosophical topic.

that of Hume and his descendants' (p.42). It differed from Humean empiricism he argued, in that it was 'radical'. What he meant by this was that empiricism's closure – that which prevents interpretation from continuing into infinity, and therefore what constitutes what we call knowledge – has to be overtly acknowledged rather than implicitly so, as in the European empiricism of Hume, Comte and Mill. James himself expresses it thus:

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit to its construction any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system (p.42).

In other words the experiences that give rise to the perspective – ie. the overall point of the exercise - is as important as the resultant knowledge itself.

For James, two things followed from this principle. First was the view that it was this tendency of empiricism hitherto to ignore its criteria for closure, that has allowed rationalism the opportunity 'to correct its incoherences by the addition of trans-experiential agents of unification...' (p.43).²⁹ Pragmatism was an improvement in that the experiences that gave rise to a particular closure needed to be acknowledged. Second was the belief that 'truth' was a function of those experiences. This is the basis for the so-called cash value of pragmatic truth. As James explained;

²⁸ For clarity, 'Trace' and 'evolution' here are used conventionally to refer to the tracking of accounts within the historical record, rather than to any kind of notion of a posited essence of empiricism existing outside of discourse within a supposed objectively existing past.

²⁹ In fact exactly the same could be said of the relationship between empiricism and postmodernism today. It is this weakness of empiricism, in relation to closure, that has allowed it to be regarded by postmoderns as a correspondence theory.

I am well aware how odd it must seem to some of you to hear me say that an idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives (James in Goodman:1995:63).

It is not difficult to see how this insight could appeal not only to more empirical historians but also to Marxists and to certain types of postmodernists.

In John Dewey's work Peirce and James's case for a critically self-aware approach to knowledge is given a content that, in light of the value placed on pedagogic practices of student centred active learning, may seem quite familiar in the present day. Dewey shared the aporetic awareness of Peirce and James, holding that 'meaning ...is more precious than is truth' (Kestenbaum:1977:2) but for him closure implied not just theoretical notions of self-awareness but the lived experience of it. It is 'immediately lived meanings [that] disclose the world and order reality' he argued (1977:3). For this to take place the total organism must be 'implicated in the constitution of the object' (p.40). And as John Stuhr notes, Dewey's form of pragmatist critical reflection³⁰ is 'genuinely genealogical' in that it is a form of destabilisation of the present; an '“intellectual disrobing” - a critical inspection at times of some of the intellectual habits that clothe us as members of a particular culture at a particular time and particular place' (Stuhr:1997:ix). Thus, Dewey's pragmatic empiricism implied an emphasis 'on practice, on the actual ways in which we learn to do things by doing them' (Solomon and Higgins:1996:262).

Thus for these philosophers pragmatism shared empiricism's awareness of aporia as well as its experiential response to it. What separated them from empiricists was that pragmatism acknowledged the nature of its response - its closure - as part of its actual practice of

³⁰ It is this form of reflection on one's own epistemological thought processes that I am referring to when using the expression 'reflexivity'.

knowledge-making, whereas empiricism has tended not to do so. There may be several reasons why this has developed and, although I am conscious of the dangers of developing broad historical speculations, it is worth pausing to note two possible reasons why it may have happened. In doing so the connection becomes the clearer.

The first of these is that modern empirical methodologies have grown in the face of a long established and powerful Christian epistemology which had by its central definition stressed a foundational role for a supra-human knower – God. Similarly in post-enlightenment modernity the Kantian sub-tradition has functioned as an on-going competitor to Humean empiricism, maintaining a secular version of Christian metaphysical epistemology. In both cases stress has been laid on stronger forms of a priori; more absolute in their assumptions than the empirical use of it as simply a hypothetical starting point. A similar problem – and one which lay closer at hand for English empiricism – was the realism of the so-called ‘common sense’ school of philosophy arising from Thomas Reid’s critique of Hume and owing for its insights to the influence of the Christianity of the Cambridge platonists (Hutton: 1999:366-373). Here Reid’s belief in humans having a common nature implied unavoidable and certain (in that they were necessarily common) a priori.³¹ In forging a position distinct from the metaphysics of Christianity, Kantianism or realism, the a priori was an obvious area of difficulty for empiricists and it is understandable that they should have played down its importance in their approach to knowledge.

The second possible reason for this neglect is a social, that is to say a political, one. It is an obvious point but one worth recalling that until the mid twentieth century when a broadening of mass education began in earnest, the making and control of knowledge in the western world was largely in the hands of a white male middle-class. The diversity of

³¹ An effect of this can be seen in Reid’s intuitionism in ethics although it is very different from Mill’s utilitarian conclusions.

contact across ages, nations and cultures which is currently assumed in almost any understanding of 'mass society' was then largely unknown. So while the assumptions, beliefs and understandings which comprised the starting points in empirical knowledge-making (ie. a priori) may well have been a necessity at the theoretical level there was perhaps less need for it in practice. It is well understood in the present day that to have had an education before the age of mass education was, almost by definition, to have been a part of a single, classics-educated, white and male intellectual society. What is important is that within such a society it could be assumed that starting points were held effectively in common. Their assumptions would therefore have needed no elucidation and could have quite reasonably have been left at the level of general understandings, to be discussed only when or if the need arose. It is these conditions along with other changes in modern society, which are now changing and to which postmoderns refer in their use of the historical term 'postmodernity'.

It is not now difficult perhaps to imagine how in the America of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their version of empiricism may have evolved with a greater concern to articulate interpretative criteria – ie. closure. As the 'New World,' much of the cultural memories and habits of thought deriving from early modern European struggles between secular and ecclesiastical interests may well have had a looser hold on the American cultural consciousness than it had still in Europe. Similarly, the influx into America of very large numbers of immigrants during the early part of this period, may have produced a somewhat earlier version of the discursive circumstances – the multi-faceted capitalist milieu - that postmoderns currently identify as the conditions of postmodernism (Harvey:1989). In these circumstances it is not hard to see that there could be a premium placed on incorporating into one's perspectives the criteria that has given rise to it, for the common cultural context, so easily relied on in Europe, may simply not have functioned so effectively in the USA.

There is another link that can be seen between pragmatism and the empiricism of Hume, Comte and Mill and it is one that has a bearing on the similarity between empiricism and postmodernism – the postmodernism that is, of the pragmatic postmodern theorist Richard Rorty. In commenting on the decline and resurgence of pragmatism around the mid twentieth century, Cornel West has noted several reasons why, despite pragmatism's being widely regarded as the American philosophy, it never achieved a hegemonic position within US universities and indeed its popularity dipped in the 1940s. He posits several factors; for example that pragmatist thinkers tended to be engaged public philosophers rather than influential professionals and that the work of Russell, Whitehead, Lowenheim, Skolem, Church and Godel on symbolic logic rather crowded out pragmatism, which had little to say about that aspect of philosophy (West:1989:182). Most important he says, is the fact that 'Austrian and German emigres, in flight from the Nazis, brought to the American philosophical scene a project of rigor, purity, precision and seriousness - logical positivism' (1989:183). The work of Rudolf Carnap, Reichenbach, Tarski, Feigl and Hempel was immense, he suggests, and in comparison, made pragmatism seem 'vague and muddleheaded' (p.183).

In fact that situation did not last. The movement of ideas in the post-war years was clearly moving in a more open-ended direction. In particular this form of positivism did not survive W.V.O. Quine's famous critique where he showed that the analytic-synthetic foundations of logical positivism were susceptible to a destructive sceptical analysis.³² (Stroll:1999:647-651). In retrospect this should hardly have been surprising since logical positivism's origins in Comtean positivism are so clearly also aporetically sceptical. In this sense the 'logical' extension of positivism was merely an attempt to firm up on the certainty of positivism's response to aporia, but it was an attempt that has been subjected to ongoing critique almost from the outset, not least by A.J. Ayer, one of its own central

³² Quine's main critique of logical positivism was in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' *Philosophical Review* 60, 1951. There is a bibliographical history of the work in (Quine:1969:20),

architects. Moreover Ayer repeatedly acknowledged his debt to Hume and Mill and thus to sceptical empiricism (Ayer:1940:244; 1971:9,42; 1976:106). What Quine did was simply to point out the degree to which logical positivism had lost contact with its own aporetic centre. A caution is necessary here for although clearly logical positivism is a version of empiricism, not its genus, some theorists, not least Quine, but also more recently Mark Bevir (1994, 1999 & 2000) have apparently worked with that assumption. This needs to be taken into account, particularly with Quine's critique, for this is directed at logical positivism's verifiability not to empiricism in general. That becomes obvious when the significance of that critique is seen, for as Rorty notes, Quine's intervention resulted in the 're-pragmatisation...of American Philosophy' in the post-war years (Rorty:1999:31). Cornel West has charted how, in the 1950s this new more thoroughly aporetic pragmatism enjoyed a revival and, through the works of Wilfred Sellars in the 1960s and Nelson Goodman in the 1970s, it mutated into Richard Rorty's current postmodern-like position (West:1989:Ch5).

Rorty is an important figure here because postmodernists claim his support for their positions (for example Jenkins in general but specifically:1999:Ch4:98) and this has been accepted by philosophers outside postmodernism (eg. Haber 1994). Rorty himself describes his own ideas as 'pragmatist' and has readily accepted that pragmatism is close to empiricism (Rorty: 1989: XIV; 1998: 308; 1999:148). Thus if the sceptical empiricism of Hume, Comte and Mill can be equated with pragmatism, and the latter with Rorty's version of postmodernism which in turn has been claimed for the postmodern side in the historical controversy, then it obviously follows that whatever the differences between either side in that controversy, these cannot be as fundamentally epistemological as both sides seem to accept. But there is a sense in which this conclusion should not come as a surprise. Even a cursory glance at present day debates about empiricism shows that, although without the kind of apocalyptic claims that have accompanied some of the postmodern critiques, and in

the face of dismissals by empirical historians, an easier acceptance of aporia and a more overt acknowledgement of position, has become a more evident feature of empiricism.³³

As Quine himself saw, the failure of symbolic logic to produce a response to aporia that was more reliable than 'experience' meant that philosophy remained much as Hume had left it but, drawing on Jeremy Bentham's work on the meaning of sentences, as distinct from words,³⁴ Quine developed pragmatism into a form of naturalistic epistemology, which response to aporia was to focus on the closure – that is, on the psychology of the knower (Quine:1969:69-90). Donald Davidson's takes a similar approach, in *The Folly of Trying to Define Truth* (1996)³⁵ and Wittgenstein's later work on language games was a holistic contextualist response to aporia which, like Quine, assumes 'a lack of sharpness' on 'the boundary between rule and empirical propositions' (Trigg:1993:p.25-31). Less contextualist, although more in alignment with Dewey's experiential response to aporia, was Gilbert Ryle's mid twentieth century work on 'knowing how and knowing that' which appeared in 1949 (Ryle:2000:ChII). Bernard Williams too, although vigorously opposed to the idea that truth was not a useful concept because it was seemingly unachievable, avoided correspondence theory or a realist stance. Instead he concluded that truth was form of effective communication (Williams:2002:271). Moreover he criticised Jurgen Habermas's concept of an 'ideal speech situation' for Habermas's having not sufficiently realised that 'the force of reason can hardly be separated altogether from the power of persuasion and as the ancient Greeks well know, the power of persuasion ... is still a species of power (2002:226).³⁶

³³ This is discussed further in the next chapter.

³⁴ Bentham called this form of contextual definition 'paraphrasis' (Quine:1969:72).

³⁵ From reprint in Blackburn & Simmons:1999. Here Davidson argues that 'the truth of sentences depends on the inner structure of the sentence, that is on the semantic features of the parts' (1999:3111-2).

³⁶ Habermas's ideal speech situation was a thought experiment in 'Modernity an unfinished Project' that attempted to sanitise interpretative knowledge from all forms of power and potential coercion (Habermas:1981 via D' Entreves & Benhabib:1996:38-55). There is a major literature on the subject but it is beyond the scope of the argument of this study.

In political philosophy - on the edges of a postmodern analysis – John Gray has seen the importance of pyrrhonism. In the conclusion of his work *Liberalisms* (1989) he refers rather cryptically, to the possibility of a sceptical political pyrrhonism, based on Hume's thought, that he sees as a position able to sustain a post-liberal society (Gray:1989:261-264). More thoroughly worked in the philosophy of science, are some now fairly well established means of handling aporia. The work of Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos is widely known. Both have improved on Popper's falsificationism³⁷ by emphasising in their slightly different ways, how research programmes are more significant than Popper's focus on individual theories (Brown, Fauvel & Finegan:1981:Chs 4-5)). In both cases their insights are predicated on an awareness of aporia and an experiential response to it. Somewhat more controversial is Paul Feyerabend's self styled anarchistic argument that scientific knowledge rests on 'an ever increasing ocean of mutually incompatible alternatives [PF's emphasis.] (Feyerabend:1993:18&Ch2). It is likely that Feyerabend's position is perhaps closer to postmodernism than it is to empiricism but he admits to having been influenced by Wittgenstein and Quine (1993:212-3) and he agrees with Kuhn on the importance of the history of science as being an inseparable part of science itself (p.21). Ultimately his aim is to generate aporetic awareness; as he says himself, it is simply to show that 'all methodologies, even the most obvious ones, have their limits (p.23).³⁸

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the current spread of contemporary aporetic acceptance, in empiricism, is to be found in philosophical textbooks. For example Robert Audi, in his introduction accepts that knowledge - or at least justified belief – is possible whether or not scepticism has validity (Audi:1998:307). Similarly in a discussion of coherence theory in William Hughes's basic text *Critical Thinking*, Hughes readily acknowledges what is so

³⁷ Popper's falsificationism was itself a development of Mill's method of induction (Mill:1930:Bk.3 Ch.14).

³⁸ A similar pattern can be seen within the methods and philosophy of sociology. Examples include Michael Young's ground breaking work on the social organisation of knowledge (1971) and Anthony Giddens's account of 'high modernity' where aporetic awareness implies 'a fuller understanding of the reflexivity inherent in modernity itself' (Giddens:1990:49).

widely accepted now viz. that 'the very act of recognising or knowing that something is a fact necessarily involves an element of selection and interpretation' (Hughes:1997:113). Nicholas Everitt and Alec Fisher introduce their text *Modern Epistemology* by accepting that its design was influenced by the ideas of Quine and Wittgenstein (Everitt & Fisher:1995:xiii). And finally D.Z.Phillips's *Introducing Philosophy* is centred around an examination of scepticism. Phillips concludes that although it appears not to be possible to reject scepticism as such, this fact nevertheless does not stop the making of human knowledge. His treatment of the theme is interesting - especially for a basic text - since he leaves the significance of aporia appropriately open, arguing that its apparent existence does not logically compel any kind of response, whether of resistance or accommodation. (Phillips:1996:183-191).

This brief review – of necessity taking these accounts at face value - has of course barely scratched the surface of the issues, but it has perhaps done enough to show the prevalence of aporetic awareness within contemporary philosophy. Taking these two chapters - Two and Three - together I think I have shown that the kind of aporetic awareness that can be seen in the broader historiographic debate is evident in western empirical philosophy generally. It would be easy now to use this evidence to suggest that empirical historical practice is essentially aporetic in this way and thus postmodern critiques within the narrow historical controversy have been mistaken in their analysis. Undoubtedly there is some truth in that. But uncomfortably the same evidence could be deployed to argue equally convincingly that the postmodern critique of Jenkins et.al. is basically correct in that, whilst empirical historiography does not carry the realist or correspondence theory assumptions that have been alleged, its practice has been misleading and unhelpful in its refusal to acknowledge its criteria for interpretation.

What such a situation does most obviously indicate is that a shift in the positions of both sides is called for. Clearly empiricist historians cannot stand out indefinitely against more

widely accepted understandings of empiricism. At the same time the ubiquity of sceptical themes in western philosophy, as these chapters have shown, rather calls into question the validity of postmodern 'end of historical knowledge' scenarios.

It might then seem that with these comments the matter is settled and the aim of this project achieved. But an essential question still remains; that is how - in what condition - will any adjustments by these combatants in the controversy, leave the discipline of history? Will it, for example, maintain the status quo broadly, or develop radically within a fresh paradigm of knowledge? The warning that D. Z. Phillips gives about assuming that methodological adjustments in response to aporetic awareness will overcome political or epistemological difficulties, is well made. Yet at the same time, although a more coherent historical practice is certainly a step forward compared with this sterile controversy, it still needs to be seen how such coherence might interact with contemporary Marxist historiography and with the postmodernist insights of the broader debate. To attempt this task it is necessary to return the discussion to the discipline of history.

Chapter Four: Bridges Within History

Chapter Three established that the deep involvement of empiricism with scepticism that was seen in antiquity, can be found also in the modern world within the work of Hume, Comte, Mill and modern-day pragmatists. In terms of the study as a whole, this means that empirical historians, and history teachers, can approach issues of sceptical subjectivity in their daily work with a fresh confidence. It means that they no longer need be concerned that the aporetic awareness deployed by the postmodern challengers, necessarily calls into question their core empirical methods. However this does not in turn imply that traditional empirical practice should as a result be thought adequate to present-day needs and neither does it, of itself, identify a way forward for such historiography. Nevertheless in rejecting the narrow conceptions of the postmodern challenge within the controversy, the way is now open for a clearer examination of alternatives - stronger alternatives - presented by the broader debate.

Thus the intention of this final chapter is to place this now more sceptical empiricism alongside critiques of the discipline offered from within the debate. It will be argued that a degree of reflexivity, held within a critically aware methodological practice, can be thought to be an area of commonality between empirical, Marxist and some poststructuralist thought and that it is capable of providing a working dialogue between these approaches to history. This is not to try to flatten out differences between these perspectives – nothing would be gained by attempting that. Rather the aim is to help the insights of each be available to all. In attempting this research I have held the assumption that such a wider intercourse between historians will benefit the discipline as a whole; certainly it is a facility that is barely possible at present. It may well be that empirical historians are different by temperament, or by political inclination, from Marxists and poststructuralists and will

always wish to keep their methodological distance from them. It would perhaps be naive to imagine otherwise, but this is not a problem once commonality is established for (with my own Marxist starting position in mind), it would then no longer be possible for such differences to be used for political ends - for arguing that 'this is simply how the world was' and thus 'is'. Similarly, from a more liberal perspective it is reasonable to think that better history will emerge from a discipline in which there are a multiplicity of methodological practices, reflecting a variety of interests, but which nevertheless coheres around a common epistemology, than would be the case from a group of irreconcilably different historical sects. There are however several difficulties still to be addressed before that situation could be anticipated.

There are three such areas for consideration. The first is the need to determine whether the assertions of the empirical defenders in the controversy really are empirical in any sense that that can be equated with the empirical tradition discussed in this study. It will be found that this is indeed the case, but with important qualifications in relation to the contribution of Collingwood. The second task is to investigate the relationship between empiricism and modern Marxist historiography in the light of postmodern dismissals of Marxism.¹ It will be suggested here that a Thompsonian Marxist model of history, modified by Patrick Joyce's engagement with postmodernism, offers the potential for the kind of critically aware methodology that is being sought in this study. The third question to be examined is whether poststructural insights are necessarily – in their entirety that is - committed to the negativity of the postmodern challenge; that for example of Jenkins, Munslow and Southgate. In response it will be argued that not all poststructuralism is

¹ For example, within the controversy, Keith Jenkins refers to Marxism as 'absurd' and as an example of what he calls the collapsed 'upper case' – in his terminology, metaphysical - approach to history (Jenkins:1997:7). Similarly Alun Munslow considers Marxism in general, and E.P.Thompson in particular, as constructionist and therefore, in his terms, realist and metaphysical (Munslow:2000:7&160).

suffused with negativity; more optimistic and useful forms are on offer.² Indeed in Chapter One it was noted that there is a flourishing debate by historians about the nature of the discipline, a debate that has been largely unaffected by the issues of the controversy and which has utilised Marxism and poststructuralism to positive advantage. In this final stage of the study it is suggested that a 'modernised' - ie. more overtly sceptical - empirical historiography might begin to participate in that broader debate. Overall it is argued that the need for empirical historians to be more overt about their closures – obvious, now that empiricism's aporetic core is apparent - is capable of being brought into a focus with a concept of 'reflexivity,' and thus into discursive range of Marxist and poststructuralist insights.

Section I

It is not difficult to make a prima-facie case that current empirical historical practice shares the empiricism of the tradition discussed in this study.

Ernst Breisach points out for example that Gibbon held that Hume's empirical history 'dominated the field until that of Macaulay found greater favour' (Breisach:1994:215-6)

² Hitherto, following broad general usage, I have employed the terms 'postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism' in a rather easy conflation, but this needs now to be more tightly defined. There is little in the literature that is consistent to guide the use of these terms – they are often employed interchangeably – but in this chapter 'postmodernism' will be deployed to indicate the broad genre of criticism and well as its species observable in the controversy. As a part of that genre, 'poststructuralism' will be used to suggest a more technical foci - that for example of Lyotard, Rorty and Derrida – upon which much of the more general postmodern discussion rests but does not, arguably, exhaust.

and Macaulay's methodological accord with Carlyle and J.S. Mill is easy to see.³ So too is the influence of J.S. Mill, via Henry Sidgwick, upon Maitland (Elton: 1985:6) in whose tradition lay Namier and later Trevelyan. Trevelyan is important here. It is true that his simple narrative - and whiggish – style is no longer popular with present-day empirical historians, but many expressions of affinity with Trevelyan's general approach can be found among today's empirical opponents of postmodern history. Marwick for example has noted approvingly how despite Trevelyan's well known antipathy towards so called scientific historiography (eg. that of Ranke, Acton and Bury) his account of history embodied characteristics quite acceptable to current mainstream historiography. These facets of the discipline were

the scientific (collecting and weighing of evidence as to facts),
 the imaginative or speculative (selection and classification),
 interpretation and generalisation and the literary. This last
 function, whose importance Trevelyan deliberately stressed, he
 defined as “the exposition of the results of science and
 imagination in a form that will attract and educate our fellow
 countrymen” (Marwick: 1981: 60).

In the same vein Fritz Stern considered that Trevelyan ‘has done more than any other living English writer to restore history to its earlier station as a literary art’ (Stern: 1970: 227) and both Evans and Marwick have pointed out that Trevelyan, like Macaulay, accepted that historians were selective and, as Trevelyan himself makes clear (Stern: 1970: 243), he held a sceptical empirical position (Evans: 1997: 181; Marwick: 1981: 60-61). Evans goes on to

³ This is notwithstanding the sharp, but inconsequential, exchanges which took place between Macaulay and James Mill over the extent to which it is appropriate for notions of human nature to be deployed as a priori in the production of political and sociological knowledge. (Ryan: 1974: 20–26, 38–40, 88–91; Skorupski: 1998: 208-9, 218).

associate his own approach to history with the same tradition. Thus it is possible to make a clear connection between the empiricism of David Hume and that of Richard Evans.⁴

That such a connection can be made is unsurprising. If the empiricism of most present day mainstream historians were actually as realist as Munslow and others have charged (as was noted in Chapter Two), then some remnants at least of the eighteenth and nineteenth century argument between these two epistemologies, realism and empiricism, would likely still be running as a methodological debate between them within the discipline. There would thus currently be a controversy in existence between realist and empirical historians just as there was in earlier times between Humean empiricists and Reidian realists, or between J. S. Mill and Reid's intuitionist follower, Sir William Hamilton (Skorupski:1998:141-3). At the very least there would be historians arguing for historical knowledge as being, as Reid described language, 'the express image and picture of human thoughts; and from the picture we may draw some certain conclusions concerning the original' (Bracken:1999:484). In fact there appears to be no such debate at present. The nearest to it seems to be Christopher Lloyd's critical realist claim that it is possible to have the historical equivalent of what he thinks science does, ie. to 'uncover the microscopic entities and powers and deep causal structures and properties of the natural world' (Lloyd: 1996: 205), or perhaps the realism of Robert Kirk's *Relativism and Reality* (Kirk:1999). It would be hard to extrapolate from these that realism was an active force in the defence of empirical history

This is not to argue that realism is entirely absent from contemporary historiography but rather to say that it has not gained a hold in history. Even Geoffrey Elton who has largely been regarded as occupying the prime position on the reactionary wing of empirical

⁴ Trevelyan's regrettably nationalist and genderist assumptions, although perhaps uncontroversial in his time, make it difficult now to accept his values, but it is Trevelyan the empiricist, not Trevelyan the man, that is being discussed here. Nevertheless his example acts as a powerful reason for insisting that the closures of empirical historians need to be more explicit than hitherto.

historiography was very far from being a realist. Elton's well known proclamations of certainty are, in themselves, no worse than those of Keith Jenkins.⁵

It would seem then that it is possible to make at least a preliminary case that present day empirical historians could see themselves as functioning with a version of empiricism that can be compared with that of Hume, Comte, Mill and the pragmatists. If this can be more firmly established, it provides strength to empirical historiography's claim that it is aporetic.⁶ The question still remains however whether this traditional historiography has been significantly compromised by its undoubted association with competing philosophies during the past century or so.

To deny the existence of Reidian realism in contemporary historiography is not the same as saying that there has been no influence on it from other metaphysical approaches to knowledge; for example, from Christianity and from idealism.⁷ There is no doubt for example, that the ideas of Ranke have left their mark on the discipline of history in the years since his direct influence has waned. However it is still the case that such residues have not altered the essentially sceptical empiricism within which present-day mainstream historiography functions.

⁵ An example of this is, 'at the level of the historical text it just happens to be the case that interminable openness is logically unavoidable; there is no way that any historical closure can ever be achieved – that is certain' (Jenkins: 2003: 3).

⁶ In making these broad comparative claims I am influenced by John Breuilly's approach to comparative history in *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1994). See in particular Breuilly's Introduction and Conclusion for his methodological stance and his rejection of the historicist demand that historical periods and arguments had to be understood only on their 'own terms' (p.279).

⁷ For clarity, I am regarding as metaphysical, any account of knowledge that seeks a degree of certainty beyond what is possible by the use of human senses and by reflection on that sense. Knowledge statements that fail to explain their criteria for the selection of their material ie. are not overt about their closures – and here traditional empirical historiography might well be located (eg. Trevelyan) - clearly lay themselves open to the charge that they carry metaphysical assumptions. However I do not think conflating these two essentially different 'moves' in knowledge-creation, is helpful and I distinguish between them here because simply ignoring one's closures is not the same as seeking greater epistemological certainty beyond what appears possible from the senses.

The point is that western historians employed what they found useful in the work of Ranke - largely his methods – and ignored his metaphysics. R.W. Southern long ago suggested that Ranke's popularity in Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century was the result of a practical need by historians. He argued that with the growing influence of Hume's empiricism, as the academic status of history increased, a reaction developed against the discipline's association with theology. As a result the traditional historical method ie. where practitioners merely commented on old authorities, gradually came under pressure. (Southern: 1961 via Stern:1970:407).⁸ Ranke's methodology - notably his strictures about accuracy and fidelity to evidence - provided a convenient set of rules for historians. Whatever was the basis of his position, the recommended practices cohered with Humean, Comtean and Millsean sceptical empiricism at a functional level.

Ranke's aporetic awareness is plain to see in his assumption that the human achievement of knowledge was no simple affair, viz.:

What an infinite amount of material! What diverse efforts! How difficult it is to only grasp the particulars. Since moreover there is much we do not know, how are we to understand the causal nexus everywhere, not to mention getting to the bottom of the essence of totality? I consider it impossible to solve this problem entirely. God alone knows world history (Ranke in Burns et.al.:2000:93).

⁸ This interest in German scholarship was not confined to history. It had been partly responsible for a major challenge to accepted practices within the Church of England, as the debate in the English journal *Essays and Reviews* during the 1860's testifies (eg. Wilberforce: Jan.1861& Stanley: Apr.1861 in Golby:1990:50-56).

Ranke's response to aporia is best seen in contrast with that of the empirical whig historian Macaulay, who accepted the apparent limits to human knowledge by settling for a narrative method or, at best for history as a form of literature (Macaulay:1828 in Stern: 1970:71-89). A 'good' history for Macaulay was one which was convincing. For example,

A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. He must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials which he finds, and to refrain from supplying deficiencies by additions of his own. ...history begins in novel and ends in essay
(Stern:1970:72-3).

For Ranke this was unacceptable. To achieve what he thought were the desirable ends of history ie. the seeking to know 'what really happened,' historians were counselled to follow a strict methodological regime (his famous emphasis on primary sources and the valorising of national history). This was to be carried out to the extent that the result might be 'harsh, disconnected, colourless and tiring.' (Stern: 1970:55). Clearly for Ranke truth value was the prime quality. In addition to these methodological rules he considered that the past had a coherent shape and a uniqueness which needed to be respected by historians. This aspect of his work has been the subject of much discussion by western historians. David Bebbington has described it as an assumption of linearity and attributed it to broader, Christian, notions of time, capable of being distinguished from Classical or ancient assumptions that time moved in a cyclical manner. (Bebbington: 1990:Ch 1). More widely the expression 'historicism' has been employed, but with little settled acceptance of

how it should be understood.⁹ The difficulty that empirical historians have experienced with the parts of Ranke's thought which lay beyond his practical use of sources is indicative of the way that the Ranke's position as a whole was alien to empirical thinking. This is because underlying his practical response to aporetic awareness was a further position, that such truth as humans needed to live satisfactory lives was vouchsafed by God.

Thus behind Ranke's call for careful and accurate use of primary sources, or for the understanding of past actors' own ways of making sense of their worlds, was a claim of a quite different kind from that held by empiricists. For example Ranke held that: 'the human race moves along a course of uninterrupted progress, in a steady development towards perfection' (Stern:1970:58). Of course, as has already been discussed, assumptions of progress in the human condition were widespread in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, Ranke's teleology cohered with his other claims such as that the past 'does have an inner connection of its own' (Stern:1979:60). He held that this connection was independent of the historian, but if the right methods were employed and at the appropriate level ie. the national level, then it was possible for historians to do more than just make sense of the past. They could uncover 'universal history [which] comprehends the past life of mankind, not in its particular relations and trends, but in its fullness and totality' (Stern:1970:61). This was possible for Ranke because in his schema the historian was engaged in a supra-human enterprise secured by a belief that 'each epoch is immediate to God' (Burns and Rayment-Pickard: 2000: 90). There was therefore in Ranke's work a claim stronger than any of those made by empiricists.

⁹ Discomfort with the concept of historicism crosses the postmodern empirical divide. Arthur Marwick referred to the term as 'that dread term *historicism*' (1981:39) and Alun Munslow has called it 'a troubling concept' (2000:130-133). A variety of accounts of historicism can be gained from Appleby et.al 1994; Breisach:1994;Collingwood:2001; amongst others, but I find useful Tosh's view that it can be understood as a two way process. For him historicism implies that the past can be seen as being 'a unique manifestation of the human spirit' whilst the nature of the present is conversely to be understood in its relationship to contextualising time. (Tosh:1991:12-13). Thus if it is accepted that there can be no knowledge beyond knowledge, a sense of historicised linearity of the past can be recognised. This is discussed further, later in this section.

This metaphysical support was not however taken up by western historians. Peter Novick has shown how, despite Ranke's widespread popularity with American historians towards the end of the nineteenth century, his metaphysics were never embraced. Novick argued that this was the result of an 'almost total misunderstanding' of Ranke's overall conception of history, in the sense that his methodology was thought to be, simply, scientific – quite the opposite of what it is now widely understood to be (Novick:1988:26). The Americans were not alone in thinking this. Stern has pointed out that the aspiration to write history that could be thought to be objective, as it really happened, was regarded by many Anglo-American historians as a kind of 'pretentious positivism' (Stern:1970:55).

Perhaps because of an increasing disenchantment with the narrowness of Ranke's methods, or maybe because, by the turn of the century the historical community had assimilated all it needed of Ranke's practical methods of scholarship, successors to Ranke, notably Acton, attracted much criticism for what was then clearly perceived as a metaphysical approach to history. Hugh Tulloch for example pointed out that although Acton had been successful in widening the scope of Ranke's methods, by broadening what might be thought an historical source, he was nevertheless not fully accepted by the empirical historical community. As his essentially Rankean metaphysics became more thoroughly understood he became increasingly regarded as promoting an unacceptable model of history (Tulloch:1988:98-9). More recently Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued that Acton conflated judgement with science and similarly both Elton and A.J.P.Taylor criticised his position (Tulloch:p.2 & 101).¹⁰

There is evidence too that this selectivity in the way historians have handled Ranke's ideas has continued into the present. John Tosh has brought out clearly the sense in which

empiricists such as himself, currently understand the term ‘historicism.’ He saw it as meaning that historical periods had internal coherence within the historicised past. For Tosh, as for other empirical historians, there can be certainty of no knowledge, coherent or not, existing outside of what historians, or people acting as historians, make of that past. At the same time as Tosh articulated this useful reading of historicism, he warned against accepting too readily what he saw as an irrationalism at the heart of the Rankean project (Tosh: 1991:12-13). Marwick has approached Ranke in a similar manner. He too has been careful to separate the practical from the metaphysical and to note that: ‘while the methodological revolution of Neibuhr and Ranke had a powerful and salutary influence throughout the world of historical studies, that world by no means succumbed to the overlordship of Ranke’ (Marwick:1981:40). Overall however nothing illustrates more clearly the partial use of Ranke made by present day empirical historians, than Keith Jenkins’s criticism of Richard Evans on exactly those grounds; for having selectively picked up only on the practical aspects of Ranke, leaving the metaphysics to one side (Jenkins:1999:106-7).

If Ranke’s approach to history has left no metaphysical residues on empirical practice it might still be the case that other Christian historians have done so. After all, it is not difficult to see that in terms of the ‘aporia and response’ model of knowledge used in this study Christianity can be regarded as an epistemological closure that lies at the more, certainist ie. the metaphysical end of a spectrum of possible responses to aporia. Perhaps the clearest way of examining this question is to consider Herbert Butterfield’s treatment of Christianity and history. As an example he is particularly useful because he so explicitly criticised empirical whig historiography and in turn has become a target for a postmodern critique. Moreover, not only have the postmodern challengers firmly rejected Butterfield’s

¹⁰ It must be said that not all historians misunderstood Ranke’s position for his metaphysical assumptions were challenged in USA, in Britain and also in Germany (Breisach:1994:286; Beard in

critique of *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), they have dismissed it as a metaphysical genre, dubbing it 'own-sakism' (Jenkins:1995:9). Thus for both his strongly held Christian beliefs, as well as his critique of so-called whiggism, it would be easy to see Butterfield's undoubted influence on twentieth century historiography as being one through which metaphysical assumptions have been propagated within current historical practice.

Such a view would however be hard to sustain. Certainly there is clear evidence in Butterfield's work that he regarded his religious belief as having influenced his understanding of the past. This cannot be denied, but that influence, like the political conservatism (judged by today's standards at least) of J.S.Mill, has functioned at the level of content, not as method or epistemology as with Ranke. In terms of his approach to knowledge of the past Butterfield can be seen as having been thoroughly empirical. His attitude to religion as well as to science shows his awareness of aporia.

On both sides of the Galileo controversy...we see the effect of the mind's presumption – we see a little of that intellectual arrogance, or mental rigidity, or stiff-necked self assurance which manages to interpolate itself into all forms of scholarship and science. If anybody were to doubt the existence of this, it is always sufficiently evident when we turn back to examine the dogmatism of scholarship in any generation previous to our own (Butterfield:1949:10).

He was sceptical too about claims of historical truth. They 'must be regarded as fulfilling a more limited and humble role than many people take for granted' (1949:11). But at the same time he did see science as providing an epistemological role; one in which it acted as a basis for a succession of ongoing closures, or responses to aporia. For example:

The development of the scientific method in nineteenth century historiography did not merely mean that this or that fact could be corrected, or the story told in great detail, or the narrative amended at marginal points. It meant that total reconstruction proved to be necessary....evidence which had seemed to mean one thing might prove capable of an entirely different construction (1949:14-5).

Thus for Butterfield 'there exists in most historical writing, therefore, an appearance of definition and finality which is an optical illusion' (p.15). In reality, he thought, historical explanation was driven by 'insight, sympathy and imagination' (p.17). His Christian faith cohered with this modern empirical approach to knowledge by functioning as a form of 'back stop'.¹¹ His view was that in the same way that science could not provide absolute truth, Christian insights could not do this either, at least not in a way suitable for the everyday operation of knowledge. 'Although the Christian must find that religious thought is inextricably involved in historical thought' (p.3) it would be a mistake, he thought, if:

the debate was forever returning to the same issues and they [the historian or the knowledge-maker] could not discuss the ordinary operations of nature [or history] without perpetually coming back to their basic theological or philosophical differences (p.19).

¹¹ Difficulties in defining religion are of course legion (see Bruce:1995) and perhaps the more successful accounts, such as that of Ninian Smart have achieved their longevity by sheer breadth of expression (Smart:1977:Ch.1). I am therefore using Smart's multi-dimensional approach in an articulatory way (rather than as a firm definition) to conceive of religion as a response to the aporia of 'religious experiences'. In this chapter I am regarding Butterfield as thinking of history in a

In short, it is possible to see in Butterfield's account of history an empirical approach to knowledge supported by Christianity, but one comparable with the way that the historical insights produced by a non-Christian historian might be supported by a set of political views, a moral code or by normative assumptions – in other words Christianity here is but one of a variety of possible a priori.¹²

This is not to say that Butterfield's approach to method is beyond criticism; far from it. John Tosh has pointed out that Butterfield scared off a whole generation of historians from explanatory (or present-minded, or a priori) history (Tosh:1991:147). It would seem that Butterfield's case has been too good – his argument too strong and his rhetoric too persuasive. However, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that Butterfield was a metaphysician, for in the absence of an articulated account of a priori within empiricism, it is not surprising that misunderstandings should have occurred.

Butterfield's empiricism is plain to see and the evidence for it is in the parts of his work where he was most firmly critical of what he saw as sloppy history. Of course it may have been that he erected the whigs as a straw target for his account of history, but that issue is not germane to the purpose of this chapter and is ignored here. What is important though, is the breadth of Butterfield's understanding of history. In *The Whig Interpretation of History* he showed, through the qualifications that he added to each of his points, that to a considerable extent he agreed with the position he was criticising. With this in mind, his argument is better understood, less as a denial of a particular form of historicising, than as an attempt to broaden our historical conception of the past. Far from narrowing it, as might

similar manner – ie. one in which historical knowledge, like religion, responds to aporia, but unlike religion, it operates at a wholly human level.

¹² Paul Sharp's study of Butterfield's contribution to the development of disciplinary international relations in the 1960s has brought out the extent of his aporetic awareness – for example Butterfield's agreement with Ranke that 'all historical epochs are equidistant from eternity' (Sharp:2003:862). But more importantly Sharp shows how Butterfield saw history as a valuable enterprise, although one quite distinct from Christianity that, as almost a 'technical' matter, was 'incapable of answering the most important questions about human life and its significance'(2003: 866).

be thought, he has expanded the intellectual scope of the discipline. His response to aporia – his closure – is one in which he tried to express a sense of the profundity of the enterprise of history. He was thus an exemplar for what has become regarded as the best of traditional historical practice; and this is quite distinct from any consideration of his religious beliefs.

To appreciate the power of Butterfield's contribution to twentieth century western historiography it is helpful to look in a little detail at what he actually said about the whigs. And what can be seen is a rather more nuanced account of history than that offered by the postmodern challengers. In his opening statement in the main body of the argument, Butterfield's careful qualifications are immediately evident. Thus:

The primary assumption of all attempts to understand the men [sic] of the past must be the belief that we can in some degree enter into minds that are unlike our own. If this belief were unfounded it would seem that men must be for ever locked away from one another (Butterfield:1931:Ch2,p.1)

So, it is clear that however much he thought historical writing should be cast for the sake of the past itself, he did not mean this to be wholly at the expense of understandings of the present, else, as he said himself, there could have been no communication. Similarly he showed that to quite an extent he himself shared the position he was criticising. For example he said:

It is part and parcel of the whig interpretation of history that it studies the past with reference to the present; and though there may be a sense in which this is unobjectionable if its implications are carefully considered, and there may be a sense

in which it is inescapable, it has often been an obstruction to historical understanding because it has been taken to mean the study of the past with direct and perpetual reference to the present (1931:2).

Similarly Butterfield pointed out repeatedly that the historian 'can never entirely abstract himself from his own age' (Ch.2, p.3). In effect he was keen to redress what he saw as an imbalance that had crept into empirical historiography, rather than simply to prohibit historians from using their present to explain the past. For example he spoke of the whig treatment of present-mindedness as being 'an oversimplification of the relations between events' and indeed he saw 'own-sakism' as something which could lead to poor history, for

we cannot save ourselves from tumbling headlong into it...and very soon we may be concentrated upon the most useless things in the world – Marie Antoinette's ear-ring or the adventures of the Jacobites (Ch 2, p.2-3).

The point has perhaps been sufficiently made; that neither in his Christian beliefs, nor in a critique of whig uncertainties about a priori, can Herbert Butterfield be thought to be metaphysical in his approach to historical knowledge.¹³ Inconveniently, the same cannot be said about R.G. Collingwood, for his has been a more ambiguous role in empirical historiography. Certainly the more obviously idealistic aspects of his approach to history have been ignored or rejected by historians, as was Ranke's, but unlike Ranke, Collingwood's influence has been more directly epistemological than practical. Importantly, Collingwood can be seen as giving support to the development of reflexivity.

¹³ For a more thorough treatment of the issues raised here see Nick Jardine's 'Whigs and Stories: Herbert Butterfield and the Historiography of Science' (Jardine:2003).

In fact he points the way towards the kind of common ground for historical discourse that is being sought in this study.

From within the controversy, enthusiasm for Collingwood's approach to history has come mainly from the postmodern side. For example Alun Munslow acknowledges that Collingwood's thought is 'among the best explanations of how inference works' in history and that what is particularly helpful is that he makes room for 'the exercise of the historian's imagination' (Munslow:2003:10). By contrast Marwick has recently described Collingwood's work as 'complete rubbish' (Marwick:2001:15). Despite this, it is the case that few commentators on the nature of the discipline have avoided engagement with at least some aspects of his philosophy of history – indeed including Marwick in earlier years (1970:81-82 & 1981:81-85). Collingwood's work is therefore important. Nevertheless the lack of widespread and fulsome praise for him - in the light of his centrality - does suggest that there is some justification for Niall Ferguson's view that despite Collingwood's undoubted influence on the broader debate between historians, he nevertheless remains rather an outsider to the historical community (Ferguson:1977:51/2). But it is this widespread engagement with him that is important to the discussion here, and there is no shortage of evidence for it.¹⁴

The problem is of course Collingwood's idealism, which has not gone unnoticed by fellow historians. Aletta Biersack has seen this as a position akin to realism in the sense that Collingwood 'envisioned historical "facts" as indices of an underlying experiential and conceptual reality' (Biersack:1989:75). Ernst Breisach expresses his account of knowledge as one from which Collingwood denied the possibility of the past being studied from the '

¹⁴ See for example Aletta Biersack:1989; Ernst Breisach:1994; William Dray:1980&2001; Richard Evans: 1997; Hans Kellner:1995; Giuseppina D'Oro:2000&2004; Christopher Parker:2000; John Passmore:1968; Karsten Stueber:2002; Jon Tosh:1991; Richard Tuck:1992; Dimitrios Vardoulakis:2004; Adrian Wilson:1993&2001

“outside” with the methods of the natural sciences’¹⁵ (Breisach:1994:333). For Ferguson, Collingwood held the teleological ‘assumption that the present was always the end-point (and implicitly the only possible end-point) of the historian’s chosen narrative’ (Ferguson:1977:67). More specifically both Christopher Parker and Dimitrios Vardoulakis have drawn upon Collingwood’s own testimony that he embraced idealism (Parker :2000:181). Collingwood explained his position as being a ‘ “theory of reality” within which ‘the experience of understanding presupposes a “general conception of the world as a whole”’ and an awareness of ‘ “the ultimate unity of the world as a whole”’ (Vardoulakis:2004:5). Clearly aspects of Collingwood’s thought bears some affinity with that of Ranke; indeed Richard Evans - and John Passmore before him - have placed Collingwood in the same - Kantian - tradition (Evans:1997a:30/31; Passmore:1968:56)¹⁶.

It is not therefore surprising to see contemporary historians handling Collingwood as they have done Ranke; that is to say they have made use of him, and especially his theory of re-enactment, but they have done so in terms of their own empiricism. Thus Richard Tuck notes how John Dunn and Quentin Skinner have accepted Collingwood’s argument that a desirable way of reading an historical text in the history of political thought is to understand the intentions of the author. However neither of them have supposed that such meaning should be limited to authorial intention. Instead, re-enactment should simply be another method of historical analysis (Tuck:1992:194). Richard Evans too, selects what he finds useful. He notes approvingly that Collingwood’s deployment of Croce’s famous idea that “all history is contemporary history” into “all history is the history of thought” had the effect of encouraging the blurring of a distinction between fact and interpretation, since the ‘very act of observing...was itself governed by the historian’s a priori beliefs about the

¹⁵ This would also of course have put his account of history at some distance from the core methodological assumptions of empirical historians who, since Hume, have tended to affiliate their epistemology with that of the natural sciences.

past' (Evans:1997a:31). Nevertheless Evans does not accept Collingwood's theory of re-enactment since, as he points out, historical sources can be placed in juxtaposition with other sources 'to reveal more than its author thought' (pp. 91-92). He concludes with the standard empirical position that 'what the historian writes, and what the documents say, are two different things' (p.93). Similar views can be found in, for example John Tosh's work – that re-enactment is useful but can be exaggerated since historians know what happened later (Tosh:19:147). Peter Burke's criticism is similar; he points out that collective forms of explanation such as movements of prices and wages, go well beyond the perspective of the individual agent (Burke:1992:5).

Perhaps the best example of how Collingwood has been interpreted by empirical historians is offered by Adrian Wilson. In his original article (1993), and in the more detailed reworking of it in a recent article for the Collingwood Society (2001), Wilson's discussion goes beyond the mere use or otherwise of re-enactment, to an account of Collingwood's methodology as operating on three levels. In the first of these there is the now ubiquitous recognition of a difference between the past and history but it is one in which historical knowledge is created from inferences drawn from the sources, which are regarded as 'authorities'. This results for him, in his famous 'scissors and paste' history (Wilson:1993:306 & 2001:8-10 & 39). Collingwood's second level, as Wilson argues, is fairly well what might be described as sound empirical practice, where historians are aware, to a greater or lesser extent overtly, of the different possibilities that exist for interpreting their methodological selections and the sources they use. Wilson calls this the historiographical level and he recognises that Collingwood himself saw it as empirical (Wilson:2001:10-14 & 23). It is at the third level - the level that Wilson regards Collingwood as recommending – that the idealism becomes apparent. Here, instead of developing his methodological model towards a greater sense of observational self-awareness; ie. that would have led it closer to present day modern and postmodern

¹⁶ See also Beverley Southgate's view that Collingwood sees history as 'the unfolding of God's pre-

thinking, Wilson represents Collingwood as doing the exact opposite. Thus for Wilson, level three historical practice returns the historian's attention to the object of study, to the genesis of the source, to re-enactment of the historical agent's thought and to a supposed means of reaching:

...a general logic of historical thought...(which)...must be philosophical as opposed to an empirical science, and must establish a priori the pure principles on which all historical thinking is to proceed (Wilson:2001:23).

The point for this study is that, as Wilson laments, Collingwood's 'historiographic revolution' ultimately failed (Wilson:2001:59-63). Whether this was because mainstream British historians 'failed to grasp the full significance of his achievement' (P.60) or whether they grasped it only too well and rejected it, is not clear. What is clear though is that that whether one focuses on Ranke, Butterfield or Collingwood there is ample evidence to suggest that empirical historians have consistently rejected methodological theories and practices that might have compromised their traditional sceptical empiricism. But moreover, although not as overt as it could be, there is a tacit acknowledgement in Evan's appreciation of Collingwood – in Evan's awareness of the active constructional nature of observation – of the importance of critical self-awareness in the making of historical knowledge. And Wilson's recognition of the ubiquity of Collingwood's second level historiographic methodology is evidence that Evan's stance is by no means out of the ordinary amongst mainstream empirical historians.

Interestingly though, this is not the end of the story as far as Collingwood's role is concerned. It is no accident that Alun Munslow should view Collingwood's ideas as a form of support for postmodernism, for their respective positions clearly have points of

contact and Munslow is not alone in observing this. Christopher Parker has made much of such a possible link, arguing that insofar as historians have been influenced by Collingwood, they have ‘become postmodern without joining the postmodernists’ (Parker: 2000: 217). I do not wish to explore Parker’s argument in suggesting that postmodernism is a form of idealism; there is a more important point to be made. This is that, as for the empiricists, what appears to be attractive to postmoderns in Collingwood is his interest in exploring the epistemological constructing ‘activity’ of the historian - even if that activity results in the end only in the discovery of ‘pure principles’ underlying history. It is understandable why they might find it so, for that theme obviously strikes a chord with many postmoderns. Thus Hayden White had, some years ago, picked up on the constructional nature of Collingwood, noting approvingly that he was ‘fond of saying that the kind of history one wrote...was ultimately a function of the kind of man one was’ (White:1973:433). More recently Hans Kellner has suggested that it was not the content of Collingwood’s work that was important for postmoderns; rather it was his acceptance, like theirs, that history was undergoing fundamental changes because

the major task of twentieth-century philosophy was to account for the innovations and accomplishments of twentieth-century historical discourse, just as the philosophers of the seventeenth century were confronted with the world-transforming scientific discourse of that era (Kellner:1995:13).

Similarly, Allan Megill, in the same volume has argued that it was the Kantian nature of the tradition in which Collingwood stood that was responsible for his idea that ‘coherence is rooted in the mind of the historian’ (Megill:1995:162). Megill is critical of his idealistic essentialism (p.161) but considers important Collingwood’s view that the historian should have autonomy over the sources used (p.162). Indeed Munslow – again not as overtly as he could - makes the further point that a corollary of Collingwood’s account is that ‘the

simple level of the empirical' needs to embrace 'self-knowledge' (Munslow:2000:48).¹⁷

Thus the influence of Collingwood has helped bring Munslow back towards a more optimistic stance towards knowledge and towards a recognition that there can be a positive consequence drawn from aporetic awareness – for example one in which critical self-awareness is regarded as important.¹⁸

The point now is that in the light of the analysis of this study – ie. the establishment of a more sceptical empiricism – there would be good reason why defenders of traditional historiography such as Evans or Marwick should accept that a more overt openness about selectivity - one's closures - is no threat to empirical methodology. Since some postmoderns – Munslow for example - also see such openness as possible it becomes clear that a critically self-aware approach to history is, potentially at least, common to both sides of the controversy. If this is accepted then it may be Marxist historiography as a model of history that has successfully come to terms with critical self-awareness, offers a way forward. For in that perspective lies a ready made and well honed example of how an overt acknowledgement of closure can function within mainstream historical practice, enabling a depth of understanding to be achieved.

Section II

What is useful about Marxism for empirical historians, is exactly what more generally they had criticised in Marxist historiography; ie. their 'bias', or 'subjectivity' or in the terms

¹⁷ It would be possible to go on adding examples here, including the linked discussion by Karsten Stueber (2002) and Dimitrios Vardoulakis (2004) of Hans-Gorge Gadamer's poststructuralist engagement with Collingwood's thought, especially that of horizons of knowledge. But the point has been made; this is that whilst avoiding idealism, some poststructuralists, like some empiricists, have made use of Collingwood's conception of history as being something that is at least partly made in the present, rather than simply found in the past.

¹⁸ This is a welcome development, for Munslow appears here – albeit briefly - to be acknowledging the argument that, as discussed in the introduction, Keith Jenkins and I advocated in the early 1990s,

being discussed here, their overtly held position. If, as this study has attempted to show, there is some substance to empirical historians' protestations of scepticism towards epistemological certainty, then it follows that at root there is no difference between their own, hitherto barely acknowledged closures, and those more overtly held ones, of Marxist historians. Empirical historiography cannot have it both ways. If it is to be asserted (rightly) that objective historical truth appears impossible to achieve in that there is nothing in the world wholly independent of humans that is able to close the possibility of endless interpretation, then those closures that are constitutive of knowledge must come from the present, in some form of association with the knower, or historian. And this has been of course precisely the ground on which the Marxist account of history has been constructed. Thus if empirical historians wish to be taken seriously when denying the accusations of realism by postmoderns in the controversy, they must recognise the extent that they share the epistemological position, although not necessarily the values, of Marxist historians. Moreover the latter's own engagement with these issues – specifically with structuralism and postmodernism/poststructuralism – can now be seen to be relevant to the needs and interests of traditional historians. Marxist history has, in effect, the potential to be an exemplar for empiricists, on how to cope with an awareness of aporia.

What follows in this section is an attempt to draw some simple practical conclusions from the voluminous material available within the literature on Marxism and history. It brings Marxism into focus with three areas of the discussion so far. The section examines some of the more important features of the interface that has developed between empirical and metaphysical readings of Marx. It looks at the disciplinary context of the manifestly successful Marxist/social historians who have avoided the stasis of the empirical/postmodern controversy and it sees this as resulting from the work of E. P. Thompson. It suggests that the critical self-awareness that is one of the hallmarks of

but which was later abandoned by Jenkins, Munslow and Southgate in the face of their increasingly pessimistic reading of postmodernism.

Marxist academic work, - evident in the Thompsonian genre - can function as a ready-made model for non-Marxist empirical historians. Thus whilst accepting the existence of clear and established differences between empirical and Marxist historiography it is nevertheless feasible to see the possibility of a closer relationship between their philosophies of history.

At first glance there appears to be little point in attempting such a comparison, since some of the principal players on both sides of the controversy have argued that Marxism is essentially Hegelian and/or otherwise metaphysical and is therefore really quite different from either postmodernism or empiricism (Evans:1997a:61; Jenkins:1997:7; Marwick:2001:4,9,29 & 72; Munslow:2000:7&160). Certainly there is wider support for a metaphysical reading of Marxism from both sides of the empirical/postmodern divide (eg. Breisach:1994:293 & Berkhoffer, Jr:1997:40-41)¹⁹ However the complexity of Marx's thought and the variety of actual and possible readings of it rather militates against expressions of Marxism in the singular.²⁰ Similarly there is a clear spectrum of responses to postmodernism to be seen in Marxist writings; from for example, outright dismissal by Callinicos, to the measured rejection of Jurgen Habermas, through the historical creativity of David Harvey to the ambivalence of Fredric Jameson (Callinicos:1989; Habermas:orig.1980, 1996; Harvey:1990; Jameson:orig.1991,1993). And of course, there is also the example of Foucault's re-articulation of Marx's concept of power, to provide encouragement for those who would wish to draw insights between genres of history. For the purposes of this section however, the focus is on empirical readings of Marx.

¹⁹ This is not to suggest that all Marxist metaphysics is Hegelian. See for example Scott Meikle's Popperian account of Aristotelian essentialism in Marx (Meikle:1985).

²⁰ There is no shortage of broad useful accounts of the richness and complexity of Marxism. See for example Cahoon:1996: Intro; Sharpe:1992:24-39, Southgate:1996:88-93 or White:1973:285-289. But for a particularly authoritative treatment of some of the issues addressed here see J.G.Merquior's *Western Marxism* (1986) especially Parts I & III.

What can be seen here is a struggle within Marxism for what was thought to be its core characteristics. Although the section focuses on a relatively short period, ie. the emergence in the 1970's and 80's in the UK of a specifically empirical form of Marxist historiography, David McLellan offers a reminder that this 'moment' can be viewed as part of a longer term European-wide movement stemming from the development of a humanistic view of Marxism against an earlier economic, and more deterministic reading of Marx. It was this broader struggle which began after the publication of Marx's early writings from the 1920's and which gave rise to widespread debate about the relevance of a distinction between the 'early' and 'late' Marx (McLellan:1973:13-14). J.G. Merquior has pointed out that like generic Marxism, humanistic Marxism cannot be seen as a monolith either. Broadly co-terminous with the description 'western Marxism,' humanistic Marxism was riven with dissent over the extent that this early work could, or should, be seen as Hegelian and therefore idealistic (Merquior:1986:1-7). Within this pattern the French structuralist critique by Louis Althusser, of idealistic humanism within western Marxist discourse, was itself opposed by the British empirical, Marxist, historian E.P.Thompson, who regarded Althusser's work as another version of the metaphysics that Marx and Engels had struggled against. Thompson's position can be seen through historical practice in his highly successful *The Making of The English Working Class* (1963), and in theory by his *Poverty of Theory or an Orrey of Errors* (1978, here the 1995 edition is used).²¹ As a way in to Thompson's work it is worth looking briefly at Marx and Engels's objection to metaphysics, for it is possible to see there, some degree of justification for Thompson's position.

²¹ I am conscious of course that Althusser never accepted that he was a part of any school of philosophy, always warning of the dangers of attempting to explain ideas in relation to their origins. Nevertheless he has been widely - and convincingly - regarded as a structuralist (eg. Sturrock: 1986: x&34). For useful discussions of the humanist tradition in Marxism and the empirical challenge to structuralism by E.P. Thomson and others, see Davies:1997:Ch.2; Hunt:1989:1-22; Tosh:1991:163-179; Harvey-Kaye:1984:passim).

Although how theorists see themselves is not of course exhaustive of interpretive possibilities, persuasive evidence that Marxist thought is more complex than the portrayal of it as Hegelian, idealistic or in any way essentially metaphysical can readily be seen in Marx and Engels's own words. In Part One - at the outset - of *German Ideology* they explicitly distanced themselves from the German philosophical tradition, which they considered was idealistic metaphysics (Marx & Engels:1977:39-40,57,60). In fact they allied themselves more closely with English empiricism than with German idealism. Lest there should be any doubt about their position they went on to explain that their materialism differed from empiricism importantly in that it (materialism) had a criteria for what was focused upon, (ie. it had an self-conscious starting point) whereas empiricism appeared not to have one. Indeed they were quite explicit here. Viz:

This method of approach [ie. Marx & Engels's materialism] is not devoid of premises. Its starts out from the real premises and does not abandon them for a moment. Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptual process of development under definite conditions. As soon as this active life process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists

(Marx&Engels:1977:47-8)

There is neither the space nor the need to develop this line of argument here, so I shall restrict my point to simply observing that if Marx and Engels's writings were to be seen in this light - as responding to aporia in a similar way to empiricism, but with a more strongly drawn a priori - other connections would become understandable. There then becomes much to compare between the respective approaches of Comte and Marx, as Eric Matthews asserted and as Ronald Fletcher has shown (Matthews:1996:109; Fletcher:1974:246-9). So

even without taking on board Thompson's argument, it is quite possible to envisage, in outline, how it might be possible to argue for the existence of an empirical form of Marxism.

Althusser too, like Marx and Engels, and indeed like Thompson, was concerned to combat what he saw as a slide into idealism, but he saw idealism as embodied within humanistic Marxism, which he therefore opposed. The core of his thought on the nature of Marxist knowledge was contained in two works; *For Marx* published in 1969 and *Reading Capital* which appeared some ten years later. Althusser argued for the acceptance by Marxists of an alleged scientific methodology – one which for him carried an assurance of certainty, in terms of Marxist knowledge (Althusser:1969:12,22,30-35,81,111&183). As John Tosh has summarised, Althusser's strategy to strengthen Marxism against what he regarded as debilitating (humanistic) ideologies of everyday life, was to

place theory on an elevated pedestal where it is untouched by the mundane world of empirical evidence: the deeper structures which underlie both the past and the present cannot be grasped by assembling all the facts but can be apprehended only by those in possession of the correct theory....Correct theory is derived from a correct reading of Marx's mature works, especially *Capital*, in a form that practically amounts to a denial of human agency in history (Tosh:1991:176).

Moreover Tosh goes on to say that Althusser renounced in its entirety, the empirical method, arguing that 'the "real" facts of history are beyond our reach, and the distorted images we have of the past are an irrelevance' (p.176).

For Marx was widely discussed in Britain but was fairly rapidly rejected by Marxists who, in the main considered it a deviation from the original ideas of Marx. Norman Geras, for example, criticised it as being idealist (Geras:1972:74). The question also arose – an obvious one for Marxists - about who, or which group within Marxism, might control the process of discerning appropriate theory. Althusser argued that it was necessary to ‘import’ such knowledge to the working classes from the theorists – the philosophers. Workers were unable, he held, to manage for themselves this concept of Marxist science. The idea that the proletariat needed support from sections of the middle classes was hardly new (Marx & Engels: 1967:Ch1), but Althusser’s treatment of the theme was evidently unconvincing. Perhaps it was that the existence of Stalinism remained still a fresh memory, but the response of fellow Marxists was to regard Althusser’s ‘importation’ of an objective – ie. metaphysical – understanding of Marxism as elitist and unworkable (Callinicos:1976:107, Glucksman:1972:72, Kolalowski:1971: passim&Shaw:1975:110-112). In fact Althusser’s influence, beyond that of a small coterie of enthusiasts, barely survived the 1970’s.

By contrast to Althusser, Thompson’s approach, not unlike that of E.H. Carr, was to use Marxist ideas as a formative insight – ie. as an a priori – for the writing of general empirical history (Wilson:1993:19). More particularly as Fritz Stern and Dorothy Thompson have pointed out, E.P. Thompson regarded class as a historical phenomenon, not as a structural system (Stern:1970:424; Thompson:1995:ix). He used it as an empiricist might (Stern:1970:426-7). The existence of a thriving group of Marxists working in broadly the same way as Thompson, is evidence of the acceptance by at least some Marxists, of an empirical mode of history within Marxism.²² the longstanding popularity of

²² See as a small example Eric Hobsbawm: 1969,1988,1994,1997; Patrick Joyce: 1980,1987,1995, Robert Gray:1987; Kenneth Lunn & Ann Day:1999; David Feldman & Gareth Stedman Jones:1989 and Donna Loftus: 2000 & 2002. It would be hard to understate Thompson’s influence, extending as it has into studies of the third world (Cooper:1995). Even those who have criticised his work or politics have recognised his pre-eminent position as a scholar, an historian and a peace campaigner (eg. McConnell:1983).

The Making of the English Working Class as an exemplar for his version of Marxism - is testament to the continuing acceptance by mainstream historians of an empirical Marxism within mainstream historical practice.²³

There is a sense that the empirical/postmodern history controversy is almost a re-run of the structuralist/empirical Marxism exchanges. It will have been noticed for example that there is a common theme of dogmatic scepticism between Althusser and Jenkins. That is, they both know that scepticism implies that empirical knowledge is not possible.²⁴ It is this certainty that Thompson and for example Evans, are respectively combating, that is, the idea that Althusser or Jenkins somehow knows what can or cannot be known. However the difference between these two engagements lies in the nature of the responses to that form of scepticism. Whereas Evans, or Marwick, have been ambivalent about their position, Thompson has not. And it is a real difference that can take Marwick and Evan's historical practice forward, if they wish.

In *Poverty of Theory* Thompson echoed the criticisms of other Marxists. Althusser was incapable of functioning outside of an 'either/or' dichotomy (1995:67), Thompson argued. Althusser's system was a sealed one that was controlled entirely by theory, divorced for any meaningful contact with 'reality' (p.17). The effect of such a system was to remove human will from his epistemology (p.119). It was, argued Thomson, a structuralism of conservatism, of stasis – a result of the environment of the cold war on his thinking

²³It is fairly obvious I think, that I am not approaching the depiction of this engagement between Althusser and Thompson in a spirit of neutral even-handedness. My purpose however is not to re-fight old battles nor to adjudicate between the merits of either view in relation to their debate. Rather it is to use the existence of this engagement, within which it appears Thomson worked out his theoretical position, to illustrate how an empirical Marxist historiography can function as a model for traditional empirical historians.

²⁴ As discussed in Chapter 2, dogmatic scepticism is distinct from Pyrrhonian scepticism in which the knower would have no way of knowing either way. Pyrrhonists and their empirical successors would be unlikely to mount a critique like that of Althusser or Jenkins. Of course it must be accepted that this comparison goes only so far; their respective responses to their expressions of aporia are quite different; Althusser's was to rely wholly on Marxist theory and Jenkins's to retreat, in theory at least, from knowledge-making. It is in their certaintistic assumptions of an epistemological standard beyond what is seemingly possible, that they are similar.

(p.100/101). It was not that Thompson was against structuralism as such; he drew for example on Vico's account of structural 'laws' which, like Comte's, were simply regularities (p.114). He drew also on Engels's idea of structures, within which it was possible to see the structure of class (p.117), but for Engels, unlike Althusser, it was a concept of class that held a degree of free will (although not, of course, - famously - in circumstances of the knower's own making).

Perhaps the most telling of Thompson's points against Althusser's approach was his criticism of the latter's concept of observation. Althusser used the term Generalities I to refer to basic observations, which he considered to be non-knowledge until they were viewed through the prism of a theory, ie. Generalities II. The application of a theory produced for Althusser, a science; what he called Generalities III. In terms of Marxist knowledge, Generalities III was in effect Marxist science, and it was wholly reliable. Anything other than that was ideology and therefore worthless, or worse. Thompson argued, on the other hand, rather as the pragmatists had consistently argued, all observation involves some form of theory. However simple it might be, observation was theory laden, and knowledge involves a series of overlaying theoretical perspectives, from the glance to the philosophical, depending on the circumstances (p14). In the context of Marxism, workers' own perspectives were not Generalities I, ie. merely unhelpful ideology, awaiting the application of intellectuals' theory. They were already, at the instant of observation, theoretical in the sense that their perspectives were meaningful awarenesses of the lived experience of capitalism (p.19/20). This is not to say that the thought or strategies of workers could not be sharpened by theory, but to argue, as Thompson did, that Marxist, or any other kind of theory, does not operate in a vacuum. There is never an observation that was not always and already constructed at the moment of consciousness by some form of patterning. It is thus not difficult to see how Thompson's method aided the growing 'history from below' movement of the 1960s and 70's and how it encouraged self-

awareness on the part of historians, for meaning lay in the gaze, both before and after any formal theorising.

Like the empirical historians looked at in this study, and like the generic tradition of empiricism, Thompson made the point that scientific facts do not disclose their own meanings independently of conceptual organisations' – he accepted that part of Althusser's view - (p16) and also that few historians expect to find truth (p.20). In his response to this aporetic awareness Thompson makes it clear that his position is essentially one which deploys the empirical method - ie. that as for Hume, Comte, Mill and the pragmatists, Thompson's Marxist knowledge was formed by experience (p.22-23). In the end, he argued, we are led by our values in the construction of history (59). And in these, value-laden terms, Thompson's Marxism was empirical too; as he says himself, it 'differs from other orderings of historical evidence' ie. mainstream empiricism, 'not (or not necessarily) in any epistemological premises, but in its categories, its characteristic hypotheses and attendant procedures' (p.59). In other words the difference between Thompsonian Marxism and the examples of empirical historiography seen so far, is simply that Marxism makes overt its closures. Its closures are in fact its *raison d'être*.

The closer one looks at Thompson's Marxism, the more empirical it looks. For example he has argued that Marxist models are simply 'expectations' (p60), that historical materialism is a developing model that changes over time (p.68 & 72) and that in his view Marx and Engels were firmly against fixed models. They did indeed, Thompson argued, see the importance of the empirical method as their correspondence over Darwin's anti-teleological findings demonstrates (p.86). The idea that Marxists were 'moving with the current' ie. that there were objective forces acting independently of humans, had always been unhelpful, he argued (p.97). And, as he pointed out, even after using the class criterion, it was still necessary to do the actual historical work (pp.89-91).

It has been suggested that the existence of the criterion of 'class struggle' by Marxist historians has acted as a restriction on their freedom of action as historians and that this has resulted in Marxist history being poor history (Warren:1998:144). It is not necessary for the discussion of this chapter to become embroiled in such controversy, beyond noting that the existence of this charge against Marxist historians carries with it an assumption of acceptance by empirical historians that the Marxist outlook is also empirical, even if they dislike the form in which it is cast. Indeed Peter Burke has cautioned non-Marxist historians against conflating the use of the class criterion with a metaphysical approach to knowledge. Empirical historians, he thought, owed a clear debt to Marx and Engels for their role in the development of the discipline (Burke:1992:27,28).

Marwick, McCullagh and Evans have all argued that empirical Marxism has now been fully integrated into mainstream historiography (Marwick:981:44-5; McCullagh: 1998:187; Evans:1997a:169,184). Typical is Ludmilla Jordanova's comment, from within a Marxist practice that:

For those who use Marxian ideas, the claim that relations of production determine other features of a society remains central, even if it requires considerable unpacking. While it may be that the whole package we call Marxism is now wholeheartedly espoused by very few historians, many practitioners who never saw themselves in this camp, are, nonetheless, economic determinists at heart. (Jordanova:2000:68).

This concurs with the Marxist historian Victor Kiernan's view that without losing its specific identity, Marxism has become a preferred method of approaching the past for some historians, but not the only method of doing so (Kiernan:1983:97). It would thus seem that

as Joyce Appleby and her co-authors (as empirical historians) and Ludmilla Jordanova (as a Marxist historian) agree that it is quite possible to be both a Marxist and also a member of the mainstream of empirical historical practice (Appleby:1994:80-1; Jordanova:2000:198).

Importantly Thompson was not alone – his was not an isolated re-interpretation of Marx and Engels’s work. In his work *The British Marxist Historians* Harvey J. Kaye has placed Thompson alongside Maurice Dobb, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm as together forming the start of an important theoretical tradition. The results of that formation in which clearly empirical historical research is allied to an obvious or overtly expressed perspective, can be seen to be flourishing in the work of a range of social and cultural historians.²⁵

There is a problem in leaving the discussion here, with the assertion that Marxists’ methodological self-awareness – that is to say its clarity about its own criterion for selection of material - offers a way forward for traditional empirical historians. This is that the latter are unlikely to avail themselves of the offer. The point about empirical tardiness in making clear their own criteria has of course been seen by Marxists as a strategy for the masking of values – bourgeois values. And conversely the Marxist criterion has been regarded by many empiricists as evidence of closed minds that insist on focussing on class to the exclusion of other factors. This is of course needs no elaboration. So while there may be no theoretical reason why empiricists should not share Marxists’ methods, it is not

²⁵ See for example, Robert Gray’s ‘The Languages of Factory reform’ (1987), Gareth Stedman Jones’s ‘The “Cockney” and the Nation, 1780-1988’ (Feldman & Jones:1989:272-324) and Raphael Samuel’s influential *History Workshop* Series at Routledge. See also Lunn & Day’s collection of papers *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards* (1999) and the series of which it is a part - *Employment and Work Relations* edited by Tony Elger & Peter Fairbrother at the Centre for Comparative Labour Studies, Dept. of Sociology, University of Warwick. Also central here is Patrick Joyce’s *Work Society and Politics: the Culture of the Factory in Later 19th Century England* (1980) and his other works eg., 1987,1991,1994& 2002. His historiographical contribution to the debate between Marxist social history and poststructuralism is considered separately in the next section. Indicative too of this approach to history is Donna Loftus’s ‘Class Co-operation and the Urban Landscape in Mid-Nineteenth Century England’ (2000) and ‘Capital and Community: Limited Liability and Attempts to democratise the Market in Mid-Nineteenth Century England’

hard to guess that they probably will not do so in practice – as they have not in the past. But this is not as negative a point as it may seem, for if the analysis of this study were to go no further, what it will have regained is the degree of clarity between empirical and Marxist history that formerly existed. That is to say it is possible to see again, before the postmodern controversy clouded the issues, that the difference between empirical and Marxist historians is ultimately not epistemological, but political.

However it is not necessary to leave the discussion at this point, because so far it has merely raised the possibility of establishing some commonality between empiricist and Marxist history. A continued analysis of the broader debate can show how this is possible in practice. This is because Thompsonian Marxists, particularly Patrick Joyce,²⁶ have had their own engagement with poststructuralism. The result of this has been a more optimistic account of knowledge, and history, than the one that emerged from Jenkins, Munslow and Southgate's reading and which formed the postmodern challenge within the controversy. Of course, differences of values between Marxists and others rightly remain, but it can be seen that poststructuralist insights are capable of softening the edges between the now more sceptical empirical historiography and Thompsonian Marxism. And they can do the same too for the interface between empirical history and poststructuralism. They are therefore indicative of the discursive basis sought for in this study.²⁷

(2002). Other work by Thompson, contributing to this tradition, includes 'The Peculiarities of the English' (1965), 'Caudwell' (1977) and 'Class Struggle Without Class' (1978).

²⁶ Generally Joyce describes himself as a social historian, but he has at times made it clear that he works within a broadly Marxist position (eg. Joyce:1996:96).

²⁷ For clarity of expression in the final section of this chapter, I am using the term 'aporetic empiricism' to denote the more overtly sceptical empirical stance argued for in earlier chapters of this study. Likewise I am employing the description 'empirical Marxism' to refer to the Thompsonian tradition discussed in this section.

Section III

Keith Jenkins's use of postmodern insights is a useful point to begin this final section of the discussion – for two reasons. As with Marxism there is an initial issue to be addressed in relation to poststructuralism.²⁸ This is that within the controversy - especially evident in Jenkins's contribution - there is an assumption that poststructuralism provides an argument for the impossibility of knowledge. It is of course this that fuels notions of negativity in relation to aporetic awareness. Although such epistemological negativity could simply be omitted for the purpose of this chapter, it is helpful to indicate briefly why I find it unconvincing, since this has a bearing on the way poststructuralism might be seen differently. The second, and more important, reason for starting with Jenkins is that, despite his own reading of it, he provides some splendid evidence of how poststructuralism can be seen positively, as not only supportive of the possibility of knowledge, but also as providing a valuable model for sceptical empirical historians. In short it is possible to select, profitably, from Jenkins's work.

For example in *Why History*²⁹ it is clear that he relies heavily on a reading of Derrida to support his position. The picture that Jenkins gives of Derrida's account of knowledge is useful indeed, for it is one with which no pyrrhonist could disagree. All the pyrrhonian strictures against essentialism, objectivist or dogmatic knowledge, are there. In Sextus Empiricus's pyrrhonian work the central dimension is a reductive one – ie. that any justification of knowledge relies upon further justifications and so on. This of course tends to emphasis how closures (responses to aporia) pile up one upon another to produce the epistemological raft that we call knowledge. On the other hand, the central emphasis on

²⁸ I am broadly following John Sturrock's view of poststructuralism as encompassing the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jaques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. (Sturrock:1979 & 1986). But because of the focus on Jenkins's work I include also, as he does, Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Richard Rorty (Jenkins:1999). However I accept David West's focus on a 'decentring of the subject' principally by Foucault and Derrida, as perhaps constituting the core of the concept (West:1996:Ch.6).

language in Derrida is a highly appropriate means for our own times, by which it is possible to see the same process – ie a coagulation of ‘responses’ into meaning - being formed and transmitted within concepts and across socially constructed usages of language. Certainly Derrida’s treatment of the issues is a good deal more sophisticated than the fragments of pyrrhonism that now remain, but their common role in enabling the understanding of how aporia might be thought to produce knowledge, is unmistakable. Although the general thrust of each is to debunk notions of objective truth, they both carry clear recognition that lower case (to use Jenkins’s expression) everyday truths (responses to aporia) are both possible and necessary. For example Jenkins explains:

To be sure Derrida knows that to get around in the world ‘we’ need some fictive stabilities to (albeit imperfectly) occur...
 “Thus it becomes necessary to stabilise precisely because stabilisation is not natural.” (Jenkins:1999:44)³⁰

Clearly on this evidence it is obvious that Derrida, like pyrrhonism, is supportive of the possibility of ordinary everyday knowledge – everyday (lower case) historical knowledge.

³¹ Yet this is precisely what Jenkins has argued against, using Derrida as his primary justification. It is not unreasonable to ask why this should be so. Unfortunately the answer is not clear – Jenkins is uncharacteristically reticent here. There is no doubt that Jenkins’s quarrel is with what he regards as metaphysical history, but his response to the issue is a

²⁹ This is Jenkins’s most systematic explanation of his ‘end of history’ argument.

³⁰ Here Jenkins’s Derrida can be directly compared with Sextus Empiricus’s acceptance that it is quite possible to have knowledge provided always that one does not believe it to be objectively true. See the discussion on pyrrhonian epistemology in Chapter Two.

³¹ Optimistic readings of poststructuralism are not difficult to find. See for example Hugh Rayment-pickard’s ‘Derrida and Fidelity to history’ where it is argued that Derrida is ‘a philosopher who cares very much about truth, in particular about historical truth’ (Rayment-pickard:2002:13). See also Rodolphe Gasche’s ‘Infrstructures and Systematicity’. Gasche argues that ‘Derrida’s philosophy is more often than not [wrongly] constructed as a license for arbitrary free play in flagrant disregard of all established rules of argumentation, traditional requirements of thought, and ethical standards binding upon the interpretative community’ (Gasche: 1988:3). Similar arguments can be found in Christina Howell’s *Derrida, Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics* (1999) and Christopher Norris’s *Derrida* (1987).

call for the ending of all forms of history, not just for those demonstrating metaphysical assumptions. It is nothing less than for everyone to – ‘live out of history but in time...’ (p.206).

It is possible that Jenkins’s argument - from the evidenced ‘particular’ to the asserted ‘general’ - is simply the result of exuberance of rhetoric, but this is perhaps unlikely. A more feasible explanation might be that his argument simply slipped. It is noticeable that when in the book he first presented his account of Derrida, due regard was given to the importance that Derrida places on knowledge, especially on that of ‘emancipation’ (eg. pages 38, 40 & 41). When Jenkins later drew his conclusions from his reading of Derrida and others, there was no longer any reference to their acceptance of closures in the everyday construction of knowledge – the ‘getting about in the world’. Jenkins acknowledged that ‘Derrida doesn’t go on to consider this context of lower case history, concentrating on the metanarratives of yesteryear’ but he went ahead anyway to include it in an all-embracing ban. Moreover in his continual reference to Derrida throughout the conclusion of his argument, he leaves the reader with the impression that Derrida supports this inclusion of lower case history just as if Derrida had included it in his target. Thus in the absence of any further references to ‘fictive stabilities’ Jenkins regards all form of closure as metaphysical and therefore needing to be expunged from intellectual life.

Of course it is possible that I have misread Jenkins’s account here, but in the absence by him of any serious analysis of lower case complicity in metaphysical historicising, a degree of conjecture is necessary. Clearly then, on its own, Jenkins’s reading of Derrida’s poststructuralist stance towards history is hardly compelling. Munslow and Southgate, who support his work generally, have been decidedly ambivalent on this issue and, as previously mentioned, in recent works they have both become noticeably more optimistic about a future for history. Thus in the absence of substantive support from other postmodernists within the controversy it would seem sensible to lay Jenkins’s version of

poststructuralism to one side. It is true that these brief comments hardly constitute an in depth analysis of his case. But it is obvious that there is a problem – a lacuna – in the justification Jenkins offers for epistemological negativity. Indeed the problem may be indicative of a deeper difficulty in his approach to aporia. It has, for example already been noted that the degree of certainty with which he discusses the existence of postmodernity sits uneasily on his espoused scepticism (Richard Evans in Chapter One of this study). Similarly Patrick Joyce regards Jenkins as offering ‘a kind of idealist or subjectivist postmodernism which is the objectivist position stood on its head’ - that, in effect, Jenkins and Evans ‘mutually constitute each other.’ (Joyce 1998:231).³² Such further analysis, however, would take the discussion beyond the scope and aims of this section. If there is no obvious reason why awareness of aporia should imply a problem with the making of knowledge in the ordinary sense of the word, then there is no reason why sceptical empiricists should not seek insights from other, readily available and more positive explanations of poststructuralism.

To do this it is helpful to return to the Marxist social history experience, for as empirical Marxists they have had a comparable ‘controversy’ themselves, first briefly with traditional empirical historians but subsequently in the form of an internal discussion about the lessons to be learned from poststructuralism. The result has been quite different from the outcome of the controversy in that Marxism has unambiguously endorsed a reflexive approach to history.³³

³² A related area of analysis might focus on theorists who regard the existence of aporia with all its messy uncertainty as a major problem (a problem always putatively for others). It might compare this response with empiricists’ easy acceptance of the need to make ‘the best of it’, and conclude that the problem for such theorists is not in aporia itself, but in their own anxiety towards it.

³³ Use of the word ‘unambiguously’ prompts the need for a qualifier. First it is not strictly accurate to say that this part of the debate has been separate from the controversy, not least because most its contents would have been known to Jenkins, Evans et.al. This is evidenced by the inclusion of some of these papers within Keith Jenkins’s collection *The Postmodern Reader* (1997) and elsewhere. Nevertheless the respective patterns are sufficiently different for the distinction to stand.

The exchanges began in May 1991 with the publication of the now well known short piece in *Past & Present* by Lawrence Stone in which he expressed a concern at new ideas about the nature of historical knowledge. (1991:217/8). It was clear that Stone did not have a strong understanding of poststructuralist concepts such as ‘nothing beyond the text’, the ‘real is as imagined as the imaginary’ or what he regarded as New Historicist ideas of ‘the “real” as being constructed as it was apprehended’ (Stone:1991:217). Patrick Joyce’s response to this, later in 1991, was robust, pointing out that some of these so called threats to history were coming from mainstream figures such as Bakhtin. Despite Joyce’s combative stance the stasis of the controversy was avoided by his suggesting a way forward for the discipline – methodological self-awareness. His paper was accompanied by a similar although more conciliatory piece by Catriona Kelly who, using women’s studies as an example, explored common ground between postmodern and empirical positions. She argued that in the twentieth/ twenty-first century, in conditions of mass education and communication, the now more varied constituency of history-making, implied that there was a need to define the context giving rise to particular selections and interpretations of evidence. Kelly argued that a consequence of this was that meaning had to be defined by understanding the multi-faceted nature of context – in other words, by reflexive practice. Here then at the outset of these exchanges, was a practical suggestion for a sceptical empirical methodology that was more flexible than empirical Marxism’s class criterion, but nevertheless shared its overt constructivism.

This paired reply to Stone was in turn responded to by Stone and Gabrielle Spiegel the following year. They readily acknowledged that theirs was sceptical empirical practice and they accepted a degree of constructivism in their understanding of history, but they continued to assume that there was a core of historical knowledge that was not susceptible to interpretation. Spiegel, for example, welcomed the use of deconstructive strategies in reading historical texts as

powerful tools of analysis in uncovering and dismantling the ways in which texts perform elaborate ideological mystifications of which it is proper to be suspicious (Spiegel:1992:204).

But at the same time she still spoke of 'extreme' poststructuralists and posited poststructuralism against 'history' as though it was possible to separate knowledge as such from its means of achievement (p.207). Thus they still differed from postmodernists about whether in the last instance there was a core of historical knowledge that eluded interpretation. However I do not find this point too discouraging. Spiegel largely agrees with the poststructuralist process in which knowledge is formed - through what she calls 'mediation'(197/8). She explains it thus. It functions:

both for the operation of mediation in the past (that is, for example, as embodied in a discourse that mediates between a social world and its literary and discursive consciousness of its own nature) and for the historical analyses that we undertake of that world, allowing historians to comprehend historical experience via the linguistic evidence – whether literary or documentary – by which we come to know and understand the past (Spiegel:1992:198).

That is to say (on behalf of Spiegel) that whilst she believes there is a world existing objectively of the knowing subject (and this is common ground) it can only be known through human discursive patterns. If this is so, it leaves her supposed unproblematic 'last instance' fragile indeed, and susceptible to an understanding of it as being sedimented layers of interpretation, rather than a form of realism. In other words, I consider there to be little of principle between Spiegel and for example Kelly and I am hopeful that the kind of

empirical analysis of empiricism offered in this study, will prove helpful in supporting a continued dialogue between these positions.

The following year (1993) in Adrian Wilson's *Rethinking Social History*, Patrick Curry turned the focus onto Marxism, arguing that it had a future only in the post-Marxist form that he saw emerging from Thompson but also more recently from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and Patrick Joyce. Interestingly (in terms of the historical connection between pragmatist/postmodernism and empiricism discussed in the previous chapter) Curry considered that, epistemologically if not politically, this form of Marxism was coherent with Rortean postmodernism. After two somewhat combative papers in *Social History* (1994) by James Vernon and Neville Kirk, the postmodern analysis of Marxism gathered pace with Patrick Joyce's paper in 1995 when he suggested ways in which Marxist social history could address the issues being raised by poststructuralism. Far from the negativity of the controversy, his was a positive response that followed the example of Foucault, drawing from Marxism what was useful whilst avoiding what was outdated or unhelpful. In particular Joyce argued for a broadening of the concept of class towards a more fluid, flexible, articulation (1995:86). Class was not to be abandoned so much as rethought. It was no longer feasible he argued, to simply invoke class as a 'coded term for the real' (p.78). 'This referent, the "social" is itself a "discursive" product of history' (p.82). Thus 'the search is now for how meanings have been produced by relations of power, rather than for "external" or "objective" class "structures", or other "social" referents.' Moreover, the role of the individual had become more obviously multifaceted, he argued; 'many identities press and react with one another' (p.82). Again, 'there (in the new postmodern sociologies) the whole emphasis is against understandings of society as a system or a totality, and upon self-constitution, randomness and the reflexivity of subjects' (p.90). Poststructuralism in his view became an exciting catalyst for change, for renewal and development in Marxist social history. And there was, in effect, nothing in his

approach that, of necessity, would bar the involvement of sceptical empirical historians so long as they were willing to adopt a more reflexive practice.

Later in 1995 Joyce received something resembling a 'dressing down' from fellow Marxists Geoff Eley and Keith Nield who considered his intervention to be too hostile to traditional concepts of class and too certainistic in its general tone.³⁴ Although in 1996 he replied, re-asserting his core claim that Marxist social history must rethink its working concepts by engaging with poststructuralism, Eley and Nield's critique had an effect. Thus Joyce contributed a piece (to *Past and Present*) that was noticeably more optimistic than before, about history. Poststructuralism perhaps implied 'not the end, but the return of history' (1996:235). Postmodernism was as much a product of social change as its instigator and therefore other forms of expression may be more effective than postmodernism in bringing about methodological change (p.209). These other forms may include traditional historiography itself, he reasoned, for history had become looser in recent years and practitioners had become more aware of their constructive role (p.209). And the aim now, he thought, was for historians to see 'the inescapable operations of power in the creation of discourse (p.210). What was needed he suggested, was a form of reflexivity that recognised what Berkhoffer had called 'the inevitability of narrative historical knowledge, but yet seeks to subvert the tendencies to closure evident in all narratives' (Joyce:1996:216).³⁵

Joyce continued this optimistic theme in 2001, in an auto-biographical piece for rethinking *History*. Here he considered that 'power and truth in history do not seem to me to be incompatible' although he acknowledged that a certain tension could result. Indeed the historian had 'a sort of duty to doubt' (p.368). His conclusion was again that reflexivity

³⁴ For simplicity of exposition I am ignoring other criticisms such as Joyce's avoidance of engagement with Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' (Jameson:1991) which, although important for the participants, has perhaps less value for this study.

³⁵ I am assuming Berkhoffer is using the term closure to indicate upper case objective certainty and not the kind of lower case 'means of making sense' ie. closing off the potential for ongoing interpretation, as I have used it in this study.

was the way forward for historians. It would be possible to go on, exploring the byways of these exchanges between Marxist social historians and those in favour of poststructuralist change, but the lesson from them can now be drawn.

The contrast between the dynamics of these exchanges and the static controversy of Jenkins, Munslow and Southgate with Evans, Marwick and Zagorin, could not be more marked. In the controversy, as was noted in Chapter One, the participants are still arguing about objectivity and the possibility of knowledge in conditions of postmodernism. Here between Marxism and poststructuralism, both of these positions are theoretically aware and the discussion has become one about responses to aporia. What appears to be happening is that the influence of poststructuralism is nudging Marxist responses away from the traditional criterion of class, with all its apparent reliability, and towards a more open-ended, linguistic, flexible reflexivity. It is not that they are claiming that class longer functions as a closure, but that its appropriateness needs justifying in particular circumstances, rather than being taken as 'a given'. Naturally enough not all Marxists are likely to be happy with such changes – Marxism is nothing if not alive to the existence of political positions that would want to neutralise its effective edge. There is no need however for this discussion to become involved in the desirability or otherwise of this shift of closure except to note that the reflexive form makes it easier (as will be apparent) for empirical historians to locate themselves alongside, rather than as epistemologically opposed to, Marxism.

Several questions need now to be answered before it is possible to see clearly a common base between these positions of empiricism, Marxism and poststructuralism. The first is about the nature of this term 'reflexivity' that has been used until now interchangeably with 'methodological self-awareness'. How exactly does the former differ from the latter? A preliminary answer might be that methodological self-awareness seems to carry an

assumption that if the historian gets the method right, then 'right' kind of knowledge results. With reflexivity, there is a sense that the model implies a double effect. First there is an awareness of the choices that are being made in forming any historical knowledge and that these draw the intellectual activity of the knower, always already in existence in an act of knowing, more closely towards being a core part of the practice of history. Secondly there is a similar awareness that the knowledge thus produced by that selection/interpretation affects in turn the perspective that gave rise to it. Therefore knowledge builds, as if on a raft, floating on an acceptance of a world outside human knowledge (this is no idealism) but unconnected with that world in any meaningful way (ie. all knowledge is a human construction). In this way the 'activity' of the knower becomes a necessary part of the construction of historical knowledge and not merely an optional add-on. The historian, working such a model of history, needs to be as much aware of this process of reflexivity as of the use made of sources.

What follows now, in this discussion, is a brief examination of how poststructuralists themselves have treated issues of reflexivity, and thus of how mainstream empirical historians could begin a dialogue with them, for poststructuralism is a response to aporia that has made the study of closures absolutely central to its approach to knowledge. It can be seen here that not only is there nothing in this reading of poststructuralism that is likely to prove at all problematic in reflexivity for empirical historiography, there is much that is positively beneficial, not least its ability to effect a dialogue between empiricism and Marxism.

It is not difficult to see that although traditional (now aporetic) empirical historians might balk at using a traditional Marxist form of methodological awareness as a means of practising history, they are more likely to be persuaded to accept the need for a greater

degree of reflexivity in their work. In this sense reflexivity is not any less value laden - or political - a process than methodological self-awareness; it only seems so, but it does offer a more flexible means of handling values in history. Reflexivity then, could in both theory and practice, become a common methodology for empirical as well as Marxist historians. If this should be the case, it is reasonable to ask whether reflexivity is stable as a closure – whether it provides stable knowledge.

The answer is, not entirely unexpectedly but equally not inappropriately, ambivalent.

Hilary Lawson's poststructuralist approach helps here. She speaks of reflexivity as being 'a mystery' (1985:Ch.1) and warns that no 'self conscious nod' in the direction of reflexivity will settle the matter of aporia and the identification of 'correct' responses to it. I have given here three quotes from her work *Reflexivity* (1985) which I find helpful as a way into an understanding of the concept. Thus for her reflexivity is:

A turning back on oneself, a form of self-awareness that has been a part of philosophy from its inception, but reflexive questions have been given their special force in consequence of the recognition of the special role played by language, theory, sign and text ...paradox rules (1985:9).

Similarly:

Through language, theory and text, we close the openness that is the world. The closures we make provide the world – they are in a sense all that we have and all that we could have. To want a final description of the world is to want more than this! (p.128).

And perhaps crucially:

There are a multiplicity of possible closures but each closure textures the world and thereby enables us to do things in the “world”. The choice of closures is not merely a theoretical affair, for it determines the possibility of action open to us (p.129).

Clearly traditional empirical historians do not, at present at least, talk about their closures, that is to say their interpretations, in this way, but they could so; nothing that they have at present would be lost except the masking of their values, and this they deny anyway! Were they to model their practice in terms of reflexivity, then a wealth of theoretical insights on the nature of closures - of poststructuralism - would be available to them. But this turn would raise further questions, the most pressing of which is whether, or the extent to which, poststructuralism – or deconstruction, which is in effect the same as poststructuralism – differs from empiricism and pragmatism. The answer here is that there is perhaps a difference, but it is not one that implies epistemological nihilism; in fact quite the reverse. Christopher Norris has pointed out that there is a point at which Derridean deconstruction parts company with postmodern pragmatism in its various forms (Norris:1987:161). However, for Norris this is not because, as so often assumed, the former is more radically sceptical than pragmatism so much as more intellectually rigorous.

³⁶ Norris’s point here is that pragmatism’s response to aporia is to accept a consensual account of knowledge, a view that I have suggested is shared with empiricism.

³⁶ It is worth recalling here the argued connection between empiricism and pragmatism (Ch.3).

Deconstruction on the other hand, Norris argues, considers the process through which arguments are created, ie. the nature of closures.

However - and this enables Derrida's thought to be of value to empiricists – it is essentially metaphysical assumptions and especially Kantian claims to certainty, that is the target of Derrida's critique – not knowledge in its entirety. For example:

I have argued (and understood Derrida as arguing) that deconstruction is a rigorous attempt to think the limits of that principle of reason which has shaped the emergence of western philosophy, science and technology at large. ...thus the outcome of deconstruction is strictly inconceivable outside the tradition of enlightened rational critique whose classic formulations are still to be found in Kant. (1987:162).

Christine Howell offers a useful, albeit lengthy, explanation of how deconstruction might be understood, thus:

Deconstruction may set out to 'read between the lines', or even 'read against the grain', but it always attempts to read, and to understand. The so-called 'play of

interpretation', which Derrida refers to as 'dissemination', is a play in the linguistic mechanism perhaps, but it is not the 'free play' beloved of some of Derrida's less rigorous followers. It is rather the demonstration of textual self-contradiction which is the essence of the deconstructive project. It differs from the standard philosophical technique of finding flaws in the logic of an opponent's argument in that the contradictions uncovered reveal an incompatibility between what the writer believes him or herself to be arguing and what the text itself actually says. This gap between authorial intention and textual meaning is a key focus of deconstruction (Howells:1999;3).³⁷

My intention here is not to attempt to offer an assessment of these 'definitions', much less so of the concepts discussed. Rather it is that, in showing what poststructuralists are currently saying about their approaches to knowledge, I am showing too - hopefully - that their critical focus on linguistic closures offer a new intellectual resource upon which aporetic empirical historians can draw, to the benefit of their practice. But - and this is the next of the pressing questions - can it still be said that poststructuralism is political if it abjures the class criterion? Is it not the case that accounts of the world that try to cope with every aspect of values are likely to have little effect on any of them?

³⁷ See also John Sturrock's useful work *Structuralism* (1986) especially Chapter Five.

The answer here is that there is no doubt that poststructuralists attempt to be political. Whether they achieve it is perhaps something that needs to be discussed in relation to particular issues and circumstances – a generic response is inappropriate. Here Keith Jenkins has provided useful evidence. In this example his extract follows Derrida having argued that democracy is something that may, and should be, sought, but that it will never be achieved in the sense of being unable to be improved upon.³⁸ Derrida is nevertheless keen to stress that he does not mean that democracy as such – in the usual everyday sense – cannot happen. Thus:

emancipation is once again a vast question today and I must say that I have no tolerance for those who – deconstructionist or not – are ironical with regard to the grand discourse of emancipation. This attitude has always distressed and irritated me. I do not want to renounce this discourse (Jenkins:1999:41).³⁹

Aside from Derrida, Honi Fern Haber has examined and compared particular expressions of poststructuralism - ie. the closures - of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault from her standpoint as a socialist woman of colour (Haber:1994). She concluded that although all three of them held positions that could be regarded as ostensibly supportive of her own, in fact only Foucault handled power in knowledge in a way that someone in her position might find practically useful. She found that Lyotard universalised difference (ie. scepticism) to the extent that in no act of closure would work adequately – all was and remained, interpretative. For Haber this had real significance in

³⁸Derrida's account of the unrealisability of democracy and other value laden concepts is discussed in more detail in Chantal Mouffe's *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (1996) Chapter One and, more generally, in Derrida's *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001).

³⁹ See also Derrida's heavy criticism of Heidegger's politics in 'Geschlech III' (Sallis:1972). Culler too discusses the issue of poststructuralist politics, making the point that deconstruction is a way of taking a position that although 'too political for some, it will seem paralyzing to those who only recognise politics by the most familiar road signs' (Culler:1983:156).

disfranchising emergent 'voices'. Similarly Rorty's abandonment (as Haber saw it) of rigorous analysis for consensus epistemology, tended to have the same practical effect as Lyotard, namely that of valorising existing class, gender and ethnic power (Haber: 1994: 7/8).⁴⁰ Foucault by contrast, shows how power and knowledge intersect, she argued. Thus Foucault recognises the

ubiquity of power and that this is a thesis that encourages imaginative reconstructions of everyday life along lines that are in keeping with the poststructural insight that subjectivity and intentionality are not prior to, but functions of forms of life and systems of language, and they therefore do not constitute the world but are themselves elements of a linguistically disclosed reality (Haber: 1994: 78).⁴¹

The final, perhaps most important question, is how exactly might newly converted aporetic empirical historians use these poststructuralist ideas in their daily work. What follows can only be sketched lightly, for the aim here has been to provide a path towards a possible dialogue between empiricism, marxism and poststructuralism, rather than to host the dialogue itself. Nevertheless it must be clear to the reader by now that the ground I see as

⁴⁰ On the face of it the connection (made in this study) between aporetic empiricism and Rortian pragmatic postmodernism would seem to suggest that modernised empiricism might itself suffer from the same defect, that both Haber, and Norris, have identified. However there is a reasonable chance that empiricism's own tradition of analytical rigour will be protection against this possible naïve consensualism (or constructualism). Certainly this is not an issue that I think is necessary to address here.

⁴¹ See also Eric Matthews's *Twentieth Century French Philosophy* (1996) where he makes the same point about Foucault as was made about Derrida. Thus for Matthews, Foucault sees ideas existing in their social context as part of a 'modern scepticism about the possibility of metaphysics.' Foucault's critique is firmly against the 'formation of general a-priori accounts of an unchanging "human nature"' (1996:149), his treatment of genealogy applying itself to institutions as well as discourses (p.152). Matthews's reading of Foucault brings out - positively - the tension seen between a sense of permanent critique of the self resulting from the enlightenment and notions of a fixed concept of human nature as a consequence of humanism (p.153). For a less sympathetic reading of Foucault,

potentially existing, on which this dialogue can be built, is that of reflexivity. It is reflexivity - in the sense of making more overt its closures - that is now possible for aporetic empirical historians. It is reflexivity in a rather different 'methodological' form that has long been a part of empirical Marxist historiography and it is reflexivity that is the *raison d'être* of poststructuralism, to the extent that it is reasonable to look to its theorists for guidance and insights as to how the concept can be effectively used. Again, Derrida's work is pre-eminent.

Sturrock explains how deconstruction might be employed. This turns on Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence. Sturrock summarises it as an assumption that Derrida has regarded as fundamental to the western tradition,⁴² which 'assumes that whatever is present to us is wholly and immediately so, grasped in an act of "pure" intuition which has no recourse to sign. Presence (in this view) precedes signification' (Sturrock:1986:138). The point is that for Derrida presence can apparently be known only by language and, post Saussure, (moderated by Derrida) once language is brought into the process the connection between meaning and the referent (the Kantian 'thing in itself') is only by a system of signification (ie. a language with all its cultural implications) and by a matrix of difference ie. by comparison with what it is not. Sturrock again: 'we are conscious of what is present to us as being present; and the concept of presence like all concepts, is not a self enclosed unity, but one inhabited by its contrary' (1986:138).⁴³

Thus, in history, the more that the meaning of an organising concept, a perspective or the result of an analysis of a source, etc. is understood to be constructed in part by its

see Walzer's argument that power without a centre is an essentially conservative doctrine (1986: 54 & 67). Also useful more generally, is Hoy's collection of papers (1986) and Merquior (1991).

⁴² I am not at all sure that my analysis of the longevity of empirical forms of aporetic awareness sits easily with Derrida's somewhat universalist characterisation of the metaphysics of presence, but I see no reason why selections should not be made from his work as happened with so many other theorists.

⁴³ In practice I have found helpful Catherine Belsey's somewhat sloganised summary of deconstruction as being 'the other invades the selfsame' (Belsey: 2002:81,82 & 113).

differential relations with other concepts, perspectives or analyses, then the clearer is going to be the understanding gained (constructed) from the past. What this implies in practice is the desirability of history in which the selections, options, principles and values are included as prominently as are currently the more obvious and physical means of making sense of the past ie. the sources and conventions. By making them overt and obvious, historians make it easier for those with whom they communicate to ‘deconstruct’ the intellectual component of their historical knowledge and thereby to understand what is being communicated better. This for me is reflexivity and this is what I should like to commend as the base-line benefit for empirical historians, teachers and students in following such a route to understanding the past.⁴⁴ I have tried to model this practice here in this study, in the explanatory remarks made in the introduction and at times in the body of the work.

There are of course other concepts and procedures of poststructuralism that are of considerable benefit in constructing histories and which an interspectival dialogue might pick up on and explore and which cannot be discussed to any useful extent here. One such concept has been available for a long time – and regarded as almost pre-poststructuralist⁴⁵ – ie. Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia. What it shares with current poststructuralism is its rigorous working of issues relating to language against a cultural context – in fact that of class. In brief heteroglossia is intended to signify the multiplicity of voices that can be heard within a text and which become merged in the process of understanding. It indicates too the tension that might be thought to exist in the use of words as between the pull of the

⁴⁴ This is not to say that once an open reflexive attitude to the past has been adopted, that is the end of the business of making sense of the past. Culler points out that deconstruction does not set everything straight. The historian can still be left with all sorts of contradictions and difficulties to sort out in the process of making historical knowledge (Culler:1983:109).

⁴⁵ This is a rather controversial issue. See Thomson (2001:85) and Sturrock (1986:136) for a discussion of Bakhtin’s credentials as a poststructuralist.

‘centre’ ie. the meaning of the word within the system of language which it inhabits and the often contrary pull of the actual use of the word in particular circumstances and context.⁴⁶

Clearly these comments on poststructuralism and history are very far from exhaustive, but perhaps they give a sense of a useful - and epistemologically coherent – range of possibilities that can be accessed by hitherto traditional empirical historians who are prepared to reconsider their historical practice in the way suggested here. To reach this point this final chapter started by sketching out how present day empirical history could be thought to be associated with the longer tradition of generic empiricism discussed in Chapters Two and Three and which was shown to have long been aporetically aware. In doing this it was noted although empirical historiography had been influenced at times, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, by historians of more metaphysical inclinations, its empiricism has remained intact. An exception to this pattern was seen in relation to Collingwood’s work where his influence was towards encouraging a welcome degree of self-awareness of the constructivism inherent in the making of history. The focus then moved to consider Marxist history and it was noted that this awareness – a methodological self-awareness – was not only a hallmark of a now more empirical approach within Marxist historiography, but also a link between aporetic empiricism and the linguistic concepts of poststructuralism. Thus I have suggested, and I conclude this chapter by contending that despite their obvious differences, empirical, Marxist and poststructuralist historians can, if they wish, enter into productive dialogue with each other around a focus on reflexivity.

⁴⁶ See Dentith (1995) for a thorough discussion of Bakhtin’s thought (and that of his collaborator V. N. Voloshinov and the complex authorial relationship between them). See too John Arnold (1998) for an example of heteroglossia in historical use. Nancy Fraser (1997:155) is useful for an explanation of what she calls Bakhtin’s ‘pragmatics model’ and Lynette Hunter (1999:139) for a discussion of his accompanying concept – ‘dialogism’. Bakhtin’s Marxist base is usefully explored in Pechey’s review article on Ken Hirschop’s work on Bakhtin (2001).

Conclusion

In engaging with the scepticism of this postmodern challenge to empirical history, I hope that I have helped in several ways, to move the debate forward. First, in identifying the very many examples of scepticism evident in the western historical tradition, I have attempted to show that scepticism is a more important dimension of philosophy than merely a component of a particular reading of postmodernism. Second, in doing this I have offered an account of empiricism that I believe can meet the postmodern challenge (specifically that of Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow and Beverly Southgate) on its own philosophical grounds. Third, I have tried to draw out from this controversy, and from the broader debate that stands behind it, a core criticism of traditional empirical historiography (eg. that of Richard Evans, Arthur Marwick and Perez Zagorin) that has seemed to me justified and easily capable of remedy. Finally I have pointed to some implications of this critique for the way that empirical historians might continue their practice in the face of postmodernism and how, within this, teachers of history can begin to respond to these issues. In short the aim of this study has been to find a better understanding than currently exists, of the relationship between postmodernism and empirical historiography.

The problem with the empirical position in the controversy has been its vagueness - almost incoherence even - in grounding its knowledge-claims. Empirical historians seem to have accepted that the account of scepticism given by this particular version of postmodernism is the only way that interpretation in history can be expressed. Their rejection of the postmodern critique has been accompanied by a tendency to resist also any discussion of historical theories and methods and this has added fuel to the criticisms made of them, that empiricism is resistant to change and unwilling to debate the issues. The postmodernists by contrast have offered a trenchant critique of what they consider to be a complacent, naïve form of realist empiricism. But they too have been unconvincing, partly because of their

general negativity in relation to knowledge (this includes a complete denial of the possibility of history by Jenkins) but also because their position lacks convincing analysis of how precisely it compares with generic empiricism. Indeed, the weakness of the controversy as a whole is that its grounds are narrow. Justifications for both positions have been drawn largely from the present or the very recent past. The postmoderns have developed their case from postmodern/poststructuralist philosophy in seeming disregard of the broader discussion of scepticism by philosophers and by historians of ideas. The empiricists have mirrored this weakness by drawing their own evidence narrowly, from only late nineteenth or twentieth century historical practices.

The unsatisfactory nature of the controversy has been amply demonstrated at the time of writing, by a short review in the *Times Higher* (August 27 2004). This was a critique by Professor Jeremy Black, of Beverly Southgate's recent work *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom* (2003). Black criticised Southgate's claim that all scepticism in the western historical tradition is evidence of postmodernism to come - much as I have criticised it myself in Chapter One of this study. But unhelpfully, Black then avoided the question of what is implied by scepticism for historical practice. He simply dismissed Southgate's central argument as 'a somewhat marginal debate' and allowed his review to be read as a general deprecation of historical theory with phrases such as '...most historians get on with research'. Thus another opportunity to discuss this important question of how interpretative issues in history should be conceived and handled, was lost. Equally importantly, the improbable idea that all scepticism in the past can be understood as proto-postmodernism - described by Jenkins on the book cover as 'a depth of learning few carry so easily' - was not adequately engaged with. Moreover the intemperate nature of the exchanges between these historians in the controversy is perhaps evidence of a degree of stasis within the controversy.

To move the discussion on, it has increasingly seemed necessary to find some common ground as premise for constructive argument.¹

There have been several reasons why I have considered that the ground of this controversy was capable of being moved. The first was that it was possible for empirical historians to broaden their focus and draw more widely on the tradition of empiricism outside of history, to offer an epistemology equal to postmodernism in terms of its awareness of aporia, but one not susceptible to negativity. Second, there has been evidence of another broader debate within history - between Marxism and poststructuralism and this one has not suffered the same stasis as the controversy.² Third, there exists poststructuralist arguments that have not been pessimistic about the possibility of knowledge and which, far from condemning the discipline of history in its entirety, offer concepts that can improve its ability to function in conditions of mass society.

The common ground that I have sought here can be summarised by the term 'reflexivity'. This expression has emerged from poststructuralism. It can be understood as identifying a need for a degree of reflection about one's practice, but it means rather more than simply reflection. What is additionally implied by the term is a sense of self-awareness that there exists a dynamic relationship between knowledge gained from the past and the gaze, from the present to that past, which constructs to some extent the knowledge that is produced by the gaze. The concept rests upon the idea that knowledge, of the past or indeed of the present, is what humans make in response to a perception of aporia. This awareness of

¹ It is important for any debate to move on from time to time and to be seen to be providing new, interesting or useful understandings of the discipline, however minor these might be. This is especially so in this case because the static and seemingly increasingly rancorous nature of the controversy carries a danger of turning off the interest of students and student teachers of the discipline. The significance of this for the future of the discipline is obvious.

² The term 'controversy' has been used to indicate the exchanges between Evans/Jenkins et. al. to differentiate it from the 'broader debate' involving Marxist historiography and other more positive readings of poststructuralism.

aporia is, in turn, a consciousness that complete certainty of knowledge of the world appears impossible to achieve.

Poststructuralists use reflexivity as a way of expressing and handling what they see as an essentially linguistic nature of the response that we count as knowledge. Marxists have been introduced to poststructuralism largely by Patrick Joyce who has suggested that the linguistic closures that constitute poststructuralist reflexivity, can incorporate Marxist methodological self-awareness (of class). At the time of writing it appears that Marxist historians have largely accepted Joyce's arguments and have thus come to terms with reflexivity as an epistemology through which Marxist history can be produced. To provide the possibility of a connection – a dialogue – between empirical historians and both Marxists and poststructuralists I have focused the central part of this study, Chapters Two and Three, on identifying an alternative genealogy for empirical historiography, drawn from the broader accounts of empiricism outside of history and considered over the longer period of the western tradition. This has been an important part of this project, for if it could be shown - as indeed it has - that empiricism had long been associated with broadly the same kind of epistemological scepticism as found in Marxism and poststructuralism, then the way would be clear for an identification of the sought-for common ground.

Chapter Two considered empiricism in the ancient world. To facilitate the discussion, a particular model of knowledge was used; that of 'aporia and response'. What was implied by the expression is that an awareness of the apparent impossibility of gaining certain knowledge of the world seems to be a constant, experienced by humans at widely different times and places. The 'response' is what humans do, in different ways at different times and places and by different people, about this realisation. Empiricists generally can be seen to rely on the senses; realists, idealist or Christians make, or assume the possibility, of other responses. Apart from a brief consideration of Plato and Aristotle, to clarify the model being used, this chapter has focused on two important forms of empiricism, sophism and

pyrrhonism which, although different according to time, place and person, can be seen nevertheless to be linked by a reliance on the senses. Moreover between sophism and Sextus Empiricus's pyrrhonism, a degree of tentativeness can be thought to have become incorporated within empiricism. Thus from Pyrrhonism onwards, the empirical awareness of aporia is characterised by a belief in 'apparent' aporia, rather than in the certainty that no certain objective knowledge can exist. This seemingly insignificant, but crucial, feature allows responses to aporia to be treated as if knowledge could be relied upon to be possible, tentatively but practically. It also evades the otherwise rather serious charge of a performative contradiction i.e. if knowledge is not possible, how can that statement be made? This model is by no means new. Historians of philosophy have been well aware of the issues involved but this has not before been employed in the empirical/postmodern history controversy in this way.

Chapter Three brought the discussion into the modern world. It argued that the empiricism of David Hume, August Comte, J.S.Mill, the pragmatist tradition of William James and John Dewey and the neo-pragmatism/ postmodernism of Richard Rorty could all be linked via this same model of 'aporia and response'. They all showed awareness of aporia in the tentative manner of pyrrhonists and they all relied, for their response to that aporia, on the senses and what could be made of them. The same pattern could be seen too in a variety of present day expressions of empirical philosophy. The chapter thus concluded that although empiricists may not make their responses sufficiently overt they nevertheless share with the postmoderns an awareness of aporia.

Chapter Four returned to the discussion of history, to place empiricism, Marxism and poststructuralism in juxtaposition with each other in terms of their use of – or potential use of – reflexivity. The chapter opened by sealing the link between empirical historiography and the larger general tradition of empiricism that had been examined in the previous two chapters. It then focused on Marxism, noting how since E.P. Thompson's intervention,

Western Marxist historiography has been empirical in terms of its basic epistemology and, under the influence of Patrick Joyce, is in the process of moving closer to poststructuralism by becoming more reflexive. The point here is that there is no reason why empiricism should not do the same.

There really is no need for the defensiveness that has been characteristic of the empirical side within the controversy. The example of Marxism has shown that other, more optimistic readings of poststructuralism exist than those deployed by the postmodernism of the controversy. It can be seen that poststructural use of the term 'closure' refers not to notions of absolute truth, but to criteria that enable knowledge statements to be made which close, for the time being, the potentially endless flow of interpretations – i.e. which enables knowledge to function. Each of these positions, empiricism, Marxism and poststructuralism either is, or has the capacity to be, reflexive in one form or another. Empirical historiography has hitherto bothered little about its criteria for explaining knowledge statements. Marxist historiography, for political purposes, has seen its closures as relating primarily to class, and poststructuralism's reflexivity has concerned itself most especially with the implications of language as a means of expressing closures generally. It is not being suggested here that differences between these positions will evaporate in the light of common ground between them being identified. That is neither expected nor desired, but what may happen if this research is accepted by practitioners, is that an easier discursive relationship could develop between these positions. This in turn could bring about an important change to mainstream historical practice.

The hoped-for result is that traditional empirical historians might become more open about their everyday closures. At one level this has little to do with recognising aporia and a good deal to do with clarity of communication. What I mean by this is that poststructuralist deployment of linguistic expressions of closure is indeed right for 'our times.' Linguistic concepts are capable of carrying a sense both of individuality and of community, be they

national, regional, class gender, or ethnicity. It may be that in earlier times the constituency of historians was so narrow (in terms of class, gender or ethnicity) that they did know what every concept, comment or allusion was intended to mean, without further explanation. Their common ground was provided by common education and by membership of a common elite culture. This no longer the case and explorations into greater linguistic awareness in the closures of knowledge-making is perhaps poststructuralism's greatest asset. The ability of empirical historians, and Marxists, to debate with them is arguably well worth the effort. Similarly it makes sense for history teachers to reflect this is their own practice. There is no reason why a new generation of historians, and those who have studied the subject academically, should not find reflexivity a perfectly normal part of historical knowledge.

What reflexivity means in this practical sense is something that needs to be worked out once a theoretical background for it is accepted. It is however possible to suggest that at the level of principle it is quite simple. If access to a final truth appears to be out of the question, what needs to be included in any act of knowing (in relation to the present as much as the past) is information about the nature of the response being made to a necessary potential aporia. Those to whom the knowledge is communicated need the reasoning – the thinking – that has prevented that reductive process from continuing out of control. In other words what is required is information on how and why meaning has been constructed as it has. There are many ways in which this can be achieved in practice. In the classroom a start could be made by letting students in on the thinking behind what has already been chosen prior to their arrival. For example all courses come to life via discussions of exam or course boards, through options chosen or rejected, through assumptions about the nature of history or judgements about resources. Thus students might begin to see in ways appropriate to their level that traditional notions of history as for example 'facts plus interpretation' is meaningless in the sense that both of these categories are interpretations, at different levels. Thus nothing is wholly given, in making sense of the past.

This does not imply that every statement on a history course must be qualified by interminable value statements, nor that it is impossible to appreciate 'better' or 'worse' explanations of the past. But it does mean that if the criteria for such judgement are not given by the past itself, and as Keith Jenkins put it, we can never get back there to check if our understanding is correct (1991:Ch.1), then the criteria must come from the present. Criteria therefore needs to be explicit – making more transparent, historians' reading of the past. Once this principle is accepted, enterprising teachers will have no difficulty in working through the details for their practice, and the debate will have moved on from a focus on scepticism to the practical responses that might be made to it, in the twenty first century.

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