

Call for Contributions to a Special Issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*

## Historical Contingency: Epistemic & Non-Epistemic Values in Historical Sciences

### Call for Abstracts

Submissions are invited for contributions to a special issue of the journal that focuses on the role of values in historical sciences. The guest editors of the special issue are Derek D. Turner (dtur@conncoll.edu) and Alison K. McConwell (ak.mcconwell@ubc.ca).

### Motivation

Historical contingency has been a central theme of much recent work in the philosophy of historical sciences. There is currently a rich interdisciplinary literature on the role and nature of contingency in historical sciences like evolutionary biology, paleontology, geology, ecology, astrobiology, etc. Philosophers have approached their shared historical character through mostly metaphysical and epistemic concerns about e.g. the nature of life's past, trends, determinism, and (a lack of) directionality, fragility and causal dependence of events, and the success and nature of narrative explanations in these contexts. Generally, this has sparked interest in questions of the following form:

- What are the different *meanings* of 'historical contingency'?
- How is contingency related to narrative styles of *explanation*?
- How, in practice, can scientists investigate questions about contingency, using modeling, comparative methods, experimental techniques, or other approaches?
- What would count as evidence for (or against) the claim that history is contingent?
- If history is contingent, what makes it so? What are the *sources* of contingency?
- If history is contingent, what are the *consequences* of contingency?
- How is historical contingency related to other issues in evolutionary theory, such as the importance of natural selection, or the prevalence of passive trends at larger scales?

These questions weave together in complicated ways. Their focus on contingency can be contrasted against views that emphasize repeatability, inevitability, predictability, and directedness concerning how historical explanations are structured in life sciences that center on analyses of the past. Contingency as a feature of historical analysis derives from Stephen Jay Gould's (1989) characterization of evolutionary history. While there has been much scientific work testing the significance of contingency in life's history through both field and laboratory experiments, philosophers have mainly focused on characterizing

history's metaphysical structure and the epistemic suitability of historical narratives. Because many philosophers think that engagement with the above questions about contingency is one of the things that makes historical sciences *historical*, and thus a common feature among various life sciences, literature in the philosophy of science frequently engages with and mirrors issues in the philosophy of history. Such issues include how contingency undermines the prospect of exceptionless laws, causal relationships among series of events, scale of analysis (i.e. micro versus macro evolutionary scales), probability of outcomes, and categorizing trends and conditions for contingent history.

### Topics of Focus

In recent years, however, philosophers of science have given more and more attention to questions about how epistemic and non-epistemic (e.g. ethical, social, political, aesthetic) values figure in the practice of science. Philosophers of historical sciences are just beginning to engage in this larger discussion of values in science. In this special issue, we will feature new and emerging work that draws connections between the literature on historicity and historical contingency and recent work on values in science. The larger goal is to get clear about whether there is anything special about historical sciences when it comes to the role(s) that both epistemic and non-epistemic values play in the sort of scientific investigation in historical sciences. Questions that contributions to the special issue might include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Does contingency have any normative (ethical, social, or even existential) consequences?
- How might non-epistemic values figure in the construction and assessment of narrative explanations in historical sciences?
- How do non-epistemic values influence the framing of counterfactual claims that historical scientists investigate?
- Do non-epistemic values have any role to play in the construction of representations of the deep past?
- What larger (philosophical, normative, even theological) issues are at stake in scientific disagreements about the degree of contingency in evolutionary history?
- If uniqueness and rarity are strongly associated with a contingent life history, then do those qualities call for special consideration in conservation efforts?
- What social consequences does contingency have for humanity's place in nature? What about for humanity's place in the greater cosmos?
- Are epistemic and non-epistemic values deployed differently (or uniquely) in the practice of historical sciences compared to other sciences?

- What role (if any) do epistemic values play in shaping methodological choices and aims of historical scientists?
- What sorts of non-epistemic values exist in historical sciences? Are they different from other sorts of non-historical sciences?
- How do non-epistemic values shape narrative explanations? Do they contribute to aesthetic qualities of narratives concerning life's history?

This special issue will draw from values at the intersection of historical, philosophical, and social scientific consequences of historical life sciences. A broad goal is to draw connections between the notion of contingency and values in historical sciences as, for example, features of historical reasoning and scientific engagement with the past, as well as to explore the normative and value-oriented consequences of a contingent life history. Non-epistemic values in the latter context have significance for broader societal concerns about the meaning of life's history, but also how values shape methodologies and epistemic processes in historical fields of science. We aim to include a diverse range of perspectives with expertise from both early and mid-career scholars, as well as established philosophers in the field.

### Submission & Important Dates

Abstracts should be no longer than 500 words (excluding references) and submitted by March 15 2021. Once authors are notified of acceptance, full papers will be expected by mid-November.

Please submit your abstracts by email to: [historical.contingency@gmail.com](mailto:historical.contingency@gmail.com)