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Meta-History's Dangerous Dream

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"Big History" and "meta-history" are grounded in an ancient lamentation over the segmentation of human existence, the alienation from an original sense of oneness. In this paper I am doing my disciplinary duty by providing a deflating historical counterweight to the desire to overcome those last remaining obstacles on the path to a complete account. For me at least, the difficulties in reaching a complete account in a common language remain; nor am I persuaded that the difficulties are merely technical. The difficulties are deeply engrained not just in modern disciplinary thought but in cognition as such. Indeed, the very goal of a complete account in a common language seems to me to be based on a false view of disciplinary distinctions as well as a false understanding of what we ought to wish for, our real interests.

At the end of his extremely stimulating paper "the Quest for Patterns in Meta-History," [1] David Krakauer invokes the shimmering possibility of a "complete account" of historical events that would embrace all frequencies on the "epistemic spectrum." A 2005 meeting sponsored by the Santa Fe Institute had revealed, as he put it, "the will towards a common language"; it must, he and others felt, be possible to break out of "the tombs of disciplinary scholarship" and come up with a way of speaking that embraces both individuals and types, events and patterns, concrete particulars and universal laws. Sadly, that meeting ended with the recognition that certain "significant technical difficulties" continued to impede progress on this front, and so other meetings were planned in the hope that these could be overcome. The Waikiki Beach setting of the March 2008 SFI conference certainly encouraged a spirit of reconciliation, and the papers were deeply impressive. But for me at least, the difficulties in reaching a complete account in a common language remain; nor am I persuaded that the difficulties are merely technical. In fact, I will argue, the difficulties are deeply engrained not just in modern disciplinary thought but in cognition as such. Indeed, the very goal of a complete account in a common language seems to me to be based on a false view of disciplinary distinctions as well as a false understanding of what we ought to wish for, our real interests.

In making this case, I speak from within the disciplinary tomb of the humanities, which are oriented towards the past. This orientation produces, or is produced by, a characteristic mindset, an anti-utopian skepticism. It is

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historically anomalous that so many humanists today identify themselves as politically left, because for most of the history of humanistic study, the scientists were the radical innovators and modernizers, while the humanists encouraged a spirit of reverential attention to the great names of the tradition; this was in fact the basis for the low value placed on the humanities by C. P. Snow in 1959. Today, of course, the situation is complicated if not reversed by the fact that the scientists are all on government funding while the humanists, who have little hope of such support, have become comfortable describing themselves and their work as politically radical. This reorientation may, however, be merely superficial, because humanists still churn out examples from history of how wars, revolutions, utopian projects, and good intentions of all kinds worked out badly; they still throw up cautionary red flags, and introduce a reflective doubt into structures of unquestioned conviction or unexamined enthusiasm. The humanistic disposition has its limits, but the scientific optimism that collective effort will bring us to an ultimate truth is also limited in its way. When Max Planck, voicing this optimism, identifies the goal of theoretical physics as "nothing less than the unity and completeness of the system . . . not only with respect to all particulars of the system, but also with respect to physicists of all places, all times, all peoples, all cultures . . . not merely for the inhabitants of this earth, but also for the inhabitants of other planets," I have to wonder what planet he's living on [2]. In any event, I will in this paper be doing my disciplinary duty by providing a deflating historical counterweight to Krakauer's characteristically scientific desire to overcome those last remaining obstacles on the path to a complete account.

"Big History" and "meta-history" are exciting new terms, but they do not describe an altogether new practice, much less a new ambition, for they are grounded in an ancient lamentation over the segmentation of human existence, the alienation from an original sense of oneness. The complaint about the arbitrary and deadening character of academic disciplines is a modern version of a complaint has in the past taken mythic, religious, and political forms. Over the course of the last century, when disciplines have assumed their current forms, such complaints have been heard frequently. But before that time, they were not heard at all, because there was a discipline that combined science, history, and literary studies. Having assumed its modern form at the end of the eighteenth century, the discipline of philology was seeking to construct a complete account that combined human history and human nature, one that began in an empirical study of observable linguistic data and ended in nothing less than an understanding of the origins, and thus the natural and normative forms, of human existence. Considered by its advocates to be the science of sciences, philology was also the most prestigious form of what would come to be called the humanities: it was the fertile seed out of which the modern division of disciplines would grow.

To get a sense of how the philological project was imagined, we can turn to the great French scholar Ernest Renan's 1849 treatise, *The Future of Science*, which, coming on the heels of the great events of the previous year, confidently stated that science had brought humankind to the brink of a new era of emancipation and reason. Renan was completely persuaded that science was heading in the right direction, guided by what he (and not only he) considered the preeminent science of the day, philology. The "modern spirit," he wrote, "that is, rationalism, criticism, liberalism, was founded on the same day as philology. *The founders of the modern spirit are the philologists*" [138]. In the empirical and scientific study of ancient languages, Renan thought he had found the key to both the past and the future.

If such a statement seems preposterous to us, that is only because our sense of the possible has been channeled by the disciplines to which philology gave birth half a century after Renan wrote. Philology *circa* 1849 claimed for itself a vast terrain. The discipline began with the attempt to create a clean and error-free text (of Homer), and then to study the language of that and other texts, noting anomalous case terminations, marking first usages, and establishing the geographical diffusion of languages. But its real ambitions were not so limited, and they were quickly revealed. Philology was always *in search of* something, and then something more. At first, the object was to locate, in the corrupted extant texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, traces of the pure, authentic voice of the bard. But in order to determine which utterances might be Homer's, one had to had a view of who Homer might have been, which meant one had to know about the culture he inhabited, which meant you had to know, for comparative purposes, other contemporary cultures, and the origins of all those cultures. Ultimately, philologists found – and I am abbreviating a fascinating collective tale – that you need an account of human origins, and the best way to obtain that account was through the formal and historical study of language.

Such a project drew on everything that could be known about the human past. One of the early German philologists, P. A. Boeckh, saw philology as a master-discipline encompassing a total knowledge of antiquity, including history, geography, law, religion, mythology, art, epigraphy, and social history – "the knowledge of the known." No subsequent philologist made quite such expansive claims, but philology under any nineteenth-century description was, by today's standards, an exceptionally capacious discipline. In the first instance, its commitment to a systematic examination of the textual object qualified it as a science. Throughout the nineteenth century, it was routinely compared to anatomy, botany, anthropology, archeology, and particularly to geology, inasmuch as its objects could, like stones, be seen as preserved forms of the past. But with its historical orientation and its focus on poetry and "artistic" language, philology also had strong claims to be considered what we would today regard as a humanistic discipline. And it was a philosophy. The

founder of "modern" philology, F. A. Wolf, said that his real project, beyond the analysis of Homeric language, was to create "*the philosophy of the history of human nature in Greece*" [2, p.233]. Philosophy, history, classics, poetry, and biology – it was, in short, all in all.

So if we are looking for an actual historical example of the common language and complete account David Krakauer projects as the goal of meta-history, philology qualifies. It is the most capacious discipline ever to have the name of a discipline, and it enlisted the energies of many of the most accomplished scholars of the nineteenth century.

How did it fare?

At first, spectacularly well. One of the tasks that occupied the early philologists was the attempt to find the common ancestor of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. This effort began with the classification of languages into "families" and then reverse-engineering those families in order to arrive at their history. Within a few decades, scholars had accomplished a monumental task, the recovery of "Proto-Indo-European," a language that, according to philologists, stood to a great many existing natural languages as Adam stood to the human race today. And with the discovery of Proto-Indo-European, scholars thought, they could infer the thought-forms prevailing at the origin of civilization itself; they could re-enter Paradise and study the human mind in its uncorrupted form. The early philologists were, of course, Christians or, like Renan, reluctant post-Christians, and it is not difficult to see in the mighty effort of reconstructing the original human language an attempt to provide through science a compensation for what science – geology, and the Higher Criticism of the Bible – had stolen, the Biblical account of human history that had for so many centuries comforted human beings by linking the secular present to a sacred origin.

But the attempt to recapture, if only in a scholarly sense, this sacred origin produced its own distinctive kind of corruption. The study of language was always also a study of the people who spoke and wrote that language; indeed, one studied a language only in order to learn about its users, who were always, therefore, in the frame if not always in focus. As the project of classification advanced, linguistic distinctions began to harden into ethnographic distinctions. The term "Indo-Germanic languages," which Franz Bopp had proposed in 1833, was understood by many to be a scientific way of defining a "racial" group, a highly useful concept that gave point and heft to linguistic analyses by suggesting that the differences between languages were really differences between kinds of people. Comparing languages, philologists could imagine the cultural mindsets that had created them and the people who spoke them. This was such an absorbing task that, over time, linguists found it difficult to sustain a methodological distinction between language and its speakers, and many failed to see the point of the effort. Thus the idea of race was taken up by philologists, who saw in it a way of concretizing – making

more scientific – their account of linguistic characteristics by describing them in terms of observable cultural attributes.

The slide from language use to language users seems innocent enough, but the impression of innocence fades rapidly when we consider the particulars. Some of the decisive formulations of the mother tongue, or *Ursprache*, were given by Max Müller, a German-born scholar who settled in London in the 1840s to work in the archives of the East India Company. Müller proposed the name "Indo-European" as the common ancestor of Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit; and in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1861-63) [3], he made a fateful leap by suggesting that this ancient tongue was spoken by what he called the "Aryans," an ancient tribal group that had been the object of intense and often wild speculation and mythologizing in German thinking since the late eighteenth century. He located the Aryan homeland somewhat north and east of the supposed site of the Garden of Eden, either in the Caucasus Mountains between the Caspian and Black Seas or, more likely, in the Pamir Mountains of Central Asia (now Tajikistan); others, excited by the thought of an early Aryan civilization from which (European) civilization itself had descended, put the Aryans in Persia, Anatolia, the Himalayas, southern Germany, southern Sweden, the Boreal Pole, and even North Africa [4-7]. Largely through Müller's influence, language became widely accepted as the primary body of evidence, and philology the master-discipline, for theorizing in a quasi-normative way about human origins in general and races in particular.

Others less liberal and cosmopolitan than Müller drew strength from his stature as a scholar, and turned his arguments in their own direction. One of these was Comte de Gobineau who, in his *Essay on the Inequality of Races* [8], had deployed linguistic evidence to argue for Aryan superiority and the need for preserving racial purity, especially from Semitic influences. According to Gobineau, language indicated the character of a race, and race was the most powerful explanation for human difference in general, particularly the difference between healthy and degenerate civilizations. Gobineau gave voice to a consensus view when he said that Aryans were not simply an ancient race, but the most masterly and "creative" of races; and he spoke to a smaller but still sizable and committed group when he argued that the corruption or contamination of Aryan stock by Semitic or other races, wherever it occurred, constituted a species disaster.

Müller's views were completely different. He believed fervently in the unity of the human race and held that philology was premised on that unity. He argued, in fact, that the Aryan (Indo-European), Semitic, and "Turanian" linguistic families all derived from some even earlier source, a Central Asian language spoken at the dawn of human existence that could only be speculated about. And, in his later statements at least, he insisted on the perniciousness of racial theory and its utter irrelevance to linguistic scholarship. He was

appalled at the way in which linguistics was conscripted to make such arguments, singling out for special opprobrium the United States, where "comparative philologists have been encouraged to prove the impossibility of a common origin of languages and races, in order to justify, by scientific arguments, the unhallowed theory of slavery. Never," he said, "do I remember to have seen science more degraded than on the title-page of an American publication in which, among the profiles of the different races of man, the profile of the ape was made to look more human than that of the negro" [3, vol.1(12)]. He may have encountered another American publication, a popular book called *Types of Mankind* (1857) written by Josiah Nott (who, among his other accomplishments, translated Gobineau's *Essay*) and George Gliddon [9]. They concede that the Negro falls inside the boundaries of the human race, to be sure, but at the lowest margin of humanity, just above the line separating humans from primates. If he had seen this book, Müller would have been immensely irritated by their complaint about the way in which philologists were always seeking to prove a common human origin, an absurd hypothesis, Nott and Gliddon thought, which was utterly falsified by the fact that, whatever language Negroes speak, they still retain "that peculiar, unmistakably-*Negro*, intonation, which no culture can eradicate" [9, p.282].

Over Müller's objections, linguistic scholarship continued to be used to buttress racialist theorizing. Nor were all theorists of race racists. Renan himself was one of the most liberal and learned minds of his age, a professor of Hebrew and a scholar of Semitic languages. Like Müller, Renan sought a complete account in a common language that would combine the rigor of empirical science with the historical dimension of the humanities. He sought, in other words, to articulate the universal laws of society. But as with Müller, Renan's earnest scholarship lent itself to its own vulgar inversion, a common anti-Semitism.

Renan was unlike Müller in one important respect: while Müller believed in human unity and the inevitability of Christian dominion, Renan believed that there were two groups at the dawn of time, Aryans and Semites. There were differences between them, of course, and Renan sought to enumerate these in a dispassionate and scholarly way. Semitic peoples in the ancient world, he said, made an indispensable but largely negative contribution. The historical record suggests that they were incapable of science, philosophy, civilization, personal courage, and tolerance; they were selfish, rigid, and righteous; their culture displayed a "want of fertility both of imagination and language," a "startling simplicity of ideas," a stubborn incompleteness [10, pp.13, 39]. All this could be seen in their culture and especially in their religion, but the hard evidence for, and real mechanism of, these racial characteristics, was language. In Renan's view, language, once established in a community, becomes a form into which thought is poured like "a mould, a corset so to speak, more binding than even religion, legislation, manners, and

customs" [10, p.30]. A close study of the Bible and other texts would reveal the inner essence of Semitic culture. Such a study would focus on "roots," defined as the irreducible kernel of meaning. In the Aryan languages, Renan said, nearly all roots "contained an embryo divinity," but the roots of Semitic languages were "dry, inorganic, and quite incapable of giving birth to a mythology" [10, p.40]. Limited by their language, the ancient Semites could not think abstractly; and their conjugation of verbs displayed a dismaying primitivism.

Renan had devoted his life to studying the Semitic peoples and their languages, and in many respects, he had advanced and liberal views on the subject of race. But his scholarly and deeply informed understanding of this concept was as wobbly as the popular view it sought to correct. Renan believed that an admirable language denoted an admirable race, and an inferior language denoted an ignoble race, one eligible for subjugation. At the peak of his career, he wrote that there was "nothing shocking about the conquest of a nation of inferior race by a superior race"; Christian Europeans were emphatically the latter, "a race of masters and soldiers" [11]. Müller and Renan both equivocated on the question of race, but Renan's pendulum swung farther than Müller's in the direction of Gobineau.

This story does not get better. Scholars, especially in Germany, continued to promote the linkage between language and race, and after the Great War, the entire discipline of philology in Germany, including some of the most distinguished scholars in the country, became a hotbed of monarchist nostalgia and anti-Semitic reaction. Decades of concentrated effort by the most learned and exacting scholars had "discovered" in Semitic languages a host of limitations and deficiencies that explained in scientific terms the particular role of Jews in history and accounted, as well, for the Jews' current position of isolation and inferiority. With these accomplishments behind them, scholars during the Third Reich felt they were on a firm foundation when they espoused what has been called "mother-tongue fascism," which must be considered the ultimate profanation of what was, in Müller's work, a mere suggestion made in the context of an argument about the unity of the human race [12].

The history of philology in the nineteenth century was dominated not by people like Gobineau but by people like Müller, Renan, Friedrich Schlegel, the Grimm brothers, the Humboldt brothers, Theodor Mommsen, and Boeckh, all big-brained, large-souled, and deeply learned men who thought they were using scientific methods to extend the range of human connectedness, provide a secular and rational account of human origins, articulate ways of understanding and valuing cultural differences, and hold up for general approval those fascinating instances in which an original purity had been preserved. Scholars in the late nineteenth century had no way of knowing what forms the theory of Aryan supremacy would take after it left their hands. But the real point is that ideas of Jewish inferiority and Aryan superiority were

developed by scholars, who regarded them as hard-won scientific knowledge about language. The work of numerous admirable sages lent itself in ways both obvious and subtle to the purposes of others less scrupulous and learned than they, and it was these others who influenced more directly the course of events.

If the goal had been to establish a discipline, a specific way of knowing based on a methodology, an object, and a clear set of objectives, it must be said that philology's reach exceeded its grasp. After a century and a half, philology had been affiliated or identified with an astonishing variety of causes, including those mentioned – modernity, liberalism, science, colonialism, and race theory – and others I have not mentioned, including nationalism and Darwinism.[1] It had been enlisted in support of theories of the unity and disunity of the human race; it had lent credence to theories of a master race, the superiority of Christianity, and the natural dominance of the weaker by the stronger; it had given to race theory a scientific credibility it never could have won on its own, as long as "scientific racism" was based on such dubious indicators as cranial measurements [14, 15]. Many of the intellectual and sub-intellectual currents of the time circulated through it; others had brushed up against it, often leaning on it for support, or lending theirs. It had accomplished a great deal, but not all of its accomplishments were genuine; indeed, many were rejected on both methodological and moral grounds. And it had failed to establish itself as a modern discipline.

Both literary studies and linguistics broke away from philology early in the twentieth century, leaving in the manner of angry young people everywhere, with vows never to return. Philology was seen to have betrayed its own scientific status by permitting its empirical dimension to be determined by ideological forces in the general social surround. With these two disciplines, representing major components of its overall project, having established themselves independently, philology was never able to flourish in the climate of the modern research university, and after the second World War, departments of philology all but disappeared in the United States, with remaining philologists being absorbed by other departments, particularly Classics.

Still, history has not been entirely unkind to philology. With the institutional rejection of philology now complete, at least in the American academy, philology has become something of an object of nostalgic reverie, its virtues seeming to some to be more compelling than its vices. One factor in the partial rehabilitation of philology is undoubtedly the fact that the holistic

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[1] For a fuller account of the extraordinary career of philology, including an account of the calls for a "return" to philology that have been heard ever since the discipline all but disappeared, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham [13].

aspirations of philology echo the perennial desire of academic discourse, arbitrarily carved up into disciplines, for a master discourse that covers what Krakauer calls the "full *historical spectrum*" [38]. This echo is particularly loud and clear in those disciplines that trace their genealogy back to philology, where a number of calls for a redemptive or rejuvenating return to philology have been heard in recent years. But in a sense, all modern disciplines strain to transcend themselves, to break out of their artificial limits. The return to philology is one form of this desire, and meta-history is another. A third has been voiced in the relatively new discipline of evolutionary literary studies, whose leading proponent, Joseph Carroll, describes his aspirations candidly as the unification of science and literature:

> Who knows? Perhaps in ten or twenty years, looking back, cultural historians will be denying that the humanities and the evolutionary social sciences were ever in any way at odds with one another. The integration of historical scholarship with a knowledge of human universals will have become standard equipment in literary study. Humanistic expertise in manipulating cultural figurations will have flowed into a smooth and harmonious stream with Darwinian findings on the elemental features of human nature. Humanistic sensitivity to the fine shades of tone and style in literary works will have blended seamlessly with a rigorous empirical analysis of cognitive mechanisms, and a facility in writing elegantly nuanced prose will mingle happily with the severe logic of a quantitative methodology [16].

With this prophetic vision of lions lying down with lambs, the apocalyptic yearnings of academic discourse are laid bare.

Reviewing my argument so far, I see that in order to suggest the dangers inherent in Krakauer's call (which he may well have regarded as an entirely unproblematic proposal) for a complete account expressed in a common language, I have invoked the holocaust, racism, anti-Semitism, imperial conquest, and, in a final flourish, the apocalypse. But I do this in a friendly attempt to isolate what I consider the dangerous but inessential part of his argument, and to peel it off from the part I find essential to his larger case and completely unexceptionable. For the most part, Krakauer displays an admirable sensitivity not just to disciplinary differences, but to differences of style and scale within disciplines. Spengler, he notes, chose one way of doing history, Oakeshott another, and scientists have made similar choices. Within any discipline, one can find practitioners who, having chosen the point on the epistemic spectrum that suits them, conduct their work in a given way. These intra-disciplinary differences are played out at a higher level in inter-

disciplinary distinctions. With respect to these distinctions, Krakauer concedes, "there seems to be a level at which history and natural science is [sic] probably untranslatable" [39].

I agree. Where I part company with Krakauer is on the question of how to feel about this untranslatability, which he regards as a largely regrettable circumstance that we should try to overcome as best we can, and I regard as almost entirely positive, something that must be preserved (lest we replicate the holocaust or hasten the apocalypse).

We have become accustomed to demonizing disciplinarity as if it kept us from realizing our full human cognitive destiny, something we could achieve if we were not burdened with academic departments – or if we had a giant brain like Newton's. But beneath those arbitrary disciplinary divisions by which modern knowledge is organized is the deeper and non-arbitrary fact of disciplinarity or division itself, which, I would submit, has both epistemological and even moral justifications. We should not underestimate the value in having a large number of sectoral discourses that aspire to adequacy only within their frames. Such knowledge sectors, which directly announce their own inability to generate a complete account of any event, object, or process, invite their own completion or complementation by other discourses that are similarly limited, if not limited in the same way. The gaps between the disciplines are not mere empty spaces to be crossed by exceptionally brainy and imaginative people, but are the very spaces of freedom. They should be preserved and cherished, for so long as they remain open, like oceans or forests or interstellar space, thought of a different kind, from a different perspective, on a different wave-length, is still possible. It is our failure to find a common language that paradoxically preserves our cognitive freedom; similar failures ensure our political and moral autonomy as well, by preserving distinctions between, for example, the public and the private, the local and the national, the governed and the governors. It is the inadequacy of our explanations that stands between us and the closure of futurity. The spaces between disciplines are, perhaps, the best parts of the disciplines, and the strongest justification for disciplinarity itself.

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