

Cristian Popescu*

“WHY SHOULD IT BE TRUE”? THE QUEST FOR ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN HISTORY

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Abstract: This conceptual paper explores the complex problem of truth in Ancient Near Eastern historiography. In his Presidential Address to the American Oriental Society, Professor Beckman suggests that “in dealing with a cuneiform narrative of purported historical content we ask first of all, Why should this or that statement or implication be true? rather than Why might it be false?” (Beckman 349) This sobering remark of the distinguished Hittitologist obviously concerns, beyond the central cradle of cuneiform civilizations, Egypt as well, India, China, and other ancient civilizations. Indeed Beckman thereby engages one natural inclination that ceaselessly threatens to overpower its ‘checks and balances’ vastly variable across time, space, culture, group of belonging, socio-demographic factors, personality, and situation: i. e., self-interest (or, alternatively, that “falsity, which seems to be rooted in human nature itself”, Kant, Practical Philosophy 554). And yet, the fundamental fact that there are ‘checks and balances’ against the domination of self-interest is simply not acknowledged by Beckman. I contend that Beckman’s methodological skepticism is sound, while his anthropological pessimism is rather one-sided. Human culture, including ancient cultures, takes great pains at helping human nature in erecting such ‘checks and balances’ against self-indulgence. Specifically, in his Presidential Address to the American Historical Association, Professor Beard distinguishes between history as past actuality (“all that has been done, said, felt, and thought”), history as record (“monuments, documents, and symbols”), and history as thought (“thought about past actuality, instructed and delimited by history as record” – Beard 219-220). I discuss problems in Ancient Near Eastern history at all three levels. Moreover, I suggest a counterintuitive operationalization of the world-famous concept of ‘value freedom’ (Weber, Collected 304-334) that should assist our quest for truth in history. And yet, the problem of truth in Ancient Near Eastern historiography remains a complex problem with no simple solution.

“Friends have everything in common”
(Plato, *Complete Works* 556¹)

* University of Bucharest; Romania.

¹ “Κοινὰ γὰρ τὰ τῶν φίλων” (Plato, *Opera* 279c). So “Phaedrus”, eponymous (anti-)hero of Plato’s splendid dialogue, tells “Socrates” in his last line.

What is truth?

“‘Truth?’ said Pilate. ‘What is that?’” (John 18: 38²). Pilate seems to have been a man ahead of his time. He might have felt strangely at home in the climate of ethical and epistemological relativism that is becoming all too ‘normal’ at the beginning of our third millennium. Indeed, ‘alternative facts’ and other related forms of fiction are but the tip of the iceberg of untruth and of distrust triumphantly floating ahead through this time of rising tides that we live in. But then again, his was a time not entirely unlike our own. Without doubt, let me state in the same breath that his was a time of daunting differences from our own; but with some striking similarities. A time of existential challenge and of existential change, when truth by its association with tradition had slowly grown to smack of treason to reason if not of treason of reason itself, that time at the beginning of the first millennium, “age of anxiety” laden with “fear of freedom”, is set between the memorable events depicted respectively in Professor Dodds’ two groundbreaking books, *The Greeks and the Irrational* and *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*. Pilate’s was a time indeed spelling out loud, already, Professor Auden’s poem title written in and for our time: *The Age of Anxiety*. But does anxiety actually justify the dictum, *anything goes*? I think not. And in times such as his and our own, when *lies tell the truth and truth tells lies*,³ the question that presents irrepressibly to my mind becomes: what truth is this that thereby we name truth? Is there a problem in the eye of the beholder? Is there a problem in the ‘beauty’ she or he beholds? Time and again a quest grows from a question. Or, sometimes, a quest grows from many questions badly lacking any answers. “A thousand-mile journey/ begins with a single step”, reads indeed the *Tao Te Ching (The Four Chinese Classics 104⁴)*. It is now time to take this single step.

This single step is but a simple step. This simple step is but to give a simple definition of the topic of our discussion. This need for definition is indeed but age-old. No less than twelve of Plato’s dialogues⁵ are engineered in their entirety as successive albeit not always successful attempts at defining some thing or another.⁶ As Plato (or “Socrates”) puts it in the *Phaedrus*: someone who does not define in advance what one is talking about will come to agree neither with himself nor with others.⁷ Why should I choose to disagree myself with a sensible habit? Why should I

² Quoted from the *New Jerusalem Bible*. The original text is: “λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· τί ἐστὶν ἀλήθεια” (quoted from the *Novum Testamentum Graece*).

³ “Verum dicit falsitas, veritas mentitur” (Carmina Burana vol. 1, 3). Poem 3, 3.

⁴ Chapter 64.

⁵ I. e., Gorgias, Euthyphro, Theaetetus, Hippias maior, Laches, Lysis, Meno, Res publica, Politicus, Protagoras, Sophistes, and Charmides.

⁶ I. e., as attempts to define, respectively: rhetoric, piety, knowledge, beauty, courage, friendship, virtue, justice, statesmen, virtue again, sophists, and moderation.

⁷ “If you wish to reach a good decision on any topic, my boy, there is only one way to begin: You must know what the decision is about, or else you are bound to miss your target altogether. Ordinary people cannot see that they do not know the true nature of a particular subject, so they proceed as if they did; and because they do not work out an agreement at the start of the inquiry, they wind up as you would expect – in conflict with themselves and each

try to break free from a long tradition? Since, as Professor Whitehead memorably quips, “the safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (Whitehead 63). Therefore, I take Plato’s example and proceed toward a definition of the fundamental concept of our discussion: *i. e.*, truth. “And a definition is a formula which is one not by being connected together, like the *Iliad*, but by dealing with one object”, aptly quips Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* (Aristotle, *Complete Works* vol. 2, 1650)⁸; again, in his *Topics*, “a definition is a phrase signifying a thing’s essence” (Aristotle, *Complete Works* vol. 1, 169)⁹. Accordingly, I contend that an *explanatory* definition is best built on Aristotle’s theory of what was later labelled *genus-differentia* definitions, involving a proximal *genus* and a specific *differentia* (*cf.* Aristotle, *Graece* 102a-b, 107a-108b, 109a-b, 111a-b, especially 120a-128b, and *passim*¹⁰). The road to such a proper definition is *not* long and winding. Indeed, Aquinas contributes a systematic discussion of the core concept of truth, including its world-famous definition as “the conformity of thing and intellect”, in his *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*:

The first reference of being to the intellect, therefore, consists in its agreement with the intellect. This agreement is called “the conformity of thing and intellect.” In this conformity is fulfilled the formal constituent of the true, and this is what *the true* adds to being, namely, the conformity or equation of thing and intellect. As we said, the knowledge of a thing is a consequence of this conformity; therefore, it is an effect of truth, even though the fact that the thing is a being is prior to its truth (Aquinas, *Truth*).¹¹

And he adds, in his *Summa theologiae*:

Now we do not judge of a thing by what is in it accidentally, but by what is in it essentially. Hence, everything is said to be true absolutely, in so far as it is related to

other” (Plato, *Complete Works* 516). The original text is: “Περὶ παντός, ὃ παῖ, μία ἀρχὴ τοῖς μέλλουσι καλῶς βουλευέσθαι: εἰδέναι δεῖ περὶ οὗ ἂν ἦ ἡ βουλή, ἡ παντὸς ἀμαρτάνειν ἀνάγκη. Τοὺς δὲ πολλοὺς λέληθεν ὅτι οὐκ ἴσασι τὴν οὐσίαν ἐκάστου. Ὡς οὖν εἰδότες οὐ διομολογοῦνται ἐν ἀρχῇ τῆς σκέψεως, προελθόντες δὲ τὸ εἰκὸς ἀποδιδόασιν: οὔτε γὰρ ἑαυτοῖς οὔτε ἀλλήλοις ὁμολογοῦσιν” (Plato, *Opera* 237b-d).

⁸ “Ὁ δ’ ὀρισμὸς λόγος ἐστὶν εἷς οὐ συνδέσμων καθάπερ ἡ Ἰλιάς ἀλλὰ τῷ ἐνὸς εἶναι” (Aristotle, *Graece* 1045a).

⁹ “Ἔστι δ’ ὅρος μὲν λόγος ὁ τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι σημαίνων” (Aristotle, *Graece* 101b).

¹⁰ In his *Topics*, again.

¹¹ “Prima ergo comparatio entis ad intellectum est ut ens intellectui concordet: quae quidem concordia adaequatio intellectus et rei dicitur; et in hoc formaliter ratio veri perficitur. Hoc est ergo quod addit verum super ens, scilicet conformitatem, sive adaequationem rei et intellectus; ad quam conformitatem, ut dictum est, sequitur cognitio rei. Sic ergo entitas rei praecedit rationem veritatis, sed cognitio est quidam veritatis effectus” (Aquinas, *Opera* vol. 22, 5-6). *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 1 a. 1 co. “But being, the true, the one, and the good are such that by their very nature they are one in reality. Therefore, no matter where they are found, they are really one” (Aquinas, *Truth*). The original text is: “sed ens, unum, verum et bonum secundum rationem suam habent quod sint unum secundum rem; unde ubicumque inveniuntur, realiter unum sunt” (Aquinas, *Opera* vol. 22, 8). *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 1 a. 1 ad s. c. 5.

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the intellect from which it depends; and thus it is that artificial things are said to be true a being related to our intellect. For a house is said to be true that expresses the likeness of the form in the architect's mind; and words are said to be true so far as they are the signs of truth in the intellect. In the same way natural things are said to be true in so far as they express the likeness of the species that are in the divine mind. For a stone is called true, which possesses the nature proper to a stone, according to the preconception in the divine intellect. Thus, then, truth resides primarily in the intellect, and secondarily in things according as they are related to the intellect as their principle (Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*).¹²

If I may comment on Aquinas, truth is the delicate, delightful harmony among the *inner reality*, the *outer reality*, and the *other reality*. Or, the harmony among the human mind within, the natural and cultural reality without, and their mutual overall 'cause' and 'condition of possibility', together *cause* and *condition of possibility*, cause of all other causes and condition of possibility of all other conditions of possibility, including certainly Kant's core concepts of time and space (cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 76-79). The room made in the shadow of the realm of cause by the related, relegated realm of condition of possibility allows for human freedom. The harmony among the three realities allows for human trust. And truth allows for falsity (reading again Aquinas¹³) at the momentous intersection of a free agent and a trusting patient. Such is the case also in Ancient Near Eastern history¹⁴.

¹² "*Judicium autem de re non sumitur secundum id quod inest ei per accidens, sed secundum id quod inest ei per se. Unde unaquaeque res dicitur vera absolute, secundum ordinem ad intellectum a quo dependet. Et inde est quod res artificiales dicuntur verae per ordinem ad intellectum nostrum, dicitur enim domus vera, quae assequitur similitudinem formae quae est in mente artificis; et dicitur oratio vera, in quantum est signum intellectus veri. Et similiter res naturales dicuntur esse verae, secundum quod assequuntur similitudinem specierum quae sunt in mente divina, dicitur enim verus lapis, qui assequitur propriam lapidis naturam, secundum praeconceptionem intellectus divini. Sic ergo veritas principaliter est in intellectu; secundario vero in rebus, secundum quod comparantur ad intellectum ut ad principium*" (Aquinas, *Opera* vol. 4, 206-207). *Summa theologiae*, I^a q. 16 a. 1 co.

¹³ "Falsity is not founded in the truth which is contrary to it, just as evil is not founded in the good which is contrary to it, but in that which is its proper subject. This happens in either, because true and good are universals, and convertible with being. Hence, as every privation is founded in a subject, that is a being, so every evil is founded in some good, and every falsity in some truth" (Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*). The original text is: "*Ad secundum dicendum quod falsum non fundatur in vero sibi contrario, sicut nec malum in bono sibi contrario; sed in eo quod sibi subiicitur. Et hoc ideo in utroque accidit, quia verum et bonum communia sunt, et convertuntur cum ente, unde, sicut omnis privatio fundatur in subiecto quod est ens, ita omne malum fundatur in aliquo bono, et omne falsum in aliquo vero*" (Aquinas, *Opera* vol. 4, 223). *Summa theologiae*, I^a q. 17 a. 4 ad 2.

¹⁴ "By *Ancient Near East* I mean the areas of the modern countries of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt" (Snell IX).

Truth as distrust

Or is it not? Not necessarily? Should we – may we – can we stop trusting our primary historiographical sources, and start searching for *falsity* instead of *truth* therein? So does suggest Professor Beckman in his Presidential Address (delivered on 20 March 2005 at the 215th annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in Philadelphia):

In dealing with these official texts we come up against a significant inherent difficulty: telling the truth is not a value much honored by governments, but is at best secondary to the pursuit of their policy goals, and above all, to assuring their survival. As illustration here I may simply adduce from our own recent experience the Iran-Contra mess or *l'affaire* Lewinsky, both of which eventuated in findings or admissions of mendacity in high places. Has human nature changed, or should we expect that ancient rulers and their minions had a greater regard for veracity than our contemporaries? I suggest that in dealing with a cuneiform narrative of purported historical content we ask first of all, Why should this or that statement or implication be true? rather than Why might it be false?¹⁵ (Beckman 348-9)

Has human nature changed, indeed? There is no need to answer this rhetorical question with the sweeping statement of Orwell's Party bureaucrat from the world-famous novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable" (Orwell 279). Such was the dream of (communist or national-socialist) totalitarianism, that "novel form of government" (according to Professor Arendt)¹⁶ born 101 years ago and still around, the dream or was it rather nightmare, of millions and of billions of people living under its crude and cruel rule. There is no need indeed of such superior sleight of hand in so far as it is only so easy to see that 'human nature' is permanently, across history, pervasively, across geography, chiselled by human culture. Not *changed* if change means sudden metamorphosis; but 'changed' indeed if change means subtle modification. And I might even go so far as to contend that the whole scope and purpose of our human culture is to help alter human nature in order to help us better adapt to our environment. I certainly do not mean thereby only the natural environment, but also

¹⁵ "To answer such questions we consider why a particular text might have been written and then attempt to reconstruct the conditions under which it was created, that is, its context. This process entails developing an understanding of the dominant ideology of the culture, a task that we can accomplish by immersing ourselves in the totality of the documentary record, collating explicit statements of ideals and examining documents written in extreme circumstances, under which the usual ideological filters may have been displaced temporarily" (Beckman 349).

¹⁶ "Apart from such considerations – which as predictions are of little avail and less consolation – there remains the fact that the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on, just as other forms of government which came about at different historical moments and rested on different fundamental **experiences** have stayed with mankind regardless of temporary defeats – monarchies, and republics, tyrannies, dictatorships and despotism" (Arendt 327).

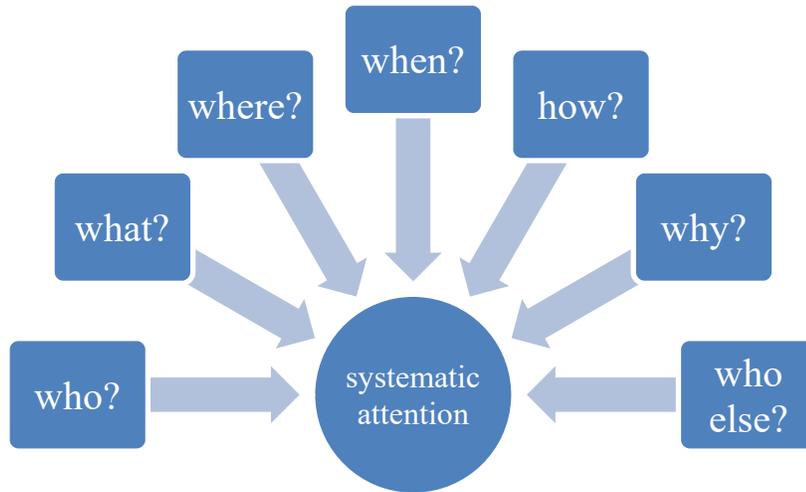
the social environment – and, above all, what one might call the sacred environment, where the human perception of a divine presence, or of the presence of the sacred at the very least (*cf.* Father Professor Dancă’s discussion of the distinction between sacred and divine in Professor Eliade’s work¹⁷), forms and informs our most important existential choices. Therefore, first, selfishness and selflessness are but both aspects of the self, sincerity is rooted together with Kant’s “insincerity”¹⁸ in human nature itself, cooperation (*cf.* Professor Tomasello’s empirical evidence in his *Why We Cooperate?*) competes sometimes and sometimes cooperates with competitiveness. Second, human culture, including cuneiform, and other ancient, civilizations, takes great pains at helping human nature in erecting what one might call ‘checks and balances’ against the domination of self-profit¹⁹, not from pure love for absolute truth, but since the ruthless pursuit of self-profit is socially disruptive. Third, the construction of a new man in a new society in a new reality is the mutual project of monotheistic religions, Christianity included, and this new man is fundamentally altruistic rather than egotistic, responsive to God rather than Caesar, thirsty for truth rather than falsity.

Thus I contend that Beckman’s methodological skepticism is sound, while his anthropological pessimism is rather one-sided. Self-interest is a constant of human belief and behaviour, but its impact, including on history writing, is mediated by a number of variables such as culture, religion, reference group, group of belonging, socio-demographic factors, personality, and situation. *Who* writes *what*, *where* and *when*, *how* and *why*, and in relation *to whom*: all these thus become truly relevant (*i. e.*, necessary and sufficient) research questions. Professor Edzard observes: “we can only partly translate into Sumerian the famous hexameter *quis quid ubi quibus auxiliis cur quomodo quando*” (Edzard 27). However, I contend that we can fully translate (or rather adopt and adapt) this *famous hexameter* into research practice by progressive habituation, or internalization, *i. e.*, by decidedly learning to pay automatic systematic attention to its complex, seven-dimensional, mapping of phenomena, as suggested in the graphic below:

¹⁷ “În sensul acesta, propunem o definiție a religiei care consideră omul în totalitatea sa, ontologică și ontică, și evidențiază natura sacrului transcendent și întrupat în istorie: ‘religia este legătura care permite omului un contact cu Realitatea Ultimă și Transcendentă, de care omul crede că depinde în mod existențial, și raporturile culturale și teoretice pe care omul credincios le stabilește cu realitatea aceasta’. *Definiția noastră deosebește, dar nu separă în mod radical sacrul de divin, dimensiunea ontologică de cea ontică. Diferită este situația în opera lui M. Eliade unde noțiunile în discuție se confundă*” (Dancă 108).

¹⁸ “But such insincerity in his declarations, which a human being perpetrates upon himself, still deserves the strongest censure, since it is from such a rotten spot (falsity, which seems to be rooted in human nature itself) that the ill of untruthfulness spreads into his relations with other human beings as well, once the highest principle of truthfulness has been violated” (Kant, *Practical Philosophy* 554).

¹⁹ *Cf.* the comment, “Lies and insincerity are unbecoming. This is because they are for self-profit” (Yamamoto 53).

The building blocks of systematic attention**Truth as distinction**

Aquinas's definition of truth as "the conformity of thing and intellect" brings into play the decisive distinction drawn by Professor Beard in his Presidential Address (delivered before the American Historical Association at Urbana on 28 December 1933) between *history as past actuality*, *history as record*, and *history as thought*:

History as past actuality includes, to be sure, all that has been done, said, felt, and thought by human beings on this planet since humanity began its long career. History as record embraces the monuments, documents, and symbols which provide such knowledge as we have or can find respecting past actuality. But it is history as thought, not as actuality, record, or specific knowledge, that is really meant when the term history is used in its widest and most general significance. It is thought about past actuality, instructed and delimited by history as record and knowledge – record and knowledge authenticated by criticism and ordered with the help of the scientific method. This is the final, positive, inescapable definition. It contains all the exactness that is possible and all the bewildering problems inherent in the nature of thought and the relation of the thinker to the thing thought about (Beard 219-220).

The distance between *thing* and *intellect*, and hence the possibility of falsity but also of truth, despite our certain taste for self-profit, remains at all three levels. In so far as these are three levels in the life of fellow *humans* in diachronic dimension. Human experience, with its structure and its strategy, is essential at each level. Professor Liverani observes:

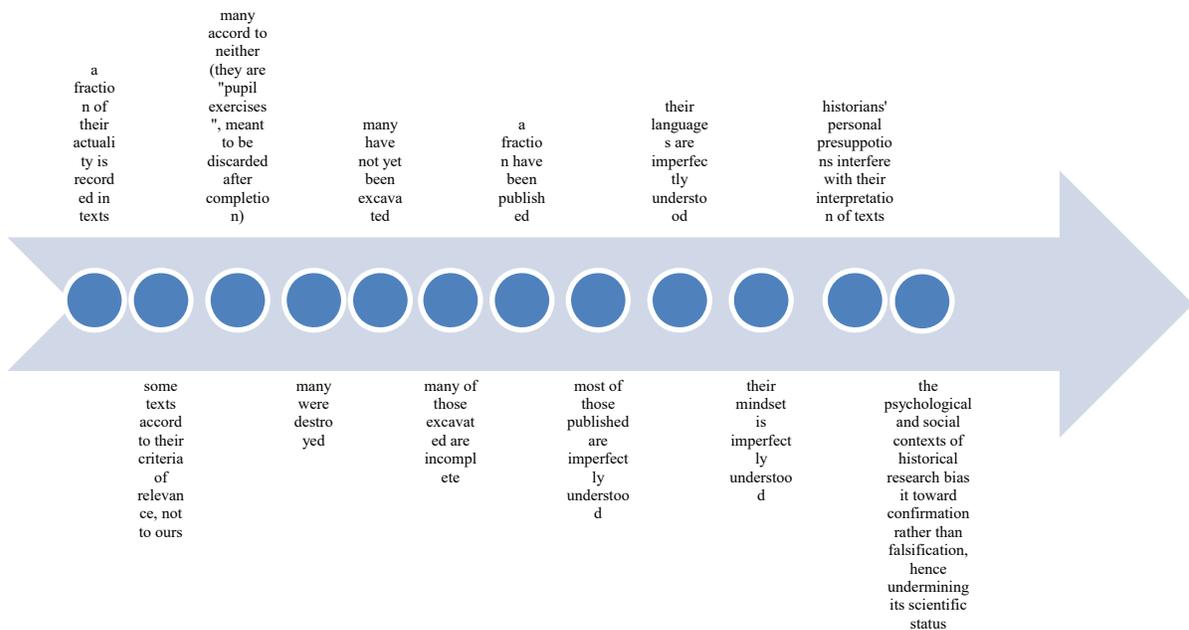
It is only too easy to object – and it can never be repeated often enough – that such 'ancient' historical narratives are generally separated by decades or centuries from the events they narrate. Therefore they are not to be considered as primary sources, but as historical reconstructions in themselves. And it is only too easy to recall –

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this too can never be repeated often enough – that such historical narratives do not have a ‘pure’ historical aim, if such an aim could ever exist. Their aim is political, moral, theological, or whatever else it may be, and therefore they view events from a particular perspective. All these objections can be subsumed under a single point: history is not something that already exists or is already reconstructed, and that can be accepted without question. On the contrary, it is an active engagement, which the ancient authors took up in relation to their own needs, not to ours (Liverani 28).

In order to increase both brevity and clarity, I summarize in the graphic below some of the more significant problems of Ancient Near Eastern history that I am aware of:

Problems of Ancient Near Eastern history



Truth as discovery

Professor Snell contends:

Another nineteenth-century preconception that persists is that the ideal kind of scholarship is scholarship that tries to be objective, to present the past more or less as it actually happened. Increasingly in the twentieth century it has become clear that although an objective reality may once have existed, we have a great deal of work to do to sift through the viewpoints and prejudices of the ancients about events. And we also have to contend with the fact that our own cultures endow us with ideas about how societies worked and should work that may keep us from seeing explanations for institutions and events (Snell 8).

Thus Snell suggests that fundamental problems remain across time at two fundamental levels: *their historiography* and *our historiography*. Specifically, “history as actuality”, “history as record”, and “history as thought” all belong to a complex process of construction of reality where the paradigmatic “constative” is actually “performative”, in Professor Austin’s words (Austin 3-7). Yet, I contend myself in turn that, “nineteenth-century preconception” or not, still “the ideal kind of scholarship is scholarship that tries to be objective”. The fundamental fact that it is diffidently difficult, even *impossible*, to ever be perfectly objective is, I notice, *not* an argument *against* trying to be objective but an argument *in favour* of trying to be objective. Indeed, the very fact that an ideal is an ideal does not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that it has to be abandoned, or otherwise avoided. To strive toward it is, more often than not, to make progress. Imperfectly objective is still better than perfectly subjective. Thus the ideal of objectivity becomes a challenge that we face to change our ways, and our approach, to change ourselves. If *progress in perfection* is indeed what we can, may, and should pursue on earth (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life* 30-31)²⁰ – then should we not give it at least a thought? The road leading to objectivity is long and winding; so, is it not better to leave at sunrise than at sunset? “One must edge forward like the inchworm, bit by bit. The gods and Buddhas, too, first started with a vow” (Yamamoto 177).

Thus I suggest a counterintuitive operationalization of the concept of ‘value freedom’ (Weber, *Collected* 304-334), that should assist our quest for truth in history. I draw on the following image:

Although the Mean is the standard for all things, in military affairs a man must always strive to outstrip others. According to archery instructions the right and left hands are supposed to be level, but the right hand has a tendency to go higher. They will become level if one will lower the right hand a bit when shooting (Yamamoto 45).

Similarly, I contend that the historian who is striving to be objective, as best she or he can, should perhaps focus for a change, for instance, on the positive, rather than on the negative, aspects of the topics that they love to hate. (Full disclosure: so I did, for instance, when working on Romanian communism.) This is an exercise in toleration. This is an exercise in open-mindedness. This is an exercise in self-restraint. *There is a measure in things*, famously wrote Horace²¹: still must we find it, for it is not always obvious. Still must we strike indeed the proper balance in our historical research between our personal strong feelings and our quest for a truth concealed in the bright light. Still must we make an effort, always make an effort. Is

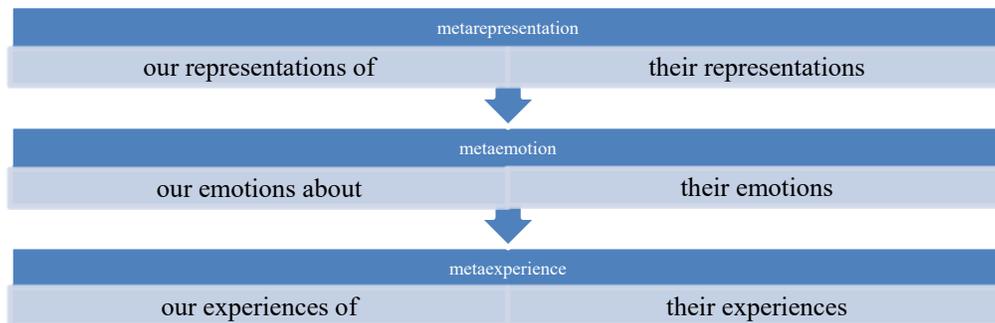
²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life*, § 5-10; “for the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness” (§ 10). Cf. the conclusion of his *On Perfection*: “Changing in everything for the better, let him exchange ‘glory for glory’, becoming greater through daily increase, ever perfecting himself, and never arriving too quickly at the limit of perfection. For this is truly perfection: never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Ascetical* 122).

²¹ “*Est modus in rebus, sunt certi denique fines, / quos ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum*” (Horatius 165). *Sermonum*, I, 1, 106-107.

it so difficult indeed? Is it displeasing? Or disturbing? Then maybe this is how it should actually be. “A saying of Kichinosuke’s that is similar to this is, ‘A man’s life should be as toilsome as possible’” (Yamamoto 113)²². And also: “It is spiritless to think that you cannot attain to that which you have seen and heard the masters attain. The masters are men. You are also a man. If you think that you will be inferior in doing something, you will be on that road very soon” (Yamamoto 51-52). In Weber’s words, if I may say so, it is time to advance from the “ethics of conviction” onto the “ethics of responsibility” in historical research (Weber, *Political* 359-368).

To take one further step, in order to fully understand the people of the Ancient Near East: we need to think some of the fundamental things that they thought – we need to feel some of the fundamental things that they felt – and we need to experience some of the fundamental things that they experienced. In this connection, as always, sincerity is essential. Only thus can we find relevant answers to our modern questions in those ancient cultures. This voyage from identity into alterity and back, through metarepresentation, metaemotion, and metaexperience, is outlined in the graphic below:

Three small steps to understanding



What is falsity?

“Friends have everything in common”, says Plato’s Phaedrus. In common they have truth. In common, falsity. Ancient historians and their sponsors may have held truth in high regard – or not. Or yet again, not always (*cf.* the end of **Section 2** above). Falsity is much more than a passive absence of truth; it is an active absence, a destruction, a dynamic. “Then Pilate saw that he was making no impression, that in fact a riot was imminent. So he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd and said, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your concern’” (Matthew

²² “Once there was a certain man who was very clever, but it was his character to always see the negative points of his jobs. In such a way, one will be useless. If one does not get it into his head from the very beginning that the world is full of unseemly situations, for the most part his demeanor will be poor and he will not be believed by others. And if one is not believed by others, no matter how good a person he may be, he will not have the essence of a good person” (Yamamoto 36-37).

27: 24²³). May we, if I may end myself this paper on a note of commitment to the truth, never be Pilates in our own life history and in the history of other people's lives, ancient or modern, mediated by other histories and by other historians or yet unmediated. In those very lives that in Professor Hallo's words, for instance (in his Presidential Address delivered on 14 March 1989 at the 199th annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in New Orleans), we strive to write back into being "much as the archaeologist must use every surviving potsherd to reconstruct and restore a fragmentary vessel"²⁴. The choice between truth on the one hand and on the other hand both falsity and, will we like this word or not, *complicity* to falsity is clear. There is no washing hands that can wash down this choice. We only wash ourselves, with our hands, out of being.

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²³ "Ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Πιλάτος ὅτι οὐδὲν ὠφελεῖ ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον θόρυβος γίνεται, λαβὼν ὕδωρ ἀπενίψατο τὰς χεῖρας ἀπέναντι τοῦ ὄχλου λέγων· ἀθῶός εἰμι ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵματος τούτου· ὑμεῖς ὄψεσθε".

²⁴ "We are not to limit the inferences we extract from the evidence, but to treat the evidence, precisely because it is limited, as a precious resource – none of it to be ignored, or squandered, but every fragmentary bit of it critically sifted, so that it fits into our reconstruction of the history of antiquity – much as the archaeologist must use every surviving potsherd to reconstruct and restore a fragmentary vessel" (Hallo 199).

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