

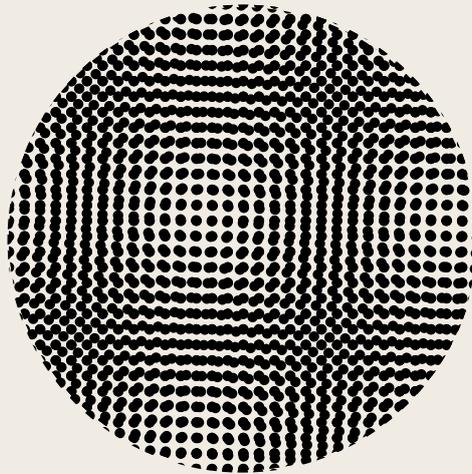
**Tuesday**  
**13 November 2012**  
**7:30 pm**  
**In English**

Both the (logical-)positivist and the hermeneuticist approach to historical writing felt a greater affinity with the parts than with the whole of the historical text. This is because both approaches tended to focus on the issue of historical explanation. And explanations are typically given of events, which we may expect to find at the level of the components of an historical text rather than on that of its whole. This is not to deny that historical texts as a whole can properly be said to explain. But when that is the case, neither (logical-)positivism nor hermeneutics can clarify the historical text's explanatory force.

We owe to Hayden White the recognition that it is necessary to address the issue of the historical text as a whole. However, neither White nor his many followers ever discussed the problem of the relationship between the historical text as a whole and that part of the past represented in it.

This, then, is what I hope to do in my presentation. I shall argue for three claims. In the first place, Donald Davidson's argument against conceptual schemes (as in his 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme') applies here as well. Next, that little is to be expected from an epistemological analysis of the relationship between the historical text and the past it is about. And, finally, that past reality should be seen as a model of the historical text and not the other way round. This is where the writing of history comes strangely close to mathematics and theoretical physics and where the relationship between model and reality is basically the same.

**Frank Ankersmit** is Emeritus Professor of Intellectual History and Historical Theory at the University of Groningen. He has published fifteen books and more than 220 articles in the fields of philosophy of history, political philosophy and aesthetics. He is a member of the Dutch Royal Academy of the Sciences (KNAW) and of the Academia Europaea. He is founder and chief editor of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* and holds an honorary degree in the humanities of the University of Ghent. His writings have been translated into many languages. His most recent book, entitled *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, came out with Cornell UP in May 2012.



### **Constituting Wholes**

Wholes are said to be more than the sum of their parts. This 'more' contains both a promise and a threat. When different elements – disciplines, methods, cultures, individuals – form a whole, they not only join forces, but also generate effects of synergy and a surplus from which also the parts can benefit. Being part of a whole is a way to acquire meaning and to extend oneself beyond one's limited existence; and having a part in the whole is to have an enlarged agency. But wholes are also more powerful than the sum of their parts. Wholes constitute their parts, determining what is a part and what is apart, what has a part and what is deprived of agency. Becoming a part requires submission and although parts may not pre-exist the whole, there may still be something in the elements that exceeds being a part – even if only the possibility of being part of a different whole. While a desire for being whole or part of a whole seems all-too-natural, organic metaphors, which are often used to think part-whole relationships, have been criticized precisely for naturalizing relations of hierarchy and power. Yet, entirely abandoning the whole in favour of the part(icular) is also problematic. After the disenchantments of the postmodern post-cold-war period and in the face of global crises – be they financial, economic, political, or ecological – the critical need to include a holistic perspective is felt with renewed urgency, as is the concern that the situatedness of any such perspective and the multiple, incommensurable ways of constituting wholes may be forgotten.

The lecture is part of the **ICI Lecture Series Constituting Wholes**, which will explore the double, both active and passive, aspect of "Constituting Wholes" within the framework of the multi-disciplinary ICI Research Focus **Complementarity and Wholes Which Are Not One**.

# **Frank Ankersmit**

## **Parts and the Whole of the (Historical) Text**