

The Objectivity of History

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THE OBJECTIVITY OF HISTORY

J. A. PASSMORE

"THERE'S one thing certain," said a historian of my acquaintance when he heard the title of this paper, "that's a problem which would never perturb a working-historian." He was wrong: a working-historian first drew it to my attention; and in one form or another it raises its head whenever historians discuss the nature of their own inquiries. Yet in a way he was right. His mind had turned to the controversies of epistemologists, controversies about "the possibility of knowledge"; historians, he rightly felt, do not trouble their heads about such matters.

When, indeed, the historian asks whether history can be objective, he is not suffering from a generalized, or epistemological, scepticism. That some forms of inquiry—he would instance physics—can be objectively conducted, he does not doubt; the only question, for him, is whether this is true of history. One cannot allay his qualms, therefore, as Mr. Christopher Blake has recently suggested in *Mind* ("Can History be Objective?", January, 1955), by an appeal to "the principle of non-vacuous contrast." This principle would forbid us to deny that history is objective unless some forms of inquiry are objective, but the distinction between objective and non-objective need not be exhibited within history itself.

A striking feature of philosophical words, however, is that it is very easy to fall into the trap of so defining them as to make them vacuous in either of two directions: they may become vacuous through applying to nothing at all, or through applying to everything, thereby losing their usefulness as modes of distinguishing. Thus, for example, some philosophers have defined "present" so rigidly that it would never be proper to say of anything that it is "present," others so loosely that the present swallows up both the past and the future. Similar considerations apply to "objectivity."

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Consider the following arguments, the first constructed but by no means, I think, implausible, the second a quotation from an article by A. J. P. Taylor (*The Times Literary Supplement*, January 6, 1956), intended to disprove the objectivity of history. *Argument One*: "Of course history is objective: no one really doubts such facts as that Magna Charta was signed in 1215." *Argument Two*: "Historians seek to be detached, impassionate, impartial. In fact, however, no historian starts out with his mind a blank, to be gradually filled by the evidence."

Now if an inquiry is objectively conducted provided only that the inquirer sometimes asserts true propositions, then every inquiry is objective; the most arbitrary of partisans will tell the truth sometimes, if only by accident. On the other side, if only those inquiries are objective in which the inquirer begins with a blank mind, then no inquiry whatsoever is objective. By the time we begin to inquire we already, and inevitably, have beliefs, expectations, interests. What Hegel says of the historian—"Even the average and mediocre historian who perhaps believes and pretends that he is merely receptive, merely surrendering to the data, is not passive in his thinking"—applies to all scientists. Not even the worst of them, the dreariest laboratory drudge, is objective—in Taylor's sense of the word. Thus on *Argument One* objectivity no longer discriminates; on *Argument Two* it no longer applies. Yet so treacherous is the ground on which we are now standing that neither of these arguments is wholly outrageous. Each has a certain contact with quite ordinary ways of using the word "objective."

Since it is my object to compare and contrast history with other forms of inquiry, I shall dismiss out of hand all proposed criteria of objectivity which would make it vacuous. But even then the range of possibilities is considerable; and we have no option but to canvass them in turn. "Is history objective?" is a question to which one can only give the not very satisfactory answer "it all depends on how high you set your standards."

Criterion I (The Cartesian or mathematico-deductive): *An objective inquiry either (a) deduces its conclusions from self-evident axioms or (b) unfolds them from essences or definitions.*

It has sometimes been held, as by the Hegelians, that history consists in the gradual revelation of a plan, or an Idea; on this view, it might seem, the historian could satisfy the Cartesian criterion. But the conception of a plan, as Hegel explicitly says, emerges within a philosophy of history, in which history is made the starting-point for philosophical reflection. It cannot be so used as to obviate the need for historical investigation, enabling it to be replaced by logical analysis. "History itself," writes Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philo-*

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sophy of History, "must be taken as it is; we have to proceed historically, empirically . . . only the study of world history itself can show that it has proceeded rationally." Hegel's most distinguished historical disciple, Ranke, sought his inspiration in the archives of Venice; if he was convinced that it was "the hand of God" which he there sought to disclose, the fact remains that history disclosed God, not God history.

We can safely conclude, then, that if the "objectivity" of a form of inquiry depends upon the possibility of deducing its content *a priori*, history must abandon all claims to objectivity. In this respect, however, it is in excellent company: company which includes at least all that scientific activity which Mr. Toulmin describes, interestingly enough from our present point of view, as "natural history."

Criterion Two (Mach's criterion): *An objective inquiry is one which begins from data which are literally such, i.e. which nakedly confront us.*

This ideal at once stirred the ambitions and disturbed the dreams of nineteenth-century historians. Events flow around us: why should we not, by restricting ourselves to their description, achieve a history which is barely, but truly, a record?

We might assail this ideal on purely epistemological grounds; we might argue that there are no "pure data" in the Machian sense of that phrase. But we should not, by so doing, seriously perturb the positivistically-minded historian. The philosophical difficulty in nominating data which are strictly such has never interested the historian; he leaves anxiety on that point, we might say, to the physicist. For him it is enough if his "data" are equal in status to the observations and experiments of the natural scientists; quite sensibly, he feels that if their work is not objective, the word ceases to have any methodological significance. His ideal-in-theory may be a science composed out of Machian data; his ideal-in-practice, the ideal to which he hopes to conform or despairs of realizing, transforms "bare data" into observations, with no niggardliness, even then, in the use of the word "observation."

Thus he is not made uneasy by the objection that since the events which concern him are *past*, they cannot be data, but must always be inferences or reconstructions. For since the simplest of experiments and observations takes time, the restriction of "data" to the "immediately present"—presuming one can make some sense of that phrase—would carry with it the consequence that science knows nothing of data, either. And the historian's ideal, as we said, is natural science, not an epistemologist's Utopia.

For that reason, another objection has been taken more seriously. The natural scientist, it is argued, can always pass beyond the

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recorded facts to the facts themselves, and this direct reference to the facts is the essence of objectivity; the scientist confronts the world as it nakedly is, whereas the historian sees it, always, through the medium of someone else's testimony—a testimony he can never by the nature of the case penetrate beyond, because the events the testimony describes are gone forever. If a scientist doubts the testimony of some other scientist that when hydrochloric acid is poured on to zinc, hydrogen is produced, he can repeat the experiment for himself; if a historian doubts Ben Jonson's testimony about Shakespeare's character, he has no way of examining that character for himself—the most he can do is to set Jonson's testimony against somebody else's. Thus the historian cannot hope to achieve objectivity.

Criterion Three: An objective inquiry is a direct examination of the world which does not rely upon testimony.

One may note, in the first place, that there is implicit in this way of looking at the matter a curious kind of methodological solipsism. The contrast "other people's testimony"—"the facts" presumes that what *we* observe is a fact, whereas the best that other people can do is to "express an opinion." It is perhaps worth remembering that what *we* call "our observations" are from the point of view of other people "our testimony."

Even historians are not exempt from a vulgar preference for what "they can see with their own eyes." Sir Henry Lambert, for example, suggests in his *The Nature of History* that the evidence that the Jameson raid took place is superior to the evidence that Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, because there are still people alive who took part in Jameson's raid. This, it seems to me, is an obvious error: the historian is in a much better position to know that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo than any participant in the battle could be. He can take a wider view of the situation than is accessible to any participant. Furthermore, if men are sometimes deceived by testimony, they are no less capable of deceiving themselves in the actual situation; indeed, this, rather than the risk of lying, is the principal reason for regarding their testimony with suspicion. There are some points of detail, of course, on which the evidence of a participant—who could be cross-examined—might happen to be useful, but these are of minor consequence. Historians do not in fact go in search of "old soldiers."

A second point is that what is called "observation" is always to a considerable measure dependent upon testimony; we can never put ourselves in such a situation that we are relying on nothing except "pure observation." If we say that we have "observed for ourselves" that hydrochloric acid acts on zinc to produce hydrogen, this obser-

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vation, of course, depends on someone's testimony that what confront us in this case are hydrochloric acid, zinc, and hydrogen; and if we wish to question any part of this testimony, we can do so only by depending upon some other testimony. So there can be nothing "non-objective" about making use of testimony—unless "objective" is vacuous—although this does not mean, of course, that any *particular* testimony is exempt from critical examination.

A third point is that considerable areas of physical science, in their reliance upon testimony, are in exactly the same position as history. Astronomy and seismology will serve as examples. One might, however, argue thus: the testimony on which the scientist has to rely is the careful recording of a fact by a trained observer; the historian, on the other hand, begins with chronicles, i.e. with testimonies composed by somebody who had an axe to grind. "The so-called 'sources' of history," wrote Popper in *The Open Society*, "only record such facts as appeared sufficiently interesting to record, so that sources will contain only facts that fit in with a preconceived theory."

Now, of course, the historian does occasionally find himself in a situation in which he has no "sources" at his disposal except chronicles or, in the worst case, except *a* chronicle. But even then the historian is not quite at the mercy of the chronicler; he has his ways of testing chronicle accounts, and he can discover important facts from them which the chronicler had no intention whatever of recording. Mediaeval lives of saints, for example, are invaluable to the historian for the light they throw on the life of the Middle Ages, a life which the chronicler certainly would not have bothered deliberately to record. Furthermore, the greater part of the historian's sources, at least since Ranke's time, no chronicler compiled. They are, let us say, lists of tax-collections, drawn up by careful and certainly unimaginative bureaucrats for purposes quite temporary and official—not at all for the greater glory of the Emperor. Or the sources may be archaeological, rather than written documents—and rubbish-tips were not constructed to deceive the archaeologist. In short, the historian is not in the position of having to rely wholly on the propaganda of partisans.

It does not seem to me, then, that such a statement as "Peter Pipkin paid twopence rent" need fear any comparison with "this gas is oxygen"; or that it is possible to maintain, against history's objectivity, that it has no way of getting access to the facts. But one feature of the "Peter Pipkin" statement deserves some little attention; it contains the phrase "paid rent," and this is a phrase which refers to a set of rights and duties which are not precisely defined. Such "open texture" is characteristic of the statements of historians, and is sometimes alleged against history's objectivity.

Thus M. E. Hulme in his *History and its Neighbours* maintains

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that historical facts, in sharp distinction from scientific facts, are "highly subjective"; taking as an example such an historical statement as that "Lincoln is a great man" he argues that different historians have such different conceptions of "a great man," that there is no objectivity in the fact the statement asserts. On this showing, I suppose, a science proceeds objectively *only if its statements contain no expressions except those which "mean the same" for all observers*. Let us call this *Criterion Four*. In its extreme form, we can, I think, dismiss it on the familiar ground that it makes objectivity vacuous. As has emerged very clearly from the chequered history of logical positivism, no language can be so constructed as to make misunderstanding impossible—to guarantee that everyone will have the same conception of the terms it employs. But it is characteristic of science that it uses expressions we can bring to "the test," i.e. allowing that there is always the risk of misunderstanding, we can be given explanations which will enable us to see how to criticize the statements the scientist makes. History could certainly not be conducted objectively if its statements were not criticizable. And no doubt some historians make statements which are not in this sense "objectively testable"—statements about "the German spirit," for example. It will, I should say, be a sign of a good historian, that he avoids *ex parte* assertions like "Lincoln was a great man," unless this is meant as a summary way of referring to a number of characteristics to which he has drawn attention; or that he makes it clear to us how, if at all, "paying rent" differs from what we now understand by that same expression. So far as we can safely talk about degrees of open texture, I think we should have to admit that historical statements are "more open" than chemical statements; but this does not entitle us to dismiss them as "subjective."

Suppose, however, it be admitted that there are historical facts; it might still be argued that history is incurably subjective because it is bound to *impose a pattern* on the facts. History consists not in the simple accumulation of facts but in telling some sort of connected story, and the choice of the pattern, so it is sometimes suggested, can only be a matter of arbitrary decision. We can take the implicit criterion in two different ways: as maintaining that the pattern is an arbitrary *construction*, or that it is an arbitrary *selection*.

Criterion Five: An inquiry is objective only if it keeps to atomic facts.

At this point, the argument is reminiscent of the British empiricist view that all relations are "the work of the mind." We can see this in the well-known text-book by Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*. "Historical construction," they write, "has to be performed with an incoherent mass of minute facts, with

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detail-knowledge reduced as it were to a powder." If history really begins with an "incoherent mass," then certainly it would be reasonable to conclude that a coherent history book is a merely personal construction: there would be no way whatever of checking the pattern it suggests. But Langlois and Seignobos break down this simple-minded empiricism when they go on to suggest that there are links and connections between these atomic facts. This is clearly so: indeed, as we have already suggested, to say that someone is "paying rent" is already to have become conscious of a system of rights and duties. Relations and connections are ingredient within the simplest facts; they are not somehow imposed upon facts which are quite devoid of them. There is no *a priori* reason, then, for maintaining that order is imposed, as distinct from discovered. Let us turn then, rather, to

Criterion Six: An inquiry is objective only if it does not select from within its material.

Here, for example, is L. B. Namier in *Avenues of History*: "The function of the historian is akin to that of the painter and not of the photographic camera: to discover and set forth, to single out and stress that which is the nature of the thing and not to reproduce indiscriminately all that meets the eye. . . . History is therefore necessarily subjective and individual, conditioned by the interest and the vision of the historian." The historian regards certain facts as unimportant and others as important; in thus distinguishing them, so Namier is saying, he demonstrates that his inquiries are rooted in subjectivity. This complaint goes back to Descartes: "Even the most accurate of histories," he wrote in his *Discourse on Method* (Pt. I), "if they do not wholly misrepresent or exaggerate the value of things in order to render them more worthy of being read, at least omit in them all the circumstances which are basest and least notable; and from that fact it follows that what is retained is not portrayed as it really is."

On the face of it, this is a queer criterion, because every form of inquiry is selective. Nothing is more irritating to the botanist or to the geologist than the presumption that every flower or every stone is of equal interest to him. A physicist is interested only in such physical operations as bear upon a problem he is investigating; a historian, similarly, will refer only to those facts which in some way bear upon the story he is telling.

The difficulty, however, lies in this conception of "bearing upon." We are accustomed, in discussing physical science, to talk in terms of problem, hypothesis, testing: if anybody asks us which facts are relevant, we shall say "those which assist us to test the hypothesis." Of course, we can overlook, or can unscrupulously ignore, relevant

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facts, but at least we have a relatively secure—and objective—test of relevance. Is there a comparable test of relevance in history?

Our discussion of this point is complicated by the tendency of a great many historians to speak as if description as such, description for its own sake, were their object—as if an ideal history would be one which described every social action which has ever taken place on the surface of the earth. Recognizing that it is not their object to discover general laws, and anxious, not unnaturally, to distinguish their work from that of the “interpreters” or “philosophers” of history, historians have concluded that their attention must be directed towards the *complete* description, in all its particularity, of a world which interests the sociologist, by comparison, only as exhibiting this or that social law. Then, since from this point of view one fact is as good as another, the historian lies open to the charge that the selectivity which is forced upon him is purely arbitrary; he has left himself with no way of distinguishing between what is important and what is unimportant, except in terms of arbitrary preference.

Historians write books, for example, with what seem to me to be preposterous titles—titles like *The History of England*. Then the critics complain: “He says he is writing about the history of England, and yet he doesn’t mention the Romantic Revival, or the institution of joint-stock companies, or the invention of the triple-expansion engine, or the publication of Newton’s *Principia*.” And they allege these omissions as proof that the historian has a prejudice against literature, or against commerce, or science, or whatever else he fails to discuss. Since no historian can discuss everything, it is an easy step to the conclusion that history is irredeemably subjective.

The fact of the matter is that there is no such subject as *The History of England*: a book which purports to be a history of England is either a collection of fragments—like Trevelyan’s *Social History* which, to borrow a metaphor from Butterfield, is a set of lantern-slides, not a moving picture—or else it tacitly confines itself to a more specific problem, say to the changes which have taken place in the distribution of sovereignty. Very often, the historian does not seem to know *what* he is doing; his instinct leads him to select a single problem for consideration, and yet he feels uneasily that since he is purporting to write about the “History of England,” he ought to say something about its literature, or its social life. So a good book is marred by perfunctory and irrelevant chapters; and the historian cannot defend himself against the charge of arbitrariness, since his selection is not determined by the structure of the work he has undertaken. History books, indeed, ought commonly to be more, not less, selective than they are: greater selectivity would be a step

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towards objectivity, not away from it. What the historian calls "general history" is a fraud—resting for its plausibility upon the metaphysical notion that there is something called "the whole community" which moves in the manner of a single man.

If this point be granted, the question still arises: how exactly is the historian to choose amongst his material? The determining factor, I have suggested, must be the nature of the problem from which he sets out, just as it is in the case of the physical scientist. There is, however, an important difference in the character of his problems; historical problems are more like a certain type of problem in applied science than they are like problems in pure science. This is a consequence of the fact that the historian is interested in what happens in a particular situation on a particular occasion; just as an engineer may have to ask himself: "why did *that* aeroplane collapse?" so the historian asks: "why did *that* monarchy collapse?" Furthermore, again like the engineer, he may, usually does, solve his problem by constructing a model. The engineer builds a scale model of the aeroplane, places it in what he takes to have been its environment on the fatal occasion, and shows it collapsing. What he shows can also be said, but only in a highly detailed form; "aeroplanes with that sort of structure, with that length of span, etc., will not stand up to a wind of more than a certain force." Similarly the historian constructs a narrative model of, say, the collapse of the monarchy in France—one which draws attention, he hopes, to the strains and stresses which were relevant to that collapse; then we see its collapse taking place. He may comment as well, bidding us pay special attention to this or that point in his narrative, as an engineer may comment on what is happening to his model aeroplane or (more irritatingly) a novelist on the development of his characters. Yet, at least in an important type of historical writing, the model, the narrative, is the central thing; and a "relevant" fact is one which can be employed in the construction of a model. "The last word of the historian," as Butterfield writes in *The Whig Interpretation of History*, "is not some firm general statement: it is a detailed piece of research."

The engineer, however, can test his model: if he puts the right stress on it, it collapses. What, if anything, corresponds, in history, to this testing process? Unless there is *some* test, it would seem, one model is as good as another; history, therefore, would fail to satisfy a familiar criterion for objectivity. Here, it might be said, is the crux of the matter: let it be granted that there are historical facts, let it be granted that these facts are "important" or "unimportant" in relation to a particular reconstruction, even then history fails to be objective because there are no grounds on which one historical reconstruction can rationally be preferred to another.

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Criterion Seven: A branch of inquiry is objective only if it contains a method of deciding between conflicting hypotheses.

That history does not satisfy this criterion is persuasively argued by Popper in *The Open Society*. Popper's criticism amounts to this: the hypotheses of history are *ad hoc* hypotheses, and we are free to choose as we like between *ad hoc* hypotheses. In contrast, the hypotheses of science are designed to apply to situations other than those which suggested them; in this way, the facts compel us to choose between them. We accept the hypothesis which leads us to expect, as other hypotheses do not, certain changes to take place which we then observe to occur. In history, however, all the relevant facts are already before us when we construct our hypothesis. Thus in choosing between hypotheses, the historian is not, as the physicist is, *constrained* by the facts, and in this difference the subjectivity of history resides.

In making this contrast, Popper is certainly exaggerating, I should say, the degree to which the physicist is constrained by his experiments. At the same time he is pointing to a real difficulty, even if it is perhaps not quite so serious as he imagines. I can illustrate the character of the difficulty most clearly by drawing on my own experience. Some little time ago, I wrote a book which purported to be an interpretation of Hume's philosophy.¹ One reviewer addressed me somewhat as follows: "a possible interpretation, but other interpretations are equally possible." How is one to reply? Obviously, this is a case where Popper's difficulty is at its most acute. I can produce as evidence nothing except passages in Hume's writings; I can do nothing which corresponds to predicting an as yet unobserved colour-shift in Mercury.

Yet at the same time my inquiry, as I conduct it, is not *ad hoc*. Why? Because what happens is something like this: an interpretation is suggested by certain passages in Hume; that interpretation is then confirmed by passages I had not previously so much as noticed, which the proposed interpretation serves to illuminate. Or I discover that passages which I previously could not understand now make good sense.

In the completed book, however, I lay all my cards on the table. All the passages are quoted as if they had equal confirmatory value. That explains why the interpretation has an *ad hoc* air. If a reader is convinced by my interpretation, this will be because he has himself been puzzled by passages in Hume, and my interpretation solves his

¹ Of course, writing an interpretation is not the same thing as writing a history-book. I do not wish at the moment to consider more precisely in what an interpretation consists. But the general point I am making, I trust, applies to history-books and to interpretations alike.

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puzzle for him. If, on the other hand, he approaches the book "cold," with no problems of his own, it is bound to strike him as being at best ingenious, at worst wholly factitious.

The historian is very often in the position in which I found myself; it is not surprising, therefore, that to the outside observer his work has an *ad hoc* appearance, even if, as I have suggested, that appearance is distinctly misleading. Not infrequently, however, his position is a good deal more favourable. An hypothesis occurs to him, say, about the origins of the Peasant's Revolt; that hypothesis, were it true, would involve a revision of accepted views about population shifts after the Black Death; some ingenious inquirer discovers a quite new way of determining just what did happen to the population during those crucial years. He may, for example, light on the accounts of a mediaeval quarry whose stones were used exclusively for tombstones. Thus the historian's hypothesis is confirmed, at what seemed to be the weakest point, by evidence which was not at the disposal of its framer. The most that can be said against history, then, is that there is *sometimes* no known way of deciding between conflicting historical hypotheses; this difficulty is not peculiar to history and ought not to be alleged against its objectivity.

The question we have been considering, it should be observed, is substantially identical with one that has a more familiar ring about it: whether, as it is said, history employs a "correspondence" or a "coherence" theory of truth. For this amounts to asking whether there is any test of a historical hypothesis except that it "makes sense," i.e. that the historian has constructed a plausible story. I have been suggesting that there often is such a test: we can look and see whether the hypothesis "corresponds with the facts"—if we like to use that mode of expression—as they are dug up by the archaeologist or by the archive-ransacker. In ordinary life, if somebody gives us an account of what happened in a committee, we may believe him without further investigation—because the story has a familiar pattern—or else we may look for independent evidence. If we were asked whether we employed a coherence or a correspondence criterion of truth, we should look blank, as would the historian, quite rightly. Like the rest of us, he has various ways of testing his hypotheses, or his reconstructions, none of them committing him to a "criterion of truth."

So far, then, we have been arguing that the historian proceeds scientifically—in the sense that he puts forward hypotheses, or constructs narratives, which are subject to the constraint of facts. Yet, we may wonder, if this is so, how does it happen that historical works differ so notably one from another? The extent of this difference is perhaps the most popular of all grounds for denying the objectivity of history. Let us set out the implicit criterion thus:

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Criterion Eight: In objective inquiries, conclusions are reached which are universally acceptable.

Compare, for example, Mr. Walsh in his *Philosophy of History*: "The main presuppositions of the thinking of physics," he writes, "are shared by all physicists and to think scientifically is to think in accordance with them. And this is at any rate one of the things that gives general validity to the conclusions of physicists; they do not depend to any important extent on the personal idiosyncrasies or private feelings of those who reach them, but are reached by a process in which complete abstraction is made from them" (p. 96).

In this statement there is, I should say, more than a little exaggeration, a relic of the calculating-machine theory of science. The personal idiosyncrasies and private feelings of natural scientists are much more powerful agents both of discovery and of confusion than Mr. Walsh allows. One does not doff an idiosyncrasy as easily as one dons a white coat. But we could put his point thus (this might be described as the ideal-in-practice of "absolute impartiality"): physical scientists have developed regular ways of tackling scientific problems and of testing proposed solutions to them. Not to accept these methods is to be "prejudiced," "biased," "unscientific."

One may well ask, however, whether the situation within history is so very different. There are generally accepted ways—involving a considerable level of expertness—of showing that a certain document (e.g. the *Donation of Constantine*) is a forgery, or that another (e.g. the *Kings of Rome*) is unreliable. If a man would not now be described as a "physicist" who made assertions about physical operations without supporting them by experiment or calculation, so equally a man is "no historian" who writes about past events without paying any attention to documentary evidence.

So much must be said; and yet the cases of history and natural science do not seem to be quite parallel. One distinguishes a Roman Catholic from a Protestant historian whereas one does not refer to the religion of a physicist; it seems sensible to talk about the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution but not about the Marxist interpretation of the Döpler effect. Nor does this difficulty entirely vanish even after a distinction is made between history and the interpretation of history; it is not just that the French Revolution is used by the Marxists to illustrate some particular sociological thesis and by other philosophers of history to illustrate a *different* thesis. The Marxist model of the events which took place will be incompatible at certain points with the model constructed by non-Marxists. Yet is not the same true, or could it not be true, of natural science? A footnote in Mr. Walsh's book gives us pause: "I am assuming," he says, "that 'Soviet biology' and 'bourgeois physics' are non-existent." This we read with a smile of agreement, but should we?

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Imagine a situation in which there were Marxist universities in our midst, as there are Roman Catholic schools; the physics taught at these universities would certainly differ, in important respects, from the physics taught at non-Marxist universities. Would we then deny that physics is objective?

Furthermore, to make the contrast one between history and physics is certainly misleading; the identification of science and physics is a perpetual source of philosophical confusion. A peculiarity of physics—deriving not from its form as a branch of inquiry but from the nature of its subject-matter—is that the conclusions at which it arrives do not generally touch upon the non-theoretical interests of human beings. A physicist can come to recognize that Boyle's law is not universally applicable without concluding that he must abandon going to church, or voting conservative, or acting despotically as a father. The situation is quite different in psychology and sociology, and is somewhat different even in biology. Let us suppose that Freud's argument in *Totem and Taboo* were scientifically impregnable; could we contemplate a situation in which it was accepted by Roman Catholics? There is an insignificant band of flat-earthers, a much larger group which refuses to accept the evolutionary theory of human origins—the difference is a matter of degree, only, if we pass on to psychology, to sociology, to history.

What ought to surprise and gratify us is the extent to which the spirit of objectivity has won its triumphs. Roman Catholic and Protestant accounts of the Reformation, considered as a story about social institutions, come more and more into conformity. If the test of objectivity is that there are regular ways of settling issues, by the use of which men of whatever party can be brought to see what actually happened, then I do not see how one can doubt the objectivity of history. But if we are satisfied with nothing less than the production of histories which all men the least rational will accept as final, then that would be a greater victory for the scientific spirit than we have any reason to expect. Such unanimity, however, is not to be found in any branch of human inquiry. Once again, if we press the criterion of objectivity too hard, it applies to no form of inquiry; slacken it slightly and history edges its way in with the rest.

One must emphasize, also, that very many of the differences which undoubtedly exist between, say, various histories of the French Revolution do not proceed from genuine differences of opinion, or oppositions in policy. The historian, I said, attempts to construct a narrative-model. Now for one thing there are models on different scales; the smaller the scale, the more we shall be told and the less we shall be shown. That is what makes school text-books so impossibly dull and so misleading, too, in their judgments. As Hegel puts this point: "A history of this kind . . . must give up the indi-

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vidual presentation of reality, and abridge itself by means of abstraction. . . ." In so doing, we may argue, it quite falsifies the character of historical inquiry. Text-books in elementary science, however, are no less dull and no less misleading. Differences between history books derive in part from differences in the extent to which they simplify.

Secondly, although we talk happily enough about "*the* French Revolution," or "*the* English Civil War," obviously these descriptive phrases refer to extremely complex and diversified states of affairs. The "French Revolution," for example, was at once the collapse of the monarchy and the collapse of the feudal economic system. The name "French Revolution" is a convenient abbreviation for a complex of historical changes, any one of which can set for us a historical problem. Thus two history books, one of which emphasizes the importance, for any understanding of the French Revolution, of the separation between monarchy and people, and the other of which emphasizes the economic obstacles encountered by the rising bourgeoisie, need not really be in conflict with one another; each has as its subject a different aspect of the Revolution. Of course, if there were some single cause from which all the events of the French Revolution flowed, then certainly we should have to choose between the luxury of the court and the rise of the middle classes; we should have to say that one of these was the true cause and the other was not.

Professor Gallie has recently argued in *Mind* ("Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences," April, 1955) that the task of the historian is to draw attention to those *necessary* conditions which we might otherwise overlook, and that he quite misconceives the limits of his just ambitions if he tries to nominate *sufficient* conditions. This doctrine, for all its attractiveness, would be difficult to accept as it stands; for necessary conditions are endless—even necessary conditions we could easily overlook. It was a necessary condition of Gladstone's becoming Prime Minister that at the age of seven he took his mother's advice and changed his wet clothes; but scarcely a matter for the historian's consideration. What can, however, be said is that in the excitement of discovering a particular type of necessary condition, the historian is sometimes led into asserting that it is both necessary and sufficient—as happens also in a great many other cases, say in the germ theory of disease. Or again, a condition which is necessary and sufficient for the explanation of a certain phase, or a certain aspect, of a historical complex is wrongly supposed to be sufficient and necessary for other phases or other aspects, as if we could deduce from the economic origins of the French Revolution why the Goddess of Reason was worshipped. Once we recognize the complexity of historical changes, and the multitude of different problems they raise, we can hope to avoid the more gratuitous cases of this particular error.

THE OBJECTIVITY OF HISTORY

One can understand, also, why each generation rewrites its history-books; a point sometimes urged in proof of history's incurable subjectivity. The explanation, often enough, is that men come to be interested in quite new aspects of past events; we look differently at the French Revolution now we have experienced the Russian Revolution, with a new interest in the way in which it passed into a dictatorship. In that sense, all history is contemporary history: our contemporary interests determine what we select for consideration from the past—as, for example, the working out of a propositional calculus, or of a modal logic, may cause us to examine from a new point of view the mediaeval doctrine of “consequences.” But nothing of importance about the nature and status of historical inquiry follows from this fact.

What is our final conclusion about the “placing” of history amongst forms of human activity? Well, one can see why there have been arguments about its relation both to literature and to science. If we mean by “science” the attempt to find out what really happens, then history is a science. It demands the same kind of dedication, the same ruthlessness, the same passion for exactness, as physics. That is all I have been trying to show. If, however, we mean by science the search for general theories, then history is not science; indeed, in so far as it tries to show us something through a particularized pattern of action, it stands closer to the novel and the drama than it does to physics. It differs from literature, however, in two important respects: human society, not individual entanglements, provide it with its themes—and, more important for our present purposes, it is both sensible and necessary to ask whether its narrative “really happened like that.” It is *history*, neither literature nor science, but sharing some of the properties of both. Its very existence, indeed, helps to bring home to us the connection and the distinction between these two forms of human endeavour.

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