

8 Scholarship as self-knowledge

A case study

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Introduction

Do historians inscribe their own lives in their narratives? Do the threads of their life stories reveal themselves in their work? To varying degrees, I believe they do—both in intellectual and existential ways. Many scholars have already commented on this issue.¹ Rather than delineate the contours of this position, or explore its implications, I will review my own scholarship in the history of immunology—two books since 1994 and many articles—to add another case example to this literature.

I do so at a time when I seem to have reached a plateau in my own writing on immunology, for the basic idea I wished to explore has for me, at least for the time being, been exhausted. The project began in 1987, when I took a few months off from my laboratory activities to review the genesis of my particular area of expertise, phagocyte biology. I also re-educated myself in evolutionary and developmental biology, which seemed to have undergone significant changes since I had last studied these subjects twenty years previously. Little did I know, at least consciously, that this sabbatical would initiate a career shift from active basic laboratory research to philosophy and history of science.

In this chapter, my remarks are directed less as to *how* I wrote my histories than to *why* they took the conceptual form they did. Indeed, before describing my history of immunology and offering an “explanation” of its underlying *telos*, I should offer my readers a short orientation.

First, let me comment on my views of immunology from a theoretical point of view. While I was a practicing scientist, duly elected to the societies devoted to biochemistry, cell biology, and immunology, my specialty interests were remote to the pivotal debates about immunology’s theory. As an *immunologist*, I was an informed “outsider” to the central action of the discipline; I interpreted its conceptual development with no particular partiality toward one theory or another based on my own research. But now I can acknowledge a certain “bias.” For, as a *biologist*, I maintained an organismic orientation—by which I mean that my conception of biology made the organism the orienting site of study. So while my research in free radical chemistry and cellular activation mechanisms was firmly committed to a reductionist research program, my broader concerns were how to integrate these elemental functions back into a holistic construct. This was a position in contrast to those who embraced what