# THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

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"THE doubtful story of successive events." With this contemptuous phrase[1] Bernard Bosanquet brushed aside the claim of history to be considered a study deserving the attention of a thoughtful mind. Unsatisfactory in form, because never rising above uncertainty; unsatisfactory in matter, because always concerned with the transitory, the successive, the merely particular as opposed to the universal; a chronicle of small beer, and an untrustworthy chronicle at that. Yet Bosanquet was well read in history; he had taught it as a young man at Oxford, and his first published work had been a translation of a recent German book on the Athenian constitution; he knew that a vast amount of the world's best genius in the last hundred years had been devoted to historical studies; and when, late in life, he asked himself what it came to, that was all he could say.

There are, as I have pointed out, two heads in his indictment of historical knowledge: that it is doubtful, and that its objects are transitory. I propose here to consider the first of these alone. It is by no means an isolated expression of distrust. On the contrary, we have long been familiar with the idea that history is incapable of arriving at certainty. Epigrams describing it as *une fable convenue*, or the historian's art as *celle de choisir, entre plusieurs mensonges, celui qui ressemble le plus à la vérité*, come back to our minds, and lead them, through eighteenth-century illuminism, back to Descartes, and his polemic against history as a type of thought not susceptible of that mathematical clearness and distinctness which alone reveal the presence of indubitable truth. In fact, this accusation has been a commonplace of European thought for two or three hundred years; and curiously enough, these have been exactly the years during which historical studies have most greatly flourished and produced the most original and unexpected results. One might almost imagine that historical thought, in its most active and successful incarnation, and historical scepticism, doubt as to the value of that thought, were twins, like Brother Date and Brother Dabitur. This at any rate is true, that historical scepticism has not in point of fact been either a cause or a symptom of any decay in historical studies. It follows, either that the human mind is grotesquely illogical (the favourite conclusion of careless observers

[1] *The Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 78.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100017459 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and indolent thinkers), or else that the function of historical scepticism is not to deny the validity of historical thought, but in some way not fully defined to call attention to its limits.

In order to explore the second alternative (the first is not worth exploring, for if it were true the exploration would be vain) let us consider what case there is to be made out for historical scepticism.

All history is the fruit of a more or less critical and scientific interpretation of evidence. Now there are here two loopholes for scepticism. First, it may be said that the interpretation is never as critical, never as scientific as it might be ; that the most learned and most careful historians are able to blunder amazingly in their treatment of evidence, and that therefore we can never be certain that we have interpreted the evidence rightly. But this is a perfectly general topic of scepticism, directed essentially not against history but against all forms of thought ; the eternal abstract possibility of this kind of error is identical with the danger that any piece of reckoning or arguing or observing may have been bungled ; and consequently this is in no sense a special indictment against historical knowledge.

Secondly, it may be pointed out that the historian, unlike the mathematician or philosopher or biologist, has something to interpret which is called evidence : his documents, his data, his records or sources. What evidence is there for the binomial theorem ? None ; the question is meaningless. What evidence is there for Plato's theory of Ideas ? Everything is evidence for it, if you believe it ; everything evidence against it, if you disbelieve it. In other words, the conception of evidence does not enter into the process of thought by which it is defended or assailed. What evidence is there for or against the inheritance of acquired characteristics ? None ; what might loosely be called *evidence for* it would be properly described as *well-attested cases of* it. The experiments which corroborate or overthrow a biological theory are not sources or documents, precisely because, if they are impugned, they can be repeated, done over again. You cannot " repeat " Herodotus, or write him over again, if you doubt something that he says ; that is what shows him to be, in the strict sense of the word, evidence.

Now—and this is the root of historical scepticism—we only have a strictly limited quantity of evidence concerning any historical question ; it is seldom free from grave defects, it is generally tendencious, fragmentary, silent where it ought to be explicit, and detailed where it had better be silent ; even at its best, it is never free from these and similar faults, it only refrains from thrusting them indecently upon our notice. Hence the best may be the worst, because it lulls us into a false security and induces us to mistake its incompleteness for completeness, its tendenciousness



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for sincerity, and to become innocent accomplices in its own deceit. Indeed, the poetic inspiration of Clio the Muse is never more needed, and never more brilliantly employed, than by the task of lulling to sleep the critical faculties of the historical student, while she sings his imagination a Siren's song. But if he binds himself to the mast and refuses to alter his course, he ceases to be a dupe and becomes a sceptic. He will now say, "I know that my evidence is incomplete. I know that I have only an inconsiderable fraction of what I might have had, if fate had been kinder; if the library of Alexandria had survived, if the humanists had been luckier or better supported in their search for manuscripts, if a thousand things had happened which did not happen, I should have had a mass of evidence where now I have only a few shreds. The wholesale destruction of documents due to the French Revolution, and the holocaust of manorial records and title-deeds now going on in England since the passing of Lord Birkenhead's Real Property Act—tempered though it is by the efforts of historical societies and the authority of the Master of the Rolls—have blotted out irreplaceably a vast percentage of the once existing sources for mediæval history in France and England; what is left will never be more than a fragment, never enough to form the basis for a complete history of the Middle Ages. But even had these catastrophes not happened, our sources, though more extensive, would still be incomplete. We should have more to study, but our results would not really be more certain, except in the doubtful sense in which a larger finite quantity approximates more nearly to infinity."

To say this may seem tantamount to renouncing historical certainty altogether. Yet it must be said. Only by shutting our eyes to the most familiar and obvious facts can we fail to see that the evidence to the whole of which we always appeal when we decide a debated historical point is a mere fragment of what we might have had, if our luck had been better. How vital the Paston Letters are to our knowledge of the fifteenth century; yet it is only by luck that we have them at all, and if our luck had been different we might have had not one such collection but a dozen, giving us on the balance a very different picture of the period. We toil and sweat to get the last ounce of inferential knowledge out of the sources we possess, whereas if we could acquire only a few more, our inferences would be confirmed or overthrown by the merest glance at the new documents. Only actual experience, or, failing that, a careful study of the history of research, can show how utterly the historian is at the mercy of his sources and how completely an addition to his sources may alter his conclusions. No doubt, the scientist may be no less profoundly affected by a new experiment; but this gives him no deep sense of impotence or futility, because



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it is his business to invent the crucial experiment and his fault if he does not; whereas the historian, however hard he works at the discovery of sources, depends in the long run on the chance that someone did not break up the Monumentum Ancyranum to burn in a lime-kiln, or light the kitchen fire with the Paston Letters.

And this, perhaps, is the real sting of historical scepticism. Doubt is a disease endemic in human thought; if history is doubtful, so is science, so is philosophy; in every department of knowledge, everything is doubtful until it has been satisfactorily settled, and even then it becomes doubtful again unless the doubter can settle it afresh for himself. In mathematics, we are not plagued by the doubtfulness of our theorems, because if we feel unhappy about the axiom of parallels we can think it out on our own account and arrive at an independent opinion; in physics, if we doubt the accepted view about falling bodies, we can climb a tower and test them. But the sources of history we must take or leave. They are not, like scientific or philosophical theorems, results of processes which we can repeat for ourselves; they are results, but results of processes which we cannot repeat; hence they are a solid barrier to thought, a wall of "data" against which all we can do is to build lean-to sheds of inference, not knowing what strains it is capable of bearing. The peculiar, the disastrous doubtfulness of history lies not in the fact that everything in it is dubitable, but in the fact that these doubts cannot be resolved. Everywhere else, it seems, knowledge grows by a healthy oscillation between doubt and certainty: you are allowed to doubt as much as you like, to say, like Hobbes on first looking into Euclid, "By God, it is impossible!" because it is by facing and answering these doubts that you acquire knowledge; but in history we must not doubt; we dare not doubt; we must assume that our evidence is adequate, though we know it to be inadequate, and trustworthy, though we know it to be tainted, for if we did not, our occupation as historians would be gone. The most we can do is to discover and collect, with infinite pains, the extant sources bearing on certain types of problem; to publish vast collections of charters, chronicles, inscriptions, and so forth, whose very bulk overawes the imagination and makes us ashamed to suggest that they may be too small to contain the whole truth even about a little thing. We bolster ourselves up by the ponderous mass of the learning at our disposal, when the disease from which we suffer demands not more that is doubtful, but a little, however little, that is certain—a single fact that we can check for ourselves, not an ever-increasing number that we can never check. For what, in history, we call checking a statement is not really checking it at all; it is only comparing one statement with another statement.

This feeling, that in historical studies the mind is bound hand



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and foot by an act of irrational acquiescence, whereas in science and philosophy it is free to question everything, to reject everything that it cannot substantiate, and assert nothing that it cannot accept on the authority of its own thinking, seems to be what Bosanquet has expressed in the sentence which I quoted at the beginning. Now it is easy to reply that this is hypercriticism ; that such doubts do not affect actual historians in the actual course of their work, but only fastidious and probably unsympathetic spectators of that work ; and that in point of fact, so far from its being true that history is unable to bear inspection, it is constantly being revised by enormous numbers of intelligent people, who actually all come to very much the same conclusions—that Charles I was beheaded, that Charles II was a ladies' man, that James II fled the country, and so on through a catalogue which may or may not be small beer, but is at least not found doubtful by anyone who takes the trouble to inquire into it.

Such a reply, I must confess, brings a breath of fresh air into an argument which had begun to smell stuffy. It is always with a sense of relief that, after arguing the hind leg off a donkey, one goes out into the field to look at the animal for oneself ; and hypercriticism is no doubt the right term for an argument which proves that history, or religion, or politics, is an impossible or idiotic pursuit, when all the time one is aware that plenty of intelligent people are pursuing it in an intelligent spirit. But you cannot dispel an argument by calling it hypercritical. If your donkey has four visible legs, and you can prove that it ought to have three, the discrepancy is a reason not for ceasing to think about the donkey's anatomy, but for thinking about it again : revising, not merely ignoring, the original argument.

It is important to recognize this principle in the interests of all sound philosophical inquiry. People are often tempted to argue thus : " Such and such a view, if pressed home, leads to scepticism. Now scepticism is a self-contradictory position, because it materially claims to possess the knowledge which formally it denies ; therefore whatever leads logically to scepticism leads to self-contradiction and is false. This is a sufficient refutation of such and such a view, which accordingly we hereby dismiss from further consideration." This type of refutation, though logically valid, is always unsatisfactory, because it belongs to " eristic," to use Plato's distinction, not to " dialectic." The critic has made a debating point against the view in question, and has left its advocate silenced but unconvinced ; aware that his argument has not received justice, but has merely been bludgeoned into momentary submission. The bludgeon of a coarse common sense is a very necessary part of the philosopher's armoury ; as the truthful man must know how ψεύδη λέγειν ὡς δεῖ



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so the philosopher must know how to be stupid ὡς δεῖ, and reply to an argument—a perfectly sound argument, it may be—" this is merely an exercise in logical ingenuity; the Facts are, so and so." But if one makes up one's mind to be permanently stupid, as those would have us do who teach their disciples (while reserving other weapons for their own service) the exclusive use of the common-sense bludgeon, one is merely condemning oneself to learn nothing. When you have clubbed the sceptic into silence, get out your scalpel and dissect him; and you may be able to pick his brains to some purpose.

The contentions of historical scepticism—to take up the scalpel—are by no means the mere product of an unintelligent inspection of historical work from the outside. In the preceding paragraphs the writer has stated them altogether as the fruit of his own experience in historical research, and could enlarge on the topic considerably without for a moment ceasing to give an accurate description of that experience in one of its most prominent features. In reading history-books and memorizing their contents, and even in teaching history to students, this feature sinks into the background and may be altogether lost to sight. But when one takes up the study of some difficult historical question as yet unsettled, and enters with well-equipped and honest opponents into the *concordia discors* of learned controversy, there is one thing which one cannot fail to observe. This is the existence of what I may call rules of the game. One rule—the first—runs thus: " You must not say anything, however true, for which you cannot produce evidence." The game is won not by the player who can reconstitute what really happened, but by the player who can show that his view of what happened is the one which the evidence accessible to all players, when criticized up to the hilt, supports. Suppose a given view is in fact the correct one, and suppose (granted it were possible) that all the extant evidence, interpreted with the maximum degree of skill, led to a different view, no evidence supporting the correct view: in that case the holder of the correct view would lose the game, the holder of the other view win it. Not only is this rule accepted by every player of the game without protest or question, but anyone can see it to be reasonable. For there is no way of knowing what view is " correct," except by finding what the evidence, critically interpreted, proves. A view defined as " correct, but not supported by the evidence," is a view by definition unknowable, incapable of being the goal of the historian's search. And at the same time, every historian actually engaged in such work keenly recognizes the limited character of his sources, and knows very well that it is no more in his power to add to them than it is in the power of a chess-player to conjure a third bishop into existence. He must



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play the game with the pieces that he has; and if he can find a new piece—quote a hitherto unexploited source of information—he must begin a new game, after putting it on the table for his opponent to use as well as himself. Everyone who has any experience of first-hand historical research, especially in the sharpened form of historical controversy, is thus perfectly familiar with all the topics of historical scepticism, and is not in the least perturbed by them. In fact, experience shows that the people who are scared by them are never the practised historians, who accept them as a matter of course, but the philosophers of schools committed to theories which they seem, rightly or wrongly, to contradict.

But, I shall be told, I have frankly reduced history to a game. I have deprived its narratives of all objective value, and degraded them to a mere exercise in the interpretation of arbitrarily selected bodies of evidence, every such body being selected by the operation of chance and confessedly impotent to prove the truth.

It is time to drop the metaphor of a game. The so-called rules of the game are really the definition of what historical thinking is; the winner of the game is the historian proper—the person who thinks historically, whose thought fulfils the ideal of historical truth. For historical thinking means nothing else than interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill. It does not mean discovering what really happened, if "what really happened" is anything other than "what the evidence indicates." If there once happened an event concerning which no shred of evidence now survives, that event is not part of any historian's universe; it is no historian's business to discover it; it is no gap in any historian's knowledge that he does not know it. If he had any ideas about it, they would be supernatural revelations, poetic fancies, or unfounded conjectures; they would form no part whatever of his historical thought. "What really happened" in this sense of the phrase is simply the thing in itself, the thing defined as out of all relation to the knower of it, not only unknown but unknowable, not only unknowable but non-existent.

Historical scepticism may now be seen in its proper function, as the negative side of the definition of historical knowledge. There is a permanent tendency in all thought—it is sometimes called the plain man's realism—to think of the object as a "thing in itself," a thing out of all relation to the knowledge of it, a thing existing in itself and by itself. From that point of view, the object of history appears as simply "the past"; the sum total of events that have happened; and the aim of the historian appears as the discovery of the past, the finding out of what has happened. But in the actual practice of historical thinking, the historian discovers that he cannot move a step towards the achievement of this aim



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without appealing to evidence; and evidence is something present, something now existing, regarded as a relic or trace left by the past. If the past had left no traces, he could never come to know it; and if it has, so to speak, inextricably confused its own traces, all he can do is to disentangle them up to the limit of his own powers. The past simply as past is wholly unknowable; it is the past as residually preserved in the present that is alone knowable. The discovery that the past as such is unknowable is the scepticism which is the permanent and necessary counterpart of the plain man's realism. It is its counterpart, because it asserts the exact opposite; the one asserts that the past as such can be known and is known by history, the other, that it is not known by history and cannot be known. It is a permanent counterpart, because wherever historical thinking is actually done, the discovery which is the basis of historical scepticism is invariably made. Date and Dabitur really are twins. It is a necessary counterpart, because without qualification by historical scepticism, historical realism is wholly false, and must lead to absurd misconceptions of the limits of historical knowledge.

Historical realism by itself implies that whatever is included in the sum total of events that have happened is a possible and legitimate object of historical knowledge: a thing that all historians can and therefore (*qua* historians) ought to know. Every historian as such ought to know the whole past. That being impossible owing to human frailty, the best historian is the one who knows the largest amount of the past; and the more information he can acquire, the better historian he becomes. This leads to countless absurdities. Every historian knows that to be an historian one must be a specialist, and that the historian who tries to know everything knows nothing. But historical realism would imply the reverse. It would imply that historical knowledge is to be reckoned by the quantity of facts with which acquaintance has been scraped, and that the greatest historical writer is the writer of the longest history of the world. Again, every historian knows that there are some questions—pseudo-questions rather—into which it is not his business to inquire, because there is no available evidence towards their answer; and that it is no shame to him to be ignorant by what name Achilles was called when he was disguised as a maiden. But historical realism would imply that this is incorrect; that there are no limits whatever to historical knowledge except the limits of the past as past, and that therefore the question what Julius Cæsar had for breakfast the day he overcame the Nervii is as genuinely historical a problem as the question whether he proposed to become king of Rome. Again, historical realism involves the absurdity of thinking of the past as something still



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existing by itself in a νοητὸς τόπος of its own; a world where Galileo's weight is still falling, where the smoke of Nero's Rome still fills the intelligible air, and where interglacial man is still laboriously learning to chip flints. This limbo, where events which have finished happening still go on, is familiar to us all; it is the room in the fairy-tale, where all the old moons are kept behind the door; it is the answer to the poet's refrain: *Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?* It is the land east of the sun and west of the moon. Its prose name is Nowhere.

An event that has finished happening is just nothing at all. It has no existence of any kind whatever. The past is simply non-existent; and every historian feels this in his dealings with it. Until he feels it firmly and habitually, his historial technique is precarious. Realistic philosophers who try to fit him out with a real past in order to serve as object for his thought greatly mistake his requirements. He does not want a real past; or rather, he only wants that in his moments of crude realism. In his moments of scepticism he discovers that he does not possess it, and reflection shows that he gets along very well without it.

What the historian wants is a real present. He wants a real world around him (not, of course, a world of things in themselves, unknown and unknowable, but a world of things seen and heard, felt and described); and he wants to be able to see this world as the living successor of an unreal, a dead and perished, past. He wants to reconstruct in his mind the process by which *his* world—the world in those of its aspects which at this particular moment impress themselves on *him*—has come to be what it is. This process is not now going on. The realistic account of knowledge as apprehension of an independently existing object does not apply to his knowledge of it. It is not existing at all, and he is in no natural sense of the word apprehending it. If "imagine" is our only term for the "apprehension" of a non-existent object, he is imagining it; but that will not fit either, because imagining knows nothing of the difference between truth and error, and he is doing his best to avoid error and achieve truth. He is trying to know the past; not the past as it was in itself—for that is not only non-existent but unknowable into the bargain—but the past as it appears from its traces in this present: the past of *his* world, or *his* past, the past which is the proper object of *his* historical researches, specialized as all historical researches must be, and arising directly out of the world he perceives around him, as all historical researches must arise.

From this point of view many problems concerning the proper aims, methods, and objects of historical thought find their solution. This is not the place to demonstrate the truth of that claim; I hope



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to do it in detail elsewhere. It is enough for the present to have stated the general thesis that all historical thought is the historical interpretation of the present; that its central question is: "How has this world as it now exists come to be what it is?" and that for this reason the past concerns the historian only so far as it has led to the present. By leading to the present, it has left its traces upon the present; and by doing that, it has supplied the historian with evidence concerning itself, a starting-point for his investigations. The historian does not first think of a problem and then search for evidence bearing on it; it is his possession of evidence bearing on a problem that alone makes the problem a real one.

It thus appears that history is not doubtful at all. It seemed doubtful, to say the least, so long as we imagined its object to be the past as past; but though the question "what really happened," where "what happened" and "what the evidence proves" are assumed as distinct, is necessarily doubtful, the question "what the evidence proves" is not doubtful. Granted a training in historical methods, and an equipment of historical scholarship, without which no one can fairly judge,[1] it is possible to take a particular problem, to study the solution of that problem advanced by a particular historian on a particular review of the evidence, and within the limits of this problem, as stated, to raise the question whether he has or has not proved his case. That question can be answered, by a competent scholar, with no more doubt than must attend any man's answer to any question that can be asked in any department of knowledge. And in the certainty of that answer lies the formal dignity, the logical worth, the scientific value in the highest sense of that word, of historical studies.

[1] It may be worth while to point out that even a rigidly cogent historical argument always seems to contain loopholes for doubt, to a critic unfamiliar with the matter in hand; a reader, *e.g.*, who does not know enough numismatics to know what the possible alternatives in a given case are, cannot judge the solidity of an expert numismatist's discussion of that case, because he will see that certain alternatives are tacitly ruled out, without knowing why. Had the numismatist been writing for beginners, he ought to have explained why; not otherwise. One might have supposed that the logic of an historical argument could be judged by one ignorant of its subject-matter; that is not the case. But I must not enlarge on this here.



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