Historical Judgement, by Jonathan Gorman. Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, 2007. Pp. xi + 258.

In *Historical Judgement*, Jonathan Gorman aims to develop a philosophical model of historiography, and to use that model to shed light on the fundamental theoretical concerns of historians. Gorman focuses on choice: on the nature, limits and determination of the choices available to historians as they exercise their judgement. Gorman adopts a thoroughly pragmatic approach, in particular in his refusal to foreclose available choices on the basis of general philosophical considerations. The end result is a philosophy of history which does not criticise or enforce, but which rather seeks to embrace disagreement and encourage novelty.

Following a summary outline in chapter one, Gorman uses the first substantive chapter to argue for a particular philosophical methodology. He is concerned not to impose an alien philosophy upon historiography, but rather to base philosophising on what historiography is, as discovered by a history of that historiography. Inspired by Thomas Kuhn, this 'descriptive' approach to the philosophy of history has, in the last couple of decades, become orthodoxy. Gorman is well placed to execute such an approach successfully: he has consistently made it his business to engage working historians in sustained dialogue, and he writes with an evident sensitivity to the particularities of the historical approach. Still, for those familiar with the self-reflective debates of 1960s and 1970s philosophy of science, inspired by Kuhn and joined by writers such as Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend, this methodological discussion will not contain many surprises. Indeed, it is a little frustrating that we are well into chapter three, with one hundred pages behind us, before the promised history of historiography is begun.

Gorman finds a surprising ahistoricality in his study of historiography, given that the theoretical concerns of historians have not much changed from Herodotus onwards. While historians have consistently and often vigorously disagreed, what they have disagreed about has remained constant. The central philosophical or theoretical concerns were, and remain, (a) the role and nature of truth in historiography; (b) the acceptability and grounds of moral judgement in historiography; (c) the synthesis of atomic facts in a historical account as a whole; and (d) the role and function of historiography in society.

The fourth chapter contains the central philosophical argument, focused around an examination of an intellectual attitude which is an object of interest to many contemporary historians, and of fear to many more: postmodernism. Gorman argues that postmodernism is best appreciated as a form of anti-realist holistic empiricism. He joins a long tradition, dating

back at least to Giambattista Vico, in suggesting that anti-realism is inherent in the word 'history', given its meaning as both the object of historians' study, and the study itself. Whether or not that suggestion is accurate, anti-realism is presupposed for the remainder of the book. In an original and convincing exposition, Gorman connects the holistic empiricism of W. V. O. Quine to the postmodernism of Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty. Both Quine and the postmodernists emphasise choice, on the basis of the underdetermination of one's totality of beliefs by experience. In particular, a recalcitrant experience (such as that provided by the proverbial black swan) can be integrated into one's system of beliefs in many different ways, and it is a matter of choice which system of beliefs to hold in the light of that experience.

Can we really hold true any belief, no matter what the evidence? Three claims attributed to Quine would appear to commit us to answer in the affirmative: (i) we can hold true any statement; (ii) if we are to hold true any statement, then we must make sufficient adjustments for the purpose; (iii) we can make sufficient adjustments for the purpose. (It is unfortunate that there are errata concerning the numbering of these statements both on p.11 and p.146.) Gorman criticises both (ii) and (iii). Against (ii), Gorman is sympathetic to Foucault's brand of postmodernism, which takes the laws of logic, and in particular logical consistency - that which is supposed to enforce adjustments in the web of beliefs - as just one more rule imposed on the back of cultural relations of power. More central to his argument is Gorman's rejection of (iii): for we should realise that, as a contingent matter, we *cannot* always make sufficient adjustments. Sometimes the costs of belief are simply too high. Where there is no alternative, in practice, I (the historian, singular) can have certainty, and we (the historical community) can be in agreement, and hence have objectivity. This remains the case even where the laws of logic are not available to enforce logical consistency. It is, after all, a psychological fact that I find it impossible to hold certain beliefs alongside other beliefs. And it is a cultural fact that we are interested not only in expressing our power but also in communicating; and in so far as we communicate we presuppose a shared language, and (given the anti-realist presupposition) a shared reality.

The final chapter applies Gorman's 'pragmatic postmodernism' to questions of distinctively historiographical concern, in particular to moral judgement, and 'synthetic' or 'whole account' truth (questions (b) and (c), above). Contrary to traditional debates in the philosophy of history, it is not metaphysical considerations that determine whether or not choice of judgement is possible. It is, in particular, not the case that factual statements are determined by evidence, while value statements can be freely and subjectively chosen. Choice is potentially available in either factual or evaluative belief, though for either class it may

contingently be the case that no alternative is available.

Nor is it the case that atomic truths (such as 'William Joyce was born in New York on April 24, 1906') are determined by the evidence, while the content at the level of the historical account as a whole - the story it tells, the evaluative conclusions it draws - are merely a matter of opinion. Gorman insists that it is mere dogma to insist on a difference, as a matter of philosophical principle, between the possibility of truth at the atomic and synthetic levels. It may be the case that, in our post-Rankean historical practice, historians are more likely to agree on atomic facts than on the truth of whole historical accounts. But that is a merely a cultural preference: Gorman speculates that some previous historical cultures expressed the opposite belief, that agreement at the holistic level was of vital importance (the true story worth fighting for, where persuasion failed), agreement on most atomic truths less so. Further, we should not consider synthetic or whole account truth to be a mere conjunction of individual atomic truths - rather, the latter are combined in various and sometimes subtle ways, according to judgements of mutual *relevance*. Hayden White's seminal (1973) *Metahistory* is treated primarily as a theory of historiographical relevance, in its examination of historians' differing strategies of emplotment, explanation and evaluation.

While Gorman's radical pragmatism provides an interesting and novel basis on which to approach historiography, I am left unsure as to the status of the philosophical conclusions that are thereby drawn. One could regard the conclusions as being descriptive (modelling historiography as it is and has been), methodological (informing how historiography should be written), or hypothetical (exploring the application of a philosophical position to historiography). Despite the explicit commitment to 'modelling' historiography, the general features of historiography thereby identified by Gorman do not go far beyond (i) the identification of the four central theoretical questions, (a)-(d), and (ii) the insistence that historians exercise pragmatically constrained choice.

At times, Gorman seems to regard the conclusions as being able to inform historiographical practice - as being, in a broad sense, methodological. In particular, White's theory is ostensibly selected by Gorman on the basis that it 'enables historians to judge relevance' (p.196). One criticism of this use of White's theory is that it is uncritical: Gorman adds little, if anything, to White's own conclusions of 35 years ago, except perhaps in demonstrating their fit with the empiricist tradition. A more substantive criticism is that the presentation of a methodology of relevance sits uneasily with the central pragmatic demand for the historian to have free choice in any judgement, the presence of actual alternative beliefs permitting.

It seems, then, that the book is best regarded as an attempt to explore the hypothetical application of a radical pragmatic, anti-realist philosophy to historiography. Yet there are urgent questions that would arise from applying this sort of philosophical position, about which *Historical Judgement* is silent. For, once we abandon the idea that there are any constraints to epistemic choice beyond what is (for the individual) psychologically possible, or what is (for the community) contingently chosen as shareable, a very different sort of historiography could be expected to emerge. On the one hand, we could thereby expect the historians' imagination to be placed centre stage, to be akin to the artists' attempt to always re-experience the world. On the other hand, a range of undesirable strategies thereby become permissible, so long as they are pragmatically available to the subject or community. We might include: the selection of belief on the basis of monetary gain, prestige, career advancement, or on the need to remain in good favour with one's political masters; the decision to choose not to seek new evidence, or to ignore that evidence, or not to seek out alternative positions; the adoption of a style that is sufficiently vague and imprecise so as to be able to defend one's position. It would be of great interest to hear how the anti-realist pragmatic postmodernist would respond to these and similar strategies.