

Appendix II: History as a Moral Science

For many academics, history is the paradigm moral science, the humanity par excellence, the great study of man, and all that he has done. Many academics are historians, and their studies are models of modern scholarship, in which the academic virtues of precision and impartiality have been developed and honed. But historians, like politicians, have tended not to formulate the principles of their thinking. They have perfected their know-how, and suspect that any attempt to articulate their methodology would distort it. *Doctus latet in generalibus*. Better to get on with the job, resolving difficulties as and when they arise.

There is much force in this contention. Inadequate philosophies of history have resulted in much bad history. But even good historians sometimes think about what they are doing, and are in danger of being misled by the bad philosophies of history their colleagues profess. If bad philosophies of history are in the air, better philosophies of history are needed as prophylactics against them. We can never produce a single, correct philosophy of history, since there are many different sorts of history, but we can guard against some common mistakes.

History is almost always written history, written in prose, by an author who wants to be read. These features impose important constraints: written language is markedly different from spoken language; it has one author, who hopes to be read by many readers. We need to consider who the intended readers are, and why they might take time to read what the author has written. Many thinkers overlook these points, and consider only the author, and what he says about the things he writes about. They fear he might be biased, and seek to tie him down to reporting just the facts. History should be a record of what actually happened, no more and no less.

But that is impossible. For one thing, the word ‘fact’ is systematically ambiguous, meaning different things in different contexts. It is helpful, whenever encountering the word ‘fact’, to ask what it is being contrasted with: fact as opposed to fiction, or as opposed to interpretation, or as opposed to theory, or as opposed to law. In a law court, the advocates will set out the facts of the case, and then argue for different conclusions. If it is a criminal case, the judge decides questions of law, and it is the task of the jury to make a finding of fact. What had been a possible conclusion, becomes an established fact, and judges’ decisions on matters of law

are taken as facts when a solicitor is advising a client. The common thread through all these confusing usages is that facts are relative to disputes: in a dispute the facts are what are undisputed in that dispute; and when the dispute changes, so do the facts. It follows that there is no class of simple, unvarnished facts for the historian to record. There are many true statements he might make, and among them many undisputedly true ones. But the boundaries are not sharp: even hitherto undisputed ones, that William won the battle of Hastings in 1066, for example, might come to be disputed by some one.

The fact that there is no class of indisputable facts does not mean that history is a purely subjective exercise, with the historian free to tell whatever tales he likes. On the contrary, there is an objective course of events, which constrains what a historian may legitimately say. We can give substance to this by imagining that there were a host of closed television surveillance cameras at every point and pointing in every direction. If we could have access to any subset of these, we could determine whether a particular person was at a particular place at a particular time, and what his bodily movements were. We could focus on King Harold the Second, and see whether he really was killed by an arrow through his eye. But it is evident that history is not just the sum of these pictures, no more and no less. We could not make any sense at all of the plethora of information without stringent principles of selection and interpretation. Even to go from pictures of bodily movements to reports of actions involves an ascription of motive that may be disputed. We may select a sequence of pictures featuring one particular person, or we may focus on the whole group of people—Harold II or the English fyrd—neither is wrong, but they are different. And, whatever our focus, we have to compress in a few words a vast multiplicity of pictures. The English fled: three words, but innumerable pictures of different Englishmen turning and running pursued by victorious Normans, and of that vast array of information, an immense amount passed over in silence—no mention of some stout-hearted Egrith fighting on until abandoned by all his comrades, or a lowly Swithun casting away his shield in order to run faster.

We can gain some idea of the compression and editing required if we consider the task of turning a transcript of a lecture or debate into readable English. In this case there is hardly any problem of

construing the sounds as particular words (in contrast to the problem of interpreting bodily movements as actions). It becomes clear then how different written English is from spoken English. The unfinished sentences, fresh starts, interjections, of spoken English have to be pruned, re-ordered, compressed, occasionally amplified, to be made intelligible to the reader. Without informed editing, a transcript is in danger of being merely a meaningless babble. We need guidance so as to focus on key words and sentences, and to filter out waffle and noise.

Guidance is given by the intended readership. The author wants to be read. Although many people like retailing statements about the past without regard to their hearers' interests, we soon learn to avoid bores. If he is going to be read, the historian must deal with things that some people will want to read about. He must have a theme. There are many possible themes. A mother may edit the letters from her son at the front. They will be of interest to his family and friends, and may also be of value to the military historian. A churchwarden may write a brief history of the church for the benefit of visitors. More often it is people rather than buildings that have histories written about them, and biographies abound both in the best-seller lists and on the shelves of second-hand bookshops. More often still a history is written not about a single individual, but an institution—a school, a regiment, a town, or most most importantly, a nation. The history is written to explore and establish a corporate identity, and is read largely by those seeking to understand and reinforce their sense of who they are. But narratives are not the only themes. I may seek to explain the causes of the First World War, or to solve a particular problem about Trajan's Persian War. I may think I have discovered who Barabbas really was, or who moved the stone. Or I may be trying to pin responsibility onto a particular person for a particular deed; or to exculpate him. There are many, many topics which may interest a historian, and may, he hopes, interest some readers.¹

¹ This is the reason why there is room for new histories in each generation. Although Gibbon has not changed, and the historical events have not changed, those who now are interested in the later Roman Empire live now and not in the eighteenth century, and have different knowledge and different background assumptions from Gibbon's original readers. Different sub-themes interest them; different problems puzzle them; different explanations are reckoned explanatory. So a different history is called for.

Besides interest in the theme, the historian and his intended readers have much in common. They necessarily share a common language, and hence to some extent a common culture, a common background of knowledge, assumptions and expectations. But they also differ—else there would be no point in his writing for them. The historian knows what they do not, and may need not only to tell them about his subject, but to make explicit various background assumptions which explain what happened and why the subject is worth their attention. He empathizes with historical figures as we do with contemporaries, and his understanding of them is a function of him as much as it is of them. (Again, this is not to say that it is purely subjective—it is a function of them too, and will be in error if it fails to accord with what they actually are.) Sometimes he can bring to bear understanding not available at the time he is writing about. A modern logician can recognise the problem that was bothering Plato, and see what he was trying to say in the dark sayings of his that have long puzzled classical scholars. Marxist historians claim to understand past events in ways quite unconvincing to the agents at the time. In writing and reading about the past, we necessarily have insights and hindights which illuminate, but may also distort, our understanding of our subject. It is fairly easy to be on our guard against distorting insights, because we all have experience of misunderstanding our contemporaries. Distortion due to hindsight is more difficult to detect, because it often lurks in the choice of the theme. We need to distinguish the standpoint which makes the subject interesting from the standpoint of the subject itself. After the Second World War three young officers were discussing their prospects while waiting to be demobbed. and wondering what the future held for them. One ended up as Home Secretary (William Whitelaw), one as Foreign Secretary (Lord Carrington), and one as Archbishop of Canterbury (Robert Runcie). It is that that makes their discussion interesting: but the discussion was in the future simple, not in the future-already-present-in-its-causes. We can say that they subsequently became Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury, and can look out for gifts of leadership, strength of character, force of personality and power of intellect that enabled them to rise to the top, but we should not say that at the time they were to be Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury. There is a difference between the heir to the throne, who is already a future monarch, and ordinary young men,

who may do well in life but in their youth are not marked out for future preferment. I may happen to be a neighbour of Mrs Johnson who wins the jack-pot, and I may tell people what she is like. I tell them because she is now a multi-millionairess, but I should describe her as she was, not as an about-to-be-multi-millionairess.

Usually it is not just happenstance that makes a subject worth writing about and reading about. Often what is common between a historian and his readers is membership of a community. I relate the family history to my children, because it is part of our identity. Similarly the history of the regiment, the school, the college, and above all, the nation. I read English and British history to understand better who we are and how we came to be what we are now. It naturally seems a progress, because the end-point is what we are now. And there is a natural tendency to emphasize the successes and play down the failures and shameful episodes, because in being our history it makes us, and me in particular, responsible for what was done by us on our way to being who we are now.

As the historian looks back on his subject, he and his readers take for granted knowledge, which was not available at the time, but which explains its significance to them. Much that we now think important might not have been, were it not for the efforts of some outstanding person, or for the consequences of some unremarked concatenation of events. The event turned out to be a turning point. But it was not clear at the time that it was a turning point, and indeed might well not have been. If William had fallen from his horse and been killed after the battle of Hastings, the leaderless Normans would have returned home after looting a few towns. If Sherman had been unsuccessful in the West, Lee might have captured Washington at a second attempt, and Lincoln's Gettysburg address a forgotten footnote in the Confederate War of Independence. Most contentious is the influence of hindsight on our understanding of the origin of Christianity. All the books of the New Testament were written for the recently founded Christian churches after the Resurrection, and portrayed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, or even as God. but that does not mean, as New Testament critics often assume, that they made them up, nor that, as the evangelists seem to say, what actually happened had to happen. Judas Iscariot, who afterwards betrayed him was just that, not Judas Iscariot who was going to betray him. He could have not betrayed him. In the Middle Ages, the Schoolmen were worried at the apparent injustice of Judas' being blamed for

what he was fore-ordained to do. But he was not fore-ordained to do it: he could have done differently; he could have realised that if it came to a showdown, Jesus would not summon legions of angels from on high, and by military might re-establish the kingdom of David. And then? And then the High Priests and Elders, unable to arrest Jesus quietly, would have deployed a posse of Temple Guards to arrest him in the Temple, to question him themselves, and to hand him over to Pilate to be crucified. But what if Pilate had heeded the promptings of his conscience and warnings of his wife? Jesus would still have been killed, not by crucifixion but, like Stephen a few weeks later, by stoning. Pontius Pilate would not have his name repeated every time a Christian recited the creed. He would be known to Jewish scholars who read Philo and Josephus, and to Christians would be on a par with Zacchaeus or Simon of Cyrene. So, too, if Sherman had got bogged down in the Mississippi valley, we should never be singing about his dashing Yankee boys marching through Georgia. If William, Duke of Normandy, had died falling off his horse, he would have been William the Bastard, not William the Conqueror. The outcome seems necessitated by the designation, and when we try to empathize with the agents in the ambiguity of the actual situation in which they had to act, we struggle with the consequence that if the outcome had been different, we should not be wanting to think about that situation at all. We are interested in William, Sherman and Jesus, because Sherman reached the coast, William conquered England, and Jesus was raised from the dead. In pursuit of absolute objectivity, we feel it wrong to write history distorted by hindsight. Better to try to adopt a contemporary stand point: The *dictum* "All history is contemporary history", though untrue, represents an ideal that historians aspire to: to understand agents' actions from the agents' point of view at the time they were decided upon. But it is dangerously easy then, in not taking for granted the actual outcome, to assume that it did not take place. In the "The Quest for the Historical Jesus" many New Testament critics distance themselves from the evangelists who wrote about a man they believed to have risen from the dead. by assuming that Jesus did not rise from the dead. This was, indeed, the common opinion of both the critics and their intended readers but it prejudged the result of the quest. The Jesus who emerged was the Jesus of nineteenth and twentieth century secular historians, not the Jesus as he would have appeared to his pre-resurrection contemporaries. The search for that Jesus

is conceptually possible, though actually difficult. Gleanings from the gospels, especially hostile comments, remembered afterwards as having been voiced in his lifetime, give us some clues.

A properly unbiased account needs to keep open the possible outcomes. It is a difficult exercise in knowing and not knowing. We cannot help knowing why we are interested in William, Sherman and Jesus, and that most of our sources are coloured by the same knowledge of what followed, but as we seek to empathize with them, and view their actions from a contemporary stand-point, we need to not know what actually followed. Although it is with benefit of hindsight that historians choose their themes and write their histories, the understanding they need to offer their readers requires a hindsight-less empathy with the agents facing an uncertain future and knowing that it was up to them to decide what to do.

Such understanding, if achieved, can still mislead. There is a tension between actual deliberation and overall explanation. Historical agents were decision-makers. Decision-makers have to decide between alternatives where there are arguments for and arguments against. They weigh the considerations, but in the end it is up to them which course of action they adopt, and they are responsible for their decision. Often the reasons they adopt justify their decision: sometimes they do not, and the agents are blamed. Occasionally it emerges that they had no alternative, and then they are exculpated. The picture is of many decision-makers, each one an initiator of action—ἀρχὴ τοῦ κινεῖν (*arche tou kinein*)—who could have decided differently, but did not. For the agent and anyone concerned to see things from the agent's point of view, that is the end of questioning. He did it. The buck stops there. But the historian is not deliberating. His theme does not have to be, and usually is not, just one single decision. Although he needs to be able to enter into the minds of agents, he is usually concerned to give an overall picture covering many decisions, taken for reasons the historian regards as significant. And then it is easy to suppose that the reasons that led agents to act as they did made them do it. If you know that I did something for reasons which seemed good to me, you conclude that really I had no alternative; me being me, it was necessary that I should do it; I was compelled to do it. And so, once again, determinism takes over, and freedom goes out of the door, expelled this time not by the fixity of the past, but the necessity of reason.

As with the New Testament, the problems historians grapple with have been intensively debated by theologians. St Augustine was conscious of the contemporary humanity of his fellow men, and their sharing a common human nature and a common culture. He was grateful for his human abilities and aspirations, and for his Christian upbringing. He took issue with Pelagius, because the Pelagians, he sensed were not only taking responsibility for their actions, but claiming all the credit for them. Rather than pride themselves on having chosen aright, they should be grateful for having been called from darkness into light. His point is well expressed by Peter Abelard:

*Et juges gratias de donis gratiae
Beata referet plebs tibi, Domine*

We can take the point and yet protest that St Augustine overreached himself. Responsibility and credit are not the same. He had earlier written on Free Will, and needed it, not only to give an adequate account of man, but to acquit God of responsibility for men's evil deeds. St Augustine may have felt it impossible to resist God's call, but he could have done so. He was not compelled. He was not necessitated. It is our responsibility how we live our lives, though we do well to be grateful for the influences and circumstances that have enabled us to live them well.

The Existentialists were right in seeing it as an essential part of my being an autonomous human being that I make up my mind for myself, and can make it up differently. But though it is necessarily the case that I can perform an *acte gratuit*, it is not the case that I have to. I can act responsibly for good reasons, reasons that, in Leibniz' words incline, not necessitate.² Although I did decide for reasons that seemed good to me, I could have decided differently. I could have given way to temptation, I could have accepted the bribe, I could have funk'd the fight. "Ah," you say, "but it is not in your character to". Perhaps: but what is my character? My character is only a disposition to do the things I do. If I had acted out of character, people would not have had to revise the laws of nature, but would have had occasion to remark ruefully on the fickleness of flesh. There is, indeed, a necessary connection between character and actions, but it is a logical necessity, and the necessary inference goes from the actions to the character and not

² G.W.Leibniz, Fifth Letter to Clarke, §9, in H.G.Alexander, *The Leibniz Clarke Correspondence*, Manchester University Press, 1956.

vice versa: if I continually act out of character it ceases to be my character.

The explanatory argument for determinism is broken-backed. A historian may see my actions as being in character, and my character as stemming from my upbringing, my ideals, my experience and my culture, and conclude that, granted my character, which was formed by my upbringing, my ideals, my experience and my culture, I had to act as I did. But it is a different modality, a different sense of *could* and *must*. I could have acted differently. Instead of coming to the meeting as promised, or giving the lecture at the stated time, I could have taken the bus to Heathrow, flown to Paris and staged an art exhibition in a public lavatory. If I had, people would have revised their opinion of me and my character. I would have become a different person, no longer the me that people had felt they could rely on. But that is all. My character is not something fixed, determining my actions with causal necessity, but is formed and constituted by my actions. I can cultivate good habits, and habitually act well, but can—sometimes all too easily—fail. If I manage not to fail, the historian can view me as a reliable character, acting for intelligible reasons which may form part of a larger picture. But it was my choice that I did what I did, not some natural necessity that forced me to do so, willy-nilly.

History is literature, but a special sort of literature. Some histories are great literature, and can be read and appreciated for their literary merits alone. But the criteria of historical assessment are not simply literary ones. History has to be true. And the hard reality of historical truth imposes constraints that sit ill with purely literary canons of excellence. The cast of *dramatis personae* is both too large and too narrow. Too many figures clutter up the canvas, obtruding themselves irrelevantly and obstructing the smooth flow of narrative. The playwright and the novelist can do better without them. But the playwright and the novelist can also avail themselves of a wider range of characters, who bring out the possibilities of human nature and the tragedies of human existence far more strikingly than the often banal record of historical events can achieve. Shakespeare's Macbeth is much larger character than the historical Macbeth. Mrs Proudie rules our imagination in a way that no Victorian wife ever did. Literature can explore possibilities and reveal profundities that history, circumscribed by the happenstance of what actually happened and who actually did it, can never aspire to. But the obduracy of historical truth brings a different reward. In place of the range and profundity of great literature, history has the hard gritiness of being about what actually happened. History is for real.