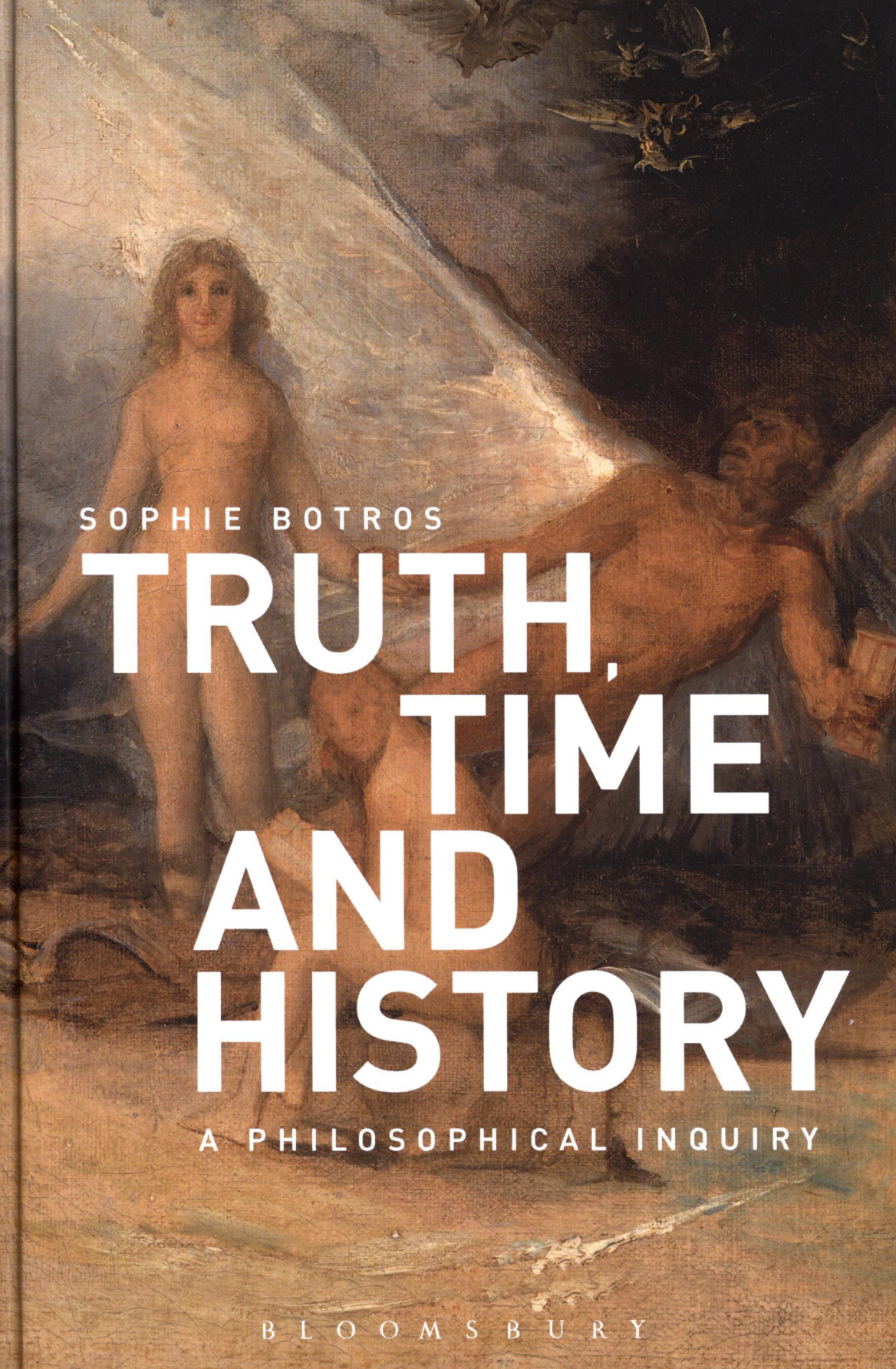
SOPHIE BOTROS
TRUTH, TIME AND HISTORY
A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY
BLOOMSBURY

Truth, Time and History investigates the reality of the past by connecting arguments across areas which are conventionally discussed in isolation from each other.

Breaking the impasse within the narrower analytic debate between Dummett's semantic anti-realists and the truth value link realists as to whether the past exists independently of our methods of verification, Sophie Botros argues, through an examination of the puzzles concerning identity over time, that only the present exists. Drawing on Lewis's analogy between times and possible worlds, and work by Collingwood, Oakeshott and Barthes, Botros advances a wholly novel proposal, as to how aspects of ersatz presentism may be combined with historical coherentism to uphold the legitimacy of discourse about the past.

In highlighting the role of historians in the creation and construction of temporality, *Truth, Time and History* offers a convincing philosophical argument for the inherence of an unreal past in the real present.

SOPHIE BOTROS is Honorary Research Associate at the School of Advanced Study, Institute of Philosophy, University of London, UK and author of *Hume, Reason and Morality: A legacy of contradiction (2006).*

PHILOSOPHY

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A Philosophical Inquiry

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Truth, Time and History

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Contents

Part I

Truth

1

The Realist/Anti-Realist Wars

Perhaps the most metaphysical thoughts we have in the ordinary course of our lives (apart from those about death) concern time, particularly the past. These thoughts are disturbingly various, even contradictory. We feel certain on the one hand that past events really happened: that we were once six years old, that dinosaurs roamed the earth ten million years ago, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon and Napoleon was victorious at Austerlitz. On the other hand, and in another mood, we ask, marvelling: where is the past? For it seems no longer to exist: all that was solid has simply melted away. This insistent and constant miracle of vanishing – which we call the fleetingness of the present – fills us with perplexity. I ask: where is the you of yesterday? Tempted as I am to say that it has turned into the you of today, this does not satisfy me. It fails to do justice to a characteristic discontinuity about time which does not assail space. Thus I can watch you from a spatially fixed vantage point as you move from one side of the room to the other: you are first here then over there. But in so far as this is also a movement through time, my own position cannot be fixed either. I only see you in the present: the present you. I cannot see you traverse from past to present or catch in these perceptions the you of five minutes ago. For it has already fallen, with everything else past, into 'the dark backward and abysm of time'.

Nor is this conflict only a matter of the intellect: it spreads to our emotional life. There, alongside the sense that our memories of the dead are dreams that evaporate when we wake – 'I dreamt,' says Cleopatra,[1] 'there was an Emperor Antony/ O such another sleep, that I might see/ but such another man!', and again, 'Think you that there was, or might be such a man/ As this I dreamt of'/ 'it's past the size of dreaming' – we may suddenly be jolted into a perspective from which it is our past life, disclosed through the present – now a mere interpretative medium – that seems the more real and vibrant. The jolt may on some occasions be reassuring. On other occasions it is unwelcome, even shocking, as when long-held assumptions about an incident from one's past are shattered, and one is forced, in an access of acute pain, to revise one's understanding of it. Did one too easily – perhaps from self-deception – accept a subsequent story which others, desiring not to cause one further trauma, told one about it? Sometimes what is at the centre of this emotional whirlwind may, in the larger scheme of things, be a comparatively trivial occurrence.

A boy remembers playing with a red ball on a rocky beach where, because the second world war had just ended and unbeknown to him, German mines were still lying around unexploded. He remembers the ball bouncing away from him and then

an explosion. His aunt, thirty years later, tells him that it wasn't a ball he was playing with but his dog who skipped away and was blown to pieces. This information hits him like live news, as though he were witnessing the event all over again: he is pierced with grief. A girl leaves her pet dog at her parents' home while she is away at university. Returning one holiday she suddenly notices her dog is missing, although no one has said anything. 'Where is he?' she asks, and is told that he had a heart attack when he was running and dropped down dead in the drive. She thinks it odd that they didn't tell her, and that it is surprising that a healthy young dog should die, but puts it down to over-exertion or a congenital heart defect. Many years later, after her parents are dead, her brother casually intimates to her that things were different, and mutters something disjointed about her mother's car accident in the drive, and the dog being run over. So acutely painful are the implications of her brother's remarks concerning this long-past incident – the possibility of a cover-up and so on – that she deliberately refrains from continuing the conversation so that she might not hear any more.

There are philosophical problems with both of our conflicting convictions: that the past in some sense exists, and can without warning erupt into the present as here, and that it does not exist. If it does exist, then we are bound to ask where and how. As O'Brien remarks to a bemused Winston in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, jolting him out of his naïve, unthinking realism, 'Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?' But if it does *not* exist, then what are we to make of all our confident beliefs and assertions about the past? Should we hold on to them, but radically reassess their import, agreeing with post-modernist historians, such as Keith Jenkins (1991:8) who baldly, but confusedly,[2] declares that 'seventeenth-century Spain' is in 'the library ... between Dewey numbers'. Should we concede, alternatively, that historical claims are just claims that we pretend to believe, or in relation to which, we suspend our disbelief as, it may be said, we do the claims of fiction. But then Napoleon or Caesar, however mesmeric we find them, would be no more real than Sherlock Holmes, or Stendhal's Julien Sorel, in the *Red and the Black*, and the Battle of Waterloo, no matter how much bloodshed it caused, indistinguishable from a fictional battle. Worse still, we might even be forced to admit that our claims about the past, and about our own past, were all quite meaningless. In this chapter and the following, I explore the implications of Michael Dummett's semantic anti-realist claim (1978:358–74), that the past does not exist *independently of our methods of verification*, for the truth of past-tensed statements, namely that it is not fixed, but rather a construction out of our present, and shifting evidence.[3]

1: Dummett's reconfiguration of the debate

(i) Selective anti-realism: the importance of reduction

As a preliminary, I situate Dummett's stance concerning the past in relation to the traditional realist/anti-realist debates. Whereas, for Dummett, this is just one expression of a more global anti-realism, traditional anti-realists have typically been selective. They might exclusively single out for doubt the theoretical entities of physics, such as