

Response to Peter P. Icke

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In 2012 Icke published a controversial book *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause* about the development in the views of Frank Ankersmit, one of the most influential philosophers of history these days. Recently, I have reviewed this book, which prompted Icke to respond with a short paper criticizing my review. I welcome his response; nevertheless, I must correct Icke's misinterpretation of my claims. Icke raises several issues but I consider two to be particularly important. Icke is convinced that my objection pointing to shallowness in his book is unsubstantiated. Moreover, he feels disappointed because I allegedly focus only on minor points and consequently I neglect the crucial things he has to say. I argue that both of his criticisms are misguided.

Let me begin with a few words about Ankersmit's position, which is the main topic of Icke's book. Ankersmit is one of the leading philosophers of history who is well known for criticizing a naïve view of historical writing. Especially in his earlier writings, for instance in *Narrative Logic* from 1983, he claims that historical works are never pure and simple depictions of what happened in the past, but complicated and sophisticated constructions. According to (this early) Ankersmit, historians never copy the past events but they create their own special tools to explain the past. This position in philosophy of history is sometimes called *narrativism*. However, later in his writings, Ankersmit defends also what seems to be a view incompatible with his *narrativism*. He claims that it is possible to have some kind of direct experience with the past. In a nutshell, in his earlier works Ankersmit maintains that no direct access to the past events is possible, but

in his later works he suggests it is possible. One of the pressing questions is then why Ankersmit developed his position in this direction. How should we explain his “journey” from his earlier to his later views? How should we account for the move from an “early” to “later Ankersmit”?¹

In his book Icke discusses both the earlier and later views of Ankersmit: he welcomes the crucial points of Ankersmit’s narrativism but rejects Ankersmit’s later views about experience. Icke’s novel contribution to the ongoing debate about Ankersmit seems to be his explanation for Ankersmit’s “journey” from narrativism to experience.² Since I find *this explanation* as something new in the discussion about Ankersmit, in my review I focus on Icke’s account (in fact, he provides two explanations – primary and secondary one) of Ankersmit’s journey. The crucial point to be noted is that when I say something is shallow, it is *this explanation* (more specifically Icke’s primary explanation) I am speaking about. Icke, however, misreads my review. He alleges that I claim it is Icke’s *critique of the later views of Ankersmit*, which is shallow. He writes the following about my review:

... in his review he characterizes my primary argument(s) – those marshalled against Ankersmit’s proposal(s) for a direct, unmediated form of engagement with the past through (sublime) historical experience – as ‘shallow and not illuminating at all’ (p. 261), ‘just too shallow to explain anything’ (p. 264) and again, lest the charge of *shallowness* be somehow missed, he finds that my writings constitute ‘a very shallow type of explanation’ (p. 267). Yet nowhere in his review does he even begin to address those primary arguments. (Icke 2014, 531)

Only the last sentence is correct. I do not provide any critical examination of Icke’s arguments “marshalled against Ankersmit’s proposal(s) for a direct, unmediated form of engagement with the past through (sublime) historical experience”. In fact, this is the aspect of his book I do not discuss in my review. Instead, I concentrate on something else. I explicitly and repeatedly emphasize that I find Icke’s *explanation of Ankersmit’s journey* shallow (not

¹ This is at least one way the issue might be presented. I am not going to consider here whether this is right.

² Several other works analyze or criticize the earlier or later views of Ankersmit so this part of Icke’s book is not so original. The most original part focuses on Ankersmit’s journey from narrativism to experience, although this is the part of Icke’s book I consider contentious.

his critique of Ankersmit's later views). If my objections are read in their proper context and not in an *ad hoc* collage constructed by Icke, it is clear that I discuss Icke's "explanation of Ankersmit's route" or Icke's explanation of "Ankersmit's move from language to experience". Let me quote from my review to document this:

I try to show that [Icke's] so-called secondary explanation of Ankersmit's route is misguided and incoherent with what Icke himself says in some other places of the book. Moreover, his primary explanation is shallow and not illuminating at all. (Zeleňák 2014, 261)

Moreover, his so-called 'primary explanation' is just too shallow to explain anything. (Zeleňák 2014, 264)

Finally, what is Icke's primary explanation of Ankersmit's move from language to experience? ... To put it briefly, Icke's primary explanation tells us that Ankersmit turns to the topic of experience and direct relation with the past because he *wants* and *needs* such a direct access. But this is a very shallow type of explanation. (Zeleňák 2014, 267)

I nowhere criticize Icke's objections "marshalled against Ankersmit's proposal(s) for a direct, unmediated form of engagement with the past through (sublime) historical experience". Hence, Icke attributes to me a completely different type of criticism, which I do not even attempt to give.

Let me turn now to Icke's second point. Icke claims he is "more than a little perplexed by [my] style of argumentation which alights everywhere on the book's relatively minor points while skipping over, or omitting entirely, the vital points about which its central argument turns" (Icke 2014, 531). Hence, he is disappointed that in my review I focus on "secondary matters" (Icke 2014, 533) and ignore the crucial claims of the book. What, according to Icke's response, seem to be those things I should have concentrated on? Supposedly, it should have been mainly his critique of later Ankersmit (discussion of the issue of experience) – recall that Icke is (mistakenly) convinced that I simply label his critique as shallow and do not give any reasons for that. Indeed, he rightly notices that I do not analyze in detail his critique of later Ankersmit. I must admit, as I did already in my review, that my review is selective. Nevertheless, I believe it is not about "secondary matters".

In my review I concentrate on Icke's explanation of Ankersmit's development, i.e., his route from language to experience. If Icke is right in his

complaint, this must be a “relatively minor” issue of his book. But is it really the case? One may give several reasons in support of the negative answer. First, let me remind the reader that Icke’s book has a subtitle *A Journey from Language to Experience*. Why would an author mention a secondary issue in the subtitle of his book? Second, besides Introduction and Conclusion Icke’s book contains four chapters: the first one deals with Ankersmit’s narrativism, the last one with the topic of experience, but the remaining two chapters analyze Ankersmit’s route from language to experience or questions closely linked to this development. Why would an author devote almost half of the book to “secondary matters”? Third, Icke himself writes in the book:

And it is this *shift* between theoretical positions [shift from narrativism to the topic of experience] which, I shall argue, precipitates his fall from the *good* to the *lost* Ankersmit that constitutes this book’s central theme. (Icke 2012, 68)

If Ankersmit’s development is Icke’s “central theme”, how is it possible that when I focus on Icke’s explanation of this shift I suddenly deal with a “minor point”?

Icke discusses various questions in his book. If he thinks that the topic X is the most important one, I am not going to dispute it. However, it must be obvious to anybody who read the book that Icke’s account of Ankersmit’s journey from language to experience is not a secondary issue, but, on the contrary, one of the key things explored in the book. Unfortunately, as I argue in my review, Icke’s explanation is misguided and shallow.

While it is to be welcomed that Peter P. Icke takes notice of the reviews written about his book,³ I argued that in his response he misinterprets my main objection targeting his (primary) explanation of Ankersmit’s move. As a result he does not even address my real critique of his book and it looks like in our exchange we both simply focus on different topics of interest: I concentrate on the explanation of Ankersmit’s journey and Icke concentrates on his critique of later Ankersmit. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that. Except, Icke is convinced that I focus on “secondary

³ I did not realize this before submitting my review article, but now I see that Icke reacted to and criticized each of the other two published reviews of his book I am aware of.

matters”, whereas I believe that there are several reasons pointing to the fact that his explanation of Ankersmit’s journey is one of the key topics of his book subtitled *A Journey from Language to Experience*.⁴

References

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⁴ I would like to thank the members of our Writing group for their helpful comments.