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HISTORY AS NARRATIVE

A. R. LOUCH

I. INTRODUCTION

I propose to examine the technique of narrative as it is used by historians, in order to show that it is not merely an incidental, stylistic feature of the historian's craft, but essential to the business of historical explanation. There is no reason to suppose that what I have to say is limited to history as it is usually conceived; examples could be found as well in biology, cosmology, and biography. But history will serve as a standard example of the technique I have in mind.

It will be argued, no doubt, that narrative is in fact a matter of style. In this view, to suppose that narrative explains is to be lulled by a story's smooth flow into mistaking literary transitions for real connections. This view will very naturally be held by those who are convinced that explanations must always consist in supporting any alleged connection among events by means of a covering law. If we fail to find instances of such laws in history, it is because they are simply not mentioned, but nonetheless operate covertly. Otherwise, the historian cannot be said to offer explanations at all.

If we accept the covering-law thesis as universal and a priori, we must admit one or the other of these options. But if we approach the nature of explanation with an open mind, we may take seriously the lack of explicit reference to covering laws in narratives which, nonetheless, appear to explain. At least we feel that we gain occasional enlightenment from historical narratives; we are conscious that puzzles are sometimes removed and obscurities clarified.

Hempel, who has carried the covering-law thesis most vigorously into the historian's territory, admits that typical historical explanations lack explicit reference to covering generalizations. He says, rather vaguely, that historical accounts do rest "on certain assumptions as to how human beings will behave."¹ Yet in all his examples it is the particular case that makes the

1. Carl Hempel, "Explanation in Science and in History," *Philosophical Analysis and History*, ed. William Dray (New York, 1966), 109.

process clear; the generalization always looks as though it was generated artificially from the particular case.

If we are not already convinced that the covering-law view of explanation has universal application, we must cast about for an attractive alternative candidate to account for the special character of historical explanation. This I propose to find in the technique of narrative itself.

II. NARRATIVE AS EXPLANATION

A case that will help us here is provided by courtesy of modern movie-making techniques. Accelerated motion pictures make it possible to *see* a continuously changing state of affairs, like the blossoming of a flower or the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Normally these changes are too slow to be observed; what we witness are discontinuous and radically different states: bud then flower, seed then sprout, cocoon then moth. If we extend this list to historical affairs we can add: feudal into capitalist economy, local into nationalist political order, agricultural into industrial means of production, a sacred into a secular way of life, and so on. The list might well touch on biological, geological, and cosmological matters as well: reptilian into mammalian forms, rock into sand, plains into mountains, gas clouds into stars.

What we want to do in such cases is fill in the gaps and provide a smooth flow of change where a first glance reveals radical discontinuities. Such a strategy, I suppose, might be thought to depend on a metaphysical presupposition, that dissimilar events are taken to be the earlier and later features of a continuously existing thing, process, system or substance. Think here of Thales' paradigm example of water, with all its momentous consequences for the history of western thought. Discontinuous observations present us with a puzzle: how a thing can be now liquid, now solid, now steam? Has one kind of stuff, water, been removed secretly in the night and been replaced by another, ice? To do a bit of historical mythologizing, one might venture to say that that is not how a primitive man might have reacted to his discovery of ice. Perhaps he says instead, let's keep watch and see what happens. To choose that strategy is to be guided by the narrative style of explanation, to feel that one's puzzles will be resolved, to an extent at least, by seeing the change take place. It is rational to proceed in this way if we may assume that things persist and undergo change.

We do not need to review the difficulties philosophers have always found in theories of substance. These difficulties have no doubt prompted the opposite kind of metaphysical thesis, that the world consists of discontinuous

and discrete atoms, events, or sense-data. Such a view, however, has profound difficulties of its own. It must explain away the wide range of descriptions and explanations predicated on the persistence of objects. It is in danger, too, of espousing a wholly irrational universe, in which the only sensible approach is statistical in nature, since the only significant question about the occurrence of an event is whether patterns in the occurrence of events support predictions as to further events. It is difficult to state this view coherently without presupposing at least the continued existence of persons as observers or predictors. Otherwise, how can one sensibly argue for the search for regularities?

In any event, in narrative we do describe and presuppose (if you will) a world of things that endure through change. We do not verify such claims, but we can illustrate them by much that is common in our experience, simply by reference to the life stories of mayflies, man, and mountains. This is to claim that we directly experience change, and that such experience simply demands concepts like substance, permanence, and persistence. The experience of change acquires for us a paradigmatic status, shaping the methods we use to attack less clear, less continuous, more unusual cases.

In history this is the guiding paradigm, creating the style and generating the puzzles and resolutions of them that are peculiarly historical. A world of discontinuities is inconsistent with historical practice. The historian's questions presuppose a connection of later portions of a man's life with earlier, the character of a nation at one point in time with its nature a hundred years later, the state of a culture in one century with its state at earlier and later times. These assumed connections focus attention on the dissimilarities, and predispose the historian to an explanation of them by means of a description that *shows* later stages evolving out of earlier. He makes continuity visible; he fills in the gaps.

Notice that we seem caught here by visual and tactile images in exploring the ideas of continuity and change. Perhaps these models lead us astray when applied to historical narrative; perhaps they indicate, as Strawson believes, that a spatio-temporal framework of bodies is simply basic to our description of the world. In any case, the visual model suggests that explanation can be provided simply by filling in the gaps in perception. Narrative, ideally, stands proxy for experience. (In Section VI we shall see how this proxy notion plays an even greater role in historical practice.) We do not, of course, attain this ideal, and no criterion can be formulated that will tell us when the story is complete enough. We might even want to say that in this sense historical knowledge is always relative to a certain place in the history of historiography. We judge an account to be better than its predecessors, not that it is the best or that it is complete.

III. WHY CHOOSE NARRATIVE?

What we have admitted so far is that narration is only one possible technique of explanation. We must answer also the more difficult question, why choose narrative? Suppose, for example, that we see the following:



We could say: to explain is to fill in the gaps, to show a continuous line, like this:



But could we not also imagine this possibility?



Here the arrows might be thought of as particles colliding with the object whose history, course, or trajectory we are recounting. In this case our account is causal, or mechanical. Why should we prefer one to the other? We have to answer: it depends upon the kind of events they are. This seems unsatisfactory because it forces us to give an account of explanatory strategies in terms of the kinds of puzzles that emerge naturally from an already collected context of information. Our description of data already inclines us toward the further moves we want to make in giving an explanation of them.

IV. NARRATIVE AND THE NATURE OF HISTORY

Perhaps we are now in a position to see why the historian is able to repudiate the covering-law model of historical explanation. His object is to lay out a continuum of events related in such a way as to meet the condition of narrative smoothness. These connections are not causal or statistical. The condition is met instead when one sees a narrative constructed out of adjacent descriptions which closely resemble one another, and when one is entitled to assume that there is some persisting thing or process to which this sequence of closely resembling descriptions applies.

It can also be seen why it has often been claimed that the historian must deal in the unique and the unrepeated. The historian is seeking to discover a chain of similarities that will exhibit the evolution of an historical feature or process; he is not presuming similarities (e.g., all revolution-type events) in order to discover other factors constantly associated with them.

The narrative conception of history also brings out the substance of the claim that the historian's task is a continuous one, standing in need of constant reworking, though not, for that reason, lacking in its own canons of discipline. In the first place, the historian's task is cumulative, a business of filling in more and more gaps, thus eliminating or softening the breaks in narrative smoothness. When historians speak of the infinite detail with which they have to deal, they draw attention to the fact that it would be unreasonable to suppose that there could be a finished account.

But in the second place, the construction of narrative is also a business of perspective. We see different chains of events, given different starting points and finish lines. We look, given our context of inquiry, for different resemblances among items. Episodes that enjoy prominence in the account of a decade may disappear from the account of an epoch. Equally, the episodes that figure prominently in the larger story may be irrelevant to the smaller.

Geoffrey Barraclough, in a piece on "Universal History," provides a useful example of this point. In discussing the early thirteenth century, English historians order their narratives around the constitutional struggle under John and Henry III, the French emphasize the strengthening of the national monarchy under Philip Augustus and Louis IX, and Germans trace the career of Frederick II and the collapse of German power after his death. But the historian "with global vision" places the conquests of Genghis Khan at the center of the stage, for his "achievements were far more momentous for mankind than anything which happened in England in his lifetime." Such an historian "will redesign the rest to fit the altered perspective."² Understanding the past in these terms comes down to ordering events and personalities in such a way as to bring a person or an episode into central focus, and to see in that mode of description the way in which other happenings flow from the actions of the central character or the climactic episode.

Historical talk is full of dramatic notions and devices like turning points. The Battle of Stalingrad becomes a central episode on which to build the account of the war in Europe. It represents an episode decisive in the changing fortunes of German and Russian arms during the Second World War. It has, I am tempted to say, a dramatic truth about it, and by this I do not mean to say that the connection of the battle with subsequent events is not causal. But the concept of cause ties philosophers to a particular manner of reasoning associated with the use of scientific law and large-scale generalization which is surely out of place here. We could just as well say that the concept of cause is highly protean, and that one of its uses appears in the style of narration. To approach narration, instead, as a distinct kind of explanation helps us overcome the epistemological difficulties connected so

2. In *Approaches to History*, ed. H. P. R. Finberg (Toronto, 1942), 102-103.

closely with the word *cause*. It focuses attention on the fact that describing a chain of events from a certain perspective in itself reveals connections among the events.

It is the scope of inquiry that determines the logic of narration. The historian sees a sequence of events *as* connected, belonging together, having an identity, and then constructs the narrative that reveals the course of evolution, of connectedness, among these events. Lingered debates over the proper extent of the Middle Ages or Renaissance or the proper moment at which to begin the history of France or Italy are thus not merely old scholars' battles over special preserves. There would be no historical puzzles in this sense without the assumption that something persists. It is the persistence of French civilization that makes it reasonable to wonder how the violent upheaval of the French Revolution developed out of the ideas and practices of the *ancien régime*.

It would be instructive to be able to offer an account of the historical entity. I can only assume that it works in the business of historical inquiry, for I think that to carry out such an analysis is to engage in historical inquiry itself. To grasp the entity on which historical narration is built is itself part of the business of historical discovery. No doubt the best method of carrying out this task in the metaphysics of history would be to write good narrative and then call attention to what has been done. Admitting an incapacity for this, I assume only the humbler role of reminding historians that they can do, and have often done, this sort of thing well. It will not help to look to generalizing and law-making sciences as models for what they should do.

V. A TENTATIVE SUMMARY

There is a way, then, of looking at change that requires continuity and smoothness of passage from feature to feature of what persists, if we are to give a perspicacious account of it. Narration is the method of doing this in the absence of the ideal: *seeing* something change before our eyes. The ideal is something that in the nature of the case is rarely met; narratives stand proxy for such ideal viewings, presenting a semblance of smooth transitions by the selection of closely resembling cases. Smoothness of passage is, moreover, one paradigm of what it is to understand or become clear about something. The account that can convert the apparent discontinuities in human, biological, geological or cosmological history into the perceived evolution of earlier into later states is in that sense explanatory. The force of such explanations does not depend upon covering laws or theories, but rests instead on a covert assimilation of these accounts to what is directly perceived. It is the language of ordinary experience that the historian speaks, and this is the language of continua. The covering-law view of explanation, on the other

hand, is best supported by the atomistic view of the world, and is rooted in a mathematical conception of reality. Whether this view is adequate for physical explanation is another and more difficult question. But in any event its success appears to be connected to the fact that its descriptions bear reference to hypothetical entities or to quantitative features abstracted from experience, and not to actual objects of perception. The narrative view is naturalistic, and finds its home in ordinary experience.

VI. THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE EXTENDED: PROXY EXPERIENCE

So much for the thesis. It now requires amplification, and an answer to criticisms. It will be useful, to begin with, to turn to a feature of the historian's craft closely allied to the method of narration.

It is worth observing that the historian may simply wish to give as clear a picture as he can of what the past was like. His aim is like that of the traveller who attempts to describe for stay-at-homes the sights, sounds, and flavors of the places visited. He re-creates for his readers what he has seen or studied. He provides, as it were, a proxy-experience for an audience lacking the detailed and more immediate acquaintance possessed by the historian or traveller.

It is tempting to compare this procedure with map-making or portrait painting. The comparison with a map suggests point-by-point correspondence, as a way of constructing accurate maps. The map-maker's aim requires a technique for identifying the elements of the world which correspond to the elements of his design. Since a recognizable feature of terrain — shape — is used as the basis for constructing the map, it is not surprising that one can then employ the notion of point-by-point correspondence. It is built into the kind of feature of the world we wish to describe by means of maps. Such a program, however, encounters insurmountable difficulties when applied to propositions rather than maps.

Suppose our concern is not with terrain but with, say, a face. We can see at once that some of our purposes will be different in the new case. We shall no longer be interested in computing mileages, for example, or determining exact directions from one place to another. Nonetheless suppose you pursue the map-making method. You take a piece of graph paper and, with some care, plot the points of the physiognomy at appropriate intersections of the graph-lines. In contrast, I draw a few suggestive lines. We both, in the eyes of our audience, produce a likeness. You deplore my inaccuracy, yet have to admit that my caricature conveys what we both intended to convey — how the man looks. You might argue that your method results in the "truer" account, since the entire face is constructed out of smaller corresponding likenesses, where the possibility of an error by the hand (compare: a mis-

description) is virtually eliminated. And yet the audience might say: his detail is distracting, the perfect copy does not add anything to what we can see for ourselves by looking at the man. The caricature, on the other hand, does something fresh. It produces a recognizable likeness, and in a way that reveals the character of the man, or what is striking about his physiognomy.

Caricature is a more instructive analogy for dealing with travellers' tales and historical narratives than point-by-point map-making. For the point-by-point construction assumes a similarity between the portrait and the thing portrayed. Caricature reminds us that tasks other than literal accuracy can be served by representation, while still preserving the notion that the caricature might be true to its model. We are looking for something besides inventory; we want the story or the portrait to create an impression for us of the man or place or time. (History, we are often told, is not mere chronicle.) Moreover, the very complexity of the things to be portrayed by the traveller and historian defeat the intention to produce a point-by-point likeness. Such a likeness would require a virtually infinite time to produce or to comprehend. The method of caricature turns out to be the only feasible way of doing the job. (History, we are told, requires a drastic selection from an infinite number of facts.)

VII. IMPRESSIONS AND EVOCATIONS: THE PROBLEM OF VERIFICATION

Still, what is it to create an impression? Perhaps it only means how one person or another sees things. (History, some say, is an art, not a science.) And if that is so, there appears to be no particular reason to prefer one impression to another, except as it appeals to a particular audience because of its vividness or familiarity.

Someone returns from Italy and describes his experiences. Those who listen to him say: what a vivid picture he conjures up! One can almost taste the food, smell the sewage in the streets, see the colors, and hear the raucous noises of an Italian city. Suppose they go to Italy, and find themselves recalling his descriptions at every turn. Are they verifying his account, or finding Italy through his words? Someone else in the audience has been to Italy. Perhaps he says: how well the man catches the spirit of the country; or perhaps he says: that's not the Italy I remember; or, even more significant: I hadn't thought of that before, but, yes, that *is* Italy, isn't it?

What sort of process is agreement and disagreement here? Perhaps the man's words conjure up in his auditors images which match or fail to match their own. Here verification is a business of matching pictures, a process in which words play the crucial role of evoking pictures. This is a tempting account because it allows for correspondence of sentences and things without the encumbrance of a theory of meaning in which at least some words are

attached, by fiat, to the reality they describe — hooks, as it were, that pull reality into language. In the absence of a coherent way of treating a special class of words as recognizable labels, the matching game of verification could be saved by substituting evocation for denotation as a way of moving from language to reality. This would be especially useful in the case of proxy-experience, for here it seems most plausible to say — though not, one supposes, as Wittgenstein intended it — that propositions are pictures of facts. We need to amend this to say, stories are pictures of facts, for it is not the elements that are verified separately in proxy-experience or narrative accounts, but the story as a whole.

But can we substitute evocation for denotation without losing the claim to know in the process? (This, of course, is a question for narrative as well, proxy-experience being only the simplified case of story-telling in which change over time is ignored.) Remember, then, what the third member of the audience at the Italian travelogue had to say: the description led him to see Italy in a new light. Well, is this description, properly speaking, or persuasion? When we hear the Middle Ages described either as barbaric and culturally impoverished or fermenting with ideas and techniques that fashioned the modern world, are we listening to reports of facts or the expression of attitudes?

To some the answer appears easy because they assume that a criterion for an adequate description can be stated quite generally. That, of course, is the question, as the example of caricature shows. Adequate description will vary with our intent in describing or in hearing descriptions given, and with the kind of thing whose description we essay. In any description there comes a point at which we must simply agree that we see the same things. In the map case, perhaps, this comes when one has resolved the map and terrain into elements; in the caricature case it comes at once — either you see the likeness or you don't.

This in itself should not lead us to prefer analysis in every case, for analysis may be neither relevant nor possible. On the other hand, it might seem prudent to seek analyses rather than relapse into the position — sometimes suggested by Collingwood — that true description of the past is logically tied to appreciation. The retort: “You just see that it's the case” leaves us with a feeling of uneasiness which, we hope, analysis might remove.

Still, looking at common experience, much can be said for Collingwood's view. Some ingredients of perception — taste and smell, for example — excite responses which are both descriptive and evocative or attitudinal. I think here of terms like bitter, acrid, sweet, pungent as well as the more elaborate and usually more metaphorical descriptions we have to offer of these aspects of our experience. It is hard to see how the descriptive and evocative could be separated here. But one might, I suppose, attribute this to physio-

logical equipment shared by most men, so that a uniform attitude toward experience can acquire a descriptive force just because the presence of the attitude can be relied upon to signal the presence of a particular aspect of the world. In contrast, historians' and travellers' tastes are rather more idiosyncratic, conditioned by differences in upbringing and heredity.

Nonetheless historical evocations can still provide a case like taste or smell in the essential respect. The historian immerses himself in the documents and artifacts of his period, and mulls it over until an impression emerges which, like a caricature, captures something of the mood or style of his man or period. The words here, like those describing taste and smell, are both descriptive and evocative, or rather descriptive through evocation: friendly, aggressive, cunning, arrogant, vacillating, determined are sample terms employed in such contexts. It is not clear how we are to convey impressions of scenes or episodes other than by evocation, that is, by descriptions that can be given only by means of words that also express attitudes.

But what about verification? Pictures and impressions are "true," we want to say, as a whole. Piecemeal confirmation of elements is not going to do the job. Yet it is hard to see how a general sense to terms like verification and evidence can be given except by means of the program of analysis. If two impressions are in conflict we lack a procedure for arbitration; they are simply different impressions.

Suppose one man at the travelogue says: "That's not *my* Italy." Can we resolve this dispute? We might very likely say: "His picture doesn't count for much. His was only a Cook's tour, while the other man actually lived in the country." The intimacy of acquaintance counts in favor, surely, of one man's story over the other's. The same is true of history. An historian supports his impressions of the past by showing the kind of acquaintance he has with his materials. But he cannot simply put his scholarship on view; somehow the quantity of information, for which we accord him status as an expert, must be displayed by deploying it in a new impression that meets standards of vividness and coherence. Both his greater fund of information and his skill in weaving it into an impression contribute to his fellow historians' judgment that his work represents an advance in historical knowledge. Of course, if the scales do not come down in favor of one impression over another, it is always possible that skepticism is the proper attitude. But this is the case in which we lack sufficient knowledge of the *special* case, not the *general* capacity to undertake and judge impression-formation.

VIII. A SECOND SUMMARY

Verification in history, or at least the kind of history that aims at proxy-experience, is both an internal and a changing matter. It is internal because

the sense of the past is only acquired through long exposure and persistent study. One cannot judge the deliverances of an historian except through that kind of experience. It is, one might say, a matter of detail rather than logical inference. It is changing because the technique of representation must succeed in evoking an impression, and this is a matter of using the sort of description that is tied to the experiences of its auditors. These, after all, may and do change. And so one finds it compelling to hear Croce tell us that all history is contemporary history.

The adequacy of proxy-experience or narrative can only be judged within the texture of previous knowledge and experience. Evocation is an essential ingredient in the business of comparing, and so judging, impressions. The critical as well as the evocative aspect of the historian's trade can only be carried out within the texture of a common experience. Perhaps in this sense Croce's dictum is only a special case of Wittgenstein's, that language is a form of life. But Wittgensteinian exegesis aside, we can see how evocation plays a role in proxy-experience, confirming impressions as well as convincing others of their merits. The thesis that one strategy of confirmation, and therefore one account of knowledge, must do for any kind of description, fails when examined in the light of such cases.

IX. SOME OBJECTIONS: HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

These remarks on proxy-experience have aimed at challenging the objection that narrative method substitutes evocation for description. But my thesis might also be challenged by claiming that it is not, indeed, in the flow of narrative that explanatory power lies, but in the way in which the historian handles the breaks, kinks, or intersections in the narrative. This suggests that the historian's explanations are causal after all, requiring support by general laws.

For example, we might explain the growth of a village into a city as the result of a gradual accumulation of wealth and an acceleration of trade. But it is equally possible that we could attribute the village's growth to particular events — a neighboring town's harbor silting up — or to particular acts — a town burgher's energetic and ambitious scheming. These are events that turn or jolt the otherwise steady stream of change. The analogy is perilous; nonetheless it might be convenient to compare these further elements in the historian's narrative to a landslide that blocks and diverts the stream and to dam-building, by men or beavers, which also in a sudden and intrusive manner breaks the continuity of the stream.

A way of dealing with material factors can best be seen by looking at the role of purposive explanations in historical narration. A crop failure, say, results in economic disaster. We detect this causal connection in the light of

economic strategies. The role of a material factor in this sense is recognized only where it disrupts or facilitates human plans and strategies. To give an account of our understanding of the role of material factors is thus to give an account of our understanding of purposive action.

It might be argued, however, that, purposes aside, material factors determine the course of events, that, for example, geographical factors like climate and good harbors and supplies of resources are, properly speaking, the determinants of historical processes. Marxism appears to be an instance of such a thesis. But, I think, the strength of Marxism lies in its covert reference to the purposes of human agents, its weakness in its overt denial of this. The material factors that are held to determine the shape of a culture are not chosen on the basis of a selection of physical events, such as movements in space and time, but by means of an assumption as to what human purposes are primary. Material factors, like slaves, windmills, and steam engines, are seen to be primary because they facilitate fundamental human aims. In the typical Marxist argument material factors are not really shown to cause cultural factors; instead these factors are shown to depend on the primary aims of human agents. Marxism is thus not so much a materialist theory of history as it is a thesis about primary motivation. In explaining the past, the Marxist says, look at the economic *goals* and the other features will fall into place. This may be a powerful thesis, but it is not, in the strict sense, a materialist thesis at all. It cannot be stated in the language of physical bodies in motion where the concept of cause finds its securest place. It can only be stated in the language of purposive action.

The case generally for a materialist account is, I suspect, in much the same position. The effects of climate or topography are judged in the light of what men might do in facilitating their aims. We detect the operation of such causes in a far different way from that assumed by those who espouse materialist programs for historical explanation. Such programs require that the connections among events in history be disclosed in a way strictly analogous to the way in which observed collisions or noted regularities disclose the connections among physical objects. But in fact historical connections are noted in the way that we discover how circumstances relate to strategies. It is always the nature of some human activity that makes us see features of the environment as efficacious, that is, as facilitating or hindering the fulfillment of human designs. Something like this may have encouraged Collingwood to argue that history is the story of ideas.

X. MORE OBJECTIONS: PURPOSES IN HISTORY

But to say, then, that historical events are to be explained by reference to purposes and plans, motives and intentions, is to threaten the narrative con-

ception of historical explanation from a new angle. It might be supposed, for example, that motives and purposes are internal causes requiring the assistance of psychological laws to diagnose. Or it might be argued that ideas — to continue to use Collingwood's term as shorthand for the bundle of concepts like purpose, intent, motive, and the like — have a logical relation to the actions that facilitate them, and that what is required in history is conceptual analysis, in order to make clear how the lines of inference run from idea to action. Either way, explanations are needed to which the methods of proxy-experience and narration are irrelevant, or worse, interfering.

Perhaps there should be no objection to this. History, to use and possibly mutilate a phrase of Wittgenstein's, is a "motley of techniques," reflecting miscellaneous interests. It would not be surprising to find that historians use a variety of explanatory devices. In the present case, however, idea talk will not force us to abandon the explanatory scheme of narration.

To begin, we might admit that something very much like the psychologist's general laws is at work in accounting for the human past. We surely do have at hand a sheaf of expectations having to do with general proclivities and tendencies of human beings toward greed, lust, company, and praise, and away from pain and discomfort. These general truths, rules of thumb, likelihoods, serve us well, on the whole, in estimating the conduct of others and of ourselves. But one feature of these rules needs to be kept in mind. They form an important part of the practical knowledge that guides our decisions and actions, and only secondarily have a place among our observations as spectators.

Idea concepts are thus primarily amateur concepts. It must be within the power of the ordinary man to apply them, even though his view of human nature is casual and unstudied. Many philosophers and most psychologists have assumed instead that talk about motives and purposes is difficult talk, requiring expert conceptual analysis or scientific construction of experimental methods for trapping these elusive causes of human behavior. Among psychologists, motives and the like are taken to be hidden causes inferred from behavior and recurrences in behavior. Philosophers in recent years have been concerned to deny the hidden nature of motives, but they are still apt to judge the application of these concepts in their amateur settings by highly general and professional truth-condition standards, finding it difficult to arrive at any formulae not open to obvious and devastating counter-examples. The result is that philosophical analysis often ends with the view that idea concepts are terribly difficult indeed, so that one wonders how ordinary men (and historians) can apply them so constantly and with such an apparent measure of success.

In a sense the layman must succeed at least part of the time in applying purpose-concepts, for the primary use of purpose ascriptions is with a view to acting oneself, not describing or explaining the actions of others. At least

some of the time a man must know what he wants to do and how he wants to do it in order to do it. It is not a matter of ferreting out hidden causes, for otherwise deliberate actions could not be undertaken. He may sometimes be confused about his goals because he does not know what they should be or perhaps simply because he is indecisive — nothing in a situation inclines him one way or another. Or he may be unclear about a way of achieving them. But at least, to function in a recognizably human way, he must know a good portion of the time what he wants to do and in a rough way how to do it.

He knows what he wants. How? In some cases we would be hard put to give an answer to this question without restoring to biological evolution. It is just the case that the organism responds to bodily sensations — pains, pangs, and tensions — as if they declared a need. It is useless to say here, the pain is one thing, the need quite another, as if the need is inferred from previous knowledge of what reduces pain. We do not have pangs and guess that eating will assuage them. (Though this might turn out to be the case *some* of the time.) We simply have pangs of hunger. Perhaps we learned this connection once, but our learning is of that basic sort that leads to concept-formation and a way of apprehending the world, not to generalizations conjoining between discreet objects in experience. Having the concept, pangs of hunger, provides a way of describing and grasping our experience in purposive terms; the purpose is not disclosed by inference from what is experienced. It is just in the nature of man to prize or oppose certain things, and this is a feature of his knowledge of himself and others as well as a condition of his biological existence.

At a further level, no doubt, we would be less inclined to speak of purposes as rooted in the organism, and more likely to think of them as resulting from education and experience. But this situation is not essentially different. Again, our capacity to identify a need, a motive, a purpose, or desire is not to be confused with the manner in which it was acquired or “learned.” There are no doubt many aims that a man has only in virtue of what has been passed on from generation to generation as acceptable, worthwhile, or praiseworthy. But these goals are not merely moral formulae that we come to apply to behavior once it is carried through, and by which we judge the act; they are the tools by which action is initiated. That we have the same tools, the same biological and social equipment, makes for our mutual understanding and confidence in ascribing purposes and motives to others.

XI. PURPOSES IN HISTORY: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTION

The tools of action, including its conceptual facilitations, can often be misemployed; agency can in various ways misfire. And thus, in their very nature, ascriptions of purpose and action to human agents are attended by doubt.

The problem is particularly aggravated when purposes are ascribed to agents in the past. In the present we might argue that it is our common humanity, our common role as agents, that justifies the extension of knowledge-without-inference to others. But in the past, is it not possible that men were prompted by different aims, belonging as they did to different social orders and facing, as they did, different circumstances? For example, is it not all too easy to be led, falsely, into reading our democratic institutions and beliefs into the political practices of ancient Athens, or into the agitations of the feudal barons against King John?

Questions like these have often been asked with the air: it is wrong to do it, of course, but what else can we do? It would be odd, though, to *know* that such a reading is wrong, yet find it inevitable. This form of the sociology of knowledge will not do. But it is difficult to give an alternative interpretation that will do justice to the perils of historical interpretation (reading the present point of view of the actor into the past object of observation) while allowing that it is the point of view of the actor that correctly characterizes historical study. For the alternative available seems trivial: another historian looked again at what the Athenians did and said, and began to see that it was not a parliamentary spirit that animated their public lives. In one sense you might say that he dredged up new facts that made the defects of the old account obvious. But the new facts lead to a re-ordering of the description; a new emphasis forces a new interpretation upon us.

Suppose, for example, that I am bartering with a Levantine merchant on assumptions derived from Adam Smith or from the range of economic motives that obtain for my own case. But my experience does not fit the facts. Selling dear is not his only object. I note the shade of disappointment on his face when I say "Done!" at the first price. Taking note of this leads to a new description of the entire haggling episode, in which sheer joy in barter takes its place alongside the profit motive.

Thus the language of motive is not the theoretical interpretation of independently described action, but a revised way of describing what is happening. It belongs to the technique of proxy-experience, for it is impossible to separate the illumination of the account from the description.

Imagine a game in which the identity of a thing, person, or episode is guessed from the successive addition of lines on a sheet of paper.³ It takes only a few lines to see something emerging, yet with a few more lines the early guess is dropped in favor of a new one. Sooner or later a point must come at which further strokes with the pen add only detail; nothing will change our view of what it is.

The historian, one might say, is in the middle of the game. He has enough

3. A revised version, the reader will see, of Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit. See *Philosophical Investigations*, II, xi.

lines to guess the picture, but not so many that further scratch-marks might not lead him to revise his conception of the whole. Moreover there is an upper limit to the number of lines that can be added to the picture, after which the picture becomes unmanageable, a meaningless jumble of detail. But that upper limit also leaves open the possibility that the substitution of some lines for others (a new rule in our game) may alter our conception of the thing represented in a drastic way. In this sense there will never be a complete account, but some accounts (guesses) will be better than others, for some accounts will reveal design in a wider range of marks than do others. But in the nature of the game there is no way of saying, so many lines or so and so much detail is enough. We do not add detail as a means of testing a hypothesis already formed; instead, the addition of new detail can in radical and unpredictable ways alter the existing picture.

It is, then, a special kind of description that reveals purpose, motive, intention. Narrative is one such kind; a possibly more general type is what we have called "proxy-experience." To explain by reference to purpose is not to disrupt the story or to bring in something extraneous to the plot. Purpose is the plot, the movement, of the story. Purposes and motives are not inferences from the data; they emerge as arrangements of the data.

XII. A FINAL WORD

The notion of plot depends upon the choice of story. And this is very much a matter of what is emphasized, where the story begins, and where the historian chooses to end it. For what confers the aura of inevitability on the historical process is that the different episodes that carry the story forward are chosen in such a way as to *lead* to the circumstances with which the historian has chosen to end his tale. And he *might* have selected a different emphasis, a different starting point, a different conclusion. How we see the evolving process and how we understand the past will vary accordingly. And, we might add, the selection of emphasis, starting-point, and conclusion will be shaped by present concerns. *Now* we can see the tremendous role of economic processes, for they are part and parcel of our contemporary rationale for action; *now* we can see the importance of the evolution of socialist ideas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, having seen the issue of these ideas in the twentieth.

All history, Croce says, is contemporary history, and his critics argue that this implies a radical subjectivity in the story of the past. We can now see one thing Croce might have meant. The plot provides understanding, and the plot in turn is shaped by current conceptions of what is important. The connections drawn by means of historical narratives tell us how it is that one thing, one event, one idea is important to another. This is a rather differ-

ent sense of causal connection from that found in ordinary experiences of push and pull, and in the less ordinary hypotheses of mechanics. This may lead us to say that, after all, cause is a protean concept, neither tamed nor tameable by philosophers. But in any event, unlike the case of push and pull, what counts as important shifts with the continuation of the story.

At the same time we may have now some basis to rebut the charge of radical subjectivity. For though a condition of constructing a narrative may be the historian's choice of what he deems important, still his story is limited by the chronology of events and his picture can be challenged by the accumulation of detail out of which his narrative is constructed. These features of objective fact and researched discovery eliminate the whimsical in historical interpretation. And so Croce's dictum and Ranke's motto that history should be written exactly as it happened may be compatible after all.

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