



<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Review: *How History Gets Things Wrong* by Alex Rosenberg

Matthew Goodrum, Virginia Tech, [mgoodrum@vt.edu](mailto:mgoodrum@vt.edu)

---

Goodrum, Matthew. 2020. "Review: *How History Gets Things Wrong* by Alex Rosenberg." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (5): 82-85. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-546>.

*How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories*

Alex Rosenberg

MIT Press, 2018

289 pp., 8 unnumbered pages of plates, illus.

Alex Rosenberg, a professor of philosophy at Duke University, has written a thought provoking and intellectually unsettling book. His basic claim is that historical narratives that attempt to explain the motives or intentions (the thought processes) of individuals is fundamentally flawed, because of what recent research in the neurosciences tells us about how the brain works. To defend such a bold and consequential claim, Rosenberg constructs an argument based upon neuroscience and cognitive science research, evolutionary biology, paleoanthropology, psychology, and a conception of the origins and function of history.

### **Types of History and a Theory of Mind**

Rosenberg begins by distinguishing between narrative history and other forms of history where historical subjects are treated in ways shaped by social science research. It is the first type of history, which offers explanations of historical events and the actions of individuals and groups by constructing narrative “true stories” that is the focus of his critique. Rosenberg’s fundamental claim is that these explanations and stories will be mostly wrong, and if they get things right it is only by accident that they do so. He argues that these histories fail to identify the “real causal forces” that drive historical events and that they obstruct our efforts to “really understand our past” (6). He also rejects the widely held notion that in order to understand something one needs to know its history.

The root of the problem with narrative histories that seek to explain the actions of individuals or groups lies, according to Rosenberg, with the theory of mind. Since theory of mind posits that people possess beliefs and desires, and that these beliefs and desires explain their actions, it appears natural that historians would try to infer from the historical evidence the beliefs and desires that drove the actions of historical figures. Rosenberg discusses the research that suggests the theory of mind is innate (hardwired) in humans, or is at least acquired very early in infancy. He also discusses the neuroscience research investigating the parts of the brain responsible for theory of mind, as well as the evolutionary processes that could have produced theory of mind in prehistoric species of humans. He notes that there were a number of survival challenges confronting early humans that developing a theory of mind would have helped solve. This process “involved the coevolution of almost all the processes that operated together to select for the suite of adaptive traits characteristic of *Homo sapiens*: tool making, social and group tolerance and collaboration (to include collaborative child rearing and coordinated hunting), shared intentionality, theory of mind, and the ability to imitate, teach, and learn” (80-81). Rosenberg argues that theory of mind, combined with the acquisition of language, allowed humans to tell stories about peoples’ intentions and to explain their actions.

However, according to Rosenberg, since theory of mind emerged as a result of natural selection it is imperfect and thus it can mislead us. The crucial questions that arise regarding

the implications of the theory of mind for history are: 1) can theory of mind identify the causes of events in human history; and 2) can historians make the right connections between these causes and their effects. Rosenberg raises serious doubts about the ability of conscious introspection to identify the motives or causes of people's actions. A significant part of his argument relies upon neurobiological research investigating mental processes. He reviews this research in some detail and explains how it fundamentally undermines how theory of mind explains human action based upon beliefs and desires. A great deal rests upon Rosenberg's interpretation of the meaning of recent neurobiological discoveries and their implications for theory of mind. Neurobiology is a rapidly advancing science and the experiments that Rosenberg cites represent only a small portion of recent research, although he would certainly claim that it is the research directly relevant to the problem at hand. One can ask whether at this point in time we can reasonably draw the conclusions that Rosenberg wants to derive from neurobiology. Beyond this question, there are also philosophical questions surrounding just how neurobiology's understanding of the operations of the human brain require us to rethink our understanding of human cognition.

### **Understanding Brain Function**

Rosenberg places great emphasis on the physical processes operating in the human brain. He concludes that our current understanding of brain function means that a historian trying to explain the actions and thoughts of historical figures by applying theory of mind to explain those actions is being misled. This may well be relevant if the historian is only dealing with what could be called objective phenomena (actual observable phenomena in human brains, which is what the experiments of neurobiologists is concerned with). But it is unclear if Rosenberg's critique applies to subjective phenomena, the historical actor's subjective experience of what is motivating their thoughts and actions, whether that subjective experience corresponds to what is happening neurologically or not. Perhaps the historian cannot correctly identify what the desires and beliefs were that motivated a person, since according to Rosenberg this is not how humans actually work at the neurological level. But if the historical actor subjectively believed that some set of desires and beliefs were motivating their actions, then historians would seem to still be able to tell a history where, even if the "objective" neurological (theory of mind) explanation is unattainable, it would still be possible to tell the "subjective" account of what the historical actor thought was motivating them.

Rosenberg is aware that his critique of theory of mind based upon neurobiology smacks of reductionism, but he dismisses this criticism of his argument. In addition to relying heavily on neurobiological accounts of brain function, Rosenberg also proposes a paleoanthropological hypothesis for how theory of mind originated in humans. This hypothesis is rooted in early human social behavior and the emergence of language, which he thinks led to the invention of words to express the beliefs and desires of others (theory of mind).

To be clear, Rosenberg does not reject the validity of all history. Only historical narratives that seek to explain the beliefs and desires (the content in the minds) of historical actors. There is no such problem with histories that seek to explain events through broad sociological, demographic, environmental, technological, or any number of other impersonal forces that drive historical events. He offers Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) as

an example of the historical approach that he believes offers proper and valid explanations of past events. Rosenberg is very clear in his support of a historical methodology that is Darwinian in the sense of being non-teleological. In his conception of history, events do not have purpose and people do not have intentions, but events do result from underlying factors and forces. So, just as evolution by natural selection is not purposeful but is governed by underlying natural causes and forces, so too historical events are not purposeful but are governed by observable causes that historians can seek to identify.

### **Sources of Critique**

Rosenberg's thesis needs to be critiqued from a number of perspectives. His argument relies upon specific interpretations of psychology, neurobiology, evolutionary biology, paleoanthropology, and theory of mind. Philosophers and psychologists need to assess if his critique of theory of mind is valid. Probably more importantly, they will need to judge whether the evidence that Rosenberg draws from neurobiology to challenge theory of mind actually implies what he says it does, or are there other ways to interpret the implications of this research. There is a broader question regarding the wider range of neurobiological research and how it is interpreted with regard to psychological theories of how the mind operates. Neurobiologists and psychologists are still in the early stages of trying to understand how the physiological functioning of the brain produces subjective mental states and the phenomenon we call human consciousness.

Beyond these questions, there are others relating to Rosenberg's assertions about the evolutionary origin and selective advantage that theory of mind and narrative history are supposed to bestow upon early humans. The history of biology is replete with examples of attempts to provide evolutionary explanations for human social, economic, or political behaviors that addressed concerns of their day but were later rejected. Equally, there have been numerous competing evolutionary scenarios presented by biologists and social scientists over the last century and a half to explain the origins of social institutions, human behaviors, or cultural practices. These have often received rather mixed receptions by other scientists and the public alike. Rosenberg's description of how theory of mind could have emerged in the course of human evolution is interesting and valuable in terms of prompting further investigation of the subject, but it remains speculative and far from proven. Equally interesting but even more speculative are his ideas about the social, cultural, and psychological function of history and historical narrative in the evolution of modern humans.

Important books are not limited to those that present 'true' or valid theses, they can also be books that are largely wrong in their arguments but that raise new and important questions that spur novel avenues of research. Rosenberg is certainly correct in directing historians and philosophers to recent discoveries from neurobiology. The chasms that still often separate the sciences from the humanities means that the implications of discoveries in one domain take a long time to be felt in the other. Regardless of the specific thesis proposed by Rosenberg, it may indeed be necessary for historians to rethink historical methods and how historical narratives and explanations are constructed in light of new discoveries from

*M. Goodrum*

neurobiology, and psychology as well. But it may be too early to be sure of just what the implications of discoveries in these sciences need to be for the practice of history.