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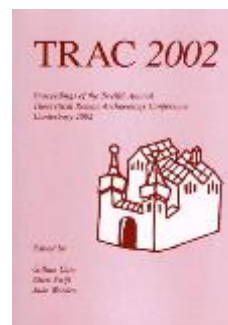
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Breaking Ground or Treading Water? Roman Archaeology and Constructive Implications of the Critique of Meta-narratives

Stephanie Koerner

Introduction

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Roman Empire, both as a source and as a paradigmatic example, in the long-term history of western social theory and philosophy. In antiquity, Roman political philosophers developed sophisticated theories about human origins and knowledge, and what these implied for evaluating contemporary pedagogical and political ideals (e.g. Cicero [106–43 BC] 1942). A number of the most significant changes in the history of western intellectual culture have turned on reinterpretations of categories and narratives rooted in two ancient ideal types: Plato's philosopher-king and Cicero's poet-orator (Mooney 1979).

In late antiquity, contrasting theories about the Roman Empire were used to formulate what became the foundational paradigms for western culture in general (Collingwood [1949] 1956). For example, Eusebius of Caesaria's [ca. AD 260–339] *Historia ecclesiastica* (1952) and Augustine of Hippo's [ca. AD 354–430] *De civitate Dei* (1963) center on theories about the emergence and expansion of the Roman Empire. The two bishops' perspectives differ in a number of respects, relating to opposing positions on relationships between Church and Empire. In Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica*, the entire history of the world (sacred *and* profane) is conceived as an evolutionary process guided by Divine Providence. In this view, humanity is to be restored to its original 'royal nature' through the evolution, expansion, and transformation of the Roman Empire to Christianity. Objecting to the radical implications of such a view, Augustine (1963) emphasizes a fundamental division between the origins and evolutionary trajectories of *the city of God* 'wandering on the earth' (*the Church*) and *the profane worldly city of man* (*Rome*). But their works share several features, which may signal the earliest horizon of what late twentieth century scholars refer to with the term, 'western meta-narratives'. Both Eusebius and Augustine combine principles drawn from Graeco-Roman philosophy and Judeo-Christian apocalyptic teleology (Funkenstein 1986). Both envisage the Roman Empire as *the* paradigmatic example for understanding fundamental truths about human nature, knowledge, and relations between sacred and profane world history. Eusebius envisages the Empire as the means whereby sacred ideals and human realities will be joined in a unified order, while, for Augustine, the Empire reveals the reasons why humans *fail* to realize such an order.

Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, images of the emergence, expansion, and decline of the Roman Empire figured centrally in debates over political authority, religious institutions, social boundaries, and the scope of human knowledge (for instance, Valla [1407–1457] 1962; Machiavelli [1469–1527] 1965). In early modern times, these images were opened to new interpretations relating to the contrasting orientations of the Enlightenment and Romantic movements (e.g., Momigliano 1966; Schnapp 1996). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these images were further embellished, in relation to large scale archaeological projects commissioned by national institutions, contemporary national, imperial and colonial ideologies (e.g., Trigger 1984, 1995; Webster and Cooper eds. 1996; Atkinson, Banks, and O'Sullivan eds. 1997; Hingley 2000), and meta-narratives concerning the Birth of Modernity and the Scientific Revolution (Toulmin 1990; Dupré 1993).

The second half of the twentieth century saw remarkable change take place throughout the human sciences and philosophy relating to what some scholars call the 'critique of meta-narratives' (Adorno 1974; Foucault 1980; Lyotard 1984; Bourdieu 1990). Many debates turn on categories that have been taken for granted for over two centuries (Toulmin 1990; Koerner and Gassón 2001). Until around the 1960s, such dichotomies as those of subject-object, mind-body, nature-culture, individual-society, evolution-history, science-values, epistemology-ontology, and western-non-western, formed a common basis for defining disciplinary boundaries, classifying subjects of study, and debating predominant paradigms for research. The last decades have seen precisely these categories come under convergent (if not identical) forms of scrutiny in fields as diverse in subject matter as the philosophy of science, social anthropology and Roman archaeology (e.g., Biagioli ed. 1999; Descola and Pálssen eds. 1996; Hingley 2000). Little by little researchers have become concerned with the extent to which categories, which went hitherto unremarked, hinge upon problematical narratives concerning human nature, knowledge and the diversity of cultures of different times and places.

The late twentieth century critique of meta-narratives is, of course, neither the first nor perhaps even the most influential. The history of western culture has not been a continuous trajectory, but marked by heterogeneous points of view, critiques of contemporary claims about universal truths and social realities (Rorty 1989; Hale 1993), and attempts to go beyond the shared presuppositions that underwrite apparently antithetical absolutist and relativist positions (Grassi 1989; Toulmin 1990). Interestingly, the Roman Empire has played important roles in such situations as well (Mooney 1979; Dupré 1993). Augustine's *De civitate Dei* (1963) centered on discrepancies between claims that the Roman Empire could realise the purposes of the city of God and what he identified as the factors most responsible for the development of the Roman Empire, namely: greed and desire of power. For another example, the critique of medieval generalizations about the Roman Empire played essential roles in Renaissance humanists' campaign against Scholastic paradigms for intellectual culture and political authority (Berlin 1976; Grassi 1980; Funkestein 1986).

For the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (henceforth TRAC) held in Canterbury, England, March 5–6, 2002, Andrew Gardner and I organized a session entitled, 'Breaking Ground or Treading Water. Theoretical Agendas for the 21st Century'. One of our aims was to explore the bearing that recent developments in the field may have upon cross-disciplinary concerns to go beyond traditional meta-narratives concerning human nature, history and knowledge. Instead of limiting the session to considerations of what 'X' social theory can do for Roman archaeology, we sought to create a context for exploring Roman archaeology's relevance to these concerns. Thus the papers included in the session offered various perspectives on key issues posed by the meta-narratives critique, including:

- (a) The need for alternatives to paradigms for the human sciences and philosophy, which render invisible the diversity of human experience and ways of life.
- (b) The challenges facing attempts to go beyond the opposition of science and values, which underwrites both objectivist and relativist points of view.
- (c) The need for multi-disciplinary contextual alternatives to approaches derived from universalising unity and disunity models of science.
- (d) The challenges facing attempts to carry forward interesting constructive directions suggested by the critique of meta-narratives.

This paper has two objectives. The first is to present something of the historical and

philosophical background of the concerns that motivated the session. To this aim, I will attempt to outline the main foci of the critique of meta-narrative. The paper's second objective builds upon two responses in Roman archaeology to this critiques, namely: (a) the growing interest in arguments against the notion that the human self is prior to its embodied and material preconditions (e.g., Foucault 1980; Bourdieu 1990) and (b) the concern to focus attention on the discrepant experiences of human agents (e.g. Said 1993). I will highlight some of the issues that these responses pose, and consider Roman archaeology's relevance to several promising constructive implications of the meta-narratives critique. Emphasis falls on what the issues at stake suggest concerning the usefulness of an approach to the historicity of agency, in which ethics plays a key role. Such an approach may have advantages for going beyond problematical meta-narratives, including those concerning the homogeneity of the Roman Empire, which continue to have an impact on perceptions of the modern world. It may also be relevant to the question of whether the discrepant experiences that human beings have of their life-worlds can make a difference not just in particular *events*, but in *conjunctions* that reconfigure the *longue durée* (cf. Husserl [1936] 1970; Braudel [1949] 1966).

Dualist paradigms for human nature and knowledge

Despite the diversity of the works of the major contributors to the critique of meta-narratives, it is possible to identify several common foci. One is the critique (or deconstruction) of the epistemic bases of dualist paradigms for *human nature* and *knowledge*. At issue is the series of essentialist categories that underwrites the notion of a transcendental, timeless, and placeless human agent, which has functioned for over two centuries as the supposedly universally valid foundation for understanding all human thought and behaviour. This critique has powerful implications. It reveals the interdependence of a wide range of dualist categories, including those of subject-object, mind-body, nature-culture, science-values, western - non-western, as well as Roman - non-Roman). It challenges claims about the existence of an a-historical standpoint from which one can make judgements about reason, knowledge, appropriate action, and what is definitive of being human.

Historical meta-narratives

Secondly there is the critique of the narratives (the plots of predominant philosophies of *history*) on which the aforementioned paradigms for *human nature* and *knowledge* hinge. Concerns with the consequences of these meta-narratives are reflected in the critical literatures on nineteenth and early twentieth century theories about the supposed importance to all of humanity's history of the Scientific Revolution, Birth of Modernity, and modern Western culture's triumph over nature. This critique has important methodological, theoretical, socio-political and ethical implications too. It challenges the ways in which these narratives standardise the criteria whereby cultures (and human experience, in general) can be said to vary (e.g., Friedman 1992; Miller ed. 1995; Wilk 1995; Koerner 2001). It calls into question the ways in which the above mentioned dichotomies have been used not only to obscure discrepant experiences, but to render some human beings 'invisible' to the *ethical* faculties of their fellows (e.g., Gaitta 2000; Geertz 2000).

Essentialist ontologies and the consequences of dualist theories of the conditions of historical (and archaeological) knowledge

The meta-narratives at issue today vary in a number of respects. The most significant differences relate to contrasts between the philosophies of history of the major contributors to the Enlightenment and Romantic movements. Contrasting interpretations of the Roman Empire figured importantly in these philosophies, as well as in contemporary national, colonial, and imperial ideologies. The challenges facing attempts to go beyond these apparently antithetical philosophies are difficult to overstate. The latter continue, for instance, to underwrite apparently unresolvable debates over 'processualist' and 'post-processualist' paradigms for archaeological research. Bruce Trigger's observations touch upon this matter:

European thought has been dominated for over 200 years by a pervasive dichotomy between rationalism, universalism and positivism on the one hand and romanticism, particularism (or 'alterity'), and idealism on the other. The first of the philosophical packages was initially associated with French liberalism, the second with German reaction [Dumont 1991]. Both ethnic nationalism and post-modernism (which is the essence of post-processualism) are products of the romantic side of the polarity (Trigger 1995: 263).

The polemical nature of such meta-narrative follows from the points on which they agree. Several examples of shared features can be mentioned:

- (a) A dependence on teleological plots, which envisage modern western culture as a standard for classifying and explaining the diversity of cultures of all times and places.
- (b) Explanations that centre on such dichotomies as nature-culture, subject-object, individual-society, western-non-western.
- (c) A shared notion of a timeless placeless 'individual', which is treated as a node through which social systems or cultural histories operate.
- (d) A dependence on theories about the conditions of historical (or archaeological) knowledge, which are underwritten by essentialist ontologies, i.e., theories about what *is* (being) and what kinds of things there *are* in the world.

The structural dimensions of modern meta-narratives are of considerable antiquity, dating at least back to the works of Eusebius and Augustine mentioned above. According to Collingwood ([1949] 1956: 49), any narrative with structures rooted in such ancient frameworks and underwritten by essentialist ontologies, will necessarily be *universal, providential, apocalyptic, and periodised*. The implications of essentialism for the persistence of problematical generalisations about human history have been another focus of critiques of meta-narratives. The problem has been touched upon by a number of papers presented in recent TRAC conferences, including several papers presented in the TRAC 2002 session 'Breaking Ground or Treading Water' and the session, entitled, 'Meaningful Objects', organized by Hella Eckhardt.

Since earliest Greek and Roman antiquity, all essentialising ontologies have been structured around two opposing poles. On one side is the notion of an absolute unity and permanence of all things. On the other is the notion of absolute dis-unity, or pure flux (Mcguire and Tushanska 2001). Questions about change (in particular, historical change) are rendered problematical by this supposed opposition. The most influential way to represent this situation was put forward by Aristotle [384–322 BC] in the *Metaphysics* ([1908] 1960). Aristotle's approach centered on the question: If something can be said to be subject to change, what is the essence of that something?

He offered three possible answers: (1) the unchanging aspect, (2) the changing aspect, and (3) both, that is, the interaction of changing and unchanging aspects. In the views that underwrite the ancient and modern meta-narratives, which we are considering, the important answer is (1), and the others have to be reducible to it.

The consequences of this emphasis on the supposed *unchanging* essence of things include the disregard of questions about how things come into being, and reduction of ontology's task to classification. Thus, ontology is supposed to address questions like: What (underlying substances) makes particular items what they are? What distinguishes them from one another? What timeless substances distinguish different categories of entities? Appropriate responses to these questions are supposed to add up to universally valid generalizations about the range of categories in terms of which all things existing at all times can be classified (McGuire and Tushanska 2001: 45–47).

The roles that essentialism plays in perpetuating problematical historical generalizations are considerable. Essentialism permits only a-historical theories about the conditions of historical knowledge (such as those structured around a subject-object dichotomy), and historical descriptions and explanations based on terms that conform to these theories (such as those forming the dichotomies, nature-culture, individual-society, western - non-western, Roman - non-Roman). In both cases, essentialism permits only terms that are deemed suitable for talking about what things are at all times.

All this relates to the problem that essentialism restricts us to only two options when it comes to historical description and interpretation. Modern versions of these options are structured around variations on the Cartesian opposition of two essentially different types of things: *perceiving things* (including the 'minds' of people and, until quite recently, God) and *extended things* (all the rest, like the physical world and society). One option is to treat history as a perceptual experience, which occurs in the minds of individual subjects. Thus, history is to be treated as an aspect of the 'representational content' of the 'mental states' of individuals. The other option is to treat history as an 'extended thing' that can occur in a number of states or forms, such as the social types: band, tribe, chiefdom and state, or the 'collective representations' associated with these types.

These options have been instrumental in creating and perpetuating very problematical perspectives on human beings and history. In order to satisfy their requirements, we must ignore all qualities, which are deemed unnecessary from an essentialist point of view. There are many famous examples of this situation. One, which had profound impacts on the works of Hegel ([1831] 1975), Marx and Engels ([1846] 1975), Morgan ([1877] 1963) Durkheim ([1914] 1960) and Weber ([1904] 1958), as well as various nineteenth and twentieth century political ideologies, is Immanuel Kant's account of the relationship between the histories of nature and culture. The most famous version is presented in what Kant entitled, an 'Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View' ([1784] 1963). Prior to Kant, the relationship between these histories (and between human beings' natural and cultural aspects) was seen as a problem, which complicated the scientific (epistemic) status of the human sciences and historiography (Cassirer 1960). Kant's ([1784] 1963) solution centred on treating (a) culture as a necessary outcome of the history of nature (indeed the means whereby 'nature's hidden plane' was to be realized), and (b) an antithesis of nature and culture as explanatory of the course humanity's history had taken (Collingwood [1949] 1956). In this view, the histories of nature and culture form a unilinear series of stages in the evolution of human capacities for 'reason' and 'moral freedom'. Kant's series starts with a hypothetical time when nature consisted only of particles and Newtonian principles of Matter and Motion (cf. Kant [1755] 1963); leads to the emergence of 'primitive' forms of human consciousness and social life; and eventuates in the 'Copernican Revolution', rational modes of consciousness, and the unification of social ideals and realities in the modern state (Kant [1784]

1963). Essential to this philosophy of history and knowledge, is a new conception of human nature. The later centres on a new image of the 'individual' human subject: simultaneously the source of all meaning and value, and reduced to a node through which relationships between human consciousness (subjectivity) and the (object) world evolve.

Comparisons can be drawn between such modern 'invisible hand' explanations and pre-modern notions of 'Divine providence'. But absent from the latter are the notions that motivate the former concerning the absolute autonomy of human history, and the mind of the individual human subject as the source of all meaning and value. We will return to this theme shortly.

Researchers have responded in various ways to critiques of essentialist modes of reasoning. One of the constructive responses has been the growth of interest in dynamic relational alternatives. Several papers presented in the 'Breaking Ground or Treading Water' and other TRAC 2002 sessions reflected this interest. A critical requirement of a satisfactory alternative is that we no longer treat the question of what things are in an essentialist way: as a static sum of supposedly self-evident properties and parts. In a relational alternative, 'to be' does not mean being belonging to a particular pre-existing type or category. Instead, as McGuire and Tuchanka (2001: 96) explain, it means "to act upon and to be acted upon, or to constitute oneself/itself and to be constituted... Any entity is constituted by its ways of being, and the latter are established in the course of its ongoing activity." Such an ontology can be expected to have an impact on the ways in which we conceptualise the conditions of archaeological knowledge, and may be carrying forward some of the most constructive implications of the meta-narratives critique in Roman archaeology.

The transformation of the concept of the subject, and the privatization of ethics

It is important for considerations of similarities between ancient and modern meta-narratives not to overshadow contrasts. Many features shared by the latter lack pre-modern precedents (cf. Koyré 1968). Here is space only to focus on two features. One is the role modern meta-narratives give to the dichotomies: nature-culture, subject-object, and individual-society. The other is a radically transformed notion of a 'subject', one which has given rise to what Hannah Arendt ([1961] 1977: 147) refers to as the 'privatisation of freedom' (and its corollary, the *privatisation of ethics*). These features underwrite the a-historical notion of a human 'self' (subject), which has become a focus of critical attention in the recent archaeological literature on agency (e.g., Dobres and Robb 2000), as well as the critical literatures of the human sciences and philosophy, in general (e.g., Barnes 2000; Geertz 2000).

These features of modern meta-narratives did not develop in a vacuum (Toulmin 1990). They are rooted in the responses to the need for new social structures and modes of solidarity, which emerged in the wake of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). Social changes had counterparts in intellectual culture. A notable example of the latter was the notion that it might be possible to develop new *social* ideals and institutions on the basis of principles, which the emerging physical sciences were using to investigate (and manipulate) *nature*. The question posed was that of whether one could model both universally valid explanations of regularities in nature and new modes of social organization on mathematics and logic (e.g., Hobbes [1651] 1962; see, for example, Shapin and Schaffer 1985).

In the views of a number of Enlightenment scholars, Descartes' [1596–1650] epistemology and Newton's [1642–1727] mathematical laws of Matter and Motion suggested that the answer to this

question could be yes (Descartes 1984–91; Newton [1687] 1934). Descartes' (1984–1991) epistemology hinged on an ontological distinction between the *rational freedom of moral intellectual decision in the human world*, and the *causal necessity of mechanical processes in the natural world of physical processes*. This radically transformed traditional notions of the 'subject', with profound implications for the status of ethics in modern epistemology. Louis Dupré (1993: 112–114) explains that, throughout most of the history of western intellectual culture, the subject was an ontological principle, which referred to the underlying essence of things (and the ontic foundation of all things was God or an ideal Nature). In Cartesian epistemology, the individual human subject was forced to function as the primary source of all meaning and value (Blumenberg 1983).

The emergence of debates over the extent to which this situation was a *cause for uncertainty* took place in the midst of serious social, theological, and epistemic crises (Toulmin 1990: 45–88; Dupre 1993: 113–115; Funkenstein 1996: 290–327). During the sixteenth century, writers such as Desiderus Erasmus, Francois Rabelais, William Shakespeare, Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon suggested that the self (human agent) was the *source* of all uncertainty (Toulmin 1990: 19–20, 57–56). The solution that Descartes proposed established the foundations of the status of ethics in modern epistemology. It turned issues of moral (as well as social and ontological) uncertainty into an epistemological problem. Specifically, Descartes translated these issues into philosophical 'doubt', and made doubt the basis of a method for attaining epistemological certainty (Toulmin 1990: 45–89; Dupré 1993: 114–116).

But it was not until Kant's times that modern moral philosophy separated this supposed inner realm of 'mental substance' from the causal network of the social and physical universe. Kant articulated this separation in the approach to relationships between human nature, history and knowledge, which was outlined above. This approach hinges upon:

- (a) A conception of human nature and knowledge that restricts discussion of ethics to individual intentions generated by the mind's (or consciousness') capacities for 'reason' and 'moral freedom' (Kant [1790] 1955).
- (b) A meta-narrative concerning relationships between the histories of nature and culture (or in Kant's terms, 'transcendental metaphysics') in which the individual subject functions as the node through which the 'final cause' of human beings' capacities for 'moral freedom' is realised, namely: the 'perfect civic constitution' (Kant [1784] 1963).

Arendt ([1961] 1977: 147) notes that the withdrawal of moral freedom (the capacity of human beings to act otherwise) from the material physical and social order ('out there') to the inward domain of individual mental states may have realised an objective, which modern thought had pursued from the onset, namely: 'the privatisation of freedom'. Once meaning and value could be seen as the product of a supposedly disembodied individual mind, it could be conceptualised as independent of its historically contingent social and ethical implications. In this connection, moral privatisation (the privatisation of freedom and ethics) removed ethics from its traditional status *at the centre of epistemology and ontology*, and reduced social life to inter-individual systems of contractual structures. Here, we may glimpse the foundations of the a-historical conceptions of the individual (self), which critics of meta-narratives have called into question, and which is receiving much attention in the recent archaeological literature on agency (e.g., Dobres and Robb 2000). We may also be able to gain an appreciation of the complexity of the problems that some new lines of research in Roman archaeology, which touch upon the historicity of agency, are attempting to address.

Ethics and a satisfactory ontology of agency

Researchers have responded in a variety of ways to the issues posed by the dimensions of the critique of meta-narratives, which are outlined in this paper. My aim in this final section takes its departure from two recent developments in Roman archaeology, which may relate to cross-disciplinary considerations of the constructive implications of this critique. One is the growing interest in arguments against the notion of a human self that is prior to its embodied and material preconditions (e.g., Foucault 1980; Bourdieu 1990). The other is the concern to focus attention on the discrepant experiences of human agents (e.g., Said 1993).

The former raises issue with approaches to the intentionality of human behaviour, which have been structured around a supposed gap between the 'mental states' of individual subjects and an object world 'out there'. An interest in alternative approaches is reflected in a number of new lines of research in philosophy and the human sciences, and several papers on 'material culture' and 'social identity' presented at TRAC 2002. The latter concern is represented in the literatures in critical theory, post-colonial studies, publications on domination and resistance in the Roman world (e.g. Webster and Cooper 1996; Mattingly ed. 1997; Hingley 2000), and several papers presented at TRAC 2002 that focused on the heterogeneity of the Roman Empire. This concern implies a complex range of issues, including: How might we best reconceptualise intentionality, and human capacities to act voluntarily (or to 'behave otherwise')? What makes it possible for human agents to act against existing socio-historical constraints, and to transform the circumstances from which these arise? Can human experiences of discrepancies between how things *are* and how things *ought to be* make a difference not just to particular *events*, but in *conjunctures* that reconfigure the *longue durée*?

I admire much of the recent epistemological work motivated by concerns to go beyond traditional notions of a timeless, placeless disembodied agent. These notions hinge on a dichotomy between how concrete embodied human beings *are* and how rational 'mental states' *ought to be*. They figure essentially as treatments of human beings as interchangeable atomistic nodes through which (the invisible hand' of) social systems and cultural histories operate (Koerner and Gassón 2001). But I am worried that if we come too close to reducing agency to its material and embodied preconditions, we may not be able to address the key issues posed by studies seeking to focus on discrepant experiences.

It might be useful to broach this matter from the perspectives offered by new frameworks for going beyond dualist paradigms for the conditions of archaeological knowledge, and philosophical insights relating to the historicity of human agency. Two notable examples of the former are those advanced by John Barrett (2000) and Christopher Gosden (1994). Barrett's contribution to the TRAC 2002 session took its starting point from the framework he has proposed for going beyond essentialist notions of an archaeological 'record', and a-historical conceptions of human agency (cf. Patrik 1985; Barrett 1988, 1994, 2000). The framework centers on a distinction between 'structuring conditions' and 'structuring principles' (Barrett 2000). The former are defined as the historically contingent embodied and materialised conditions of possibility for human agency. The latter are defined as the means whereby human beings inhabit structural conditions: "they are expressed in the agents' abilities to work on those conditions in the reproduction and transformation of their own identities and conditions of existence" (Barrett 2000: 65). The relationship between the two is not reducible to a dichotomy between mental states locked into the minds of individual subjects *versus* a world of objects (including society) somehow 'out there'. It implies processes of perception and modes of objectification, which occur in a wide range of

historically contingent implicit and explicit modes (cf., Miller 1987; Bourdieu 1990; Brandom 1994). In such a view, there is no such thing as a 'self' that is prior to its embodied and material preconditions. Yet such a view does not require that we risk reducing thought to practice (cf. Foucault 1980) or abandon notions of human selves and intentionality altogether.

Robert Brandom's work, *Making it Explicit. Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment* (1994), indicates why this is the case. Brandom shows how we can replace traditional dualist notions of *representation* by the open-ended concept, *expression*. The latter enables us to replace the traditional opposition between (a) *internal* and *external* representations with (b) a range of *implicit* and *explicit* socially situated processes of objectification that carry the materiality and mutuality of human relationships forward over time. Brandom also explains why the latter approach is important for pursuing some of the most promising implications of notions of 'social agency' *without abandoning the importance of intentionality for understanding processes of individuation*. If we ignore these processes, we cannot account for how humans can interact (Arendt [1958] 1989). Brandom explains that:

Only a creature who can make beliefs explicit – in the sense of claiming and keeping discursive score on claims – can adopt the simple intentional stance and treat another as having beliefs implicit in its intelligent behavior. Just so, only a creature who can make attitudes towards the beliefs of others explicit – in the sense of being able to ascribe scorekeeping attributions – can adopt the explicitly discursive stance and treat others as making their beliefs explicit, and so as having intentionality (Brandom 1994:639).

The importance of these observations extends well beyond the point that processes of individuation make possible the interaction of human beings. Our treatment of our fellow humans as possessing intentionality is essential to the constitution of ourselves. *We not only make our shared epistemic and ontological commitments (our collectivity) explicit, we make ourselves explicit as social agents making that collective explicit.*

Notably, these observations do not hinge upon an essentialist ontology of a timeless, placeless individual. They also have very direct bearing upon Barrett's (2000) distinction between 'structuring conditions' and 'structuring principles', and issues posed by Gosden's (1994) emphasis on the 'materiality' and 'mutuality' of human ways of life. In *Social Being and Time* (1994), Gosden writes that:

...the term 'materiality' refers to human relations with the world, 'mutuality' looks at human-interrelationships. Materiality and mutuality are linked here for the simple reason that they are inseparable. Full social relations can only be set up through making and using things; full relations with the world only come about through people working together (Gosden 1994: 82).

Brandom's arguments relate to questions about how 'structuring principles' articulate with 'structuring conditions' (Barrett 2000) and how 'materiality and mutuality' (Gosden 1994) are linked. They point towards the importance of ethics for a satisfactory ontology of such linkages, and indicate why we do not need to resort to 'invisible hand' meta-narratives in order to account for these linkages. Indeed, we may be able to abandon the dichotomy between how concrete embodied human beings *are* and how rational 'mental states' *ought to be* on which such meta-narratives hinge.

Your and my experience informs us that human beings are mutually accountable and mutually susceptible social creatures. Furthermore, as Barry Barnes (2000) points out, our interaction is informed by our experience that human beings are creatures that act voluntarily. Focusing on ethics enables us to understand the ways in which human beings freely chose and freely act as

mutually accountable and mutually susceptible creatures, and that they do so while affecting and being affected by each other as creatures of this kind. Our interaction as human agents is always situated in contingent ethical relationships (commitments), which make self-understanding possible. Our relationships to the world (ontological, epistemological, social, material, historical commitments) emerge out of our ethical relationships to one another as mutually susceptible, mutually accountable, (intentional) beings (Brandom 1994; Barnes 2000; McGuire and Tuchanska 2001). Such a view takes us beyond a-historical dichotomies of *agency* and *structure*, and enables us to develop alternatives to notions of agents, which reduce human beings to "timeless, featureless, interchangeable and atomistic individuals, untethered to time or space" (Gero 2000: 38). It rejects the very dichotomy of *being* and *acting* of the *self* in the world and the acting for *others* in history on which metaphysics traditionally hinges.

Furthermore, focusing on the importance of ethics for a satisfactory ontology of agency makes it clear that societies are not just sums of atomic individuals. Norbert Elias (1991: 12, 17–19) and others have noted that societies are very particular sorts of 'wholes'. It has been misleading to represent human communities as harmonious unities without "contradictions, tensions, or explosions," or a "formation with clear contours" (Elias (1991: 12). Openness, changeability and potential for internal tensions may characterise the histories of all communities. One of the implications of our considerations is that the 'wholeness' of communities is not a function of interacting atomic entities, consisting of natural and cultural parts, as Hobbes ([1651] 1962), Kant ([1784] 1963), and others suggest. Rather, whatever we are treating as the 'wholeness' of communities may consist of the implicit and explicit fields of thought and practice, which constitute the life-worlds of mutually susceptible and mutually accountable ethical agents, who have differing experiences of the world as such beings.

These comments may relate to some of the concerns motivating recent research on discrepant experiences, and questions of whether experiences of discrepancies between how things *are* and how things *ought to be* can make a difference not just in the outcomes of particular events, but in conjunctures that reconfigure patterns in the *longue durée*. These are the kinds of issues that motivated Edmund Husserl's ([1936] 1970) conception of the significance of ethics for understanding the life-worlds of human beings. In *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* ([1936] 1970) Husserl challenged the long tradition of philosophies of history structured around such dichotomies as those of subject-object, mind-body, and is-ought. For Husserl, human beings are not atomistic, interchangeable nodes through which social systems or cultural histories operate. A human life-world can be envisaged as a prism of diverse fields of experience, including the inanimate world given in sensation, the vital world that is given to us as embodied living beings, and an ethical dimension in which other human beings are apprehended as centres of meaning and value. These fields are interrelated, and our discussion above of the mutual susceptibility and accountability of human beings may illuminate something of the nature of their interconnections. For Husserl, the ethical field cannot emerge without the others. However, in the experiences of human beings, the ethical field is prior to the others since it is constitutive of them.

These considerations may be useful for avoiding risks associated with some recent proposals of alternatives to views of the human self as prior to its embodied and material preconditions. The present paper focuses on the problems some proposals pose for addressing questions of how discrepant experiences are possible, and whether such experiences can have an impact on long-term historical processes. Notably, following Husserl, single discrepant experiences and single ethical acts 'irradiate' the other fields of human experience because they can take on a paradigmatic quality. Expressed in the terms which are employed in this paper, these acts can

render explicit experiences of discrepancies between how things are and ought to be *on the very scales on which human meanings and values are generated*. Thus, insofar as they attest (make explicit) the existence of an ethical field, single ethical acts can transform life-worlds. In this view, it may be the structure of human experiences of meanings, values and practice (or what Barrett 2000 calls 'structuring principles') that lead to conjunctures in the *longue durée*, and the emergence of new cultural forms or 'structuring conditions'.

Some suggestions for future considerations

In this paper, I have attempted to present something of the historical and philosophical background of the concerns that motivated the 2002 TRAC session, 'Breaking Ground or Treading Water. Theoretical Agendas for the 21st Century'. One of the aims of the session's participants was to explore Roman archaeology's relevance to issues posed by the cross-disciplinary critique of meta-narratives. Much of the beginning of this paper has been devoted to highlighting the importance of the roles played by the Roman Empire (both as a source and as a paradigmatic example) in the history of these meta-narratives, and of social theory and philosophy in general. I have also tried to provide a general picture of the main foci of the meta-narratives critique. In so doing, my aim has been to illustrate something of the kinds of concerns that motivated the papers presented in the session, and why specialists in Roman archaeology are likely to be able to make particularly useful contributions to this critique.

The second aim of this paper concerns the challenges facing attempts to carry forward the constructive implications of the meta-narratives critique. My approach took its departure from two interesting responses in Roman archaeology to this critique, and a tension between them, which complicates their strengths. I attempted to show how we can go beyond the problem by combining new frameworks for the conditions of archaeological knowledge (e.g., Gosden 1994, Barrett 2000) with philosophical insights bearing upon an ontology of the historicity of agency, which gives ethics a key role (e.g., Husserl [1936] 1970; Arendt [1958] 1989, 1961; Miller 1987; Brandom 1994, Barnes 2000). The proposed approach may be useful to research on the heterogeneity of the Roman Empire, as well as broader questions of whether discrepant experiences of how things *are* and *ought to be* can make a fundamental difference not just in particular *events*, but in *conjunctures* that reconfigure the *longue durée*. In view of (a) the roles that problematical pictures of the Roman Empire have played in the history of western social theory and philosophy, and (b) the wealth of evidence which is available to Roman archaeology concerning major conjunctures in historical processes, studies of these conjunctures may be highly relevant to cross-disciplinary debates over how to carry forward the constructive implications of the meta-narratives critique.

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