Seeing the Facts and Saying What You Like: Retroactive Redescription and Indeterminacy in the Past*

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Abstract
In chapter 17 of his book, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Ian Hacking makes the disquieting claim that “perhaps we should best think of past human actions as being to a certain extent indeterminate.”1 Against what may appear like the self-evident conception of the past as fixed and unalterable, Hacking suggests that when it comes to human conduct and experience, there are reasons to adopt a more flexible view. This suggestion has caused lively debate, in the journal *History of the Human Sciences* and elsewhere.2 Central to this

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1) Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 243. All future references to this work are made parenthetically in the text by means of RS and the appropriate page number.

debate is the question of what it means to use a recently invented vocabulary to redescribe past human affairs. In particular, it is asked: How do the linguistic, cultural and social differences between past and present matter to the possibility of such a redescription's being true? We who do research in the humanities and social sciences often make retroactive redescriptions of precisely this sort. Hence, the debate is clearly of some general importance for how to conceive the goals and methods of our inquiries. My overall aim in this paper is to clarify what we may learn from the clash between Hacking and his critics.

**Keywords**
Hacking, (re-)description, indeterminacy, nominalism, relativism, culture

1. Hacking on Past Indeterminacy

What Hacking calls past indeterminacy is supposed to arise when we develop new ways of describing previous action and experience, forms of description that were not available to the persons whose actions and experiences get described. Hacking gives us many examples to think with, most of which are deliberately controversial. He asks us to consider the case of Alexander Mackenzie, a famous Scottish-Canadian explorer. At the beginning of the 19th century, when he was forty-eight years old, Mackenzie married a girl of fourteen. There is no evidence of physical violence or of his having treated the girl very differently from how he would have treated an older woman. And yet, an author writing in 1987 in *New York Times* did not hesitate to describe Mackenzie as a child molester and child abuser.

Hacking questions this description. He asks, “Should we retroactively apply terms such as child abuse so generously?”, noting that the term ‘child abuse’ is of relatively recent origin. *(RS, 242)* It was launched in 1961–62 by a group of pediatricians in Denver. In the 60’s and 70’s, it gradually replaced the older, Victorian term, ‘cruelty to children’. And this replacement was not just a terminological shift. According to Hacking, the uses of the terms ‘cruelty to children’ and ‘child abuse’ differ fundamentally in respect of class, evil, sex and medicine. Paradigmatically, cruelty to children was considered to be a lower class phenomenon, and was perceived as one among many evils in society. Sex was not conceived as central, and the perpetrator was not regarded as sick but simply as a wretch to be punished.
By contrast, child abuse is supposed to be classless, and is held to constitute a special and perhaps the ultimate sort of evil in our society. The sexual aspect is central, and the perpetrator is regarded as a person in need of medical or psychological treatment. Obviously, this relatively recent term did not belong to the conceptual resources available to Mackenzie, his fourteen-year old wife, or to anyone else in their community. Moreover, at the beginning of the 19th century, their sort of marriage was legal, conventionally acceptable, and not very unusual.

Importantly, Hacking is not claiming that Mackenzie was not a child abuser. Rather, he suggests that there is no determinate yes-or-no answer here. Whether Mackenzie’s behavior was an instance of child abuse or not is indeterminate.

Here is another one of Hacking’s examples. A royal physician in 17th century France has given an extensive description of how, when Louis XIII was an infant and child, it often happened that the adults around him played with his genitals in public. This story has been interpreted in two opposite ways. Philippe Ariès takes it as evidence that (in Hacking’s words) earlier centuries offered “a freer, franker, less sexually cluttered life for humans before and short after puberty,” a life in which “[h]umans in that age group were not harmed, were not conceptually capable of being harmed, in ways that we now harm children.” (RS, 242) Lloyd DeMause, by contrast, takes the story as evidence for widespread abuse, arguing, indeed, that Western Civilization as a whole is the history of child abuse. Hacking thinks neither account is satisfactory: “As a cautious philosopher, I am inclined to say that many retroactive descriptions are neither definitely correct nor definitely incorrect.” (RS, 243)

What Hacking seems to be arguing in connection with these examples is that there is an indeterminacy in the application of certain new ways of talking to certain past events. This may not seem like a very remarkable claim, especially since the application of such terms even to contemporary phenomena is not always a straightforward matter. However, Hacking thinks imposing these new terms on a past which is so different from our own time involves special difficulties. For the terms are supposed to pick out kinds of action, kinds of experience, and kinds of people, and actions,

3) It deserves to be noticed, however, that the use of the term ‘child abuse’ has fluctuated considerably during its brief time of existence. Hacking gives a fuller description of the use and history of this term in “The Making and Molding of Child Abuse”, Critical Inquiry 17(1991): 252–288.
experiences and people are not independent of the particular historical circumstances under which they exist.

The exact character of their dependence on such circumstances is a fascinating topic and, as so often with such topics, it is difficult not to get muddled. Hacking struggles with, and sometimes seems to succumb to, the temptation to construe the notion of past indeterminacy in a truly mind-boggling fashion. His difficulties come to the surface when he discusses examples that differ from the ones described above, in being such that he wants to say that our retroactive descriptions are not indeterminate in the sense specified before, but definitely true. For example, Hacking asks us to imagine what we would now regard as an obvious, though not particularly gross, instance of sexual harassment that took place in 1950 — a piece of behavior that was completely legal at the time and did not in any clear way transgress accepted norms of conduct. In light of the fact that our present term ‘sexual harassment’ was not in use in 1950, Hacking raises the question if the imagined piece of behavior really was an instance of sexual harassment. He says,

I do not think it was determined, in 1950, that there would come into being a pivotal Americal concept of sexual harassment. I asked you to imagine some plain, but not entirely gross, example of sexual harassment that took place in 1950. I am not at all sure that it was determinate, in 1950, that this was an intentional act of sexual harassment. Indeed, some people, with whom I strongly disagree, will say that it definitely not was sexual harassment, then. Others will insist that of course it was. In this case I do judge that it was intentional sexual harassment in 1950. (RS, 243–44)

Here, Hacking unwittingly starts employing the notion of past indeterminacy in a way that differs noticeably from how he used the same term earlier, when he argued that calling Mackenzie a child abuser means saying something that is neither true nor false. The new usage is bound to leave the careful reader perplexed. After having suggested that it was perhaps not determined in 1950 that the act was an intentional act of sexual harassment, Hacking goes on to say that the act was intentional sexual harassment in 1950. Isn’t this manifestly incoherent? Probably, what he says only one paragraph earlier is meant to clarify things:

[I]f we describe past actions in ways in which they could not have been described at the time, we derive a curious result. For all intentional actions are
actions under a description. If a description did not exist, or was not available, at an earlier time, then at that time one could not act intentionally under that description. Only later did it become true that, at that time, one performed an action under that description. (RS, 243)

But this is still very perplexing. Taking the two just quoted passages together, it seems reasonable to read Hacking as suggesting (i) that in 1950 it had not yet become true that the act that we are asked to imagine was one of intentional sexual harassment, and (ii) that this somehow became true only later when the concept of sexual harassment was invented. Hacking seems tempted to argue, not just that the invention of new forms of description makes it possible to state certain truths about the past for the first time, but that those truths somehow become true only with the creation of those new linguistic resources. Why would Hacking want to make such a strange claim?

To answer this question, we need to understand how three features of Hacking’s conception interact to engender such a conclusion. The first feature is visible in the passages just quoted, and, indeed, permeates Hacking’s discussion as a whole. What I have in mind is his wavering between talking of what is required for an action’s falling under a certain description, and talking of what is required for an action’s being intentional under that description. As Adrian Haddock has pointed out in his criticism of Hacking, it is one thing to ask,

\begin{enumerate}
\item Was the imagined 1950 behavior an instance of sexual harassment? Did Mackenzie’s having sexual intercourse with a girl of fourteen constitute child abuse?
\end{enumerate}

and another thing to ask,

\begin{enumerate}
\item Was the imagined 1950 behavior an instance of intentional sexual harassment? Did Mackenzie intentionally abuse the girl?
\end{enumerate}

It seems entirely coherent to say both that MacKenzie’s behavior constituted child abuse and that it was not intentional \textit{qua} child abuse.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{4} Adrian Haddock, “Rewriting the Past: Retroactive Description and Its Consequences”, p. 16. Barry Allen disagrees: “Child abuse (I mean not the old sense of negligence but the
The second feature is Hacking’s committing himself to a general thesis about the connection between descriptions and intentions. The thesis is that a person can have an intention of a certain kind only if the corresponding description is accessible to him. For example, if the description ‘child abuse’ (or some synonymous equivalent) was not available at a given time, then at that time people could not act with the intention to abuse children.

If you think that acting with the intention to abuse a child requires having access to the description ‘child abuse’, and then unwittingly slide from ‘acting with the intention to abuse a child’ to ‘abusing a child’, you will end up claiming that unless a person has access to the description ‘child abuse’ his action cannot be an instance of child abuse. As the passage quoted above indicates, Hacking is tempted to draw that sort of conclusion. But now there is a rather obvious tension between this conclusion and a third feature of Hacking’s conception to which I have already pointed, namely, his wish to say that there are cases in which our retroactive redescriptions are true. Suppose, for example, that it turns out that Mackenzie regularly and brutally forced himself upon his young wife. Hacking would then, I suppose, want to describe Mackenzie a child abuser, just as he wants to classify the imagined 1950 behavior as sexual harassment.5 But, as we saw, Hacking also seems to have considerable difficulties avoiding the conclusion that no matter what Mackenzie did, it could not have been child abuse since the description ‘child abuse’ was not available to him at the time. Hacking seems to know that this conclusion is absurd. But how can he steer clear of it?

Well, he could remind himself that an action may have been child abuse, or sexual harassment, even if it was not intentional under that description. Or, he could retract from the thesis that having the intention to abuse a child or to harass someone sexually requires having access to the descriptions current sense of sexual abuse) is not something that can happen unintentionally or by accident. It must be a deliberate, intentional action.” (Barry Allen, “The Soul of Knowledge”, History and Theory 36(1997): 63–82, at p. 69.) But this is simply false. As I will soon show, variations of the Mackenzie example are imaginable in which his behavior is rightly characterized as child abuse even if Mackenzie’s intention is not to abuse his wife.

5 Why would it otherwise be so important for him, in his earlier description of the case—the description which leads him to conclude that Mackenzie’s behavior neither was nor wasn’t child abuse— to emphasize that we do not have evidence of such physical cruelty?
‘child abuse’ or ‘sexual harassment’. Or, he could do both of these things. But Hacking takes a less promising route: he starts tampering with the notion of truth. Again, let us imagine that Mackenzie brutally forced himself upon his young wife. If so, Hacking would presumably want to classify Mackenzie as a child abuser, but, it seems, with the following caveat: even if it is true now that Mackenzie was a child abuser, it wasn’t true at the beginning of the 19th century. It became true only later, in the 1960’s, when our concept of child abuse was invented. That is how Hacking seems to try to get around the objection that his way of reasoning leads to the conclusion that child abuse was conceptually impossible before 1961. The first two features of his conception make him strongly inclined to argue that in earlier times people were indeed conceptually prevented from abusing children. However, he seems to think that this conceptual barrier can somehow be teared down post facto, by retroactive redescription. Supposedly, with the invention of the concept of child abuse, it became both possible and true of earlier times that children were abused.

Consider the following paragraph:

When we remember what we did, or what other people did, we may also rethink, redescribe, and refeel the past. These redescriptions may be perfectly true of the past; that is, they are truths that we now assert about the past. And yet, paradoxically, they may not have been true in the past, that is, not truths about intentional actions that made sense when the actions were performed. That is why I say that the past is revised retroactively. I do not mean that we change our opinions about what was done, but that in a certain logical sense what was done itself is modified. As we change our understanding and sensibility, the past becomes filled with intentional actions that, in a certain sense, were not there when they were performed. (RS, 249–50)

This is a tortured passage. Hacking seems half-consciously aware that there is something confused about saying that the past can become filled with intentional actions that were not there when they were performed. Hence his half-hearted attempt to defuse the idea that what is true now of the past might not have been true in the past, by suggesting that this mind-boggling thesis boils down to the considerably less startling claim that there are true statements about the past which could not be expressed in the past because they make use of terms that had not been invented then. In a later discussion of Rewriting the Soul, Hacking complains that he
equivocated between the object of child abuse and the idea or concept of child abuse, and remarks that he should have been more careful to emphasize that the object – the real behavior or practice of child abuse – was there in earlier times, even if the concept had not yet been constructed. I take it that he would be prepared to acknowledge that his tendency to slide from, say, ‘In 1950, the statement that we now express by the words, “Susan was sexually harassed by Peter”, could not be expressed’ to ‘In 1950, it was not true that Susan was sexually harassed by Peter’ constitutes a conflation of the very same kind.

Locutions such as ‘becoming true’ and ‘revising the past retroactively’ heap confusion on confusion. Rather than succumbing to the temptation of making use of such notions, Hacking should have taken a second look at the line of reasoning which seems to lead up to the mind-boggling variety of his notion of past indeterminacy. To begin with, he should have distinguished clearly between what it is for an action to fall under a description, and what it is for an action to be intentional under that description. Again, actions in the past are imaginable such that we might say that they constituted child abuse and sexual harassment, even if they were not intentional qua such abuse and such harassment. For example, it seems quite possible to imagine a version of the Mackenzie story such that Mackenzie’s behavior is rightly characterized as child abuse, even if that characterization does not capture the intention with which Mackenzie acted. Suppose that the marriage involves no physical cruelty, and that Mackenzie does his best to be a good husband according to the conventions of his time. Yet he is numb and insensitive enough not to realize that the girl suffers, in an inchoate and quiet sort of way, from what she has learnt to perceive as her duty to provide sexual satisfaction to an old man she does not love and to whom she is not attracted. Given these details about their marriage, it seems quite reasonable to say that Mackenzie was abusing the girl, even if it was not his intention to do so. (Of course, this does not mean that he bears no moral responsibility for his insensitive mistreatment of his young wife.)

Distinguishing carefully between what it is for an action to fall under a description and what it is for an action to be intentional under that description

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may suffice to make the idea that retroactive redescription can somehow change the past lose much of its attraction. More particularly, one may well reject the notion of such retroactive change without also questioning Hacking’s general thesis that an action can be intentional under a description D only if the agent has access to the description ‘D’ (or some synonymous equivalent). As long as one consistently refrains from ascribing intentions retroactively to agents who did not have access to the corresponding descriptions, all one needs to do to avoid the mind-boggling variety of the indeterminacy thesis is to keep in mind that a description might be true of an action and yet fail to capture the intention with which the action was performed.

As a diagnosis of Hacking’s confusion, however, this is insufficient. For he does not consistently refrain from retroactively ascribing intentions to people who did not have access to the corresponding descriptions: recall his claim that what we conceive as a plain example of sexual harassment in 1950 can be retroactively described (not just as sexual harassment but) as intentional sexual harassment. What is confusing, of course, is that we have also seen him defend the general thesis that acting with the intention to D requires having access to the description ‘D’ (or some synonymous equivalent). Apparently, this general thesis entails that an action could not be intentional qua sexual harassment in 1950. So, Hacking seems to be flatly contradicting himself at this point.

This is why the temptation to invoke the distinction between being true ‘in’ and being true ‘of’ the past would still be there for Hacking, even if we reminded him that a description may be true of an action and yet fail to capture the intention with which the action was performed. The distinction between being true ‘in’ and being true ‘of’ the past might seem to allow him to hold on to the general thesis that an action can be intentional under a description only if the description is available to the agent, and yet maintain, for example, that during the 1960’s it became true of some 1950 behavior that it was intentional under the description ‘sexual harassment’.

This sort of maneuver is desperate and unwarranted. It only obscures what should be obvious, namely, that to claim that intentional sexual harassment occurred in 1950 is to suggest a counterexample to the general thesis that acting with the intention to D requires having access to the description ‘D’ (or some synonymous equivalent). Hacking cannot have it
both ways: he must either retract from that general thesis, or retract from the particular claim that intentional sexual harassment occurred in 1950 (and from other particular claims of the same sort that he might be inclined to make).

Many influential philosophers of history would want to preserve the general thesis. Quentin Skinner famously insists that the “special authority of an agent over his intentions […] does exclude the possibility that an acceptable account of an agent’s behavior could ever survive the demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself.”7 Hacking invokes another philosophical authority, Elizabeth Anscombe, to the same effect. As several critics have pointed out, however, it is not at all clear that Anscombe subscribes to the thesis in question. Adrian Haddock reminds us of what she says about a bird that lands on a twig and in the process gets stuck on birdlime. She says both these descriptions are “satisfied by the same occurrence, which was something that the bird did, but under one description it was intentional, under the other unintentional. That the bird is not a language-user has no bearing on this.”8 Analogously, one might want to argue that there is no good reason to deny that there are cases in which humans have intentions the contents of which are captured by concepts invented only later. Hacking is prepared to call a piece of 1950 behavior an instance of intentional sexual harassment, while adding the confused proviso that this description became true only with the invention of the concept of sexual harassment in the 1960’s. But why not skip the proviso, and feel free to say, without qualification, that intentional sexual harassment occurred frequently in 1950? It may be argued that insisting that such behavior could not have been intentional qua sexual harassment only manifests the unwitting (and, hence, dogmatic) hardening of a fallible hypothesis into an imposed rule; nothing is allowed to function as a counterexample

to the general principle that having an intention requires having access to the corresponding description.

This is very difficult philosophical territory. Fortunately, there is no need to explore it in any more detail here. Just to sketch my own tentative views on the matter: On the one hand, it seems clear to me that examples such as Anscombe’s bird are genuine counterexamples to the principle that acting with the intention to D requires having access to the description ‘D’. Other, similar examples would be a sheepdog’s intending to keep the herd of sheep together, or an eight-months old infant’s trying to get hold of a piece of bread. On the other hand, when it comes to concepts such as child abuse and sexual harassment, it is not at all clear that analogous counterexamples can be constructed. Pace the line of argument sketched at the end of the previous paragraph, I am inclined to say that no matter how horribly Mackenzie treated his young wife, we should not say that his behavior was intentional qua child abuse. Of course he might have had other deplorable intentions. For example, he might have acted with the intention to satisfy his sexual desire regardless of the suffering his behavior may cause. He might even have intended to hurt and humiliate the girl. There is perhaps a temptation to argue that if Mackenzie had such horrible intentions, that by itself would suffice to make his behavior intentional qua child abuse. If he intended to harm and humiliate this child, shouldn’t we say that he intended to abuse her? Well; my point here is not to legislate against such usage. Rather, the important thing is to notice that if we start using the term ‘child abuse’ in this sort of way, the example will lose its relevance for the present discussion. For we would then conceive the term ‘child abuse’ simply as equivalent to a set of descriptions that were already in use at the beginning of the 19th century (‘hurt’, ‘humiliate’, and so forth). Whereas the very starting-point of Hacking’s discussion is that expressions such as ‘child abuse’ and ‘sexual harassment’ were not introduced and are usually not employed as mere substitutes for, or abbreviations of, already available terms. This is the insight from which the philosophically interesting problems about retroactive redescription arise.

To construe the terms in question as equivalent to a set of old concepts is to bypass the worries that I am addressing in this paper.

Above all, what I want to emphasize is that I do not think there is a single answer to the general question whether acting with a certain intention requires having access to the corresponding description. We need to be more specific. We can ask if intending to land on a twig requires having access to the term ‘land on a twig’—and then, the answer will probably be ‘no’. We can ask if intending to abuse a child requires having access to the term ‘child abuse’—and then, the answer will perhaps be ‘yes’. But no clear sense has been given to the general question if intending to D requires having access to the description ‘D’. The relations between intentions and descriptions look different in different cases. The sensible approach is to look at individual cases one at a time without presupposing that those individual cases must all be treated according to a single general principle.

A similarly ‘particularist’ qualification applies to my earlier point, that we should distinguish carefully between an action’s falling under a description and an action’s being intentional under that description. Making this distinction is not something that can rightly and usefully be done in every particular case and under any particular set of circumstances. There are various interconnections between descriptions, intentions and actions, and those interconnections are often very complicated and multifarious. We can say little at a general level that is useful for an adequate understanding of particular cases. We need to look carefully at each instance and consider the details of the situation.

In fact, this is in line with what Hacking himself often says about the connections between descriptions of human affairs and those human affairs themselves. He rightly emphasizes that inventing a new description of some aspect of human life is not an innocent matter, for such descriptions are not mere reflections of a passive, inert subject matter. Unlike rocks and electrons, human beings interact with their self-descriptions, and sometimes even become what they are partly because of how they characterize themselves. Hacking uses the term ‘dynamic nominalism’ as the name of the claim that inventing new ways of classifying people does not always mean identifying already existing kinds. Sometimes it means participating in the very creation of those kinds:

The claim of dynamic nominalism is not that there was a kind of person who came increasingly to be recognized by bureaucrats or by students of human
nature, but rather that a kind of person came into being at the same time as
the kind itself was being invented. In some cases, that is, our classifications and
our classes conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging each other on.¹⁰

I want to emphasize the word ‘some’ in the last sentence. Hacking wisely
refrains from making a general claim to the effect that it is always the case
that people are what they are or do what they do because of how they have
learnt to describe themselves and their actions.

At other places, he talks of “looping effects” between descriptions and
their human subject matter. “People,” he says,

can make tacit or even explicit choices, adapt or adopt ways of living so as to
fit or get away from the very classification that may be applied to them. These
very choices, adaptations or adoptions have consequences for the very group,
for the kind of people that is invoked. […] What was known about people of
a kind may become false because people of that kind have changed in virtue
of what they believe about themselves. […] Think what the category of genius
did to those Romantics who saw themselves as geniuses, and what their
behavior did in turn to the category of genius itself. Think about the transfor-
mations effected by the notions of fat, overweight, anorexic.¹¹

Hacking points out that such looping effects may look very different in
different cases. Dynamic nominalism, he says, should not be seen as an
abstract philosophical thesis, but as an invitation “to do serious philoso-
phy, namely, to take a look: to examine the intricate origins of our ideas of
[say] multiple personality or of suicide.” The goal of such particular inves-
tigations is not to draw general conclusions. Indeed, we should not expect
such general conclusions to be found: “just because dynamic nominalism
invites us to examine the intricacies of real life, it has little chance of being
a general philosophical theory. […] I see no reason to suppose that we shall
ever tell two identical stories of two different instances of making up people.”¹²

¹⁰) Ian Hacking, Historical Ontology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002),
p. 106.
¹²) Ian Hacking, Historical Ontology, p. 114.
I completely agree with what Hacking is saying here. Indeed, my earlier criticism can be seen as an attempt to turn this particularist strand in his thinking against his opposite tendency to reason from general premises about how descriptions are related to human action and intentionality. Again, the possibility of some actions and intentions is directly and straightforwardly connected to the availability of the corresponding descriptions. To take a simple example: in a society where the concept of chess playing has not been invented, people cannot play chess and cannot intend to play chess. The concept of chess playing, chess playing itself, and the possibility of intending to play chess come in a package; they are inseparable from each other. Here we do have a case where the invention of a description is also the invention of the possibility of certain actions and intentions.

In most cases, however, the connections between descriptions, actions and intentions are less straightforward and yet of considerable importance. Consider again the notion of child abuse. A third variation on the Mackenzie example may hint at some of the complications. Let us imagine that both Mackenzie and his young wife regard themselves as happily married. They enjoy each other's company and would say, honestly and without hesitation, that their relation is characterized by mutual respect and devotion. The girl does not see herself as a victim, and she often finds herself thinking of how lucky she has been to find herself such a good husband. And Mackenzie does, indeed, treat the girl much better than most men would treat their wives at the time. He is faithful; he would not dream of beating her; if he happens to hurt her feelings, he is genuinely remorseful; and so on and so forth. Suppose, moreover, that this mutual happiness lasts. Even as she grows older, the woman never finds reason to revise her opinion about the marriage as a very happy one. When she is 45, her husband dies. As a widow, she looks back with satisfaction on their life together, thinking that she could not have wished for a better man.

In this case, was Mackenzie a child abuser? It seems weird to say that he was. But it also seems doubtful to say he was not. I find it difficult to picture the relation as described above without thinking that both Mackenzie and the girl must have been naive about, or, perhaps better, blind to certain aspects of their relation, aspects having to do with the wider social and cultural environment in which their relation was set. I find it plausible, or even irresistible, to say that they both unreflectively accepted inherited structures of oppression, and that they unwittingly fulfilled exploitive
expectations on how to be husband and wife. Of course, one would want to know more about their married life and their place in the society in which they lived. But I find it hard to see what further details would make it entirely unproblematic to say that Mackenzie was definitely not abusing his fourteen-year old wife.

The notion of child abuse was not part of the conceptual repertoire available to Mackenzie and his wife. Does that matter to our imagined example? Yes, certainly. The unavailability of the concept at the time is one thing that makes it problematic to say that Mackenzie was a child abuser. To realize this, try to imagine a similarly happy relation today between a forty-eight year old man and a fourteen-year old girl who have grown up and live in contemporary Western culture. Suppose they are both, say, native Swedes whose families have been living in Sweden for generations. Arguably, this contemporary relation would not be similar to Mackenzie’s, and one reason it would not be similar is that we find it much harder not to conceptualize it in terms of child abuse. And “we” here includes everyone, even the man and the girl. So the point is not merely that their relation would be classified as child abuse by the people around them, but that they themselves would have considerable difficulties not to think of and experience their relation in such terms. And to the extent that they do think of and experience the relation in such a way, it would indeed be child abuse – not just in a legalistic but in a morally full-fledged sense of the term. Arguably, it makes little sense to say that sexual intercourse between a forty-eight-year old man and a fourteen-year old girl that is experienced by one or both parties as an act of abuse is not child abuse in such a full-fledged sense of the word.

Perhaps I should not reject a priori the possibility of telling a story about such a contemporary couple that allows us to see their relation as not involving child abuse in a morally full-fledged sense of the word. But I do want to say that the fact that are at home in contemporary Western culture, where the concept of child abuse is accessible to everyone, at least makes such a story much, much harder to tell than if they had lived two centuries ago. While I find it relatively easy to describe Mackenzie’s marriage so that calling him a child abuser becomes doubtful, it is not clear to me that a plausible story to a similar effect about his contemporary counterpart can be given.13

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13) It may be argued that Mackenzie’s contemporary counterpart is not someone who has grown up and live in contemporary Western culture, but someone from a non-Western
2. Redescription, Relativism, and Two Different Ways of Using Wittgenstein

In 2002, Wes Sharrock and Ivan Leudar published a criticism of chapter 17 of *Rewriting the Soul*. Some of the points I made in the previous section were also made by them, and in a reply Hacking conceded that his discussion had been confused in various ways. Still, he maintained that, in an important sense, Sharrock’s and Leudar’s criticism was off target. Indeed, he argued that their approach was quite alien to the overall aim and spirit of what he had written. According to Hacking, Sharrock and Leudar took it for granted that the problems he was interested in could be adequately dealt with from a distanced, second-order point of view. But this was precisely the sort of distanced perspective Hacking meant to avoid. “I was not aware of anything second-order in my descriptions of various cases in my chapter. They were with one exception all real cases, cited as such, and I was trying to work as closely as possible to the level of those cases and the participants involved in them. […] On many occasions [Sharrock and Leudar] lift what I wrote to a higher level of description than was present in the chapter.” In this section, my aim is to clarify what I take to be the correct and important point in this response.

Hacking emphasizes that his book was written in 1994, in “the days of virulent skirmishes around memory, false memory, about who did what to whom psychically as well as physically, and about who felt what.” (*RDRS*, 117) In the book, Hacking urges his readers to consider the possibility that the opposite sides in those skirmishes might both be distorting the issue of false memory by presupposing that memories are either definitely true or definitely false. According to Hacking, some memories are definitely true and others are definitely false, but there are also memories that are neither.

culture in which marriages between 48-year old men and 14-year old girls are not very unusual and are generally accepted. In section 3 of this paper, I make some further comments on the issue of cross-cultural description.


Was I abused as a child? In some cases, yes, certainly; in other cases, no, definitely not; but then there are cases where the correct answer is neither a clear yes nor a clear no. Hacking wants us to have the courage to face such indeterminacy. He wants to avoid both the Schylla of irresponsible therapists who want to see child abuse wherever they look and do not hesitate to “help” their clients to “recover” repressed memories of such abuse, and the Charybdis of people who tend to think that all or nearly all memories of past abuse are simply and straightforwardly false. According to Hacking, both sides are often insensitive to the intricacies involved in applying recently developed concepts to past events and experiences that were not conceptualized in those terms when they took place. Hacking’s talk of past indeterminacy is above all an attempt to reveal the mistaken assumption taken for granted by both sides in those skirmishes, the assumption, that is, that there is always a determinate yes-or-no answer to the tormenting questions under debate. “I was regularly asked to serve as an ‘expert witness,’” he writes. “After the lawyers had talked to me for a while, they told me to get lost. They heard that in my opinion we often did not know what to say, even after as many facts were known as could be expected to be known. You do not want someone like that in the witness-box!” (RDRS, 118)

My complaints in the previous section were not directed against the sound and important point that there are cases in which it is unclear what we should say when we want to apply new concepts to past events, and that such indeterminacy often have to do with looping effects caused by the interaction between humans and their self-descriptions. Rather, my dissatisfaction had to do with Hacking’s tendency to obscure these insights by talking, mind-bogglingly, as if we could literally change the past by retroactive redescription. I think this makes Hacking’s attempt to navigate between the Schylla of irresponsible therapists and the Charybdis of their equally dogmatic opponents less convincing than it could have been. That mind-boggling variety of the indeterminacy thesis makes it seem as if Hacking takes himself to have found a way of, as it were, agreeing and disagreeing with both sides in the conflict: on the one hand, he says it might be true of times before 1960 that, say, children were abused; on the other hand, he says it was not true in those times. By contrast, a sounder version of the point about indeterminacy makes no use at all of the distinction between “of” and “in” the past. What this version says is just that careful
considerations of past cases – considerations which include reflections on the multifarious ways in which humans and their self-descriptions interact – may leave us in a position where any clear yes-or-no verdict will look dishonest. What characterizes the virulent skirmishes against which Hacking is reacting is precisely the unwillingness to engage in such careful reflection. People on either side cowardly refuse to recognize even the possibility that there might be cases that are indeterminate in the relevant sense.

I will clarify the sense in which Sharrock and Leudar are blind to the character of Hacking’s investigation by comparing their and Hacking’s very different ways of using Wittgenstein. Here is how Sharrock and Leudar start their discussion of the Mackenzie example:

The thing which strikes us about this case (which Hacking treats as important) is that the facts of the case (as the case is presented, at least) may be plainly seen and, as Wittgenstein advised, say what you like so long as it does not make you blind to the facts. (IP, 105. Original emphases.)

According to Sharrock and Leudar, the facts of the Mackenzie case, as presented by Hacking, are transparent. “These facts”, they say,

could be summarized in this way: at the time that McKenzie [sic] married the 14-year-old girl, this was considered a harmless thing to do, whereas it was what we would now call ‘child abuse’. If we do not say that it was child abuse, that is only to mark its relations to the conventions of its time, but if someone did that now it most definitely would be child abuse. The difficulties begin to arise if we insist on pressing the issue further than this, as if there was something that will be further clarified by asking: well, then, was it child abuse when McKenzie did it? Actually, the difficulty is if the question is asked thus: was it child abuse when McKenzie did it, yes or no?

The second formulation confirms that it is the desire to force a yes-or-no answer to the question that creates the difficulty here. It is one which, plainly, can be answered both ‘yes’ and ‘no’, but, like so many questions in the social studies, the best answer is: it all depends. (IP, 105. Original emphases.)

16) The passage from Wittgenstein to which Sharrock and Leudar are alluding is in Philosophical Investigations (London: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §79.
On what does it all depend, then? According to Sharrock and Leudar, how to characterize Mackenzie’s behavior depends on what viewpoint one adopts. The idea is this. As long as we look at what Mackenzie did from our contemporary point of view – as long as we insist that Mackenzie’s action should be judged according to present conceptual and moral standards, standards which include the recently invented notion of child abuse – we will have to describe his behavior as an instance of child abuse (and, hence, as something really bad). If we do not describe his behavior as child abuse, this is because we have chosen not to think of it in contemporary terms. And, supposedly, this latter alternative is open to us. If we like, we may lay aside our 21st century spectacles – in particular, our concept of child abuse – in favor of concepts that are closer to Mackenzie’s own linguistic repertoire. Or, as Sharrock and Leudar seem to be recommending at the end of the quoted passage, we may decide not to adopt any one of these two alternative schemes, but detach ourselves from both of them and say, “It all depends”.

Thus, Sharrock’s and Leudar’s discussion of this example is characterized by their taking it for granted that we can comfortably ascend to a level from which our contemporary linguistic habits and “the conventions of [Mackenzie’s] time” are both looked at from without, or from above – a level at which it appears as if we can choose to adopt either one of these different “viewpoints”, or simply remain outside. They picture our pondering the differences between Mackenzie’s time and our own, not as part of our first-level contemporary practice with the term ‘child abuse’, but as part of a second-level reflection on that practice and its relations to alternative conceptual frameworks. Sensitivity to variations in historical context is conceived as something we take into consideration only as we detach ourselves from our post-1960 linguistic habits and instead occupy a meta-level at which present conceptual standards appear side by side with those of the early 19th century. So, the controversial question is not supposed to be whether Mackenzie was a child abuser according to our post-1960 point of view. On the contrary, Sharrock and Leudar take it as unquestionable that the standards governing the post-1960 use of the term ‘child abuse’ entail that Mackenzie was a child abuser. Rather, the controversial question is supposed to be which viewpoint to adopt: should we measure Mackenzie’s behavior according to present standards or according to the conventions of his own time? Allegedly, it is not that the differences between Mackenzie’s time and our own make it any less certain that from
our post-1960 point of view Mackenzie was a child abuser. Rather, to the extent that variations in historical context matter at all, they are seen as having a quite different function, namely that of giving us reason to abandon our post-1960 point of view, as embodied in the concept of child abuse, in favor of a viewpoint closer to Mackenzie’s.

This conception is deeply problematic. For we should not be so confident in thinking that we know what it is to treat our own linguistic habits as something that can be abandoned at will, in favor of some different set of standards that are supposed to have governed people’s thinking at an earlier time in history. Do we really understand what it is to ascend to a meta-level at which such a decision can be made? The difficulties come to the fore if we think a little harder about what it would mean for us to abandon our post-1960 point of view. Would this involve a genuine withdrawal of the claim that Mackenzie was a child abuser? Or is it simply that we choose to no longer mention this fact about Mackenzie? Does it mean that we have given ourselves substantial reasons not to describe Mackenzie’s behavior as child abuse? Or do we willfully make ourselves blind to the post-1960 insight that Mackenzie was a child abuser? The exact nature of such a decision remains utterly obscure.

The contrast with Hacking’s approach is striking. His starting-point is this: It is not clear that what Mackenzie did was child abuse, even according to our present way of talking. Hacking thinks the differences between Mackenzie’s time and our own may matter even as we remain within our own, post-1960 usage. Consideration of such linguistic, cultural and social differences is not a meta-activity, but is integral to the responsible use of our concept of child abuse. Hacking never so much as suggests that we can abandon our present way of talking in favor of some earlier conceptual framework, or even that the idea of such abandonment makes sense. In his investigation, our post-1960 use of the term ‘child abuse’ does not figure as the application of a fixed set of rules according to which what Mackenzie did was definitely an instance of child abuse, but as a flexible practice which itself includes reflection on differences between present and past; reflections which, though far from arbitrary, follow no mechanical algorithm, but require our full and unregularizable engagement as morally and historically sensitive beings.

Like Hacking, Sharrock and Leudar claim that the question whether Mackenzie was a child abuser should not be pressed for a yes-or-no answer.
And yet, their view is utterly different from Hacking’s. Hacking never ascends to the meta-level at which Sharrock and Leudar are operating. He remains firmly within an engaged, first-order discussion of the issue. His refusal to provide a yes-or-no answer expresses no “say what you like”-attitude, but constitutes a head-on rejection of yes-or-no answers as wrong (rather than just optional). For Hacking, questions such as whether Mackenzie was a child abuser arise and are dealt with within our contemporary way of talking. The conventions of Mackenzie’s time – or, better, the whole conceptual, social and cultural environment in which Mackenzie lived and had been brought up – enter Hacking’s discussion, not as an alternative viewpoint that we may choose to adopt, but as something we need to consider in thinking about how we should describe and judge Mackenzie’s behavior from our present point of view. Mackenzie’s behavior, in its cultural milieu, is there as a conceptual and moral problem for us post-1960 users of the term ‘child abuse’.

Hacking notes that Sharrock’s and Leudar’s approach to the Mackenzie example “characteristically ignores the didactic message of the author in the Times – just don’t forget that Alex was a child molester! They are interested in the question of how a calm and distanced social scientist should describe the explorer, and lose the moral passion that informed the author with whom I started.” (RDRS, 121) Hacking remains at the same level as the author in the Times. He argues, straight on, that the author’s claim that Mackenzie was a child molester is mistaken, and that we should have the courage to see that our term ‘child abuse’ has no determinate application in this case. By contrast, Sharrock’s and Leudar’s meta-perspective manifests itself precisely in their wanting to avoid such direct confrontation. According to them, the author in the Times gives expression to one outlook among others, an outlook that we may choose or not choose to adopt.

It is unclear how to make sense of the idea of viewing social phenomena from Sharrock’s and Leudar’s aloof, amoral perspective. It is equally unclear for what purposes adopting such a perspective would be useful. In any case, Sharrock and Leudar are clearly confused about what those purposes might be. I just called their perspective “amoral”, but they actually seem to think of their stance as one from which it is possible to do justice to the moral dimension of the Mackenzie example. It is an important sign of their confusion that they find it natural to transform this moral issue into what seems very similar to a conflict between relativism and anti-
relativism.\textsuperscript{17} The difference between the claim that we should judge Mackenzie’s behavior according to the standards of his own time and the claim that we should apply our contemporary conceptual apparatus and classify Mackenzie’s behavior as child abuse is, they argue,

in fact primarily a moral one, between the view that the right thing to do is to respect the autonomy and independence of communities other than our own, to grant them jurisdiction over the moral status of actions done within them, or not. Against this, however, we may insist that our morality requires general application, that we can make judgements on people’s actions that override those that they would themselves make. (\textit{IP}, 106)

Transforming the moral problem about how to characterize Mackenzie’s behavior into a meta-question about whether “our morality requires general application” makes the issue quite elusive and, indeed, barely coherent. After all, what would it mean for our ways of talking not to have “general application” but somehow merely “local” scope? If careful historical reflection convinces me that I should not describe Mackenzie’s behavior as ‘child abuse’, this by no means entails that I am imposing a restriction on our present use of that term. Rather, I may regard my conclusion as itself a result of the unregularizable employment of the term ‘child abuse’. If so, what my historical reflections have convinced me of is that our concept of child abuse is such that Mackenzie’s behavior does not fall under it. I conceive of myself as still engaged in our post-1960 practice with the term ‘child abuse’, even as I conclude that that term is not properly used to characterize what Mackenzie did. According to my judgment, our contemporary way of talking is such that Mackenzie’s behavior, in its historical setting, should not be characterized as child abuse.

Sharrock and Leudar are blind to this possibility, since they simply take it for granted that our post-1960 use of the term ‘child abuse’ are governed by standards that entail that Mackenzie was a child abuser:

\textsuperscript{17} Sharrock and Leudar pay lip-service to a supposedly Wittgensteinian denial of the intelligibility of the conflict between relativism and anti-relativism: “we do not think […] that as philosophical positions either moral universalism or cultural relativism makes any sense.” (“Changing the Past?”, p. 115.) As I will show, however, their rejection of this conflict does not go deep enough. In fact, they are still very much held captive by the sort of pictures that fuel the relativist/anti-relativist controversy.
We can all agree that what Mackenzie did then is what would nowadays be called child abuse [...] – not least because that includes ‘all sexual contact with a 14-year-old girl’. In other words, all sexual contact of that type, regardless of all other circumstances, comprises harassment [sic – should be “abuse”]. In that usage, of course, the fact that McKenzie was conventional and by no means exceptional in his time counts for nothing. (IP, 106. Last emphasis added.)

Given this presupposition, Sharrock and Leudar are forced to argue that if there is a problem about how to classify Mackenzie’s behavior, this problem arises only as we ascend from a first-level engagement in our contemporary practice to a detached, second-level meta-reflection. Hence, they get the peculiar result that this moral and conceptual problem can arise only at a point located outside of the relevant parts of “our morality”; the problem gets transformed into a question about our moral and conceptual standards, about their legitimate range of application. But do we really understand this question? And do we understand the answers that may be proposed? Again, suppose we decide that, in the Mackenzie case, our morality does not require general application, but that we should grant McKenzie and his contemporaries jurisdiction over the moral status of the actions performed in their society. What is this supposed to mean? Presumably, we are trying to say that even if Mackenzie’s behavior falls under the concept of child abuse according to the standards that govern our post-1960 use of that word, we can somehow stop it from falling under that concept by refraining from applying those contemporary standards. But this is confused, and, indeed, brings out the fundamental incoherence of Sharrock’s and Leudar’s conception. If something falls under a concept, we cannot stop it from doing so by volition. We cannot both say that our own post-1960 conceptual standards would classify Mackenzie’s behavior as child abuse, and also claim that since we refrain from applying those standards, that behavior does not count as such. Once we say that according to contemporary standards Mackenzie’s behavior was child abuse, we thereby commit ourselves to the claim that his behavior was, indeed, child abuse. The attempt to somehow retract this claim by a posterior restriction of the scope of our contemporary conceptual standards makes no sense at all.

According to Hacking, we are inclined to suppose that we have the past well in hand – that questions about what happened raise only ordinary, empirical problems, and, hence, that an inability to answer such questions
can only be due to a lack of empirical information. But then we invent new
descriptions and new classifications, and it suddenly becomes unclear what
we should say about the past, even if we have access to all the empirical
information we may want. If the relevant parts of the past are of great
cconcern to us, such indeterminacy can be quite shocking. Indeed, this
shock may be almost unbearable, and, hence, we tell ourselves that the past
must have been in either one way or the other. In particular, if the relevant
parts of the past are parts of one’s own life, and if what suddenly becomes
indeterminate is how one should describe one’s own memories, it may take
an enormous strength not to seek comfort in an illusion of determinacy.

Hacking writes:

I would compare the situation with familiar observations by many, including
Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* §80. If a chair kept appearing and
disappearing before our very eyes, we would not know what to say. “Have you
rules ready for such cases – rules saying whether one may use the word ‘chair’
to include this kind of thing?” He imagined a bizarre turn of events for which
our ways of talking are not prepared. Less bizarre but otherwise comparable
things really do happen. We are not prepared, I think, for periods of con-
sciousness-raising and changes in ways of life that lead to revised moralities,
new evaluations, new emotions, new feelings. (*RDRS*, 118)

In the section of *Philosophical Investigations* to which Hacking is referring,
Wittgenstein imagines that reality starts behaving in hitherto unprece-
dented ways, which make the application of customary forms of descrip-
tion indeterminate. Most of Hacking’s own examples illustrate a somewhat
different sort of case, in which it is the development of new forms of
description that constitutes the source of indeterminacy. Still, I think
Hacking is right to connect his point to Wittgenstein’s. The crisis is similar
in both cases, and there is the same temptation to suppose that the concep-
tual apparatus we find ourselves wanting to use must always allow us to pin
down the phenomena we want to describe. Hacking is not denying that
the invention of descriptions such as ‘child abuse’ and ‘sexual harassment’
raises our consciousness, but he is questioning the idea that such con-
sciousness-raising consists simply in our becoming aware of terrible things
that have always existed but whose existence has not been acknowledged
before. Certainly, some instances of past child abuse and sexual harassment
do fit this simple picture. But in many other cases, the picture is too simple.
Consciousness-raising has a price. Disquietudes may be created, disquietudes which it would be dishonest to try to silence either by pretending that the new concepts give us mechanically applicable rules that provide unswerving guidance, or by pretending, à la Sharrock and Leudar, that “the facts” are still transparent and agreed-upon and that all that has happened is that an alternative and optional way of describing these facts has been invented.

3. Across Time, Across Cultures

As I showed in the first section of this paper, Hacking flirts with a mind-boggling thesis about past indeterminacy, according to which retroactive redescriptions can modify the past itself and somehow fill it with actions that were not there when they were performed. I argued that his being tempted to embrace this astounding view has to do with the way in which three features of his reasoning interact. First, there is his failing to distinguish clearly between what is required for an action’s falling under a description, and what is required for an action’s being intentional under that description. Second, he presupposes that acting with the intention to D always requires having access to the description ‘D’ (or some synonymous equivalent). Third, he nonetheless wants to say that there are cases in which retroactive redescriptions of past human affairs are true, even if the people whose actions and intentions get described did not have access to the concepts used in that redescription.

I argued that it is often of crucial importance to keep in mind the distinction between characterizing an action and characterizing the intention with which the action is performed. Moreover, I claimed that at least with respect to some descriptions, the presupposition that acting with the intention to D requires access to the description ‘D’ (or some synonymous equivalent) is questionable. However, I did not deny what Hacking calls “dynamic nominalism”. Human action and experience often depend on the linguistic resources available at the relevant point in history, and those linguistic resources may themselves change as a result of human action and experience. Such looping effects are diverse in character. There is little useful to say at a general level about how humans and their self-descriptions interact. We have to look carefully at individual cases in order to see what is going on there. Such historical reflections may yield surprising results.
and shatter narrow-minded, anachronistic prejudices, but they will not
give us reason to say that the past itself is revised retroactively.

Once Hacking's conception has been freed from this idea of revising the
past, it is easier to see what is original and valuable in his approach. His
way of proceeding illustrates how to take historical context-sensitivity into
account without ascending to the sort of meta-level at which Sharrock and
Leudar presume that social scientists should be operating. It may seem as
if Hacking's dynamic nominalism commits him to some sort of relativist
constructivism, and this impression is certainly strengthened by his ten-
dency to talk of the past as something we can revise by inventing new
forms of description. Once that unfortunate way of talking is rejected,
however, we can see, in Hacking's confrontation with Sharrock and Leu-
dar, that his dynamic nominalism is not relativist or constructivist in any
reasonable sense of those words. Nor is it anti-relativist or anti-constructiv-
ist. Rather, it shows how to take historical context-sensitivity into consid-
eration while refusing to play the relativist/anti-relativist game.

In this respect, we researchers in the humanities and the social sciences
seem to have much to learn from Hacking's investigation. As far as I can
see, we are still much too inclined to think that taking variations in his-
torical circumstances into consideration is something we can do only as we
ascend from our contemporary and supposedly parochial way of talking
and thinking, and look at that scheme from without, as one among a num-er of different and equally parochial conceptual apparatuses that have
existed at various times in history. According to this way of thinking, as
long as we remain within such a parochial scheme we will judge according
to the historically insensitive rules of that scheme. For example: as long as
we remain within our post-1960 way of using the term 'child abuse', we
will have to judge, parochially, that Mackenzie abused his wife.

This whole way of thinking should be rejected. Hacking's response to
his critics helps us realize how misleading it is to conceive of linguistic
practices as “schemes” that are inherently “parochial”. Certainly, individual
users of, say, the term ‘child abuse’ may be parochial, such as the author in
the Times who unhesitatingly classified Mackenzie as a child abuser. But
parochialism is not essential to the use of this term. Others who employ it
in its contemporary sense might not be parochial – Hacking himself, for
example. To say that Hacking is free from the other author’s parochialism
is not to say that he is any less immersed in our contemporary way of talking
of child abuse. Linguistic practices are flexible enough to leave room for the sort of careful yet unregularizable historical, conceptual and moral self-reflection which Hacking’s investigation exemplifies. Arguably, in many cases such self-reflection is even called for by the practice. Hence, the right thing to say seems to be that Hacking’s engagement in the practice is in fact deeper, or more serious, than the engagement exhibited by the author in the *Times*.

In section 2, I quoted Hacking as saying that Sharrock and Leudar are interested in the question of how “a calm and distanced social scientist” should describe a case like that of Mackenzie’s marriage. It seems to me that in this passage, Hacking concedes too much to his opponents. Not because adopting Sharrock’s and Leudar’s “distanced” viewpoint leads to bad social science. Rather, my point is that Sharrock and Leudar have made no coherent sense of what such a “distanced” viewpoint may be. Certainly, their discussion gives the reader a sense of how tempting it might be to think that we can ascend to a viewpoint from which all the “facts” will be “transparent”, and from which the apparent opposition between the post-1960 framework and the framework of Mackenzie and his contemporaries seems like a quibble between equally parochial perspectives; a point, that is, from which we are able to see everything as it really is, and defuse the quibble by saying, “it all depends”. In this paper I have argued that this temptation is the temptation of a mirage, and should be resisted. In the end, imagining that one can occupy such a detached viewpoint does not result in calmness. On the contrary: As the over-heated contemporary debates about relativism and constructivism may be taken to suggest, the main result of the idea of such detachment is muddled and fruitless polemics.

One reason why Sharrock’s and Leudar’s conception might look appealing and intelligible is perhaps that it is easily conflated with another, quite different point. What I have in mind is the entirely sensible observation that, for a working historian, the question of whether Mackenzie is to be classified as a child abuser or not might be of little interest. After all, not every fact about a person matters to an historical investigation. Unless he has very special interests, an historian would not care much about, say, Bismarck’s shoe size, or Cleopatra’s favorite color. When it comes to the question of whether Mackenzie was a child abuser, it is likely that answering this question does not contribute to the sort of understanding
or explanation that a historian is typically looking for. One thing that seems to characterize that sort of understanding is that questions about whether a certain piece of behavior deserves moral denunciation or not are laid aside, or, at least, that such questions are not the primary focus of the investigation. The moral convictions of people at the time might of course be important to take into consideration in order to understand past human affairs. But typically such consideration does not involve deciding whether those old views were in fact justified or correct.

It is important to get clear about the difference between this point and the conception of historical research that Sharrock and Leudar are advocating. It is not part of the approach to history that I have just sketched to answer the question, ‘Was Mackenzie a child abuser?’ by saying, ‘It all depends’. In a sense, the historian might be said to bracket his own moral convictions, but this does not mean that he relativizes them. The historian, as I am imagining him, might be quite prepared to deliver a straightforward answer. He might say, ‘Yes, Mackenzie abused his wife’, or ‘No, Mackenzie did not abuse her’, or ‘It’s not determinate whether this was an instance of child abuse’. My point is just that this is not an issue he cares much about in his actual research.

Bracketing one’s moral judgments in this sort of way is not always possible or sensible. In particular, approaching one’s own past and one’s own memories in such a historicizing fashion may often be both insincere and beside the point. Indeed, what matters in such a case may be precisely the adequacy of a retroactive moral verdict. Another interesting case is when we are dealing, not with retroactive redescriptive view of the past, but with redescription across presently existing cultures. Many readers may already have wondered to what extent the points I have been making about retroactive redescription are valid also with respect to cross-cultural redescription. After all, it happens today, not only in non-Western parts of the world but also among cultural minorities in almost every major city in Europe and North America, that 48-year-old men get married to 14-year-old girls (of course the wedding itself will have to take place in countries where such marriages are legal). Are those men child abusers in a morally full-fledged sense of the word? Or are there reasons not to describe them as such?

Most of the points I have made about retroactive redescription apply also to cross-cultural cases. Just as in the historical case, linguistic, social
and other differences do matter to the adequacy of cross-cultural redescriptions. This may at first sight appear to imply some sort of relativism. But rightly understood it does not imply any such thing. Considerations of cultural differences are internal to the responsible use of the relevant concepts, rather than part of a meta-reflection on their employment. Appreciating this point involves seeing both that characterizing what people in a foreign culture do in terms that are distinctively ours may, in many cases, be not just permissible but very illuminating, and that deciding in a particular case whether such a description is adequate requires the conscientious employment of our full, human sensibility. The word ‘sensibility’ should be taken quite seriously here: we should expect no general recipe for how to determine, in a given case, whether a concept applies to the action or experience we want to characterize and understand. Indeed, the wish to find such a general formula is likely to cloud rather than sharpen our sensibility.

Of course there are also interesting differences between retroactive and cross-cultural cases. Let me end this paper by mentioning briefly two differences that come to the fore as soon as one starts reflecting more carefully on what it is to describe the practices of a foreign culture.

To begin with, there is the question of what, exactly, it means to say that a certain description is or is not “available” to the persons whose actions, intentions, experiences, and so on, get described. In my discussion of retroactive redescription, I was not very precise about what the relevant notion of availability involves. Given the points I wanted to make in that context, and the particular examples discussed, I do not think further exactness was required. In all the examples I was working with, it was sufficiently clear what it meant to say that the persons whose actions were described did not have access to the relevant concepts.

With respect to many interesting cases of cross-cultural redescription, however, it seems as if we need to think harder about what “having access” to a concept is supposed to involve. Consider a man who immigrated to Sweden when he was 35 and who lives in a segregated suburb outside of Stockholm. In his native country, nobody talked about child abuse, and marriages between 48-year old men and 14-year old girls were common and generally accepted. Suppose this man’s interaction with native Swedes is very limited. His close friends all belong to the same cultural minority as himself, and at work his contact with people who do not share
his background is formal and businesslike. He rarely watches Swedish television or read Swedish newspapers. He has of course noticed that there is a term ‘child abuse’ being used in Swedish society, and he even has some grasp of what this use looks like. But he feels quite estranged from that way of talking. Certainly, he shares the horror with which most native Swedes react to the cruel mistreatment of small children, but he does not really understand the worries that they have about marriages between middle-aged men and women in their early teens. If the parents of the bride think this is the right thing for their daughter to do, and if the husband is a decent man, he finds it completely absurd to group such marriages together with those other, horrible instances of mistreatment to which the term ‘child abuse’ is also supposed to apply.

Does this man have access to the term ‘child abuse’? Is it part of his linguistic repertoire? We should not take it for granted that such questions always have a yes-or-no answer. In this and similar cases, the answer may be indeterminate. Such indeterminacy does not mean that we cannot get clear about the man’s relation to the term ‘child abuse’, as it is being used in Sweden and other Western countries. The point is just that we should not expect that this relation is best understood in terms of the term’s being either “available” or “not available” to him. What is in fact present, and what we need to take into account in order to understand the situation, is a bewilderingly complex set of relations between the man and the culture of the country to which he has immigrated. The fruitful thing to do is to try to describe and understand this complex set of relations, rather than to insist that this man must either have access or not have access to the term ‘child abuse’. In this sort of case, “availability” itself goes indeterminate.

Of course there are many examples of cross-cultural redescription where no such indeterminacy is present. It might, for example, be perfectly determinate that the members of a very recently discovered New Guinean tribe do not have access to our concept of child abuse. Conversely, retroactive cases are imaginable in which it is indeterminate whether the people in the past whose behavior we are trying to understand had access to the words we use to describe their actions and intentions. So, my point here is not to identify a sharp or principled difference between the retroactive and the cross-cultural case. My suggestion is just that, unlike most historical examples, interesting cross-cultural examples are very often such that it is central to keep in mind that the relevant concepts might be neither determinately
available nor determinately unavailable to the people whose actions and intentions we are trying to characterize.

Some paragraphs ago, I made the point that in the context of historical inquiry, retroactive moral denunciation is often beside the point. The working historian might not be very interested in whether or not Mackenzie was a child abuser. Given the sort of understanding he is looking for, such inherently disapproving characterizations have no central role to play. This brings me to the second difference between retroactive and cross-cultural cases that I wanted to mention. It is certainly true that in academic research about foreign cultures, moral denunciation of the foreign practices is often as beside the point as in historical investigations. The approach of a working anthropologist is in this sense similar to that of a working historian. Outside the special context of such anthropological investigations, however, cross-cultural cases often do have a special moral urgency. The point is simple and straightforward: in contrast to instances of retroactive redescription, what we are dealing with here are views and habits that we can try to do something about. After all, one reason why it may seem of relatively little interest to decide whether Mackenzie’s behavior constituted child abuse is that what has happened has happened. There is no hope of changing the habits of Mackenzie and his peers. By contrast, it makes sense and is in some cases perhaps even mandatory to criticize and try to alter the practices of a foreign contemporary culture, insofar as those practices are morally unacceptable. It would therefore seem to be of great importance to decide whether those practices really are unacceptable. For example, it may be of great importance to decide whether some of those foreign activities are correctly described as ‘child abuse’, or if such a characterization is unfair.

My aim in this paper has not been to take a stand on the adequacy of particular retroactive or cross-cultural redescriptions. Consider a foreign culture, past or present, in which marriages between middle-aged men and girls in their early teens are common and generally accepted. Does this practice amount to child abuse, in a morally full-fledged sense of the word? I have discussed three possible answers: (i) Yes, it does; (ii) No, it does not; and, (iii) It is indeterminate whether or not this is child abuse. Which answer to give will depend on the further details of the case. My discussion of different imaginable variations of the Mackenzie example was meant to illustrate ways in which such details may matter, and to suggest that no
general recipe can be given for how to judge the relevance of such contextual elements. We have to rely on our good sense of how the adequacy of a retroactive or cross-cultural redescription may depend on the multifarious differences between past and present, or between a foreign culture and our own. Concrete historical or anthropological research may help us refine this good sense, and so may real experience of previously unfamiliar ways of life. General methodological precepts or philosophical meta-theories, however, will be of much less use.

I criticized two ways of misunderstanding the sort of indeterminacy referred to in answer (iii) above. The first sort of misunderstanding is manifest in Hacking’s mind-boggling suggestion that retroactive redescription can somehow change the past. The second sort of misunderstanding is manifest in Sharrock’s and Leudar’s confused idea that we can ascend to a detached meta-level from which we can see that the adequacy of a yes-or-no answer to a question like ‘Was Mackenzie a child abuser?’ depends on what historical or cultural viewpoint one chooses to adopt. I have tried to show that the notion of such a choice is spurious. I agree that what we need in order to reach a correct verdict on a case like Mackenzie’s is a clear perception of the relevant facts. But the idea that the facts are already “transparent” and that we can therefore “say what we like” is not conducive to such clear-sightedness. On the contrary, that idea makes us blind to those facts and their real significance.