

THE OBJECTIVITY OF HISTORICAL JUDGMENTS

History studies the past. Anything past, and only a past thing, can be made the subject of a historical study. We can have histories of ideas, events, planets, nations, persons, etc. In all historical ventures the reality of the past is accepted as a postulate, and it is bound to remain a postulate because, by its very nature, it is incapable of being ever demonstratively proved to be true or false. It is true by definition that the past cannot be presented. It cannot be given in experience because, if it is, then it ceases to be past and becomes present. Hence, just on logical grounds, it is impossible to have about the past any knowledge by acquaintance or direct experience.

It may be said that certain gifted individuals, in virtue of being endowed with some super-normal powers, can actually see or experience the past; as if they have in their possession some sort of a time-machine which can take them from the present to the past. But even if all this is true, it does not solve the problem of the past. Our inability to experience the past is not just a psychological or physical inability; it is not simply the fact that our eyes are not powerful enough to penetrate into the thick cover of the past in order to see what is concealed therein. What we can see (or experience) is not, by definition, the past but the present, and therefore any attempt to prove the present-ability or observability of the past amounts to transforming the past into the present, and thus to denying the reality of the past. If there is no past, there is no problem about the past, and therefore to hold that the past is observable in some supernormal experience is not to explain but to explain away the problem of knowing the past, and also to make all history not only unnecessary but impossible. It is a queer truth, and certainly a limitation for God, that if he is omniscient, he cannot be a historian and he cannot overcome this limitation because it is a logical one.

It is clear from the above that the attempt to make the past observable is a misguided one because it is based on

misconstruing a logical difficulty as a psychological or physical one, and also that if the attempt succeeded, it would not make historical research any easier; rather, it would make it impossible. If there is no past, there cannot be any study of the past.

Another important presupposition of history is that our present thinking about the past does not and cannot alter it; i.e., it is the historian's firm faith that his *present* thinking about a past event does not modify the character of that event. Every historian, as a historian, therefore, is a realist in so far as it is an article of faith for him that the past is independent of our present thinking about it.

An important characteristic of history is the uniqueness, or the unique individuality, of its subject-matter. It is not concerned with discovering what *usually* happens, or what always happens, under certain conditions; its aim is not to discover general laws, or to arrive at generalised truths about some natural or social events or occurrences. It is concerned with what actually happened at a particular time and place, and its aim is to describe it in its concrete particularity in as detailed a manner as circumstances permit. A historian may try to *explain* the occurrence of an event by attributing it to certain antecedent circumstances and may also state, or speculate about, the effects it had, or is likely to have, on succeeding events. But he still remains confined to concrete, particular, events or entities, and what he does is very much different from what a social or natural scientist does. The latter is interested in concrete events or entities not as concrete particulars but as *examples* of certain types, and his objective is not fulfilled just by describing them or even by explaining their occurrence or existence. His objective is to discover, or infer, some general laws about the class of which these particular events and entities are members. When I say all this, I mean neither to disparage history, nor to elevate sciences; I only wish to state how, in fact, the former differs from the latter.

By its very nature a historical study is bound to be selective because it is not possible for any historian to write

the complete history of *everything*. It is not possible even to write the complete history of *anything* because no event is completely isolated. Every event is related to many other events which may precede, succeed, or be simultaneous with, it, and it is not possible to describe all of its relationships. Therefore, the historian has to make his description or narration selective by deciding to describe only some aspects of the event in question.

Every selection essentially involves the use of some principle, or criterion. This principle is almost always given to the historian by the *present*. Some present needs, ideals, policies, or purposes, motivate the historian to write the history, say, of a certain period in the life of a nation or society, and he arranges the facts in a manner determined by his understanding of the course of important events which took place during the said period. He cannot avoid using his sense of importance, and his sense of importance is largely determined by the needs and values of the present, the age in which he writes the history. He also has to use certain conceptual tools, or some conceptual framework, to get facts ordered and organised in a consistent whole, since history is not just a collection of facts. He cannot avoid using his own judgment as to what is worth including and what is not in giving a historical account of his subject. In fact, what distinguishes a good from a bad historian is not the amount of facts or data collected, but the organisation of the data in a well-structured whole. It is this trait of the historian which also distinguishes him from a chronicler or gazetteer.

* A good historian is one who puts life into dead facts. By the nature of his calling, his endeavour is restricted to collecting information about the past, but in presenting and organising the various bits of information in order to make out of them a readable story, he gets ample opportunities of using his creative and imaginative talents. A successful historian recreates the past and presents it in such a lively manner that it starts telling its tale, as if in its own words.

It is only in such works of history that the historical genius finds its adequate expression.

Just from the fact that the writing of history essentially involves selection, it cannot be inferred that historical judgments must be subjective. A subjective judgment is one which states something about the mental state of the speaker or writer himself, the truth or falsity of which can be conclusively certified only by him. A historical judgment, on the other hand, is not about any mental state of the historian, but about some objective past event or entity. It may reveal, but it does not assert, some preference, or something else, about the mind, of the historian, but that does not make it subjective. What I am trying to emphasize is that selectivity does not logically imply subjectivity.

Selectivity does not even logically imply arbitrariness. A set of historical judgments will be arbitrary if the criteria responsible for their assertion are constituted solely by the likes and dislikes, or personal preferences, of the historian. If any history is written in this manner, there is no denying the fact that it would only be spurious and not genuine history. But the fear expressed here need not disturb us because it very seldom happens that the principles of selection used by a historian consist solely of his own preferences. It is worth mentioning here that the value of a historical work very largely depends upon these principles. What the historian selects must not only seem important to him alone, but also to a good number of his professional colleagues as well as to non-professional, intelligent, members of the society. This means that the historian must possess a very balanced sense of importance or evaluation. There is nothing unusual in requiring him to fulfil this condition because it is a general but necessary condition which must be fulfilled by any researcher or explorer whatsoever. Every scientist, rather every inquirer, has to be selective in more than one way, and his inquiry has any worth only if the principles or criteria of selection used by him are

publicly defensible on impersonal grounds and acceptable to the community of inquirers.

But if selectivity does not imply subjectivity or arbitrariness, it does not follow from this non-implication alone that historical judgments are objective; if a judgment is not subjective it does not *ipso facto* become objective because it may be neither. Therefore, whether or not historical judgments are objective still remains an open question.

Historical judgments are essentially about something which belongs to the past, and for logical purposes it makes no difference whether it is immediate or distant past. Therefore, it is not possible to have a direct verification of any historical judgment. This implies that the correspondence theory of truth is completely out of place in history. We cannot require of a historical judgment that it can be accepted as true only if it corresponds to a fact, for the simple reason that it is logically impossible to fulfil the conditions which must be fulfilled in order that we may test whether or not the judgment in question corresponds to the fact in question. For example, if F be the fact to which the historical judgment H claims to correspond, and the correspondence to which is necessary to make its claim to truth valid, we can ascertain whether or not H corresponds to F only if F is given or presented, but this is logically impossible. F cannot be given or presented because it is a past fact; it is logically impossible to present a past fact. Therefore, no historical judgment can be said to be objective if by a true objective judgment we mean one which corresponds to a fact. It is important to take note of this point because it may seem quite naive to say that historical judgments are objective because for each one of them there is some fact to which it can be said to correspond or fail to correspond and, it is *true* if it does and false if it does not.

This theory of historical objectivity, besides being infected with the well-known short-comings of the correspondence theory of truth, is unacceptable because it ignores the logical peculiarity of the past. Historical judgments are

factual, in the sense that they are *about* certain facts, that they do describe certain facts. But they are different from some other factual judgments in the sense that the facts they are about cannot, being past, be reproduced. They can only be pictured, recreated, or reconstructed, out of present data.

Though it is too obvious to be emphasised, still it is worth mentioning that the evidence for any historical judgment is always some present datum. It may be documentary, archaeological, or memorial. A historian reconstructs a certain past out of the data presently available to him. He may get them out of the documents available for his scrutiny, or out of the materials obtained from some excavation, or out of the account given by an eye-witness. But in each case the evidence is something presented or given to his cognition, and the process by which a historical judgment is arrived at on the basis of the set of evidences given is not one of deduction but of reconstruction. That is why, however strong, the (present) evidences for a certain judgment are, it is still possible that some day some other evidence is discovered which makes it questionable. The peculiarity of historical reasoning is that neither the evidences entail the conclusion, nor the conclusion is verifiable in a direct manner.

When a historian intends to describe a past event, since the event has vanished and is not repeatable, he cannot deal with it in the manner in which he can deal with a present event. He can only depend upon the evidences for or against the belief that it did occur. The description which he presents on the basis of these evidences can be more or less appealing, acceptable, or appropriate, but cannot be *shown* to be true or false. He may even say, on the basis of his evidences, that he knows that the event took place. Normally, when we truly say that we *know* that X is A, it means that X is A. To know that X is A entails that X is A. But this is not true of the use of 'know' by the historian. If we want to restrict the use of 'know' only to such contexts in which to know that P entails P, we shall be forced

to say that we do not know the past, or that there is nothing called historical knowledge. This will not only quite justifiably, be very vehemently opposed by the historian; it is not even necessary to recommend such a restriction on the use of 'know'. Like many other words, 'know' also may be ambiguous. It seems to me that when we say of a past event that we know it took place, the use of 'know' here does not entail that it did take place, and, that by saying we know it took place we mean primarily that we can give adequate or satisfactory reasons for saying that it took place.

The clue to the problem of historical objectivity lies here. A historical judgment has a claim to objectivity in the sense that it makes a claim to be justifiable on satisfactory grounds. It makes sense to say that it is or it is not justifiable, that we can speak of its having or not having adequate reasons. The processing of the data or evidences for or against a historical judgment can be done in a very rigorous manner. With the development of precise techniques for interpretation of documents, archaeological remains, and cross-checking of different records, very compelling reasons can be given for or against a historical judgment.

Historical judgments are objective, therefore, in the sense that they admit of being reasoned or argued about; in short, in the sense that they admit of good and bad reasons. This sense of 'objective' is not at all Pickwickian. The paradigm of subjective judgments, namely the judgments of taste, are considered to be subjective mainly on ground that we cannot argue or reason about them. It seems to me that on the adoption of this criterion, all judgments which we normally call objective remain objective and all those which we call subjective, subjective. This sense of objectivity also seems to accord well with the ordinary uses of 'objective' and 'objectivity'.

'Objective' and 'subjective' are not purely descriptive words; they are also emotive. The application of 'objective' to a statement expresses the user's favourable, and that of

'subjective' an unfavourable, attitude towards it. Therefore, to define 'objective' in such a way that all historical judgments cease to be objective may function like a persuasive definition aiming at a general disparagement of the calling of the historian. That will also be against the ordinary uses of both 'objective' and 'history', because, according to their ordinary uses, it is correct to say that historical judgments are objective.

Regarding the problem of the truth-values of historical judgments, it seems to me that the only criterion of truth which is relevant is the one of coherence, or agreement, of the various evidences available. If all or the majority of the evidences available affirm that a certain event X took place, it is reasonable for the historian to conclude that the judgment 'X took place' is true. It is still possible that the confirming evidences were concocted to prove the occurrence of X when nothing like X really took place. But to show that those evidences were concocted, he must have another set of equally, if not more, compelling evidences to the contrary. That is, he has to depend upon some other evidence even to reject an evidence; he cannot transcend the world of evidence, and meet the subject of his investigation face to face. For him only that is (or is to be accepted as) true which all, or at least the majority of the important, evidences commonly affirm to be true. If somebody says that even then what he thinks to be true may be false, the sense in which it may be false, he may retort, is not the contradictory of the sense in which he considers it to be true. He may even say that this latter sense of 'false' and the sense of 'true' corresponding to it as its contradictory have no place in history.

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