

## RATIONALITY AND THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

As Bertrand Russell notes in his Introduction to the lectures on logical atomism, "[t]he process of sound philosophizing, to my mind, consists mainly in passing from those obvious, vague ambiguous things, that we feel quite sure of, to something precise, clear, definite, which by reflection and analysis we find is involved in the vague thing that we start from ...".<sup>1</sup> Russell's sentiments on this point would seem to be particularly appropriate to the present topic, because the role of reason and rationality in the humanities and social sciences is the sort of thing of which we all are more or less conscious, but something that is also rather vague and ambiguous. The challenge to scholars who work in these disciplines, then, is how to arrive at a precise and clear understanding of that role that does not do violence to our initial certainties.

Discussion of the relation between reason or rationality and what might broadly be called 'the human sciences' is certainly nothing new, but it has been brought to a head in disciplines like philosophy, history and literature through the influence of so-called 'post-modernism'. To pursue this discussion in a non-didactic and non-technical way, I shall begin with a brief sketch of what is, arguably, the traditional view of the subject matter and goals of the humanities and social sciences. In the process, we shall see the role played by 'reason'. I shall suggest---- and I do not think this especially controversial-----that 'reason' has long been considered to be the fundamental element in these disciplines, and that it is commonly viewed as providing, or allowing a general methodology that is common to them all. In short, 'reason' is seen as determining the methodology of the humanities and social sciences *par excellence*.

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I would like, however, to suggest some problems with viewing the function of 'reason' in this way and with the belief that these disciplines have or should have a single methodology based on it. These comments, I hope, will clarify what we mean by 'reason' and what---as students of the humanities and social sciences---we might reasonably expect of these disciplines. In the end, we should see that the conclusions arrived at are, in fact, implicit in (though are also much more precise than) our initial vague and ambiguous view of the relation of 'reason' and the human sciences.

### I. The humanities and social sciences as focused on the human person

To begin almost pleonastically, the study of literature, art, history, philosophy---indeed, the study of anything---presupposes a mind at work. The mind somehow establishes criteria by which it isolates certain elements of experience, and in this way distinguishes specific 'subject matters' or academic disciplines. The lines separating these disciplines are, however, never rigidly drawn because of the open-ended character of experience, and many of the items of our experience admit of inclusion in several distinct subject areas. Is Plato's *Apology*, for example, philosophy, literature, or history? Thus, there need be a certain degree of flexibility in placing a text within a specific discipline, but this does not count against our skill having an understanding of what is involved when we consider the *Apology* as philosophy, or as literature, or as history.

In the humanities (and, perhaps to a lesser degree, the social sciences) the subject matter is the human person. Admittedly, even animal life is studied, not simply as an unexplored vista in our knowledge of the world, but as a way of understanding more about human beings in relation (and in reaction) to the world they live in (e.g., to the flora and fauna, and to other human beings, singly or in community). Still, it is humanity--- its art, history, philosophy--- in which human beings are primarily interested and, hence, one sees the centrality of the humanities and the social sciences in most academic institutions.

### II. The 'internal criteria' which define a discipline

Within each of these disciplines which comprise the humanities

and the social sciences, there is, however, an attempt to isolate and focus on certain distinctive and fundamental elements---these reflect the 'internal criteria' which define that discipline. But how are such criteria arrived at? What is the role of reason in this process? To suggest what, concretely, is involved, consider the example of the academic study of history which reflects many of the issues that one finds in both the humanities and the social sciences.

What is it that historians attempt to do? There are at least four kinds of things with which they might be concerned: First, historians are interested in the isolation and identification of certain phenomena which are necessary in order to make accurate general statements about history itself. Thus, historians will examine particular 'events' (an admittedly vague word) in order to assert something about the essence of history (i.e., human behaviour of the past), or to note trends or streams of thought which will illuminate the nature of individual and collective human behaviour, or simply to attempt a comparison between past events and current events or trends. Second, historians may attempt causal explanations of certain events (e.g., the Second World War or the decline and the disintegration of the Soviet Union). Third, some historians are concerned with the separation of so-called 'factual' from 'value' judgements, and with attempting to construct a 'value free' account of the past. Finally---through it may be pervasive through all of the preceding---historians are sometimes concerned with reflecting critically on events as a means to settling on some specific policy of action relevant to the present or future.

### III. The modern view of the role of reason

Obviously, not all historians do all of the above, but it does seem that, as historians, they must be undertaking some of them. But the definition or description of a discipline does not stop with a list of these internal criteria. For example, philosophers, though 'outsiders', have traditionally demanded of historians---as they would of any scholar in the humanities and social sciences---that, in each of the activities mentioned above, they apply certain rational procedures. That is, it is not simply enough that the intellect or mind---or whatever one wishes to call this capacity---makes

distinctions, but it need make them in accord with certain rules. And these rules must in principle be public and universal in character. In other words, these disciplines must meet certain general standards of rationality.

In general, then, how has 'reason' operated in these disciplines? Minimally, it has distinguished questions of fact from those of value, ensured that the questions of fact are relevant to the subject matter, and has led us to (or allowed us to make) explanations, generalizations (if only rules of thumb) and predictions (with an 'acceptable' amount of accuracy)—in short, it has attempted to ensure that the discipline achieves the aim of the humanities and social sciences in general.

Clearly, though, these objectives are not without problems. For example, how do we determine what is a factual statement and what is value laden? The emotivity of language can lead to a different sense of what is being said, depending on the audience. (Is Yassar Arafat a terrorist, a freedom fighter or a head of state? These terms may refer to the same activities, but clearly reflect a wide range in sense.) Here, we cannot simply appeal to a distinction which claims that what is 'factual' is substantiated by 'objective' reasons, whereas what is value laden is only subjective opinion. Such a distinction is rejected by many and, even where it is not, what counts as 'objective' and 'subjective' is itself problematic.

The question of what is relevant to a discipline is also no easy matter to resolve. This does not simply concern how to settle borderline cases, but also involves the problems of the different conceptions of a discipline. As noted above, not all historians and philosophers of history (indeed, perhaps not many) are of the same mind as to what the academic study of history involves.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, even if we take just one answer—for example, that of history as providing an explanation of events—we will see that there is still far from unanimity in determining what 'doing history' is. Wilhelm Dilthey and R. G. Collingwood argue that the historian must have *Verstehen* or an "empathic understanding" of persons in history in order to understand them (and, consequently, understand history) better. Hence, there is an important role played by introspection in one's attempts at historical explanation. Carl Hempel has attempted

to provide a method of historical explanation, based on either a "deductive nomological" or a statistical inductive method. According to Peter McClelland, William Dray views history as involving an understanding of historical action as "a calculation which the agent would have made if the agent had attempted to make such a calculation"<sup>3</sup>—whether or not such a calculation was actually made.<sup>4</sup> And each of these approaches to the study of history has met with significant criticism.

Even once the historian settles on how to go about determining what will be examined in order to arrive at an explanation, there are other difficulties—difficulties with parallels in other disciplines—of constructing explanations, and making predictions and generalizations. For example, if, in history, as in many of the social sciences, we attempt to make generalizations about human behaviour of the form 'similar stimuli, experienced by people with similar dispositions, will result in similar actions', we are confronted with a number of questions: first, what is meant by 'similar'? second, is the generalization that the historian arrives at, something that is intended to be necessarily, possibly or simply always true?<sup>5</sup> Finally, is explanation, in the sense of 'causal explanation', possible at all? As Hume pointed out, facts are conjoined, never connected.<sup>6</sup>

Despite (or, arguably, because of) these problems, McClelland notes the tendency (in historians, at any rate) to leave the reader to supply most of the relevant generalizations that are needed for causal explanation to work.<sup>7</sup> There is, moreover, a tendency to allow a certain vagueness in historical explanation by claiming that it is acceptable within the general conventions accepted by historians. Here, however, we stumble onto the phenomenon that "no two people are likely to have exactly the same set of generalizations concerning human behaviour"<sup>8</sup>, and disagreements, therefore, concerning the adequacy of such generalizations seem unavoidable. Arguably, the reason why so many of the problems raised here do, in fact, seem to be often avoided is simply because they are never fully articulated.<sup>9</sup>

But, in any event, in describing these possible objectives of the historian, and in the comments that we make about them,

the guide to which scholars and critics turn to make the appropriate delineations and cautions seems to be an 'external' criterion of rationality—though they also evidently include 'internal' conventions accepted on the whole by practicing historians. In short, then, not only is reason apparently involved with the distinguishing and the differentiation of disciplines, but it requires that this be done according to certain general rules, and that these rules be applied according to certain general norms.

#### IV. 'Reason' and convention

This, then, seems to be how reason—along with, as I have just suggested, conventions—functions in the writing of history. However, a reader might at this point raise the question whether there is, or mightn't be, a conflict between the two. Indeed, convention could simply be a prejudice or be 'outgrown' by an increase in knowledge. For example, a conception of history as involving in some significant respect a teleological principle—say 'humanity's journey towards the New Jerusalem'—may be regarded merely as a mould into which events have been fitted without due respect for their complexity. More generally, then, the convention of 'unity' of a discipline may no longer be helpful in pursuing that study, and it may even provide an impediment to an accurate representation of the facts.

The question of whether a convention still 'works' is a recurring one in all of the humanities and social sciences. As long as it 'works' (and it seems that we 'check' this through our reason), it is used; when it doesn't (and this too seems to be determined by our reason), it is discarded. So, are we to conclude that we should subject all of our conventions to the critical scrutiny of reason—and, particularly, those norms provided by what we call 'rationality'? In the modern era at least, philosophy's response seems that we must answer in the affirmative. For, if we do not, there would apparently be no protection against inaccurate understanding of those things which, as students of the humanities and social sciences, we seek to understand.

In these disciplines, therefore, human reason—specifically, reason so far as it reflects a model of (instrumental) rationality<sup>10</sup>—is

taken as the relevant arbiter, because it appears to be the only sure guide to knowledge. In addition, it, too, 'works'.

But before accepting this analysis of the role of reason, it is important to realize that one important question has been overlooked. What precisely 'reason' is, has yet to be explained. At this point, all that has been said is that 'reason' has been identified with the general capability of human beings to think, and it involves a certain type of rule-governed behaviour. But is this approach to the human and social sciences too 'rationalistic'? Not necessarily. There is no obvious conflict between this and, for example, the empirical character of many disciplines. In fact, the way in which reason is employed here suggests that it has a predominantly experimental character. Within each discipline, one conducts 'thought experiments' by which one is able to clarify certain concepts, explain events, state facts, and make predictions.<sup>11</sup> It is, one might argue, this process taken as a whole that we are referring to when we talk about the human sciences as based on 'reason'.

For example, as McClelland points out, in the academic study of history, we often find generalizations made or implied, and in such generalizations one commonly finds reference to dispositions (of the agent or the subject). But how do we acquire knowledge about dispositions? Well, we consider such things as: statements of the agent, statements by others about the agent, observed action of the agent, and the sum total of *our* knowledge about human behaviour, including introspection (i.e., knowledge of how we would have behaved).<sup>12</sup> In short, common to this seems to be an emphasis on *experimentation*—one asks "How do I know this to be so?"

Yet, despite this concern with the empirical and the particular, the modern approach to the academic study of history seems to presuppose, first, the rationalist canon that, if one does not or cannot 'know' something to be so through reason, it is not relevant,<sup>13</sup> and, second, that there is in principle, a single right view of the world and all of its elements that can be arrived at by proper use of the right rational method. And this view can be found in all academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In short, the modern view of the role of reason in the humanities and social sciences is that it provides a method for establishing

and working within the various disciplines, and that this is ultimately something that is universal. This method—what we call ‘rationality’—then, claims to function as an external control on how we think about and pursue the humanities and social sciences.

#### IV. Criticisms

The assertion that reason—particularly, the method of ‘instrumental rationality’ that it employs—is reliable as an arbiter in the humanities and social sciences, however, ignores the obvious. It begs the question of how we know that it is reliable. Why does one say that human reason is the relevant arbiter in the human sciences? Because it is reliable. But how do we know that it is reliable? No external criterion for ‘reliability’ seems available to us. Earlier we saw some reasons to disallow past convention as being, in some sense, an absolute guide through which, for example, we can categorize historical events and construct generalizations. So what else, one may ask, is left?

But still, it seems that our sole ground for saying that reason is reliable is that its products accord with reason. Thus, the argument comes full circle. (What is, perhaps, ignored is the possibility of ‘unreasoned’ data or convention that, *together* with the products of reason, provide a complete account of historical events, and in terms of which the historian is able to make generalizations and give explanations.)

There is a second difficulty with assigning reason the role of ‘arbiter’ in these disciplines. As noted earlier, one justification of the role of reason is simply that it ‘works’. But such a justification is problematic for two reasons. First, it is, in a sense, all the modern has, for without it one rooted in modernity cannot attempt any of the tasks with which the various disciplines are concerned. So, to use fact that reason ‘works’ is to give very little justification indeed. It gives us simply what it says it will give us, but it excludes, by definition, anything which cannot be put into this mould. Second, in a sense, it doesn’t always work. What ‘occurs’ or ‘does work’ may sometimes be at variance with what our most rational estimations and predictions say should occur or should work.



Consider the collapse of the regime of the Shah of Iran or, more recently, the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Even the most careful predictions of observers of the political scene were simply wrong in the light of the turn of these events. Are we to conclude in cases such as these simply that our 'reason' has made an inference on the basis of too little evidence, but that it can in principle still make accurate inferences? Or is this not, rather, simply *ad hoc*? Why believe that the best account of an event is, in some way, the causal and the 'rational' one—particularly when passions and emotions are involved? Surely to assume that some 'rational' account is in principle possible is to assume that passions and emotions can be quantified and can be used in some kind of rational calculus. (And the only obvious ground for that presumption is that one insists that there must be a certain consistency between what 'reason' predicts and what occurs). If these criticisms hold, the modern conception of reason and rationality, then, simply cannot have a controlling role in the humanities and, arguably, the social sciences.

Let us approach these criticisms in another way. From the modern perspective, there is a presumption in favour of reason as fundamental in the social sciences and in the 'humanities'. The role of reason appears to be that of a blueprint. One has a clear (or, more or less clear) idea of what reason is and will do and then one applies it to experience. But surely it is questionable whether this approach is a correct way of carrying out studies in the humanities and social science. Do we impose rules on the discipline, or might there not be an internal reflective process where rules grow out of practices, and within the context of various aspects of life? Just as we run the risk of misunderstanding religion by imposing external criteria of meaningfulness on it<sup>4</sup>, do we also not commit a similar misrepresentation by taking different academic disciplines and arguing that there is, fundamentally, a single method of analysis and understanding common to them?

As an illustration of the inadequacy of using 'reason' in this sense, as providing a paradigm for understanding the social sciences, consider the case of an anthropologist studying a different culture—say, that of a pre-technological Indian ethnic group. Here, she notices an important role played by a feminine symbol—the "Earth

Mother"—and that, prior to planting, this is invoked through a series of ritual practices. The anthropologist might be tempted to comment that the tendency in this culture to invoke the help of this being is an irrational practice borne of a lack of scientific understanding.

But what 'irrationality' has occurred here? The invocation of the feminine does not obviously have (merely) a causal role.<sup>15</sup> Is it plausible, indeed, to suggest that the 'reason' certain individuals pray or engage in ritual is simply because they thought it would bring about some desired effect? In fact, one might well ask why the anthropologist should attempt to understand such practices in this way, as if prayer, for example, were in some sense a cause. Moreover, in terms of other activities and practices, actions like the invocation of the Earth Mother might well be quite consistent with a whole set of beliefs. And if coherence with one's other beliefs counts as a criterion for 'rationality' then surely their actions are 'rational'. That we in the technologically advanced world would not act in such a way is immaterial, because in our case such behaviour would (likely) be quite inconsistent with the rest of what we believe. In short, assessment of what is 'rational' in a culture cannot be made from without and we must be receptive to the possibility that what counts as 'rational' may differ.

This is not something that should concern only historians and those who study past human behaviour. The rigid requirements for inductive sampling in the natural, or deductive explanation in the pure sciences could not be imposed upon historical accounts unless we already supposed that the objective of history is to do just that—that is, provide quasi-scientific explanations.<sup>16</sup> Of course, some historians do yearn for a natural scientific method, but whether such a yearning can be satisfied is doubtful. Consequently, it is not surprising to see that many historians are content with describing and working the limits apparently imposed by the nature of historical events.

#### VI. Towards a post-modern view of the humanities and social sciences

Is there, then, a single method, common to the humanities and social sciences, which is foundational and rational in character?

Arguably not; for example, we surely distinguish between how to settle questions of fact (e.g., "Is it the 14th of February?") and those of value (e.g. "should you give beloved a valentine?"), and the different ways in which we answer these questions clearly introduce different standards of what is appropriate as a reason and what is not. Clearly, the guidelines, criteria and procedures to which we appeal in arriving at an answer, do not have an external justification, but an internal one. In short, what counts as 'reason' is relative to a specific conceptual framework. In as much as 'reason' deals with rules and rule making, just as different games have different rules, so also the specific disciplines in which one makes 'an appeal to reason' will, in fact, understand and employ 'reason' differently. And what counts as 'reasonable' will likely be distinct or different for each distinct and different 'conceptual epoch'. For example, our view of the world is not Homer's, and what Homer would allow as a perfectly 'reasonable' view, is likely not our own

But there is no way of settling which view is better or more 'reasonable'. What justification is possible for insisting that Homer did not appeal to the gods, who were just as much a part of nature as the Trojans and the Greeks? There is no need for external justification here any more than we need an external justification for why, in chess, the bishop moves on the diagonal. Indeed, the imposition of the external criteria represented by the demands of 'rationality' need to be justified; these criteria are not *a priori* or obviously true. And if one simply tries to deny this strategy, is one not guilty of a conceptual chauvinism, not to mention begging the question of whether there is a single method common to the humanities and social sciences? It is for this reason that it is appropriate to speak of different aims or purposes in the academic study of history and that one cannot choose among them by appealing to some canon of 'rationality'. The 'nature' of reason and its role is derived from what is required by the content—e.g., the reality it attempts to describe. Thus, there is no fundamentally normative role for reason in the study of history. Rather, we attempt to derive what 'doing history' is from the practice of those who engage in it. What we seek in history, as in all academic disciplines, is an internal norm.

There is, however, no warrant to describe this view as 'irrationalist; it simply does not subscribe to a view of reason as providing a single, universal model or method of investigation. As one's objectives differ, one's criteria differ, but so long as there are specific rules which are, in principle, open to observation of their regularity, the apparently central aspect of rules being meaningful appears to be met. Why *not* allow for different models of rationality?

The danger of social studies rooted in the approach to rationality that is paradigmatic of modernity is that what is studied is often studied according to the external criteria of the observer, which may not take account of the inner coherence and rule-governed behaviour of the subject or subjects. Admittedly, some disciplines, as some games, have rules that are similar (e.g., they follow the same strategies and have the same function.) But not all games should be judged according to one set of rules. In fact, in spite of this commitment to 'rationality' and rational justification, most researchers are more than ready to abandon it when it comes into conflict with certain basic beliefs. Thus, philosophical puzzles notwithstanding, historians do not feel compelled to worry about whether the material world exists----it is part and parcel of our living that it does exist but, if it doesn't, the academic study of history is clearly irrelevant. But it is important to note that some of these beliefs are simply 'groundless'. And it is equally important to note that this is no fault or weakness, for some beliefs simply have no ground. Similarly, perhaps, some theists err when they attempt to construct demonstrative proofs that God exists. What is more to the point is that Christians show by their actions that God exists. In short, to understand an object of study, we must look for an internal, as distinct from an external 'rationalist', justification.

## VII. Conclusion

So where does this leave us? I have suggested that there is, in fact, no single method that the human mind employs in the humanities and social sciences, though I have not said specifically what these different methods are, nor what this implies when it comes to identifying (or distinguishing different) disciplines. I have said that the role of reason within a discipline is to make distinctions,

to formulate or discover rules and to apply them. (whether one considers this sufficient to call this process 'rationality' is, however, not the point; what is important is that one is engaged in a procedure that attempts to uncover, rather than prescribe, the norms of the discipline.) And this allows that the sorts of norms or rules that may be found in one discipline may differ significantly from those found in others. An external criterion of rationality is not the sole or most reliable guide to action or to the appropriate activities within a discipline; the demands of 'reason' are not exhausted by the model of 'instrumental rationality' and conventions also play an important role. There is, in short, no question of the *a priori* legitimacy of an appeal to 'external' assessment or correction.

But will such an approach leave academic specialists in conceptual ghettos, each in different and incommensurable worlds, as it were, where 'reason' is purely equivocal? Clearly, not everything will be as the modern model of rationality would have it. But it does not follow that there is no room for overlap or for fruitful elaboration about what one is doing. It simply recognizes that different conceptual epochs and different disciplines may have different rules. What some amount to may be similar to others, but then again they may not. Of course, one will still expect to find a certain coherence of 'truths' in what is said within any particular field, but what this entails is a matter determined internally by that discipline, and research is not, incidentally, any easier for that

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#### NOTES

1. Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism (1918) in Russell's Logical Atomism*, ed. David Pears (Bungay: Fontana/Collins, 1972), p.33
2. In the next three paragraphs, I draw on the description (though not the conclusion) of the nature of historical explanation found in chapter 2 of Peter D. McClelland,

*Causal Explanation and Model Building in History. Economics and the New Economic History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975)

3. McClelland, p. 98
4. See McClelland, p. 98
5. McClelland, pp. 22, 73.
6. See McClelland, pp. 22, 73.
7. McClelland, p. 84.
8. MCClelland, p. 79.
9. See McClelland, p. 79.
10. The term "instrumental reason" was coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1944 volume, *Philosophische Fragmente* (later published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung [Dialectic of Enlightenment]*).
11. See Peter Winch's discussion of this point in his *The Idea of a social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, revised edition (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 17.
12. See McClelland, pp. 66 and 68.
13. This statement here is, admittedly, somewhat ambiguous. The ambiguity is, is it that if I do not know it to be so, it is not relevant, or is it if it cannot be known by anyone, that it is not relevant?
14. This response has been given by a number of 'post-modern' defenders of religious belief, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, D.Z. Phillips, Hendrik Hart and Alvin Plantinga.
15. See, for example, D.Z. Phillips's discussion of Wittgenstein's remarks on pre-technological religion, in *Religion without Explanation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), pp. 34 ff.
16. See McClelland, chapter 2.