

# **Understanding History**

**An Introduction  
to Analytical Philosophy  
of History**

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**JONATHAN GORMAN**

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# **Understanding History: An Introduction to Analytical Philosophy of History**

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**JONATHAN GORMAN**

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**General Editors:  
Théodore Geraets and Graeme Hunter**

*For my mother and father*

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## Preface

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**T**HIS IS A BOOK FOR READERS WHO WISH TO understand history. "History" is an ambiguous word, in its everyday use. First, it can refer to the historical past itself, to the subject matter about which historians write. Second, it can refer to the study of that past, to the practice and writings of historians. So, first, there is a question about how to understand the historical past; and, second, there is a question about how to understand the practice and writings of historians. These two questions have been said to give us two kinds of philosophy of history, philosophy of "history" in each of its two senses. This introductory book is about both of these things.

An explanation is required as to why this book is about both. For previous introductory books — and I have in mind particularly those valuable contributions by W. H. Walsh and W. H. Dray<sup>1</sup> — have used the distinction between the two kinds of philosophy of history to distance themselves from the philosophy of the historical past itself. They have claimed to concentrate rather on understanding the practice and writings of historians. The reason for this refusal to contribute to the direct understanding of the historical past is of a special kind, and derives from a particular difficulty, not with history, but in philosophy.

Walsh and Dray shared the widespread idea that certain philosophers had set a bad example in philosophizing about the actual historical past. The philosophers they had in mind were those — such as Hegel and Marx — who claimed to have discovered a large-scale pattern to the historical process: a pattern allegedly covering past, present and future in an objective manner, a pattern which gave "meaning" to the complexities of human life, a reality which lay behind the superficial discoveries of ordinary historians. Such patterns were regarded by more rationally cautious philosophers as unfounded speculation; and dangerous speculation at that, providing as they did a supposed insight into the march of history, an "insight" which could induce extremes of political belief and motivate repression or violent political change. Against such thinkers Karl Popper dedicated his *The Poverty of Historicism* to the memory of the "countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable

Laws of Historical Destiny.”<sup>2</sup> Rational caution rather required philosophers to leave the objective facts of historical development to be discovered by historians. Walsh, Dray and others built philosophy of history anew as an understanding of historical practice rather than of historical progress. It remains the case that there can be few more contentious areas of philosophy than the philosophy of history.

Certainly, philosophers should not engage in unfounded and rationally unconstrained speculation, about history or anything else. Walsh and Dray, who taught me much, were right to distance themselves from the historicists on these particular questions,<sup>3</sup> and I wish to keep a similar distance. However, while the objective facts of the historical process should, in a sense, be left to be discovered by historians, there remain philosophical issues at this level. While rational analysis is the proper activity for philosophers, this does not exclude a substantive contribution to understanding the actual historical past. One cannot distinguish clearly between the understanding of the historical past itself and the understanding of the practices and writings of historians, because historical practices and writings are a central way of expressing for us what counts as the historical past and what counts as its understanding. To understand at least the best historical writing, therefore, is to understand what counts, by our best professional standards, as historical reality. Yet “what counts as historical reality” cannot be left entirely to historians, for whether there are “objective facts of the historical process,” and what these could be, are among the proper tasks for philosophical inquiry. Understanding history, in both senses of “history,” requires that we grasp the range of assumptions which historians (and the rest of us) make about historical reality and about how it is to be explained.

However, historians rarely make explicit these central presuppositions of their writings. It is the task for the philosophical analysis of history (again, in both senses of “history”) to recover and examine those presuppositions, and it is this which will concern us in this book. The recovery of the presuppositions will be, by the logical analysis of historical examples, treated at length. This logical analysis will proceed by asking “How do we know these things are so?” and this will be the central question that will direct our inquiry. The examination (as contrasted with the recovery) of the presuppositions will, in a sense to be explained, take the form of asking if they are true.<sup>4</sup> This might suggest that philosophers have a touchstone for truth, and sit in judgment on historians. Some philosophers have given the impression that this is indeed the position, and historians have often been rightly resentful of such intrusions. However, it is a misunderstanding of philosophical analysis to think that it judges historians’ conclusions, and part of the

process of examining the presuppositions of history will in due course show this.

The essence of the structure of this book is thus the unpacking and answering of a philosophical question about historical knowledge by means of a developing logical argument, a logical development of ideas. This book is not, therefore, a historical survey of writings in the philosophy of history, but provides rather an overall philosophical perspective which shows how the different parts of the problem area fit together. The ability to see how important issues depend on each other in a logical way is one element of both philosophical and historical understanding, and my intended readership is thus students both of philosophy and of history.

It is not, however, intended only for such students. The book is sufficiently elementary to be of interest to general readers, and should also interest social theorists, for it extends the debate in philosophy of history in a new direction, that of non-Marxist economic history. The mode of presentation, while intended to be clear and elementary so far as the subject matter makes that possible, covers three new areas: a comparison of traditional narrative history with econometric history; an analysis of empathetic understanding in terms of cost-benefit analysis; and a justification of historical knowledge in terms of holistic empiricism.

This book has been slow to mature. Much is owed to the Queen's University of Belfast, which, at Professor David Evans's recommendation, gave me sabbatical leave in 1981-82. In the fall term of 1981 I gave two series of undergraduate lectures at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, as John Milton Scott Visiting Professor. One of these series was on the philosophy of history, and the other was on political philosophy. The elementary expression for an undergraduate audience of the empiricist direction of philosophy of history in the present book was worked out there, in the pleasant and stimulating surroundings of that excellent university in the beautiful country of Canada. My gratitude for the reception of my work there is particularly due to my students, and to Professors Páll Árdal, Ted Bond, Al Fell, Alasdair Macleod and Tom Robinson. While there I was able to deliver a paper on "the reality of the past" at the University of Ottawa (a paper which now appears *passim* in this book), and profited (although not, I suspect, anything like as much as I should) from discussions with Professors David Carr and Bill Dray.

There was not at that time, however, any content of economic history. In January 1982 I moved to Princeton University as Visiting Fellow and Senior Fulbright Scholar in philosophy of economics and political philosophy, working at what I then thought would be a very different level and for a very different audience. The nature and limits

of philosophy, as applied to particular disciplines, came to be important, and I recall especially, from among many valuable interactions, the help of Professors Paul Benacerraf, David Lewis and Carlos Prado. Herbert Simon, valuably interpreted by Daniel Hausman, was a particular influence while I was there.

The recognition that some of this research was of particular relevance to a wider audience came later, and the conversion of relevant parts of the research in philosophy of economics for an undergraduate audience in philosophy of history (while keeping an eye on the limits of philosophy) has taken place over subsequent years in my home university, among colleagues, students and friends as stimulating as ever. I must take this opportunity to express my sense of loss at the death of my friend and teacher Richard (W. H.) Walsh. His was a major influence on my thought in metaphysics and philosophy of history, and I continue to work within his capacious intellectual framework. He was one of the saviours of the big questions of philosophy and scholarship at a time when they were under attack by more superficial thinkers. I remember him and his kindness with great affection.

An early draft of this book was read in its entirety by David Evans, and I am particularly grateful to him for many years of support and encouragement. The final draft was written in the Donegal home of my friends Brian and Gillian Kerr. I especially thank David Carr, the University of Ottawa Press and various anonymous referees for their help and comments, and Anthony Sheehan for his help with the computer translation of text. My wife, Kyra, has saved me from many infelicities of thought and expression.

It is of the nature of philosophy of history to have implications throughout philosophy and other disciplines. Thus it is that several paragraphs in chapter 6 are put to different use in my "Ethical Responsibilities Versus Corporate Effectiveness," which is chapter 5 of *People in Corporations: Ethical Responsibilities and Corporate Effectiveness*, edited by Georges Enderle, Brenda Almond and Antonio Argandoña, published by the copyright holders Kluwer Academic Publishers in 1990.\* I am most grateful to them for consent to publish this material here. Several paragraphs in chapter 7 are expressed in my "Philosophical Confidence," which appears in *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, edited by J. D. G. Evans (Cambridge University Press, 1987). I am most grateful to the copyright holders, The Royal Institute of Philosophy, for permission to publish them here.

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## NOTES

1. W. H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 1964, p. 1; W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, 1967, p. 16.
2. Popper, Karl R., *The Poverty of Historicism*, 1961. My former teacher Maurice Cowling remarks (*The Nature and Limits of Political Science*, 1963, p. 117) that this dedication betrays a wholly inadequate explanation of the historical matters in question.
3. It should not be thought that philosophers such as Hegel, described as "historicists" in this context, were thought to be of no merit. The contrary would be true.
4. Collingwood thought that such presuppositions would themselves be historical, absolute and uncriticizable (see W. H. Walsh, *Metaphysics*, 1963, pp. 160ff, R. G. Collingwood, *Essay on Metaphysics*, 1940, and R. G. Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 1939, chapter 8). I do not regard "presuppositions" as having the status Collingwood mentions; rather, I regard a presupposition as not having been properly recovered until one is in a position to pronounce it either true or false. Recovery entails criticizability.

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## CHAPTER 1

### History: Practice and Theory

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“**I** OFTEN THINK IT ODD THAT IT SHOULD BE SO DULL, for a great deal of it must be invention,” said Catherine Morland of history in *Northanger Abbey*.<sup>1</sup> *Must* history be invention, at least a great deal of it? Is what historians say just a matter of opinion, on which no sensible person would rely? Can the historical past be safely ignored? Or perhaps, on the other hand, we should recognize history as a proper member of the group of knowledge-acquiring disciplines. Perhaps there is some reality to the historical past which historians truly understand. Maybe we need to understand the past if we are to understand the world in which we now live.

These issues about the nature of history, and about whether historians can provide any kind of knowledge or understanding of reality, are central to the philosophy of history.

Philosophy of history is, in principle, a huge subject. The entire range of philosophical problems, as variously understood by many schools of philosophy past and present, can be applied to the whole range of historical writing with its many approaches, and indeed to historical reality itself. There is a maelstrom of ideas — sometimes with significant political implications — where the currents of philosophy and of history meet.

The central question which is posed in this book is whether historians can provide knowledge about reality. The main reason why it might be supposed, at first sight, that historical knowledge is not possible is that historians frequently disagree. In the case of disagreement we would like to know, who is right? The philosopher’s main concern is whether it is possible for somebody to be right, whether a correctness of understanding is something we can hope to achieve.

A theoretical issue like this contrasts with the direct questions about the historical past that the practical historian is concerned to answer: questions about what happened when, and why. A question such as “Why did upper-class American colonists embrace republican prin-



ciples in the 1780s?" we can take to be a question falling within the practice, rather than the theory, of history.

There may appear to be an obvious contrast between the theoretical and the practical questions. There are lots of kinds of theory, and the common-sense contrast with practice can be seen very easily if we consider *moral* theory, which we may imagine to consist of a set of principles telling us what we ought to do. Only the very virtuous do always what they ought to do, and only in their lives do theory and practice of this kind coincide. But all kinds of theory are like moral theory in that they are concerned with what "ought" to happen, and for all of them it is possible that a difference may exist between what the theory says and what it says it about. Given a certain technological theory, a bridge ought to stay up. Given a certain astronomical theory, an eclipse ought to occur on a particular date. Given a certain theory of scientific knowledge, scientists ought to operate in some special way in order to achieve knowledge.

The "oughts" here are not moral "oughts" (thus, they compare to "the murderer ought not to have left his fingerprints on the weapon"), but they permit a contrast in principle between theory and practice, between theory and reality, in just the same way as moral theory can. However, the contrast between theory and practice is not a simple matter. When there is a contrast between theory and practice or reality, then something needs to be changed. It may seem to be a failure of our astronomical theory, if we predict an eclipse for the wrong date; and yet we need the theory to tell us that the darkening of the sun on the date it does occur *is* an eclipse, and not some other kind of event. On the other hand, it may seem to be a failure of practice if something is done which conflicts with the substantive principles of our moral theory; and yet, perhaps our moral principles are inadequate to specify properly what ought to be done in respect of new classes of actions, such as in genetic engineering. Finally, if historians operate in ways which seem to conflict with the requirements of the theory of knowledge, we cannot tell, in advance of the argument, what ought to be changed, the theory or the practice (or what we take to be reality). We have in the end to rely upon the certainty of the reasoning involved in reaching our conclusion.

Thus we cannot proceed at once to consider the philosophical issues in abstraction from the practical questions. We shall see that the practical and the theoretical questions about understanding history will not make sense to us without each other. Practical historians cannot ignore philosophical questions, and continue their research and writings regardless of the answers to them. Theorists of history cannot work without some grasp of practical historical questions.

In this book we propose to develop the philosophical debate over history by looking, not just at traditional historical writing, but at economic history. The belief that the social world should be understood largely in economic terms is widespread, in official social thinking as well as among many historians,<sup>2</sup> and understanding the philosophical presuppositions of economic thinking in history is of wider than technical interest. We shall show how both traditional and economic history presuppose metaphysical and moral beliefs; we shall explain those beliefs and compare them, and finally show how beliefs of this kind are to be justified.

In this chapter we shall illustrate historical practice with a real example, and show how our theoretical questions are essential to proper historical practice, in the judgements of historians themselves. The example has been especially chosen to make the theoretical questions particularly apparent, for unpacking the presuppositions of historical writing can often be a matter of great difficulty. When we have seen how the practical historical example links to theoretical issues, we shall continue by using that example to identify what the philosophical questions are for us.



September 1967 marked the end of yet another summer in which American cities had been troubled by the violence of race rioting. Eighty-three people — most of them black — had been killed and 1 897 had been injured, particularly in Newark and Detroit, the cities worst affected. “We are going to start with guns to get our liberation,” stated Stokely Carmichael, the black militant leader. “Our only answer is to destroy the government or to be destroyed.” No American with an interest in his country’s social reality could ignore the issues involved in satisfying black demands. Academic historians, away from the streets, were as exercised as anyone else.<sup>3</sup>

That September many historians were at a meeting — the Twenty-Seventh Annual Conference of the Economic History Association — held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, not one hundred miles from Newark. They were concerned with a subject linked both emotionally and in other ways to the racial problems surrounding them: black American slavery.

The first black slaves were brought from Africa to America at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In the Southern states of what in due course became the United States of America the production of tobacco and, later, cotton was less harsh on slaves than conditions in other parts of the Americas and the slave population increased naturally. By the end of the seventeenth century the majority of Southern blacks were

American-born. The slaveholding way of life continued until 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed following the end of the Civil War between the Northern and the Southern states.

The black race is an essential part of American life and history, and American people still live with the national memory of black slavery and civil war. The legal freeing of blacks may have been accomplished in 1865, but the view of blacks as being importantly different from whites, as not really a part of the ongoing progress of an essentially white nation, continued to be widespread. Racial discrimination, particularly in the Southern states, continued into the twentieth century; it continued also in the North, where it had never been absent, even among those who desired an end to slavery. Racial discrimination, and the tensions and violence it produced, were alike based on the views that blacks and whites held of each other. These views — expressions of different parts of the national memory — were fed by conceptions of the past.

Historians exist to supply conceptions of the past. At the Philadelphia conference they were concerned particularly with the economics of black American slavery. A major aim of that conference was to evaluate an essay written some years before, in 1958. In this article, "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South," Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer<sup>4</sup> asked the following question: Was slavery for the Southerners "an important (and evidently expensive) duty, part of their 'unending task of race discipline'?" Or was the Southern plantation form of agriculture "at least as remunerative an activity as most other business enterprises in the young republic?"

We cannot pass on without noticing now what was not noticed then, an example of what the historian David Hackett Fischer calls the "fallacy of many questions," which he remarks has been variously defined as: "(1) framing a question in such a way that two or more questions are asked at once, and a single answer is required; or (2) framing a question in such a way as to beg another question; or (3) framing a question which makes a false presumption; or (4) framing a complex question but demanding a simple answer."<sup>5</sup> The particular thing wrong with Conrad's and Meyer's question is that it presents two questions as if the answer had to be "yes" to one or other of them. This was a mistake for two reasons: first, the answer might be "no" to both of them, for there might be a different and better way of dealing with the economics of slavery; second, the answer might be "yes" to both of them, for there is no inconsistency in the suggestion that duty and profit might go together. There is nothing "evidently expensive" about the "unending task of race discipline."

The problem the historians were dealing with here is better put as a single question: just how profitable was slavery? Conrad's and

Meyer's work was important in particular in that it analysed the profitability of slavery in terms of "modern capital theory." We shall explain the implications of this approach after outlining the economic viewpoint presupposed by Conrad's and Meyer's conception of profitability,

It was not the first time that somebody had thought to check on how profitable the slave plantations were. The slaveholders themselves did it, of course. But there are, at the simplest, two different ways of measuring the profitability of Southern plantation agriculture. One way is simply to audit the accounts of the slave plantation, as an accountant might do. Imagine that a Southerner wishes to begin a slave plantation for himself.<sup>6</sup> He spends, let us say, \$100 000. He buys land and slaves; he purchases or rents specialist slaves and equipment to help him to clear the land and construct the buildings he will need. He buys seed and animals. If he is a reasonably good manager, and does not suffer too much bad luck, then his plantation will produce, say, cotton. This he will sell, and he will begin to make money on his investment. Perhaps he will make 5 per cent a year on his investment of \$100 000, when all is accounted for. The accountant will take into consideration here all the assets, liabilities, profits and losses of the plantation, and will find the Southerner's overall "profit." At 5 per cent a year, certainly the slave plantation is a profitable activity.

But the economist, as opposed to the accountant, looks for "profit" in a different sense. Suppose that there is a healthy manufacturing industry locally, in need of investment for the purchase of new equipment. The industry, in order to raise capital to purchase the equipment, sells shares in itself for money, and offers a return of 10 per cent a year. Our Southerner could, if he chose, simply invest his \$100 000 with the stock market and buy the appropriate number of shares in the industry, and would then receive, if all went well, a return of 10 per cent a year. Given the choice between investing in the slave plantation operation and investing in the industry, our Southerner would lose by 5 per cent a year if he chose the plantation.

Again, our Southerner might have a choice between operating a slave plantation, and operating a plantation with paid black or white labourers, who perhaps might work more efficiently and cover their own wages with the additional profits earned. With more profitable options such as these open to him, our Southerner will find that operating a slave plantation is not an economically profitable thing to do, whatever his accountant says, because he is losing money compared with what he might very well be doing instead. There is an "opportunity cost." And this is so, even if there is *no* alternative investment opportunity to the slave plantation, so long as it would be possible to create one (after all, the plantation has to be created, too). It is the profitability of slaveholding in this economic sense that Conrad and Meyer were concerned

with. We may see some of the implications of their position by looking at, for the moment, not the *actual* answer they gave to the question of the economic profit of slavery, but the *possible* answers.

Suppose that slave agriculture in general turned out to be an economically unprofitable activity. (It may even be that other options were available that would have led everyone to be better off to some degree.) Given this, then one possible argument might go as follows: the Southern economy would be inefficient, and there would be better ways of working and producing the things needed to live on. Some people — perhaps not in the South, but near enough — would adopt the more efficient practices. They could charge a little less for their goods and still enjoy a little more profit. On the open market where such things as cotton are sold worldwide, they would compete with the slaveholding areas and undercut them in price. Prices would be forced down to the level appropriate for giving efficient producers a normal accounting profit, but this would leave the slaveholders short. No doubt local laws and restrictive practices would keep the creditors at bay for a while, and perhaps the slaveholders would enjoy their way of life sufficiently to be prepared to live with the losses as long as they could. Nevertheless the economic pressure would be on the slaveholders to change their ways. The slave system, under such pressure, would be a dying institution. Only the refusal of slaveholders to act where their best interests lay would hold off the final collapse. Slavery would be dying, and it would just be a matter of time. But if all this is so, then the Civil War was unnecessary! For it was fought to achieve, or to avoid, a result which would have occurred anyway, it might be concluded.

The other possible answer to Conrad's and Meyer's question is that slavery was an economically profitable activity, and this indeed was the conclusion that was drawn, on the basis of statistical analysis. Slavery was profitable for the whole South, Conrad and Meyer argued. What was new here was not so much that slavery was profitable, for this had been *asserted* many times. Rather — and this is how academic advance takes place — the point was newly *concluded* from proper economic argument. Thus Conrad and Meyer thought that they were “disposing, once and for all, of the issue.”<sup>7</sup> Given this conclusion, we are to understand why the slaveholders engaged in and continued with slavery until they were forcibly stopped. It was in their interests to do so.

By the time of the Philadelphia conference, nearly ten years had passed since Conrad's and Meyer's article had been published, and, against their expectations, those years had seen “one of the most extensive and furious debates in the history of the discipline.”<sup>8</sup> In this time there had been a considerable development of the economic history of slavery. Those who approach history using systematic statistical methods and the principles of economic theory, like Conrad and Meyer, are

sometimes called “cliometricians,” “measurers” of the ancient Greek Muse for history, Clio. The Philadelphia conference was a time for assessing this cliometrical or “scientific” approach, and for comparing it with the traditional methods of writing history.

The session of the conference dealing with the matter was called “Slavery as an Obstacle to Economic Growth,” and it polarized into a discussion between the defenders and the critics of the Conrad and Meyer approach. The defenders included Stanley L. Engerman, who with Robert W. Fogel was to write a book published in 1974 which caused an even greater furore than had Conrad’s and Meyer’s article: *Time on the Cross*. Recalling the conference session, Fogel and Engerman said that “as the day wore on the two of us became increasingly confident that the criticisms of the cliometric analysis had missed their target . . . the discussion showed that economic models could be applied . . . to the whole array of issues thrown up by the critics.” However, “what we did not recognise, until it was too late, was the transformation in the tone of the discussion.” There were “mutual irritation,” “exasperation,” “fiery stares,” “thinly disguised accusations of racism” and “caustic charges of naïve romanticism.” Flushed faces, strident voices, passionate speeches, aggressive and menacing gestures. “We turned away from each other in anger.”<sup>9</sup>

It was “pure romanticism,” Fogel and Engerman thought, that caused the critics not to accept the possibility that a bad political, social and moral system might yet be a vigorous, deeply entrenched and rapidly growing economic system. Slavery was efficient, but “would we next claim that blacks were better off under slavery than freedom? [They were better off materially, Fogel and Engerman later argued in *Time on the Cross*.] Were we trying to convince them that the abolition of slavery was a mistake?”

And yet, “we quantifiers were challenging so much, and conceding so little, that any historian steeped in the conventional interpretation of the slave system *had* to be upset.” For, they later argued,<sup>10</sup> blacks were not, as some previous historians had held, compliant and simple “Sambo” figures and nor, on the other hand, were they “rebels whose greatest achievements were such proficiency at stealing, shirking responsibilities, and feigning illness — and who were possessed of such sly capacity for lying — that they could trick their masters into believing that they were contented.” Rather, the slave system worked precisely because of the meritorious qualities of the blacks: they were labourers of “superior quality,” “diligent workers” imbued with a “Protestant [work] ethic,” with a strong sense of family.

Nor were they just labourers: there was a hierarchy of skilled jobs, and “over 25% of males were managers, professionals, craftsmen, and semiskilled workers.” Additionally, “by exaggerating the severity

of slavery, all that has come after it has been made to appear as an improvement over previous conditions." Finally, "we have attacked the traditional interpretation of the economics of slavery not in order to resurrect a defunct system, but in order to correct the perversion of the history of blacks — in order to strike down the view that black Americans were without culture, without achievement, and without development in their first two hundred and fifty years on American soil."

This is a revealingly one-sided description by Fogel and Engerman of the nature of the discussion at Philadelphia and the cause of the "transformation" in its "tone." As defenders of the cliometric approach, they were unimpressed by the arguments of the critics, and they saw the critics as falling back, for want of rational argument, upon mere passionate appeals. However, condescendingly, they found the passion understandable, for the challenge to the conventional position was so powerful in its "correction" of the "perversion of the history of blacks." The description reveals that Fogel and Engerman recognized *no* rational arguments against their cliometric approach at all, and regarded opponents as not merely unreasonable, but as being passionate in defence of a racist distortion of history.

Is this a true description of the situation at the conference? This historical question is not easy to answer, although it is obvious that the opponents of cliometrics would be unlikely to agree with it. It is not to the point, however, to investigate this historical question (even though we be historians), for suppose we were to discover that indeed Fogel and Engerman were right, and that their opponents had produced nothing but an irrational and passionate display? The purpose of the conference was to evaluate the scientific, cliometric approach to historical writing, and what is important in such assessment is not whether particular people on a particular day made a good or bad job of rational discussion, but whether rational arguments *could* be found for or against the cliometric approach. Success in overcoming straw men, on the part of cliometrics, is no success at all.

There are two ways in which the cliometric approach of Conrad and Meyer or Fogel and Engerman might be assessed. One way is to ask whether these researchers have carried out their work properly. Judgement about this is a central task for professional historians. Typical questions might be these: given that econometric arguments are to be used, have these historians argued in a valid way? Or are there confusions and mistakes which may perhaps vitiate their conclusions? Conrad's and Meyer's paper has been described as "renowned" in an essay by two distinguished critics,<sup>11</sup> but Fogel and Engerman have fared less well. Thus their claim that "over 25% of males were managers, professionals, craftsmen, and semiskilled workers" has been criticized as deriving from evidence in a single parish in Louisiana which was not typical of slave-

holding parishes in other parts of the South, in that "it was a sugar parish, many of its slaveowners were Creole French, their holdings were uncharacteristically large, and the age distribution of the slaves was heavily skewed toward males over 14 years of age."<sup>12</sup>

Notice, too, the imprecision of the statement quoted from Fogel and Engerman. The statement gives an immediate impression that the fortunate 25 per cent of blacks were spread in some significant way throughout an entire hierarchy of higher-order occupations, and yet the statement is quite consistent with a real situation in which 99.99 per cent of slaves were unskilled or semi-skilled (just what, exactly, is the difference?), while the odd few remaining shared all the higher-order occupations. Even if the statement is true, it does not say much. Here, at least, Fogel's and Engerman's reasoning has an imprecision which is matched by an imprecision of expression.

The assessment of the cliometric approach, however, means more than checking on the detail of the reasoning in the way just illustrated, valuable though this is, and crucially though it may affect our understanding of slavery. The question historians need to ask themselves here is rather this: given that the cliometric approach may be undertaken expertly, and error-free conclusions reached, is it nevertheless an approach which ought to be adopted at all?

Fogel and Engerman recognized this question, and offered a justification for their econometric approach: they had undertaken their research "in order to correct the perversion of the history of blacks." They were well-disposed to an analysis which supported the efficiency of black slavery, for they believed that an anti-racist position was best supported thereby. The traditional view (held by many of the abolitionists of slavery), that slavery was inefficient, they held to be anti-black.

Yet even here, at a point in their position upon which so much of the direction of their argument depended, there was inadequate thinking embodying confusion. Thus, Kenneth M. Stampf asked, "did the abolitionists, who were 'the most ardent opponents of slavery,' stress the inefficiency of *black* labor? Almost never! The emphasis in their publications was on the inefficiency of *slave* labor."<sup>13</sup> Assuming that economic inefficiency is a proper ground for objecting to a social system, then the argument from inefficiency may be taken to operate against slavery independently of the race of the slaves. Claiming that black slave labour is inefficient is ambiguous, for it leaves open how much of the inefficiency, if any, is due to slavery, and how much, if any, is due to being black. There is nothing essentially anti-black about the claim that slavery was inefficient.

Similarly, there is nothing anti-racist about the claim that slavery was efficient. Suppose, for example, that the racist were to argue that the very efficiency of black labour under conditions of slavery showed



how natural such conditions were for the black race? Or that blacks were lacking in spirit — were indeed compliant “Sambo” figures — just because they permitted the well-oiled economic machine to function so effectively? It was a mistake on the part of Fogel and Engerman to suppose that attacking the traditional interpretation and supplying an argument for the efficiency of slavery would be relevant to the hoped-for collapse of the view that “black Americans were without culture, without achievement, and without development in their first two hundred and fifty years on American soil.” The argument for efficiency by no means precludes racism, just as the argument for inefficiency by no means implies it.

Moreover, even if it could be shown that being anti-racist required us to find black slavery to be efficient, this would not help Fogel and Engerman to argue in favour of their cliometric approach. There are two separate issues here: first, should a cliometric approach be adopted? and second, is slavery efficient? There is no essential connection between the approach adopted and the conclusion reached. One does not have to believe in a cliometric approach to hold that slavery was an efficient system, nor is one committed to holding slavery efficient if one adopts a cliometric approach. There is thus neither the claimed link between anti-racism and economic efficiency, nor the claimed link between economic efficiency and cliometrics.

It is easy to see, now, how the “transformation” in the “tone” of the discussion at the Philadelphia conference came about, if many of the historians there thought as Fogel and Engerman thought, that racist or anti-racist beliefs were involved so straightforwardly in the different economic arguments put forward, or directed in such simplistic ways the course which historical research should take. We may conclude that undertaking a cliometric approach “in order to correct the perversion of the history of blacks” is not a proper justification at all. But what, then, would be a proper justification?

Racial discrimination, we have noted, is based on the views that blacks and whites hold of each other, and these views are fed by conceptions of the past. Historians exist to supply conceptions of the past. We have seen that the adoption of a cliometric approach to the economics of black American slavery has led to a conception of the slave system as being economically efficient. This conception has permitted an explanation of the continuation of the slave system until it was forcibly stopped. This conception is also one which raises, for a number of historians, the issues of racism. Practical questions about how slavery is to be understood and explained have required the historians to assess the merits of a cliometric approach. The only justification for this approach so far provided is in terms of its anti-racism, and we have seen that this justification is inadequate. Moreover, the attempt at a better justification,

or a proper criticism, degenerated into irrationality, according to Fogel's and Engerman's view of the Philadelphia conference.

Historians are thus forced, by the practical question of how to understand the slave system, to answer a number of theoretical questions. We may note, first, the problematic link between the present and the past. Suppose a historian were to produce a correct, objective account of the American past, including particularly a complete understanding of black slavery and interracial attitudes. If nobody were to take any notice of him, then what he writes would have no effect upon present-day concerns. Racially inspired rioters are acting in part out of a conception they have, beliefs they hold, about the nature of themselves, of opposing or different races, and especially of their own and their ancestors' racial experience. They have a conception of history, then; but it is important to recognize that such beliefs would be effective stimulants to action even if those beliefs were completely wrong. If incorrect beliefs influence people to do things which they would not otherwise do, that may or may not be a pity, but it is the way the world is. (People do not normally act from beliefs that *they* hold to be incorrect. When you believe something, you believe it to be true.)

Do not think that a correct understanding of the racial past would somehow improve the racial present, as if truth and goodness were linked. While it is possible that historians might be so ineffective at putting their knowledge across through education that people come to believe that historical knowledge is mere opinion, this is not in fact the case. Our society does have respect for historical truth. But many historical truths are unpalatable truths, and some might hold that, for present peace, they are better forgotten. Plato, the classical Greek philosopher, argued, of his ideal state "the Republic," that the citizens should be persuaded of a *mythical* past in order to give them a better conception of themselves, so that they might act more justly within society. What is accepted as history may be a matter of present-day politics, with truth ignored. On the other hand, the search for historical truth may itself be politically inspired, and the truths themselves may be of political significance.

Just as an understanding of the past — even an incorrect one — may influence one's approach to the present, so we have seen that an understanding of the present may influence one's approach to the past. In practice we have seen some historians defend their position in terms of arguments for and against racism. Independently of such moral or political beliefs, we have seen also that the academic study of the history of black American slavery has been approached through beliefs adopted in advance of discussion or research, beliefs about how best to explain what happened. We have noted beliefs in "modern capital theory" and in a so far unexplicated "traditional approach." We see that the dis-

cussion about the most appropriate way to proceed has been linked emotionally and in other ways with racial tensions in the present.

While Fogel's and Engerman's link between anti-racism and cliometrics has been shown to be mistaken, no alternative justification for the cliometric approach has yet been presented. It may seem, at this point, that perhaps history has to be written against the background of prejudged beliefs such as those mentioned. Thus history perhaps has, in the end, to be a matter of mere opinion. Maybe there could not be a neutral and objective observer, who could decide impartially a heated discussion. For who, to the satisfaction of the anti-racist, could decide impartially between him and the racist, except another anti-racist? It could not be a matter of independent arbitration, for that would seem to the proponents of such positions to be like compromising between truth and falsehood. Why consider arguments for a false position?

Evidence is no help, no matter how exact the reasoning involved; as we have seen, the problem is less one of how correct the answer is to some question, but rather one of whether that question ought to be answered at all, or what answering it is worth. The Philadelphia conference was intended to solve this latter problem with respect to the cliometric approach, but the contributors Fogel and Engerman (if no one else) regarded it as having degenerated into irrationality, and at this stage it is difficult to see how rational arguments could have been brought to bear.

If history were mere opinion, then acting out of respect for historical truth would be mere wishful thinking. The very argument about the possibility of historical knowledge could be a part of the armoury of an aspiring tyrant, so long as he was secret and expert enough, or had a Party which did not deviate from the "correct" line on the matter. Those who wish to bend the present to suit their own concerns would be able to create and change what is accepted as history as it advantaged them to do so. Race rioters might become race murderers, with stronger "historical" justification for their actions.

What would be a proper justification for adopting a cliometric approach? This question of how historians ought to proceed is not itself a question answerable by practical historical research, but a necessary question of historical theory. More basic still, we wish to know whether the choice of historical approach can be objectively made, whether there *can* be a proper justification, rather than one adopted on the basis of unfounded present-day moral or political opinions. This general philosophical question has specific forms with practical historical implications: for example, essential to the practical historical example given in this chapter is the question of whether historians ought to have proceeded by asking whether slavery was a profitable institution. Historians at the Philadelphia conference needed to know whether answering the question

“was slavery profitable?” was a way of achieving knowledge at all, so that it would be possible to dispose, once and for all, of the issue.

The most fundamental historical theory is concerned with how knowledge is to be achieved about the world in which we have lived and acted. It is here that the philosophy of historical knowledge becomes necessary. Theory sets guidelines for practice, and practice is blind without it. Theory tells us what knowledge is. Without an answer to the theoretical questions of the nature and possibility of historical knowledge, the discussion at Philadelphia could not have avoided being irrational, and history could not avoid being mere invention.

## NOTES

1. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ch. xiv.
2. For a useful introduction, see G. R. Hawke, *Economics for Historians*, Cambridge University Press, 1980. For an explanation of statistical methods, see Roderick Floud, *An Introduction to Quantitative Methods for Historians*, London: Methuen, 1973.
3. Details of the racial violence here, and of the economic history conference, are taken from R. W. Fogel and S. L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, vol. II, Appendix A; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974.
4. *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 66, April, 1958, 95–122, reprinted in R. W. Fogel and S. L. Engerman eds. *The Reinterpretation of American Economic History*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, 342–361, especially p. 343.
5. D. H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 8.
6. Here, as in all ensuing examples, the pronouns “he,” “his,” etc. should be understood as inclusive of either gender. No sexist implication is intended or should be inferred.
7. *Time on the Cross*, vol. II, p. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17, 19.
10. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 40, 137, 210, 231, 258–260.
11. Paul A. David and Peter Temin, “Slavery: The Progressive Institution?” in P. A. David *et al.*, *Reckoning with Slavery*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 168.
12. Herbert Gutman and Richard Sutch, “Sambo Makes Good, or Were Slaves Imbued with the Protestant Work Ethic?” in David *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
13. Kenneth M. Stamp, “A Humanist Perspective,” in David *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–15.

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## CHAPTER 2

### Knowledge

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**T**HE PHILADELPHIA CONFERENCE DEMONSTRATED how theoretical problems are involved in the practice of history. From the disagreement between historians exemplified in chapter 1 we drew three theoretical questions:

1. Can historians provide knowledge about reality?
2. What would be a proper justification for the cliometric approach to history?
3. Is answering the question “was slavery profitable?” a way of achieving knowledge, so that, once answered, the issue is disposed of once and for all?

The concept of the profitability of slavery, in the third question, is to be interpreted in the “economic” sense (rather than the “accounting” sense), as explained in the last chapter. This notion of “profitability” is central to the cliometric approach exemplified in chapter 1, and this concept and its relationships will be explained in chapters 4 and 5. Notice that the concept will be so understood that, if the answer to question 3 is “yes,” then the cliometric approach to history will be justified, and the justification will supply the answer to question 2. Furthermore, “justification” is so understood that, if the cliometric approach (or any other approach) to history is justified, then question 1 is also answered in the affirmative.

It may look as if we should turn immediately to question 3, since everything else appears to depend on it. But that would be a mistake. Notice that, if the answer to question 3 were to turn out to be “no,” then nothing at all could be concluded about the answer to question 1. Furthermore, we would need some idea of how historical knowledge is to be achieved, and how an approach to history could be justified, before we could begin to answer question 2 or 3. We therefore now turn to the first question, whether historians can provide knowledge about reality. The fundamental issues of knowledge and justification will be dealt with in this and the following chapter.

ity. The fundamental issues of knowledge and justification will be dealt with in this and the following chapter.

Central to the questions derived from the Philadelphia conference was the question of whether historical knowledge is even possible, and the philosophical theory of historical knowledge is intended to answer this. But, in the face of so bald a question, the most expert philosopher will flounder. We need to have some idea of what is to count as knowledge, and of what might justify a claim to have achieved it.

“Knowledge” is a noun; it seems reasonable to suppose, then, that it is the name of something. But where do we look for that thing? Perhaps in libraries or in computer memories? If we allow that knowledge exists here, then it would mean that, for example, knowledge would continue to exist in the rubble of ruined libraries long after the end of humankind.<sup>1</sup> Many philosophers would feel uncomfortable with this result, because they would find it odd to suppose that knowledge could exist independently of people knowing (or at least of knowers knowing, if you think that there are other beings in the universe). “Knowledge,” it would be held, consists essentially in what people know, and it is knowing, considered as a verb, which we should attend to. We should understand “knowledge,” then, not as the name of some entity, but as shorthand for the many cases of people knowing things.

There are four kinds of knowing, although it ought to be said that philosophers do not like recognizing too many kinds, and often seek to show that one kind is really a part of another (that way, it gets explained). The first kind is *knowing that something is the case*, that some statement is true. “Statement” can itself be a technical word in philosophy, but we need not worry about that here, for it means for us only the kind of sentence that can be true or false. “The cat sat on the mat” and “over 25 per cent of males were managers” are statements; “Do this” is not a statement but some sort of command; “Is Fogel right?” is a question. One needs no more than the most basic grasp of English grammar to know a statement when one sees or hears it.

The second kind of knowing is knowing *how to do something*, such as riding a bicycle.<sup>2</sup> The third kind is knowing *what something is like*, such as what it is to be a slave.<sup>3</sup> The fourth kind is knowing *about something*, such as the state of slavery in the ante-bellum South.<sup>4</sup>

Statements are the kind of sentence that can be either true or false. They cannot be both true and false; and let us now suppose, as it is standard to do, that *only* statements can be true or false. Statements are linguistic expressions of some sort, and it is impossible to make sense of truth and falsity attaching to anything but some sort of linguistic expression. The first kind of knowing, knowing that something is the case, is understood by its relationship with statement-truth: to know that something is the case is to know it to be true, and the “it” here is a

statement. We may similarly understand the other three kinds of knowing better if we examine their relationship with statement-truth.

The second kind of knowing, knowing how to do something, has a quite different relationship from the first kind with statement-truth. Knowing *that* one has to push the pedals, and so forth, in order to ride a bicycle, is not the same as knowing how to ride a bicycle. One might know any number of statements here (all true, of course), and still fall off. Conversely, one might be able to ride with ease, and yet be unable to express in the form of true statements what was involved: one might be quite unsure, for example, whether one was pushing or pulling on the handlebars; indeed, an attempt to attend to what one was doing here, in order to formulate some true statements, might of itself cause one to fall off.

Thus, knowing how to do something is not in any way a matter of knowing that certain things are the case, and hence it is not a matter of having within one's mental grasp any true statements at all. Statements (whether true or false) simply have nothing to do with it: such knowledge is not a linguistic matter. Truth is irrelevant to this kind of knowledge. Historical knowledge is expressed in linguistic ways — for example, “that slavery was an efficient system” — and it is these linguistic expressions which we assess when we assess knowledge claims in history.

While historical knowledge may require the exercise of certain skills for its achievement, it does not *consist* in the exercise of those skills. The philosopher R. G. Collingwood adopted a position which might be thought contrary to the conclusion here: he held that history was essentially the “re-enactment of a past experience” or the “re-thinking of a past thought.”<sup>5</sup> But even where such a skill or activity is so essential as to be constitutive of history, the *expression*, in the present, of the thought or experience involved has to be linguistic in form. It was not, for Collingwood, historical *writing*, the expression of *knowledge*, which was constituted by “re-thinking a past thought,” but historical *reality* itself.

Less easily excluded from our concerns is the third kind of knowing, knowing what something is like, such as what it is to be a slave. Claims of this sort are often viewed as being essentially derived from some privileged experience. Thus some say that one cannot really know what it is to be hungry and poor unless one has experienced it, or that men (say) can never really understand (i. e., know what it is to be) women. Such experiences as will support such knowledge are available only to a special group, and not publicly available to all.

Notice that the privilege claimed here is a strong one. It is not merely that an ordinary kind of privilege is involved, such as the privilege of those few who have been able to observe a total eclipse of the sun from an aircraft flying above the equator. The privilege we are concerned



with entails, rather, that the acquired knowledge of “what something is like” is not transmissible or communicable to those without the experience, not because of some fondness for secrecy, but in principle.

“Only women know what it is to be women” is not like “Women know the answer (but aren’t telling).” Women *couldn’t* tell. If knowing what it is to be a woman is expressible in terms of statements at all, then it is communicable. A man could know what was involved, simply through being able to grasp what the relevant statements were; having grasped their meaning, then he would also have grasped what it was for them to be true, even though he was not in a position to experience the facts involved for himself. Women might know that certain things were so; once men knew that they knew it, then they would know those things for themselves. But if men *cannot* grasp such knowledge, then it follows that women *cannot* express their “knowing what it is like” in the form of statements — *not even to each other*. Knowing what something is like would be essentially private.

Knowledge of what something is like, conceived in this way, would be impossible to express, and thus historians would have no choice but to avoid it. The difficulty here, however, is that it is plausible to say, firstly, that historians ought to be in the business of doing this impossible thing, by making intelligible to their readers “what it was like” to be, say, a mediaeval peasant or a black slave. Secondly, it is surely plausible to hold that historians and even authors of fiction are able to express to us “what it was like” to be a mediaeval peasant or a black slave; indeed, many novelists do this sort of thing rather well.

While great literary expertise may perhaps be required on occasion, such knowledge does seem to be communicable, from which it follows that it cannot be derived from privileged experience, but rather from experience that all can share in some sense. The reader of a historical account may be able to share with the historian the experience of, say, being a slave, without either reader or historian ever having been slaves. This kind of knowledge, then, requires an *empathy* with the experience of others, a sharedness of understanding. Such empathy is required for historical knowledge, and is in fact achieved. Nevertheless, since it is expressible, it must be expressed in statements, which *must of course be true*. We may conclude, therefore, that knowing what it is to be something, knowing what something is like, has to be — in the form that historians must be concerned with — expressible in terms of knowing that something is the case.

The fourth kind of knowing is knowing about something, such as the state of slavery in the ante-bellum South. “Knowing about” has many uses. “Knowing about riding bicycles” implies more than merely being able to ride some one bicycle, or even any bicycle that is offered; it implies also that one knows a lot of true statements about riding bicycles.

Although "knowing about" does not imply unlimited knowledge of the relevant matters, it implies far more than "knowing how" does, or just one instance of "knowing that." "Knowing about," however, is of wide meaning in that sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not, imply something about "knowing how."

Historians know about things, but there is no implication here that they are *thereby* exercising some skill, akin to riding a bicycle (although skills may have been required to achieve that knowledge). Rather, what they know is that a number of things were the case. But *not* a small number of things: knowing "about" something implies a *comprehensiveness* of things known, but only of *relevant* things. Historians' accounts of historical matters such as the American Civil War express knowledge about their subject matters only in so far as they contain some comprehensive set of statements which severally express cases of knowing that certain things occurred. You do not know about the Second World War, in the sense historians need, when you know only that, for example, it began in 1939. You need also to know that a great many other things happened, and what they were. The things that need to be mentioned will depend on the question that is asked: "Was slavery profitable?" if answered, will provide knowledge about the profitability of slavery, and will include a comprehensive set of true statements relevant to the issue.<sup>6</sup>

Our four kinds of knowledge, and the kinds of understanding they permit, are all relevant to history, then; but all in effect collapse into the single notion of "knowing that something is the case." The "is" here does not of course exclude the past tense. Our understanding of historical knowledge should henceforth be understood in this way.

Now that we have an outline of what is to count as knowledge, we can deal with the question of what might justify a claim to have achieved it.

When is a claim to knowledge justified? A number of relevant considerations were presupposed in chapter 1. Firstly, that knowledge has something to do with the avoidance of mere opinion. Secondly, that knowledge has something to do with the elimination of background attitudes adopted in advance of proper research. Thirdly, that knowledge has something to do with the avoidance of evaluative judgements. Fourthly, that knowledge has something to do with the avoidance of irrational considerations. These issues can be clarified briefly here.

In the first consideration, "opinion" is a vague word. Some opinions can be well-founded, in other words, properly supported by rational argument. It would not matter to the achievement of historical knowledge if opinions in this sense were involved. Plainly, however, "mere" opinion, opinion which has no rational basis, is to be avoided, and this is expressed in the fourth consideration in the last paragraph.

The second consideration is similarly subordinate to the fourth: it would not matter to the achievement of historical knowledge if background attitudes which were rationally well-founded were involved. We only need to avoid such things where they are not rationally supported. Thus anyone who argues that historical knowledge is impossible because we cannot avoid the intrusion of some background opinions and attitudes is mistaken. What he has to do, if he wishes to pursue his argument, is show that those unavoidable background opinions and attitudes are impossible to support rationally. The "neutral observer," whom we introduced in chapter 1 to decide between different background beliefs, is, of course, the completely rational person. Perhaps there is no such person? That would not matter, so long as we knew what it was to act in a rational way, so long as rationality here is possible.

The third suggestion, that knowledge has something to do with the avoidance of evaluative judgements, is also subordinate to the fourth. The foundation for evaluative judgements is part of the subject matter of ethics. Our understanding of morality, of right and wrong, has suffered more than most theories from the supposition that its subject matter is a mere matter of opinion. So widespread is this belief that it is often thought that one need do no more than show that some discipline — history, for example — is "evaluative," if one is to show that it is subjective, a mere matter of opinion. Much of moral philosophy, however, is concerned with the question of the objectivity of judgements of value. If judgements of value can be rationally supported then it would not matter if historians made such judgements.

Historical knowledge, therefore, is that which is rationally supported to be such. Our question "is historical knowledge possible?" thus comes down to the question: can the claims which historians make in their writings be rationally supported? Whether we ought to proceed, in our Philadelphia example, by adopting an econometric approach similarly requires parallel rational support.

"History," the historian J. B. Bury announced in 1902, "is simply a science, no less and no more."<sup>7</sup> "But," commented G. M. Trevelyan on this, "history has no properly scientific value."<sup>8</sup> What we have achieved so far is the reduction of the theoretical question about the possibility of historical knowledge to a question about the rational support for historical claims. Some philosophers, following Bury's assumption, hold that the only way of rationally supporting a claim to knowledge is by means of *science*. This belief that science is the only way of achieving knowledge is called *positivism*. (The word "positivism" has been used in many different ways in the history of ideas. Be careful, if you meet it outside this book. The meaning given here is the standard one in the theory of knowledge.)

“Science” here is taken to refer directly to the natural sciences, such as physics. The question whether history does or can achieve knowledge then becomes the question whether history does or can share the kind of precise explanation and successful prediction which, it is supposed, are achieved by the natural sciences.

But note that it is irrational to appeal to physics and suchlike to set the standard for knowledge unless one has reason to think that they do succeed in achieving it for themselves. Positivism is a very weak claim, when it has no attached standard for what it is to be scientific, and when it offers no reason why we should regard science as a way of achieving knowledge.

Examining Bury’s claim that history is a science would only be useful if we meant by this to check history against the standards set by an independent theory of knowledge. “Science” here would then be the middle man, and is more efficiently cut out from the argument. There is no justifiable commitment in advance to positivism, no commitment in philosophy of history to the philosophy of the natural sciences. It is as well that this is so, for much recent work on the philosophy of science does not appeal to independent theories of knowledge but rather to the *history* of science.<sup>9</sup> It would be a flatly circular argument to attempt to justify history by an appeal to science, and then attempt to justify science by an appeal to history.

Independent of science or of history, the theory of knowledge — “epistemology” — offers two basic, but competing, accounts of how knowledge claims are to be rationally justified: empiricism and rationalism. First we shall deal with empiricism, a theory perhaps most famously expressed by David Hume, whose *Treatise of Human Nature* was first published in 1739. The essence of empiricism is the belief that knowledge can come *only* from experience.

It should be noted that there is no essential connection between positivism and empiricism. One may be a positivist and not an empiricist: one may believe that sciences like physics achieve knowledge, and are the only way of doing so, and yet not think that science derives knowledge *only* from experience. Or one might be an empiricist and not a positivist: thus one might think that knowledge comes only from experience, but that science concentrates upon only one kind of experience, and is not the only way of achieving knowledge.

In principle we would not need to defend any reliance upon empiricism here. In principle we could use empiricism as a hypothesis in the theory of knowledge, being entirely neutral about whether it would work, and leaving its plausibility to be decided by how much sense it made of our knowledge-acquiring activities and of our explicit contributions to knowledge. Nevertheless, this pudding-in-the-eating test

apart, empiricism does have considerable initial plausibility, and we shall next proceed to a conditional defence of it.

The claim that experience is the only source of knowledge does not prevent the empiricist from recognizing that, for example, we are born with knowledge of how to suckle. Recall that empiricism, like rationalism, is offered as a theory of “knowing that.” It is in this sense that the empiricist says that experience is the only source of knowledge. Moreover, “experience” covers a lot: everything of which you are consciously aware, independent of your thoughts: that which comes to you by means of touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. If there are other senses, then these too are included; and indeed there are other senses of a kind: one may feel ill, or conscious of oneself as moving, or even angry, although it is not obvious that these experiences come to us through any of the five main senses. All these experiences are, in some way, *given* to us, and we seem to be passive receptors of what we sense. Once we have our eyes open, there does not seem to be much we can do to alter what is seen. We are not aware of having much option about it, although certainly there is a wide latitude of choice of how to *describe* what we experience. With experience understood in this properly large sense, we may move to a second point: apart from experience, where else could knowledge come from?

Perhaps we are just born with knowledge, or have it revealed to us directly by God? Empiricism does not have to deny our being born with innate beliefs, or our having something revealed to us by God. It attacks such suggestions in their weak place: given that you are born with, or had revealed to you, some beliefs, what makes you suppose that they constitute *knowledge*? No matter how effectively God, or your genes, are working in your epistemological interests, why should the rest of us suppose that your privileged sources are giving you knowledge rather than merely false beliefs? God would not mislead, you might say; and yet one could only tell this — discover that He was not misleading you — by checking the beliefs with which you were supplied against some independent standard: experience, which we can *all* share.

One essential feature of knowledge is brought to our attention here. A person who makes a claim to knowledge has to defend it to the satisfaction of others, by appealing to public standards that all can share. Experience, as encapsulated in the language we learned to share in talking about a shared world, is pre-eminently the right kind of thing for this role. Private and privileged sources for knowledge claims, no matter how splendid, are worthless, unless others can be persuaded, by good objective reason, to go along with them. “Knowledge,” an ordinary English word, we were taught to use correctly as children, and it is a matter for public checking.

But need public standards that all can share necessarily involve only experience? What about logic? Is not that a source of knowledge? The *rationalist* philosopher (not the same as the *rational* philosopher, which the empiricist would also claim to be) holds that *reason*, which we all share and yet is not derived from experience, is a possible source — or even, as René Descartes claimed in his *Discourse on Method* of 1637, the *only* source — of knowledge. The rationalist claims, at the minimum, that we do have innate knowledge: some things we know to be true simply because it is self-evident to us that they could not be false. We can use these things as premises in our arguments, the validly reached conclusions of which we can claim to know.

Certainly we can rely upon logic, and where we know that our arguments are valid, we can claim properly to know the conclusions of them *if we know the premises*. More about logical reasoning will be said in chapter 3. The empiricist, arguing against rationalism, attacks not so much the validity of such arguments as the rationalist truth of their premises. The empiricist's view is that the premises the rationalist wishes to use, if they say anything that can be known at all, must get their truth from some connection with experience.<sup>10</sup>

In order to be clearer about the claims of empiricism and rationalism, and about related issues of knowledge and existence which are relevant to history, we shall next spend a little time introducing some terminology originally derived from Immanuel Kant, who produced the famous synthesis of empiricism and rationalism in his *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781. The words he introduced were, firstly, "analytic" and "synthetic," and these technical words are now standardly used to mark the two ways in which *statements can be true*.

"Analytic" and "synthetic" exhaust the possibilities: for any true statement, the claim is that it is either analytic or synthetic. An *analytic* statement is true simply in virtue of the meanings of the words in it. For the moment, we shall not look at historical examples of analyticity or syntheticity, in case the past tense obscures the issue. Consider, instead, the statement "a bachelor is an unmarried man." This is a true statement, and its truth derives entirely from what the words in it mean. Given that "bachelor" means what it does mean ("unmarried man"), then it is bound to be true, for one is, in effect, saying that an unmarried man is an unmarried man. It could not be false, and its truth derives entirely from its meaning.

By contrast, a *synthetic* statement is true in virtue of some fact about the world, in virtue of reality actually being that way. The statement "This pen is blue" is true because the pen I am referring to *is* blue, and it is that fact which makes the statement true. However, the relationship between a synthetic statement and the fact which makes it true

is not so pure as the relationship between an analytic statement and the meanings it involves. This is because some element of meaning is involved in accounting for the truth even of a synthetic statement. The meanings of the words involved in an analytic statement are entirely sufficient for supporting its truth, but the fact involved in supporting a synthetic statement is not sufficient for ensuring its truth, for more is required about the meaning. Thus "This pen is blue" would not be true if the pen I am referring to is not blue, but it would also be false if "blue" had some different meaning, such as "black."

It is common to shorten the explanation of these terms in the following way: "analytic" means "true by virtue of meaning," and "synthetic" means "true by virtue of fact." However, "synthetic" really means this: "(given that the words mean what they do) true by virtue of fact." But there is a little more. We have introduced here ways in which statements are true, but of course statements can also be false. A statement which is false by virtue of meaning, such as "all bachelors are married," we call *self-contradictory*, for the obvious reason that if you make this statement then you are contradicting yourself. However, a statement which is false by virtue of fact — such as "this pen is blue," said of a black pen — we still call "synthetic." One can only admit that this may be unhelpful, but plead that philosophers usually leave it to other people to discover whether synthetic statements are true or false. Notice, incidentally, that definitions of words are analytic.

We may illustrate with historical examples the application of these terms. "The slave Frederick was black" is synthetic; it is true in virtue of fact. But what fact? Here a problem arises.

First we must introduce the concept of *objectivity*. It is common to contrast "objective" with "subjective," and these are words very often used to express the epistemological questions about history. "Objective" suggests something "real" and "out there," beyond what is merely in our minds. "Subjective" suggests something which is just in our minds, and hints at the merely imaginary. Sometimes people look at the matter as if knowledge were a kind of picture in our heads, a picture of reality outside. The picture becomes knowledge, rather than mere imagination, just so far as its representation of reality becomes more exact.

This very simple way of looking at the matter is called *realism*, because it supposes that reality is indeed "out there," and existing independently of us and our understanding of it. This belief is to be contrasted with its opposite, *idealism*, which takes the view that what we call "reality" is something which depends for its existence upon our own minds. At first sight most people think idealism to be a quite implausible position, but if you reflect that there is no way that we can appreciate reality except through the medium of our own minds, then you may come to grasp its plausibility. The idealist, of course, argues

for more than its mere plausibility; he holds that we can simply make *no sense* of the existence of something *independently* of its existence as known by us, as mediated through our minds. We are never in a position to know about something independently of our knowing about it.<sup>11</sup>

This apparently abstract metaphysical issue between realism and idealism may be too abstract for everyday experience, but it is important for the theory of history, since it is obvious that we cannot see the past. We get at the past by means of historical research, but we are never able to look up from our historical writings to compare what we have written with reality, to see if we have got it right. Reality is always *present*, and any claims we might make about the past seem to be quite uncheckable. The idealist claims that the only knowledge we have of the past is the knowledge expressed in the writings historians *construct*. Thus the past which historians write about has no existence except in their writings. R. G. Collingwood, mentioned earlier, had a position like this.<sup>12</sup>

Since there is no historical object "out there" which historical writing is about, and which would make that writing, if correct, "objective," you might think that the idealist metaphysician is committed to holding that history cannot be objective. This is not so, however. For, if the idealist is correct, knowledge cannot be conceived to consist in the matching of what we say with some independent external reality at all. The very idea of trying to conceive knowledge in that way is impossible. We can hardly complain, then, if we "fail" to achieve this impossible thing, this nonsensical thing, and we must therefore understand knowledge in a different way. We already have the beginnings of a different approach when we talk about knowledge being based upon rational support. We do not yet know what "rational support" consists in, but we know — if we are idealists — that it cannot consist in representing some independent external reality. It must lie in something like, for example, valid reasoning from present evidence. That way we could perhaps guarantee truth, even though we could never observe the past that we were writing about. And once we have achieved truth, we must admit that we have achieved objectivity also.

A simple-minded realist might think that the idealist is committed to holding that history cannot be objective, for the realist allows, by contrast, that there is some independent external reality which is correctly pictured by our writings, if they are true. But even the realist is no better off here, for while there may be some such external reality, it is certainly the case that, so far as history is concerned, we have no way of observing it. Thus in practice truth has to be guaranteed in some other way, perhaps in valid reasoning from present evidence. That way we could perhaps guarantee truth, even though we seem regrettably unable to obtain independent verification from the past that we were



writing about. And once we have achieved truth, we must admit that we have achieved objectivity also.

Thus both idealist and realist metaphysicians find themselves forced to say that historical knowledge, if it is possible, is not made so by any kind of copying of reality.

Given this issue between realism and idealism, perhaps there is no such thing as the past fact that Frederick was black. (This is why a historical example was not used to introduce the notion of syntheticity in the first place.) Perhaps there is no such thing as a *past* reality for the statement to be true of. Perhaps; but even so, note that it does not follow that "The slave Frederick was black" is analytic. One easy test for analyticity is this: for any statement, try denying it. If you can do so without *contradicting* yourself, then it is not analytic. (Do not confuse contradicting yourself with merely being wrong.) Since every true statement is either analytic or synthetic, then one which is not analytic must be synthetic. Our historical example, by this test, is synthetic. This is hardly surprising: the statement obviously says something about reality, in some sense of "reality."

Thus "true in virtue of fact," for the idealist, cannot mean "true in virtue of *independent past fact*" when he is dealing with statements in the past tense, and this has to be understood in some more complex way. The idealist often speaks of synthetic truth as being assured by the place of a synthetic statement in a vast web of beliefs, the acceptability of which depends upon its internal coherence, consistency and comprehensiveness, and the whole of which expresses (mind-dependent) reality. A notion of coherence very close to this will be developed in the last chapter.

People can get very muddled when they think about idealism, realism, empiricism and positivism.<sup>13</sup> Empiricism and positivism have already been distinguished. Still, many historians think that empiricism, realism and positivism go essentially together. Partly this is due to the various ways in which all these words have been used in the history of thought. But, even given the explicit standard meanings introduced in this chapter, quite a few historians have thought that idealism and positivism were natural opposites. This is not so, and it is worth spending a moment to see why.

Positivism asks us to judge by the standards of science, without specifying what this means; realism and idealism are theories about the nature of reality; empiricism is a theory about the foundations of knowledge. It is easy to be a positivist idealist: one simply takes an idealist view of all reality, including that part of reality which is the subject matter of the natural sciences. One then goes on to assert that the standard of knowledge which is exemplified in natural science is the standard which is to be used for all knowledge, including history. Addi-

tionally, just as it is perfectly possible to be a positivist idealist, so it is perfectly possible to be an empiricist idealist. As an empiricist, one holds that one's knowledge comes only from experience, but what that experience is experience of is answered by an idealist conception of reality.

One final source of possible confusion: do not suppose that to be a scientist is necessarily to be a positivist, or a realist, or an empiricist. Many scientists believe in God; some believe that science is a tool, and not a description of an independent world; and however strongly their theories happen to derive from experimental work, it may not be the case, and they need not believe, that experience is the *only* possible source for knowledge.

Let us next turn to exemplify analyticity. Notice that, while "The slave Frederick was black" is synthetic, "The slave Frederick was owned by somebody" is analytic, for being owned by somebody is part of what "slave" means. "Frederick was owned by somebody," however, is synthetic. These are simple examples. Some are more difficult to recognize. Is "All human beings are mortal" synthetic or analytic? Is "Blacks are human beings" synthetic or analytic? Is "The loss of jobs led to unemployment" synthetic or analytic? Compare this last with "The freeing of the slaves led to unemployment."

It is obviously not always easy to tell whether some statements are synthetic or analytic. But do not think that your inability to judge some cases is due to lack of clarity in these technical terms. On the contrary, by trying and failing to apply them we learn that there are many words the meanings of which we are not absolutely clear about. The lack of clarity lies not in the notions of analytic and synthetic but in the words to which we try to apply them. Thus, does being a human being *mean* being a mortal thing? If it does, then claiming that all human beings are mortal is to say something analytic, while to deny it is to contradict yourself. But would one be contradicting oneself in supposing that some human being (you only need one) was immortal? You can just *decide* the issue, up to a point, so long as everybody else knows what you mean. The value of dictionaries lies in telling us what most people mean by certain words.

"Blacks are human beings" is problematic in a different way from "All human beings are mortal." "Blacks" does not mean "black objects" but black human beings, and thus denying that blacks are human beings is to contradict yourself. The statement is therefore analytic; and yet, is one really saying here nothing which relates to the world? Attend to when you might make a statement like "Blacks are human beings." Most likely you would do this in order to make a moral judgement, a recommendation of a certain kind, a plea for better treatment, for example. But moral judgements, recommendations and pleas are more like com-

mands and questions, in some ways, than like statements. If they are not statements, then “analytic” and “synthetic” are not intended to apply to them. Whether moral judgements are statements — the kinds of thing that can be true or false — is a major issue of moral philosophy.

There are two more technical terms originally derived from Immanuel Kant’s work. These are “a priori” and “a posteriori,” literally translated from Latin, respectively, as “from the first” and “from afterwards.” You may often come across statements being described as “a priori” or “a posteriori” in works of philosophy. But there is an unfortunate unclarity about these descriptions: properly speaking, it is not *statements* that are “from the first” or “from afterwards,” but *the way that they are known*. In this, we have a contrast between the “a priori/a posteriori” pair of terms, and the “analytic/synthetic” pair of terms. The former refers to the ways in which statements are known. The latter refers to the ways in which statements are true. These are different things.

A statement which is known a priori is known from the first: as soon as you know what the statement is, the moment that you understand it and grasp its meaning, then you know it to be true. (It may take time to grasp the full meaning of a statement.) We have already met an example of a statement which is known in this way: it was the analytic statement “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” Such a statement is known a priori: we know it independently of experience.

A statement which is known a posteriori is known only “afterwards”; it is not enough merely to hear the statement, understand it and grasp its meaning, for some further step which leads to knowledge has to be taken. We have met an example of such a statement already: it was the synthetic statement “This pen is blue.” We know that this is true, but we did not know it a priori, for we had to take the additional step of looking. Such a statement is known on the basis of experience.

We have said that the “a priori/a posteriori” pair of terms differs from the “analytic/synthetic” pair of terms, in that the former refers to the ways in which statements are known, while the latter refers to the ways in which statements are true. We have stressed this difference; and yet you will have noticed that the examples given were the same for “analytic” and “a priori,” and for “synthetic” and “a posteriori.” This was deliberate: it would certainly be misleading you to think that the pairs of terms *only occasionally correlate*. The empiricists would like you to think that the pairs were always correlated, however, and this we shall now examine.

Are ways of knowing and ways of truth the same things? First, some elementary remarks about the relationship between knowledge and truth. The most straightforward relationship between them is that to know a statement is to know it to be true. You cannot know something

false. But we need to be exact here. You may know perfectly well that this pen is blue, and thus know that it is false that it is black. But in knowing the latter you do not know a false thing but a true one, namely this: it is false that this pen is black. What you know here, the bit after the colon, is true. To know that something is the case is to know it to be true. This is what "know" means, in part; thus "To know that something is the case is to know it to be true" is analytic.

Here, then, we have one firm link between knowledge and truth. But it is not obvious that there is a firm link in the opposite direction: while there cannot be knowledge (that is, "knowing that") without truth, it may well be that there can be truths without knowledge. Whether or not there are truths without knowledge is a difficult philosophical issue — it is, in fact, the idealism-realism issue in one of its many forms — and there is nothing obvious about the answer.

Ways of knowing and ways of truth perhaps diverge, then. We know that there are analytic a priori and synthetic a posteriori statements. We may see the further possibilities here by asking whether there can be statements which are both analytic and a posteriori, and whether there can be statements which are both synthetic and a priori.

What would a statement which was both analytic and a posteriori be? It would be a statement which was true in virtue of its meaning, and yet which we did not know to be true *even though we knew its meaning*, for we did not know it a priori. Plainly such a statement would be impossible to have. The truth of an analytic statement consists in its meaning, and once one knows what the statement is and thus knows its meaning, one cannot fail to know its truth, for there is nothing else to know.

The final consideration here is of a statement which is both synthetic and a priori. Such a statement would be true in virtue of fact; it would involve asserting something about the world which was true just because reality was like that. And yet we would know that statement to be true a priori, as soon as we understood it, without any need to appeal to experience; although we would recognize that, if we did appeal to experience, then we would find nothing to the contrary. (This would suggest that some statements could be known either a priori or a posteriori, in the inclusive sense of the word "or."<sup>14</sup>) Notice that it would be inconsistent to suppose that the recognition of the truth of the statement derives from its meaning alone, for that would make it analytic. The rationalist here might speak of our knowledge of the statement being derived from "reason," but "reason" here, while certainly not experience, must also not be understood as the absence of self-contradiction, for, again, this would make the statement analytic. "A priori" is a way of knowing, not a kind of truth.

Now, one might be wrong in supposing that there are statements of this synthetic a priori kind, but would one be *contradicting* oneself in supposing it? It seems clear that one would not be. The possibility of synthetic a priori statements, or indeed of statements which may be known either a priori or a posteriori, is in itself enough to show that “analytic” is not equivalent to “a priori,” and “synthetic” is not equivalent to “a posteriori.” It is also enough to show that the “analytic/synthetic” pair of terms is not functioning in the same way as the “a priori/a posteriori” pair of terms: ways of knowing and ways of truth are in principle different things.

We introduced the analytic/synthetic distinction and the a priori/a posteriori distinction in order to make clearer the issues between the rationalist and the empiricist. The empiricist takes the view that knowledge comes only from experience: in other words knowledge is always a posteriori. Thus, for him, there are no synthetic a priori statements. There are, however, both analytic and synthetic statements, on his view. Since analytic statements are known a priori, surely the empiricist must therefore allow that some knowledge is a priori? Not in any worthwhile sense. What do you know when you know an analytic statement? The answer, for the empiricist, is nothing, for they are empty. To say that a bachelor is an unmarried man has as much content as to say that  $A = A$ , which is, none at all. They do not enter into knowledge, therefore, trivially true as they are, and the empiricist thus keeps his claim that knowledge comes only from experience.

It is worth noting in passing that, even if you disagree with the empiricist about the relationship to knowledge of analytic statements, you are not much better off in objecting to his overall position. Whatever they are, analytic statements are not synthetic, and it is synthetic statements — the ones which say something about reality (however “reality” is to be understood) — that we are interested in, for the purpose of analysing knowledge of the actual world of history. For our purpose, the part of the empiricist claim having to do with synthetic statements — that these must be a posteriori — is all we need to deal with.

If empiricism is true, then “analytic” and “a priori” will in practice amount to much the same thing, and “synthetic” and “a posteriori” will in practice amount to much the same thing, and the differences between the two pairs will amount to something of merely abstract interest. Many philosophers who are empiricists thus use “analytic” and “a priori” interchangeably, and “synthetic” and “a posteriori” interchangeably, and it is no surprise that the important word “known” is usually missing before “a priori” or “a posteriori.” Even non-empiricists or rationalists forget sometimes that such interchangeable uses are only reasonable if empiricism is true. A number of historians, social theorists, and others who learnt their philosophy from empiricist writers contradict

themselves as a result, desiring perhaps to express an anti-empiricist viewpoint while using terminology which commits them to empiricism.

By contrast with empiricism, if rationalism is true, then there will be synthetic a priori statements. These will say something about reality, and yet will be known a priori, known as soon as one hears them, not in virtue of the meaning alone (for that would make them analytic), but on the basis of "reason" in some form. One candidate for a synthetic a priori statement is this: "every event has a cause." The rationalist claim is that you know it a priori, and indeed you could not know it a posteriori, for no experience could support it. You cannot experience every event, and even if you could it would not help, for the statement "every event has a cause" holds, not merely that all the events in your experience have causes, but that all the events there possibly could be have causes. So you would have to experience possible events as well as actual ones, which is not a requirement you could meet. Not only that, but even the events which you are in a position to experience often do not appear to you to have causes. To put it another way, there is a vast amount you do not know about the world: there are many events of the causes of which you are ignorant. Thus experience often gives you events without, apparently, causes. Therefore experience in a number of ways does not support the claim that every event has a cause; and yet, the anti-empiricist would claim, you do know it all the same. You know it a priori. The cause must be there, in every possible case, even though you fail to find it.

The empiricist has two lines of reply to rationalist claims that some statements are synthetic a priori. He can say that apparently synthetic a priori statements we do, in spite of appearances, know a posteriori after all; or — and this is the stronger move and more commonly made — that we do not *know* them. We may *believe* that every event has a cause, and even bet money on it in funding research, but it just is mere belief, which we may be wrong about. It is open to us, therefore, to doubt such beliefs. This is beneficial, since we should not appeal to what amounts as guesswork, as the empiricist characterizes the rationalist position here.

The strongest argument against the rationalist at this point, although it is a rhetorical one (which does not prevent its being efficacious in directing philosophical research), is an appeal to the principle of the wedge. Once we admit some synthetic statements as contributions to knowledge on an a priori basis, then where are we to stop? We have no reason for picking out some claims rather than others. What makes "every event has a cause" different from "dragonflies are fairies in disguise"? The only statements which we can accept a priori as self-evidently true are analytic statements, according to the empiricist, and these are empty. The more plausibly the rationalist argues for the self-

evidence, the necessary truth, of the statements he claims to know a priori, the more material he gives the empiricist for arguing that these statements are analytic after all, and thus empty.

Rhetorical though it is, the principle of the wedge has the effect of placing the burden of proof upon the rationalist. "Burden of proof" is a simple notion; in our courts of criminal law it lies upon the prosecution. (Logic alone is neutral about where it should lie.) The issue is, what should be assumed to be the case, in default of sufficient proof one way or the other? Not to decide is itself to make a decision, a decision to leave things to take the course they would have taken without one's intervention.

When we propose to shift the burden of proof away from the empiricist, we are saying that we shall hold empiricism correct until we are proved to be wrong. If, by contrast, we were to place the burden of proof upon the empiricist, then we would be in effect asking him (and all of us) to accept *any* statement for the status of synthetic a priori until disproof was available. In the case of a synthetic a posteriori statement this is quite acceptable, for it amounts merely to testing it against experience, which may well provide disproof. Statements which fail such experiential test are quite properly to be rejected, and those which pass are quite properly to be accepted.<sup>15</sup> But how *could* you demonstrate that "every event has a cause" or "dragonflies are fairies in disguise" are wrong? Not finding the cause in some particular case only shows that you have not looked hard enough. Not finding a fairy behind the dragonfly only shows how good the disguise is.

To avoid sheer speculation, to avoid the wildest beliefs going unchecked, we conclude that we should place the burden of proof upon the rationalist. We do this by trying to make the empiricist programme work, falling back on non-experiential sources of knowledge only where we have no alternative. This, then, is our defence of proceeding on the basis of empiricism. We continue with the following claim: knowledge can come only from experience. We shall see, in the course of the argument, that we will indeed need to fall back on non-experiential sources of knowledge as empiricism is pushed to its limits.

#### NOTES

1. Compare Popper's "World 3," *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 66, 74.

2. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, pp. 28ff.

3. See Sir Isaiah Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," in his *Concepts and Categories*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 136, Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," in his *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 165, and B. R. Tighlman, "What Is It Like to Be an Aardvark?," *Philosophy* 66, 1991, p. 325.

4. This is discussed at length in J. L. Gorman, *The Expression of Historical Knowledge*, Edinburgh University Press, 1982, chs. 1, 4.
5. See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1946, pp. 282ff.
6. The relationship between the words "about" and "relevance" is puzzling. They seem to be interdefinable, but it is difficult to say which should be taken as epistemologically basic. See B. J. Copeland, "Appraising Historical Accounts: A Discussion of Gorman's Views," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 65, 1987, pp. 104–112.
7. "The Science of History," in Fritz Stern ed., *The Varieties of History*, Cleveland: Meridian, 1956, p. 223.
8. "Clio, A Muse," *ibid.*, p. 235.
9. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. See also Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1970. For a reply to this "historical" understanding of science, see David C. Stove, *Popper and After*, Pergamon Press, 1982.
10. For a brief and elementary introduction to logical reasoning and its role in the achievement of knowledge, see chapters 1-3 of John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2nd ed., 1967. A third edition is available, but in a rather different form.
11. The metaphysical issue whether there is an independent reality to which our statements may correspond is not the only way of expressing the realism/idealism problem, but it is the most straightforward. Much recent work tends to what is called "anti-realism," and concentrates on the theory of meaning rather than on metaphysics. Michael Dummett is a major contributor here. The most graspable of his difficult but important writing on these issues is perhaps "The reality of the past," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 69, 1969, pp. 238–258. There is also an epistemological version of anti-realism. See, among others, David Papineau, *Reality and Representation*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987. Finally, see chapter 4 for "idealist" theory of explanation, further explained in chapter 6.
12. See also Michael Oakshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, Cambridge University Press, 1933, and Leon J. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976.
13. See E. H. Carr, *What Is History?*, London: Macmillan, 1961, p. 3, for an example of explicit error.
14. See, for a major contribution to thought in this area, Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Harvard University Press, 1980.
15. This is analysed further below. See Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London: Hutchinson, 1968, ch. 1.



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## CHAPTER 3

### Reality

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THE THREE THEORETICAL QUESTIONS DRAWN FROM the disagreement between historians at the Philadelphia conference were these: Can historians provide knowledge about reality? What would be a proper justification for the cliometric approach to history? Is answering the question “was slavery profitable?” a way of achieving knowledge, so that, once answered, the issue is disposed of once and for all? We are currently dealing with the first of these questions. We argued in the last chapter that knowledge claims need to be rationally justified, and we conditionally defended the view that we should rely on empiricism as our criterion of rational support.

We also remarked in the last chapter that it is irrational to appeal, with the positivist, to physics and similar sciences to set the standard for knowledge unless one has reason to think that they do succeed in achieving knowledge for themselves. Still, it is widely believed that the natural sciences do achieve knowledge, and that they display this achievement through precise explanation and successful prediction, which are warranted on the basis of an independent empiricist standard.<sup>1</sup> Historians, in seeking knowledge, also seek to explain, and it was the supposed “scientific” nature of the cliometric approach which was at issue for many historians at the Philadelphia conference, as described in chapter 1. There is an empiricist theory of scientific explanation and prediction which has been developed particularly for history, and this will be introduced and examined in this chapter.

The theory is known as “covering law theory,”<sup>2</sup> and was first expressed for history by Carl G. Hempel in 1942 in his article “The Function of General Laws in History.”<sup>3</sup>

Hempel claims that the explanation of an event of some specific kind *E* consists in indicating its causes, and, further, that “the assertion that a set of events — say, of the kinds  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$  — have caused the event to be explained, amounts to the statement that, according to certain general laws, a set of events of the kinds mentioned is regularly

accompanied by an event of kind  $E$ .”<sup>4</sup> There is, he makes clear,<sup>5</sup> no difference between displaying the cause of some event and showing that universal scientific laws cover that event. A scientific law thus expresses a *regularity* which occurs in the world, and an event is “covered” by that law in so far as its occurrence can be deduced from that law and from statements which assert the occurrence of the “causes.”

Minimally, then, an explanation of  $E$  has to have the following form:

Whenever  $C_1 \dots C_n$  then  $E$ ;  
 $C_1 \dots C_n$ ;  
 Therefore,  $E$ .

The statements in this explanation, this deductive argument, must be empirically warranted; and this necessity expresses Hempel’s empiricism. On Hempel’s view, anything that goes into historical writing which falls short of this model of explanation or which goes beyond it is in principle just so much waffle, and is to be rejected as a contribution to knowledge. It cannot be enough to say “historians explain differently” or some such, as we shall shortly see; in any event, historians frequently offer the “causes” of things. Nevertheless, Hempel recognizes that historical writing hardly ever takes the form of a valid deductive argument, and, rather than hold that the historian is too silly to make his position properly explicit, he regards most historical writing as being a form of rhetoric which is appropriate for sketching to an uninformed reader the bones of knowledge which are buried within.<sup>6</sup>

Hempel’s covering law theory of explanation is merely asserted in his 1942 article. But it is not derived from an arbitrary approval of science; it would *not* be worth consideration if it had been. Empiricism, we remarked in chapter 2, has been perhaps most famously expressed by David Hume, and it is Hume’s understanding of empiricism which lies behind Hempel’s theory of explanation and which plausibly drives us towards it. This is why one cannot simply assert, in response to Hempel, that historians explain differently, for, if Hume’s empiricism is right, we have little alternative but to adopt a standard of explanation which embodies that empiricism, and Hempel’s is an elementary way of expressing such a standard.

Empiricism says that knowledge comes only from *experience*, and in chapter 2 we briefly characterized the various senses through which we experience. But what, exactly, are we *given* in experience? Experience is experience *of* something, and the full expression of the empiricist position will require a general account of the world we know by this means.

Hume’s empiricism was stronger than that which we have so far presented: experience, for him, was the sole source, not only of knowl-

edge, but of all our beliefs and ideas and imaginings. Our experiences he called "impressions" and the thoughts and imaginings about them he called "ideas." His empiricism was therefore expressed in the following way: all ideas come only from impressions.<sup>7</sup>

Hume made a claim about impressions and ideas which he thought was directly revealed by experience. He split impressions into "simple" and "complex," and the ideas that come from them he split in exactly the same way. Simple impressions or ideas are such that one cannot break them down any further, and Hume had in mind a particular colour, taste or smell.

This claim about the nature of experienced reality we may call *atomism*. Atomism (and there are other irrelevant uses of this word, which should be ignored) is the view that many things exist, rather than just one thing. It may seem obvious that many things exist, but the opposite position — monism — is plausible if you reflect that the many everyday objects and occurrences of which we are aware may not exist in total independence from each other, but exist rather as parts of some larger whole. It would be a mistake, in the monist's view, to consider individual events or objects in isolation from their place in the world. By contrast, an atomist like Hume considers that there are many things, ultimately *simple* things, which are what they are independently of whatever else exists, and which may be combined with each other in order to make more complex things. But, whichever view you take, you should note that experience does not just *give* us atoms.<sup>8</sup> Atomism is an a priori way of characterizing experience.

Notice that "atoms," in the sense a physicist might give to that word, are not what are involved here. The fundamental particles with which the physicist deals (if they exist at all) may not exist independently of each other. Compare being red in colour with occupying an area. It is impossible to conceive being red as existing independently of occupying some area, and it is impossible to conceive an area existing independently of having some colour, bland or polychromatic though it may be. Again, can one be a king independently of whatever else exists? Obviously not; subject citizens must also exist. Maybe the physicist's atoms are somewhat like this, too.

There are, then, many things, according to this Humean view. Furthermore, they are *causally related*. The usual supposition here is stronger than the claim that some causes exist, and different from the claim that every event has a cause, and it is this: that the *only* relation that exists between all the things that exist throughout space and time is a causal relation. The universe consists of many things in causal relationship with each other, and this is all there is to it. The people the historian deals with are part of this universe, of course. This strong causal claim we may call *mechanism*.

The view lying behind the covering law theory of explanation thus involves the three elements now identified: empiricism, atomism and mechanism. The view is that the world consists of many things in causal relationship with each other, a world which we are supposed to know about on the basis of experience.

As empiricists, we want to know what causation is. We seem to have an idea of it: we talk and think of one thing causing another, and so forth. Given Hume's empiricism, we know that this idea of causation must have its source in experience.

There are two routes by which ideas come from impressions. First, by direct "copying," which is true for all simple ideas and their associated impressions. "Copying" is an unclear notion, but it is intended to express, for example, the relationship between the "idea" conveyed in the statement "This pen is blue" and the impression or experience consisting in the fact that this pen is blue. This works not only for statements: thus the idea "blue" which we have is a copy (we can imagine blue perfectly well) of the impression of blue, which we have when we see a blue thing.

The second route by which ideas derive from impressions is through the imagination. In imagination we operate with ideas which have already been given to us from experience, and we can add them together to make more complex ideas. We can also split up complex ideas into their simple parts. Complex ideas may or may not represent complex impressions.

So far as the idea of causation is concerned, there must therefore either be some impression of which it is a copy, or else it must be built up by the imagination out of ideas which do derive directly from experience. All we need do is attend to the relevant impressions or experiences, and we will then know all there is to know about the idea of causation and how we got it.

Suppose that our idea of causation is a direct copy of an impression. All that we will need to do, then, is examine our experiences of those cases called causation and see which feature they have in common. Thus, suppose that I drop the blue pen on my desk and noise results. It was my dropping it that caused the noise. This is one case of causation. Again, consider the blackboard that is somehow caused to remain attached to the wall of my room, rather than drop to the floor as it would otherwise do. This is a second case of causation. Both cases alike being cases of causation, there must be some feature which they have in common, some feature the experience of which gives rise to the idea of causation (given the supposition in the first sentence of this paragraph).

And yet a little reflection makes plain that there is *no* relevant feature that they have in common. At the level of ideas, we characterize both of the examples as cases of causation, but at the level of impressions

they have nothing relevant in common. It follows at once that our idea of causation cannot be a direct copy of some feature of the world. It must therefore be a complex idea built up by the imagination, for this is the only alternative. Note that it does not follow from this that the idea of causation is “merely imaginary”: the idea of causation may be a proper summary of a number of simpler ideas which are well founded in experience and which are associated with each other for very good reason. Our next step, therefore, is to follow Hume and break up — analyse — the complex idea of causation into its simpler parts. The empiricist’s job here will only be complete when, firstly, he has shown to our satisfaction what the simpler parts are, and, secondly, he has demonstrated how these parts are connected with experience in a direct way.

Hume argued that the complex idea of causation involves three elements. The first is that of contact between the things that are causally related. If we are to say correctly that *C* causes *E*, then it must be the case (it is necessary) that *C* and *E* are in contact. More, however, is required (it is not sufficient), and we shall come to that extra in a moment. Is Hume right in his claim here? Certainly it is easy for him if he is right, for the idea of contact is one which we can readily derive from experience. No doubt there are many cases where one thing is in contact with another and we regard causation as in some way operating through the contact: say I throw a brick at a window and it causes it to break. But is contact *necessary*: is causation impossible without it? Is “action at a distance” (an expression familiar in Hume’s time) impossible? Surely not; we believe that the sun causes the flowers to grow, and magnets can pull things, without there being necessarily any contact. There *might* be contact, of course: physicists might discover little streams of particles making contact across an apparent gap. But it is not for philosophers to say that physicists *must* discover this. We do not know such things a priori: the relationship between cause and contact is not a matter of one idea containing another.

“Contact” has here been used in its normal sense of spatial, physical contact. But Hume also means contact in time: there is no temporal gap possible between the operation of the cause and the operation of the effect. This claim directs our attention to a feature of our causal talk: it is not *objects* that cause other objects, it is, as Hempel insisted, rather *events* that cause other events. We do not say that bricks cause broken windows: rather, that it is the *throwing* of bricks that causes the *breaking* of windows. Throwings are not objects, but events. Earlier we noted the supposition that the world consists of many things causally related. The “things” here, given that they are causally related, have to be events and not objects. And yet this does not seem to be the whole story, for my blackboard is still attached to the wall of my room,

and whatever causes it to remain there is continually operating. It seems inappropriate to call this operation an "event," and it seems more appropriate to call it a "state of affairs," although by this time we may be uncertain exactly what "event" means.

What is causally connected with what now becomes a puzzling matter, but it is a matter of some importance for history. We may say that every event has a cause, but is the Second World War an event? Whatever it is, is it the kind of entity that can have a cause, and what kind of entity could count as its cause? Is the world of the historian really one in which "causes" — whatever they are — operate? It is not easy to make sense of the notion of contact in time (let alone contact in space) in the case of history. Often philosophers use the word "conditions" to refer to causally effective states of affairs which operate over a long term. Thus European nationalism may have been a part of the cause of the First World War, even though it was a condition which existed for a long period of time beforehand.

Contact in time and space is therefore not a wholly intelligible notion. Our difficulties with it derive in part from serious problems with our everyday notions of time and space. Consider a problem raised by the classical Greek philosopher Zeno. Imagine Achilles and the Tortoise having a race. Achilles beforehand, knowing how fast he can run, agrees to give the Tortoise a start of some yards. They both start at the same time. In order to catch the Tortoise, Achilles has first to reach the point from which the Tortoise started. After a short time he reaches it. In the time he takes to get there, the Tortoise moves a further short distance. Achilles has next to make up this distance. In the time he takes to do so the Tortoise moves a further short distance. Achilles has next to make up this distance. In the time he takes to do so the Tortoise moves a further short distance. Achilles has next to make up this distance. In the time he takes to do so the Tortoise moves a further short distance, and so on ad infinitum. Thus Achilles can never catch the Tortoise.

And yet we know perfectly well that Achilles does catch the Tortoise. This paradoxical result shows that our argument must be wrong, but where is the mistake? We rely on nothing more than our everyday notions of space, time and motion in achieving the unacceptable result. Zeno used this sort of paradox as part of an argument for the unreality of space, time and motion. Certainly he was right to do this in a way: space, time and motion as ordinarily conceived are in some way unreal, which is to say that we must have to some extent at least simplistic and incorrect conceptions of them. Plainly space and time do not "add up" to infinity in the way that we might ordinarily suppose. Maybe our understanding of causation is as bad. Or worse. Considerations of this sort enter into an advanced theory of causation.<sup>9</sup>

The second element which Hume found to be a part of our complex idea of causation was the idea of temporal priority. He took the view that, when we say that one thing causes another, we mean, among other things, that the cause comes before the effect in time. Put briefly, temporal priority is necessary (although not sufficient) for causation. Just as in the case of contact, it is easy for Hume here if he is right, for temporal priority is just the kind of thing that we can readily experience. But is he right? Again, there are difficulties. There are two ways in which Hume might be wrong: firstly, if causes can come *after* their effects in time; and secondly, if causes and their effects can be contemporaneous.

It does seem odd to suppose that effects could come before their causes in time, but is it impossible? Could you, for example, travel back in time to the ante-bellum American South? (Would historians be better placed than they are if they could do this sort of thing?)<sup>10</sup> On your way back to that time, whatever was causing you to move would be causing you to move backwards in time, and thus the effect of the time machine's operation would be temporally prior to the cause. It is not clear whether this is an impossible idea or not, but the answer is by no means obvious, and it follows from this that it is by no means obvious that temporal priority is necessary for causation. If this is so, then we have no good reason to suppose that temporal priority is an essential part of our idea of causation.

Remember that Hume will also be wrong if causes can be contemporaneous with their effects. Such a case is readily available: my blackboard continues to be attached to the wall of my room, and whatever is causing it to remain there is still operating, and obviously operating at the same time as the effect it is bringing about. It does seem, therefore, that Hume's claims about some of the parts of the idea of causation are mistaken, even though we may recognize that, in many cases, contact and temporal priority may happen to be involved. In summary, it is not the case that contact or temporal priority are necessary for causation.

Hume, however, pre-empts the problem here by regarding the third element of the idea of causation as by far the most important. "Tis chiefly this quality," he said, "that constitutes the relation."<sup>11</sup> This third element of the idea of causation he claimed to be the idea of "necessary connection." When one thing causes another to happen, it is "necessarily connected" with it, it *makes* it happen. It is not just that the effect happens coincidentally following upon the cause.

This seems very plausible — more plausible than the suggestions about contact and temporal priority — but it raises a different kind of difficulty for this empiricist position: from what impression is the idea of necessary connection derived? We have already looked at two cases



of causation (the dropped pen and the blackboard) and found that they have no feature in common. Just as they have no feature in common to support the idea of causation — no feature which the idea of causation can “copy” — so they have no feature in common to support any other idea, including the idea of necessary connection.

There is no point looking further, and a quite general conclusion becomes clear to us. It is that, while experience may inform us that something *does* occur, it cannot inform us that it *must*. Consider two otherwise identical experiences, differing only in the respect that, while the first just happens, the second happens necessarily. How different are the experiences? There is no difference at all, and there could not be any difference. Since we are supposing that experience is all we have to go on, it follows that there is no such thing as necessary connection. And yet we have the idea of it! Do we give up Hume’s empiricism?

The empiricist cannot admit that necessity is a part of the world, and thus he must not so much explain our idea of necessary connection, as explain it away. This Hume does in a most valuable move. The idea of necessary connection, he says, is nothing more than a strong *expectation* on the part of the mind for the event we call the effect, given the event we call the cause. The feeling we have that the window just *has* to break, given the brick travelling towards it (which is the “idea” of necessity), is nothing more than the strong expectation that the window will break. What has to be explained, then, is where the mind gets this expectation from.

The answer Hume gives is that, out of mere habit, the mind moves from the idea of the event called the cause to the idea of the event called the effect. When the cause occurs, the mind then comes to expect the effect. What has now to be explained is the habitual movement of the mind from the one idea to the other. This is a matter of habitual *experience*: in our experience, the one impression (we call it the cause) is “constantly conjoined” with the other impression we call the effect. This tells us that the essence of causation, its central feature, is that of constant conjunction, which is the regular association of things we regard as causally related. Causal talk is nothing more than a way of expressing the *regularity* which occurs in nature. When we search for the causes of things we are searching for the regularities of experience. There is nothing else to it, as Hempel stressed.

How, exactly, should we express this “regularity” or “constant conjunction”? If *C* and *E* are constantly conjoined, then we *may* wish to say this: that, whenever you have *C*, then you have *E*; and, whenever you have *E*, then you have *C*.<sup>12</sup> The second part of this, however, is mistaken. It may be that whenever you throw a brick at a window it will break, but it is not the case that whenever a window is broken, a brick must have been thrown at it. We allow that there is more than one way

of causing a window to break. Constant conjunction or regularity is properly expressed in statements of the form "Whenever  $C$ , then  $E$ ." These statements express a claim about the world, and are true insofar as the world is that way. Such statements are therefore synthetic and not analytic.

"Whenever  $C$  then  $E$ ," therefore, is the way to express a regularity of nature, and our explanations of what happens must make explicit reference to such a statement. In consequence, we arrive at Hempel's position that an explanation of  $E$  must look like this, and be warranted on the basis of experience:

Whenever  $C_1 \dots C_n$  then  $E$ ;  
 $C_1 \dots C_n$ ;  
 Therefore,  $E$ .

Can such an explanation be warranted on the basis of experience? We have seen that one non-empirical and a priori assumption has already been made in arriving at the present position: that of atomism.

Regrettably, there is a crucial ambiguity in statements of the form "Whenever  $C$ , then  $E$ ," an ambiguity which raises a further problem for this kind of empiricism. "Whenever" refers to time, to *all* times, but what does "all" mean here? All the times in our experience? Let us try this and see where it leads. If it means only all the times in our experience, then, when one says "The cause of cancer is virus X operating in conditions Y," then one *means* this: "Whenever I observed virus X operating in conditions Y, cancer followed." One means nothing more. One is not saying that if you now have virus X operating in conditions Y, then you are justified in expecting cancer. One is not saying that there is any point in looking for virus X operating in conditions Y, for one is not suggesting or even hinting that the regular association which one has observed between virus X in conditions Y and cancer is a regularity which exists beyond one's experience. One's meaning is limited to one's past experience alone. But why waste money on research into the causes of cancer if all that one is looking for is a summary of past experience, with no implications for the future whatever?

Obviously this is wrong. When we look for the causes of cancer we are looking for things which, if they occur in the future, will bring about cancer. The point is to know in advance of the occurrence of cancer that certain conditions will bring it about. You only have the cause, so far as our ordinary understanding of this notion is concerned, when you are able to have some element of prediction. This is a part of what "cause" *means*. We will only allow "whenever  $C$  then  $E$ " to ground causation (as Hempel wishes it to do) if the "whenever" in it refers, not merely to all the times in our experience, but to all the *possible* times there are, so that we would know, for example, that *if* virus X operating

in conditions *Y* occurred, then cancer *would* occur. Causation means nothing less.

The crucial ambiguity in “whenever *C* then *E*” has now been explained, and we have unambiguously chosen the sense where “whenever” covers all possible times, and not just all the times in our experience. This sense of “whenever” is often called the “universal” sense, and it is contrasted with the weaker “accidental” sense. The regularity involved in our causal talk involves the universal sense, and Hempel made clear that it was “universal” laws that operated in his theory of explanation. But this is at a cost to the empiricist approach. Hume had two problems: first, he had to break up the complex idea of causation into the parts of which it is made, and, second, he had to show how those simpler parts derived directly from experience. Hume’s first two suggested parts of the idea of causation, contact and temporal priority, were clearly not essential parts of the idea of causation, although, given them, we could recognize their connection with experience well enough. The third idea, necessary connection, suffers from the opposite defect.

It is perhaps plausible enough to hold that the chief feature of the causal link is regularity, but how does that idea derive from experience? It should now be clear to you that, if the accidental sense of “whenever *C* then *E*” is involved (where “whenever” means “at all the times in our experience”), then the empiricist has no difficulty; but, since it is the universal sense which is involved (where “whenever” means “at all possible times”), then the empiricist faces a severe problem. It is open to us to ask Hume this: from where do we get our idea of a possible but unexperienced event?

Our and Hempel’s problem, however, is not quite Hume’s, that of finding out what experience our “idea” of a possible but unexperienced event derives from. Unlike Hume, we and Hempel can hold this idea innate, if we wish; our problem is rather how we can come to *know that* a universal statement — “whenever *C* then *E*” — is true, when we have only experience to go on. If we cannot know on the basis of experience that such statements are true, then we cannot know of the regularities of association which (such statements claim) characterize the reality which experience “gives” us. And then we have no empirical reason to believe that the world is a regularly ordered place, and we are left with no account of what that reality is which experience is experience of, and left with no account of how one thing can be the cause of another. We don’t appear to have been *given* anything by experience here.

How, then, in principle, might one justify a claim to know that the world is a causally ordered place, that certain statements of the universal form “whenever *C* then *E*” are true, when one has only experience to go on? Experience, at best, gives us merely “whenever *C* then

*E*” in the accidental sense. On the empiricist approach, the only method of certain justification, in default of experience, is deductive reasoning.

It is logic which sets for us the standards of deductive reasoning, and is the ultimate rational check upon what we say in our arguments. It is appropriate here to make some remarks about logical reasoning.

People often argue. Commonly their interest in arguing is to persuade their opponent of some point of view. If one is particularly charismatic then one may be able to persuade people easily, but one does not need to be charismatic to do this: one could, for example, just threaten. Years ago a child might be beaten into being persuaded to believe that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but  $2 + 2$  *does* equal 4 regardless of what steps are taken to make one believe it, The best *reason* for believing it is that it is true, but an appeal to reason is often not an effective means of persuasion. A *rational* person, however, is one who is persuaded by means of reason.

One rational way of demonstrating that something is true, we have seen, is by pointing to that experienced fact which makes it true, but this is not a kind of *argument*, and logic is essentially concerned with rational arguments. When an argument is correct we say that it is “valid,” and when it is incorrect we say that it is “invalid.” An argument is split up into “premises” and “conclusion.”

The premises of an argument are those beliefs that are assumed to be true for the purposes of the argument. The conclusion is what logically follows from them. “Following logically from” is a powerful notion: if one accepts the premises of a valid argument, and yet denies the conclusion, then one is contradicting oneself. To contradict oneself is to state both that something is, and is not, the case. Note that an argument might be valid even though the premises are false. Thus the following argument consists of nothing but false statements, but is valid:

Charles de Gaulle was Japanese;  
All Japanese are tigers;  
Therefore, Charles de Gaulle was a tiger.

This is valid because, *if* one accepts the premises to be true (which one may do for the “sake of the argument”), then one is forced to accept that the conclusion is true. Otherwise one is contradicting oneself. The following is an invalid argument consisting of nothing but true statements:

Charles de Gaulle was French;  
 $2 + 2 = 4$ ;  
Therefore, all French are mammals.

Given the premises, one is not driven to accept the conclusion. One would not be *contradicting* oneself in holding the premises true and

the conclusion false; one would simply be wrong. (Construct for yourself an example of a valid argument with true premises and conclusion.)

Note that it is *contradiction* which lies behind the power of a valid deductive argument. If the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true, and this "if-then" statement is *analytic* for a valid deductive argument. If one is an empiricist, then this "must be true" of deductive necessity will be interpreted as all other analytic statements are interpreted: as known a priori but empty of all knowledge content. The use of deductive reasoning, by an empiricist, does not commit him to rationalism by a hidden route. It follows, on the empiricist view, that there can never be more meaning in the conclusion of a valid deductive argument than could be found in the premises.<sup>13</sup>

If, in default of experience, we use logic as our standard for justifying the claim to know that the world is a regular place, then our problem becomes, in effect, how it is possible for us to *deduce* the universal statement "whenever *C* then *E*" from the accidental statement "whenever *C* then *E*." No argument can be valid if there is more meaning in the conclusion than there is in the premises, and it follows at once that it is *impossible* to deduce the universal from the accidental here, *impossible* to deduce causation from experience.

And yet, you may say, in spite of this supposed impossibility, and however irrelevant universal statements may be to historical writing, it remains the case that there are universal statements which we know to be true — for example, Newton's first law of motion, which states: if a body is not acted upon by some externally impressed force, then it will continue in a state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line. Obviously, Newton was not able to *deduce*, in a logically valid argument, from the limited range of his own experience, a conclusion which covers us today, some three hundred years later. And yet he did it all the same, it appears!

The problem of how you can deduce universal statements from the limited range of experiences we have is called the "problem of induction." "Induction" is the old name for what scientists do in reasoning for their theories, and scientific theories, if we assume the atomistic and mechanistic assumptions made so far,<sup>14</sup> are taken to consist primarily of statements in the universal sense of "whenever *C* then *E*," statements which say something true about reality and are thus synthetic. The problem of induction exists precisely because scientific reasoning conceived in this way just could not be valid, which amounts to saying that it just could not be rational, if logical deduction from experience is our standard of rationality.

Some philosophers used to suggest that we ought not to judge *inductive reasoning* by the standards of *deductive reasoning*, but it is not so easy as that. Deductive reasoning is not a game which you can

choose whether to play or not: *only* the principles of logic, specifying deductively valid arguments, give you *reason to believe with certainty* the conclusion of an argument with true premises, for only then would you be contradicting yourself in denying the conclusion. Precisely because inductive reasoning is invalid deductively, it follows that, for all that your premises are true, for all that experience gives you, your conclusion may still be wrong. It is perfectly consistent with any argument or experience which Newton could have provided that his first law of motion would have been found to be wrong the moment he died; or, indeed, at any time before or since.

Do not think, as some do, that you can avoid the problem of induction by specifying only "probabilities."<sup>15</sup> It is doubtful if we know quite what we mean by saying this, and there are many kinds of probabilities,<sup>16</sup> but consider the straightforward case: whenever *C*, then probably *E*. It does not matter how big or small the probability of *E*, given *C*, is — 1 per cent or 99 per cent — there is still an ambiguity in "whenever." The probabilistic statement here is useless unless it is interpreted in the universal sense: at all possible times, if *C* occurs, then there is a probability of so much that *E* will occur. It still covers all possible times, however weakly those times are described, and this is necessarily more than experience can support: the problem of induction includes statistical arguments. In the *accidental* sense of "whenever," of course, why rely on something as weak as probabilities? You experienced whatever relationships you experienced in their *entirety*, so you can be exact to 100 per cent. An accidental generalization is a mere summary of those experiences, no more than a list.

It is plain, given empiricism, that we need valid deduction from experience if we are to believe a conclusion (given true premises) with certainty, for the possibility of doubt is only removed when it is contradictory to suppose the conclusion false. May we not have, though, "reason to believe" something which falls short of absolute certainty? Does "reasonableness" — that rationality which in chapter 2 we noted to be the foundation of knowledge — require that we accept something *only* when there is no *possible* alternative? May we not reasonably believe something when there is no *actual* alternative to it, and if we have no reason to think it wrong?

One such alteration of the standard of "reason to believe," and thus the standard of knowledge, was made by Sir Karl Popper in his widely influential contributions to the empiricist philosophy of science and of history.<sup>17</sup> Popper noted an asymmetry about the logic of the universal statement "whenever *C* then *E*." No matter how many cases of *C* being conjoined with *E* one may observe, one is never in a position to conclude with certainty that "whenever *C* then *E*" is true. But one needs only *one* case of *C* occurring *without E* to conclude with absolute

certainly that “whenever  $C$  then  $E$ ” is wrong. To put it simply, we cannot prove or verify a universal statement, but it is logically possible to disprove or falsify it. Furthermore, falsifications are just the kind of thing we can experience: just as it is possible to experience individual cases of  $C$  and  $E$  conjoined, so it is possible to experience individual cases of  $C$  without  $E$ .

Therefore, although we cannot be empirically certain that a universal statement is true, we might come to be empirically certain that it was false. Does not this come to the same thing, you may ask? Does not finding out that a statement is not false (they are not all false, after all) amount to finding out that it is true? These questions involve a misunderstanding. Certainly we may allow that “not false” equals “true.” But “not finding a statement to be false” does *not* mean “finding a statement to be not false.” If we do find a case of “ $C$  and not  $E$ ,” then we know that “whenever  $C$  then  $E$ ” is false. But if we do not find such a case, then it tells us nothing at all about this universal statement, not even that we have no reason to disbelieve it. This last requires a further assumption, as we shall see.

Suppose you have a favourite theory involving some central claim that whenever  $C$  then  $E$ ; for example, “whenever you have full employment you will have inflation.” You cannot *prove* that your theory is true, but then neither can your rival theorists *verify* their claims, so you are no worse off. All that you need to do is avoid finding out that your theory is false. There is one easy way to do this: keep your eyes shut. Obviously this will not do. You would only have some reason to believe “whenever  $C$  then  $E$ ,” according to Popper, if you had tried hard to discover cases of  $C$  without  $E$ , but without success. The harder you had tried, the more reasonable it would be to believe that whenever  $C$  then  $E$ . Of course, this is a risky procedure for your favourite theory, since you might succeed in finding a case of  $C$  without  $E$ , and you would then know that your theory was false. Still, it is worth the risk, since an untested theory is worthless,

Popper’s line of argument, however, assumes that a tested theory is worth something: that one has reason to believe a theory if one has no reason to disbelieve it. One places the burden of disproof upon experience, so that a theory is to be accepted unless experience shows it to be wrong. But why is the burden of proof this way round? The only reason for this is that, if the burden of proof is placed upon the theorist himself, it is too heavy a burden for him to bear, since the problem of induction prevents him from successfully carrying it. It is an arbitrary move if, in an argument between two people in which the burden of proof is on one of them, the one simply shifts the burden to the other!

This shift in the burden of proof is warranted only if a further assumption is made, namely that reality consists of regularly ordered

events and conditions, such that we can suppose our assertions of regularity correct except where we find to the contrary. This assumption, which underlies Popper's work, is reminiscent of an older "solution" to the problem of induction, which assumed that the future resembles the past. This assumption was often thought to make good the validity of inductive arguments. There are some technicalities about whether, as an assumption, it could make induction work,<sup>18</sup> but even if this assumption did make induction work it would not get us anywhere unless it was *true*. The empiricist has as difficult a problem as ever as to why we should believe a priori assumptions about reality like these. The mere fact that past futures have resembled past pasts (did they? how do you know?) is no guarantee that future futures will resemble future pasts.

In spite of this, some empiricists have felt strangely comfortable in relying upon the empirically unwarranted assumption of similarity between past and future. But the problem for them is worse than merely one of worrying whether the future resembles the past; as we have seen, the problem is rather whether *possible* cases resemble *actual* ones, and the future-past relationship is merely a simple version of this, at best. The empiricist finds that he has to *assume* what he is supposed to be proving experience to *give*, namely, that the world consists of regularly ordered events and conditions.

We have to *know* that this assumption of regularity is true, if the burden of proof is to be shifted as Popper wishes. Only then may universal statements which are successfully tested be admitted to knowledge. But even if, as Popper admits, scientific theories are only provisional in their acceptance (and thus perhaps are not to be admitted to knowledge), it remains the case that the regularity assumption has to be made, even to allow provisionally well-founded belief. This is because, without this assumption, the experienced non-occurrence of a case of *C* without *E* says *nothing whatever*, not even with some small probability, about the truth of "whenever *C* then *E*."<sup>19</sup> We find, therefore, that, just as the a priori non-empirical assumption of atomism was made on this Humean empiricist approach which Popper and Hempel have adopted, so the a priori non-empirical assumption of mechanism (interpreted as expressing regularity) has also to be made.

But a priori non-empirical assumptions do not end here. Hempel stresses that the "*C*" and "*E*" in a scientific explanation mark *kinds* of things.<sup>20</sup> We can see why this is so if we suppose that, as historians, we wish to explain the occurrence of the American Civil War. This could be taken to be the "*E*" in the conclusion of the following covering law argument:

Whenever *C* then *E*;  
*C*;  
 Therefore, *E*.



However, this “*E*” also occurs in the universal statement “whenever *C* then *E*,” but how can one talk of “whenever” an event of 1861-65, which only occurred once? “American Civil War” is a proper name for a specific instance (using ordinary English elementary grammar), whereas the “*C*” and “*E*” have to be the sort of thing that can recur, so that the “whenever” in the universal statement can operate properly. Notice that the words “civil war” will do, for they form not a proper name but a description: they refer to *kinds* of thing, and kinds of thing can recur again and again.

Let us see this in an example of an explanation which uses a historical “law.” This law is surely false but it is suitable for illustration.

Whenever a revolution occurs, a civil war occurs  
thereafter;  
The American Revolution was a revolution;  
Therefore, a civil war occurred after the American  
Revolution.

It is not empty to say that the American Revolution was a revolution. “Revolution,” in its use in the last sentence, is part of a proper name, and is not necessarily a correct description. Was the Hundred Years’ War a war? Did it last for a hundred years? The situation has to be made explicit, and the second premise of the above argument does this. It says what *kind* of thing the American Revolution was.

This example helps us to spell out more exactly the form of a covering law argument. The outline is:

Whenever *C* then *E*;  
*C*;  
Therefore, *E*.

and the more exact form is:

Whenever there is an event of kind *C* then there is an  
event of kind *E*;  
The occurring event *X* is an event of kind *C*;  
Therefore, there is an occurring event of kind *E*.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, we have seen that the covering law theory of explanation requires us to spell out the application of our mechanistic assumption to the experienced world in the form of a deductive argument. The first premise of that argument is a universal statement, in the exact form: “Whenever there is an event of kind *C* then there is an event of kind *E*.” This expresses the constant conjunction of kinds of thing, and it is held true on the assumption that the world is a regular association of kinds of thing, and that the absence of regularity has, in spite of testing, not been found for these kinds *C* and *E*.

The second premise of the argument is the statement: "The occurring event X is an event of kind C." A particular experience is here being characterized as being an experience of a particular kind. It is just such a characterization of experience which is required for testing a universal statement, as mentioned in the last paragraph. Thus, to say that "the absence of regularity has, in spite of testing, not been found for these kinds C and E" is to say that no actual experience of events is characterizable as an experience of something of kind C occurring without something of kind E occurring. Both in testing the first premise, therefore, and in asserting the second premise, one is required to rely on being able to state truly that some particular event is also a particular kind of event.

In being committed to the existence of kinds, the covering law theory is committed to no more than is any other approach to history. Although the route to this commitment lies through a particular empiricist interpretation of the beliefs in mechanism and atomism, it is a commitment which is shared by all who speak, regardless of metaphysics. The use of language is always more than the mere naming of things, and includes describing things, the application to them of kind-words.

What is it to say that a particular kind exists? Here there are serious metaphysical disagreements. On Plato's rationalist view, for a kind to exist is for a single object to exist, one which appears in a number of different places at a number of different times. The kind "revolution" (if it is a kind) is a single real object with a number of scattered appearances throughout history. (Plato called such objects "Forms," and they have also traditionally been called "universals.") But the empiricist will not accept this suggestion. For him, we must rely upon experience so far as we possibly can, and at best we experience the particular "appearances" of a kind separately, and not any contrasting single reality. He has to reject the Platonic view that we can know by reason alone that there are these special entities, and he similarly rejects the view that we can know by reason alone which they are.

Consider the word "dog," said of dogs, which form a kind of thing, and about which universal statements may be made. "What we really have," said the empiricist Bertrand Russell, "is a number of more or less similar noises which are all applicable to a number of more or less similar quadrupeds."<sup>22</sup> Being a kind is then understood to be some sort of organisation of *similarities* between experiences, and being committed to the existence of kinds is being committed to the existence of such similarities.

While we might, in a single experience, be faced with a number of similar objects, and apply the word "dog" to them all indiscriminately to mark our recognition of their similarity in the relevant respects, this

experience only teaches us the word “dog” as applied to itself. “Dog” means more than this: it applies in principle to an infinite number of *possible* objects, and not just to those actually experienced. This is an essential feature of descriptive words and thus of all talk. It is a particularly obvious point for the covering law theorist, for the “whenever” in “whenever *C* then *E*” could not be used if it were not so. Thus, when the empiricist is committed to the existence of kinds, he is committed to the existence of similarities between possible objects — that is, to the existence of similarities between objects not yet experienced. *That* kinds exist is not a view that can be derived from experience, but also *which* kinds exist cannot be derived from experience either, it follows.

Just like the universal statement, the assertion that a kind exists is a claim that goes beyond that which experience alone can warrant. It follows that empirical verifiability of the claim is impossible. One might think that we could here make an analogous move to that made by Popper in his “solution” to the problem of induction, and look for an appropriate sort of falsifiability. This, however, is impossible. The analogy would require that experience could show two objects or events of claimed similarity to be dissimilar after all, but there is *always* a similarity between any two things, even if only a similarity in respect of being experienced by us.

Would it be wrong to say, either that mountains are, or that they are not, like triangles? Or that some mountains are more like triangles than they are like other mountains? What *kinds* are involved here?<sup>23</sup> Do the mountains which are like triangles, and other triangles, all form a single kind? Plainly it is necessary to identify the respect in which similarity is being judged here: shape of outline, say, or massiveness. But “shape of outline” and “massiveness” here form yet further kinds, which again are not given by experience.

Experience alone does not determine what kinds there are, and there are two choices open to us: either reality is organized into fixed kinds which we know on an unexperienced a priori basis (we can express this differently by saying that experience is of really existing kinds), which is much like Plato’s position; or we can recognize that there is a certain freedom as to which respects we pick out as at issue in our judgements of similarity.<sup>24</sup>

There is little doubt that we have innate standards for judgements of similarity for observable matters, but this does not cover matters of theory, of that which goes beyond observational experience. The historical past, of course, lies beyond observational experience. There is, in a developing science or other mode of knowledge, a choice of how to classify; and yet it is not capricious. Although we may judge similarities and classify our experiences in many different ways, the atomist mechanist empiricist will hold that it is the job of a historian to classify

things into kinds so that they can be covered by laws, so that the assumed real regularity of nature (including society) can be recognized and used to our advantage.

The assumption to which we have been committed in the application of covering law theory is that the world consists of many regularly ordered events and conditions, things which are "constantly conjoined." But we have now seen that only *kinds* of thing can be constantly conjoined, and therefore we are committed, in the application of covering law theory, to the existence of *kinds* of thing. The empiricist who is committed to atomism and mechanism is thereby committed to the claim that the world is regularly ordered, even though this claim is not derivable from experience; and he is further committed thereby to the claim that kinds of thing exist, and this claim too is not derivable from experience. Note here two different questions: whether kinds exist (to which we have our answer); and which kinds exist (to which we have no answer).

It is sometimes noted that historians "fail" to be "scientific" in that they rarely provide historical laws. It is more interesting that historians do not provide developed ways of classifying the historical matters with which they deal, so that laws may in principle be found to cover them. If physicists still used the everyday notions of the classification of experience such as "table," "tree" and so forth, it is highly unlikely that their theories would have had even the most rudimentary form of existence.<sup>25</sup> Experiences had to be re-classified in ways that permitted theories involving assertions of regularity to get a grip, and this was done because it was thought, on the basis of the approach outlined so far, that theories involving regularities were the only kind of theories we could properly have. Notice that if we made different a priori assumptions from those involved in the belief in regularity, then it would be appropriate to seek different schemes of descriptive classification of experience altogether. Alternatives will be introduced in the next chapter.

Thus the mechanism and atomism of which the covering law theory is an application state only that the world consists of many events and conditions in regular association with each other. They do not state what kinds of events and conditions exist, but covering law theory is inapplicable without an associated set of claims as to which kinds do exist, and indeed *any* linguistically expressible metaphysics or set of a priori non-empirical assumptions, *any* approach to knowledge about the world, requires such a specification. However, while mechanism and atomism do not in themselves provide a detailed metaphysics of kinds, they do provide strong constraints upon the range of possible theories here.

Thus a certain range of conceptions of human nature is alone appropriate to answering historical questions, on this view. Human beings are either natural objects in their own right, or conglomerations

of natural objects, or parts of natural objects, the activities of which objects are events and conditions in regular association with each other. A decision must be made, and somehow rationally argued for (for experience alone does not determine it), as to what are the basic kinds of thing in the world, including the peopled historical world.

Like most historians, a number of covering law theorists will object to the example above which purports to explain the occurrence of the American Civil War by reference to the American Revolution and a linking law of history.<sup>26</sup> If the American Civil War is a large event, existing as a single real object in its own right, then it will be appropriate to explain it by seeking a law governing its association with other such objects. On the other hand, while the covering law theorist is not committed to any one metaphysics as to which kinds exist, he has to make a decision about which kinds exist anyway, and he may well reject the view that the American Civil War is a basic object of reality in its own right.

It is open to the covering law theorist to adopt, as closely as he can, a "common-sense" view, like many historians, and say that the fundamental objects of reality are individual actions. The American Civil War will then be regarded as an aggregate of more fundamental things, each an individual action, and each individual action will require its own explanation in covering law form. The covering law theorist is therefore able to conceive of a historical account as a highly complex thing outlining a mass of regularly related events, all organized under the title "The American Civil War." A title like "The American Civil War" is just a proper name given by historians to a number of events which are aggregated into the invented appearance of a single entity by the historians themselves.

Again, it would be open to a covering law theorist to hold that only the cells of the body (the "most basic form of life"), or even just individual atoms, are the fundamental objects of reality, and that human actions themselves are properly to be seen as mere aggregates of the operations of such entities. Historians rarely adopt this view, but the past few years have seen a considerable increase in biographies of great historical figures written from a medical point of view, with explanations of actions cast in terms of a person's physiological state.

The many disagreements that there are between historians, and between historians and other human scientists, can thus be conceived by the covering law theorist to be, not disagreements about whether to use covering law theory, but disagreements within this theory about the basic objects of reality. Sometimes, in the elementary philosophy of social science and history, these issues are expressed as a choice between "holism" (the view that social "wholes" like the American Civil War exist in their own right), and "individualism" (the view that individuals

and their actions are the basic elements of reality), but it is not so simple as this.<sup>27</sup> There are many more than two alternatives here, and it is not even possible to range them on a single scale, from less to more aggregation, or (put differently) from more to less reduction. Moreover, the issues of the metaphysics of kinds are not issues which arise only for covering law theory, and causation itself is a "kind" of thing, and may require to be differently understood, or excluded as a mode of understanding altogether. A decision on such matters is basic to history. Yet the decision must be rationally made, and experience alone, we have seen, will not do.

We asked, in question 2 at the beginning of chapter 2, what would be a proper justification for the cliometric approach to history. Historians have to describe and explain the past world, given assumptions as to what that world is. Given the philosophical assumptions of empiricism, atomism and mechanism, as interpreted in this chapter, the historian will contribute to knowledge by explaining along the lines required by the covering law theory of explanation, and he will provide for himself, or derive from auxiliary sciences such as economics (or sociology, psychology, cell physiology or chemistry) the laws which he will need.<sup>28</sup> Covering law theory leaves open the question of which laws to use, since this depends upon which particular metaphysics of kinds is adopted. A cliometric approach to history embodies a commitment to a particular metaphysics of kinds, and it will be justified as an approach to history insofar as the metaphysics involved is justifiable.

But this covering law approach, with any associated selection of auxiliary science such as economics, needs a rational defence. We have defended empiricism against rationalism, and argued that we should proceed by trying to make the empiricist programme work, falling back on non-experiential sources of knowledge only where we have no alternative. We are now in such a position of fallback: it has become apparent in developing the Humean background to Hempel's position that we have to make some *assumptions* about what the world is which we experience, and these assumptions are prior to our reliance on experience and not themselves derived from it. They are metaphysical, non-empirical, a priori assumptions.

If we are to make sense of a shared world embracing historical time in particular we will have to have some kind of metaphysics, even if not an atomistic one; and it is clear that certain knowledge that the world is like this is not to be gained from experience alone. There must be, then, some knowledge claims — the metaphysical ones — that are not simply given in experience. While historians can provide knowledge insofar as they can base their claims upon experience, they will have to justify at the same time the conception they have of the nature of the reality which experience discloses. A conception of reality appropriate

to the cliometric approach will similarly need justification. The question of the justification of these non-empirical a priori metaphysical assumptions is left until chapter 7.

#### NOTES

1. One does not have to adopt an empiricist justification of science. See note 14.
2. So called by W. H. Dray, in *Laws and Explanation in History*, Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 1.
3. C. G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," *Journal of Philosophy* vol. 39, 1942, p. 35. Reprinted in P. Gardiner ed., *Theories of History*, New York: The Free Press, 1959, pp. 344–356. The point of view involved was further expressed for history in M. G. White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, New York: Harper and Row, 1969, and A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge University Press, 1968.
4. Hempel in Gardiner, *op. cit.* p. 345.
5. Hempel in Gardiner, *op. cit.* p. 347, note 1. There are theories of causation different from Hempel's "regularity" conception. See, for example, R. G. Collingwood, "On the So-Called Idea of Causation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 38, 1937–38 p. 85; D. Gasking, "Causation and Recipes," *Mind* 64, 1955, p. 479; J. L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, 1965, p. 245; J. L. Mackie, "The Direction of Causation," *Philosophical Review* 75, 1966, p. 441, and essays in T. L. Beauchamp ed., *Philosophical Problems of Causation*, Encino: Dickenson, 1974.
6. This is also M. G. White's position. See his *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Selby-Bigge ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888, Bk. 1, Pt. 1, Sect. 1.
8. For a strong argument by a monist empiricist see F. H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic*, Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1922, vol. 1.
9. Advanced study of causation may usefully begin with E. Sosa ed., *Causation and Conditionals*, Oxford University Press, 1975.
10. This is A. C. Danto's question, See his *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge University Press, 1968.
11. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Selby-Bigge ed., Oxford University Press, 1888, p. 173, rule 3.
12. *Ibid.*, rule 4.
13. For a non-empiricist introduction to logic, see R. Bradley and N. Swartz, *Possible Worlds*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.
14. There is a wealth of other assumptions which might be made about the nature of science. See, to begin with, T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1970, and R. Harré, *The Philosophies of Science*, Oxford University Press, 1972.
15. For an elementary account of probabilistic explanation see C. G. Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966.
16. See J. L. Mackie, *Truth, Probability and Paradox*, Oxford University Press, 1973.
17. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London: Hutchinson, 1968, ch. 1.

18. See essays by M. Black and P. Achinstein in P. H. Nidditch ed., *The Philosophy of Science*, Oxford University Press, 1968.

19. Notice that it need not be denied that some theory connects "whenever *C* then *E*" with other scientific laws, so that, conditional on these other laws, a case of non-occurrence of *C* without *E* may affect the reason for believing "whenever *C* then *E*." But this only transfers the issue to the problem of why we should hold true the other laws. In the end, the metaphysical assumption here has to be held true.

20. Hempel in Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

21. The argument form here is rightly ambiguous in that the event of kind *E* may or may not be the occurring event *X* itself. Given our interest, the occurring event of kind *E* is a different event *Y*, properly named the American Civil War. Again, it is not empty to say that the American Civil War was a civil war.

22. B. Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962, p. 22. Hume regarded resemblance as basic.

23. A simple introduction to these issues is given in P. G. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1989, particularly chapter 1.

24. This is at the basis of N. Goodman's so-called "new riddle of induction." See his *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*, Harvard University Press, 1955, and, for an updated discussion, I. L. Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, London: Hutchinson, 1987.

25. This is not, of course, a reason why historians should seek to re-classify in a similar manner. Paul Veyne argues at length and with great plausibility that it is essential to the historical approach to ignore the general and describe in terms of the unique and singular. See his *Writing History*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, [1971] 1984.

26. Karl Marx offered theories at this macrotheoretical level.

27. See the essays by Lukes and Mandelbaum in A. Ryan ed., *The Philosophy of Social Explanation*, Oxford University Press, 1973.

28. On the general issue of the scientific nature of economics, see M. Blaug, *The Methodology of Economics*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, and on the philosophy of economics, C. Dyke, *Philosophy of Economics*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981.



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## CHAPTER 4

### Traditional History

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**O**UR THREE THEORETICAL QUESTIONS ARE: CAN historians provide knowledge about reality? What would be a proper justification for the cliometric approach to history? Is answering the question “was slavery profitable?” a way of achieving knowledge, so that, once answered, the issue is disposed of once and for all? With respect to these questions, we saw that we needed a standard for knowledge, and we adopted and conditionally defended, in chapters 2 and 3, a reliance upon the epistemology of (Humean) empiricism: assuming that knowledge comes only from experience, unless we are forced to conclude to the contrary. We have been so forced: we have noted that empiricism requires associated a priori non-empirical metaphysical assumptions, and that the covering law theory of explanation involves a metaphysics which embodies the claims of atomism and mechanism. These metaphysical claims are not themselves derivable from experience. Rather, what we take experience to be experience of presupposes claims such as these.

Historians have to describe and explain the historical world, given assumptions as to what that real world is. Their descriptions and explanations are contributions to knowledge if they are well founded rationally. This rational foundation cannot be empiricism, permitting a simple appeal to experience (whether or not mediated through historical evidence), for we have seen that experience alone will not do. Empiricism is an insufficient foundation for the rational defence of claims to knowledge, for we have seen that additional a priori metaphysical assumptions have to be made, and these also require a rational defence.

The application of the covering law theory of explanation requires that we adopt additional metaphysical assumptions about the kinds of thing that exist in the world, and these assumptions have to fall within a certain range. We have noted the covering law theorist's view that the disagreements between historians are primarily about what kinds of thing exist. We will know when we are correct about the kinds of thing that

exist, given the atomist and mechanist assumptions, when the world makes total sense to us as a regularly ordered structure.

In chapter 1 we introduced two approaches to history: the “traditional” view and the econometric view. It was in the conflict between these two approaches that our theoretical questions appeared. Can the proponents of the cliometric approach be right? An approach to history may be the foundation of a claim to historical knowledge if it is an epistemologically proper application of a rationally justified metaphysics. We will therefore face two broad questions: What are the metaphysical assumptions made by our approaches to history? and, How are those assumptions to be justified?

To help us uncover the metaphysical assumptions made by the two approaches to the writing of history, one question that we shall deal with is whether these two approaches fit the metaphysical assumptions of atomism and mechanism involved in covering law theory. An associated question is this: In the event of one or both of these approaches failing to fit these metaphysical assumptions, should the approaches be rejected? It should now be recognized that questioning such a rejection amounts to questioning covering law theory. Examining the different approaches to history therefore involves — just insofar as they fail to fit atomism or mechanism — examining the possibility of alternative metaphysical assumptions. Whatever metaphysics we adopt will ultimately need a rational justification if knowledge is to be achieved on the basis of it. This last issue will be dealt with in chapter 7.

On the metaphysics of covering law theory, human beings are either natural objects in their own right, or conglomerations of natural objects, or parts of natural objects. Whichever they are, they operate in explainable ways involving appeal to regularities, and indeed a successful mode of such causal explanation at one level rather than another itself determines what kinds of natural objects human beings are. To question all this by offering alternative metaphysics is to offer alternative — and very different — theories of human nature.

In this chapter we shall examine what was vaguely described in the first chapter as the “traditional” interpretation of history. No example was then given, since the presentation could not have been brief, and it was not to the immediate purpose; but now it is. The “traditional” interpretation was introduced by contrast with the new cliometric approach, and Fogel and Engerman defined this traditional interpretation as involving five main propositions:

1. that slavery was generally an unprofitable investment, or depended on trade in slaves to be profitable, except on new, highly fertile land;
2. that slavery was economically moribund;

3. that slave labor, and agricultural production based on slave labor was economically inefficient;
4. that slavery caused the economy of the South to stagnate, or at least retarded its growth, during the antebellum era;
5. that slavery provided extremely harsh material conditions of life for the typical slave.<sup>1</sup>

At once we are off the point of the argument. The Philadelphia conference was an occasion for assessing the cliometrical approach, an occasion for comparing it with the traditional methods of writing history. But Fogel and Engerman have here given us, not an outline of the traditional mode of historical method or theory, but a set of answers to specific issues. The main propositions they specify here are propositions with which they disagree.<sup>2</sup> But the fact that they disagree with these propositions and wish to draw different conclusions does not in itself demonstrate any disagreement about method. One can disagree about answers while sharing the same questions and the same methods of answering them. There is nothing in the five "traditional" propositions which precludes their having been reached by statistical means, as we saw in chapter 1. It was a crucial feature of the argument at the conference, however (and a crucial problem for historical knowledge), that the questions, methods and modes of interpretation were *not* shared by different historical approaches. The matter of importance here is not whether, in achieving one set of answers rather than another, the cliometricians have applied their approach correctly. Rather, it is whether their approach ought to be used at all.

Our problem is not the historical one of finding out what people actually meant by "traditional interpretation" here, although we may observe that perhaps no single thing was meant, and that there was considerable confusion of detail in the minds of those at the Philadelphia conference. The expression "traditional interpretation" has a range of implications or associations of meaning. Certainly when historians think of the "traditional interpretation" here they may be thinking specifically of the conclusions reached in, for example, Frederick L. Olmsted's *The Cotton Kingdom*<sup>3</sup> or John E. Cairnes' *The Slave Power*.<sup>4</sup> They may additionally have in mind the variations on these conclusions held over a long period of time due to the writings of Ulrich B. Phillips, which suggest that slavery, although inefficient, was civilized and paternalistic.<sup>5</sup> They may even have in mind Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution*, relatively recent though it is.<sup>6</sup>

Yet there is a lengthy and rich development of historical thought about American negro slavery which cannot be encapsulated in a specific set of agreed conclusions at all, and certainly not in just the five given by Fogel and Engerman. While there is a sense — even a widely accepted

sense — in which Fogel's and Engerman's five propositions are "traditional," it is too narrow a sense to be relevant to the purpose of the Philadelphia conference. The issue is not a matter of the particular conclusions reached, but of the *method* to be used, and, for many historians, the contrast between the cliometric approach and the "traditional" approach is a contrast between cliometrics and the "narrative" approach to historical writing which essentially involves the recovery of meaning from written records. We shall see that the "narrative" approach is not just a style of presentation of results, but itself a way of conceiving historical reality.

For the argument to proceed, we need to present an example of the traditional "narrative" approach to historical writing, and examine the metaphysical assumptions involved in it, initially by checking how far it accords with the covering law theorist's assumptions of atomism and mechanism. But, before we do this, what exactly is the "narrative" approach to historical writing? We must not select as an example one which begs any central questions.

Three philosophers of history have offered analytical studies of length about narrative writing: Bryce Gallie, Morton G. White and Arthur C. Danto.<sup>7</sup> Gallie stresses that historical writing is essentially the telling of a story. A story, he holds, should be self-explanatory: it involves readers understanding "the successive actions and thoughts and feelings of certain described characters with a peculiar directness," such that we are "pulled forward by this development almost against our will." Only in a less skilfully told story, when it is difficult to follow the development towards a climax, do we require the intrusion of an explicit explanation of what the characters are doing and why.<sup>8</sup>

Two features of this position are worth picking out. First, note that what is presented in a story, viewed in Gallie's way, are *successive* and *developing* matters. Necessary to this approach is that the events and states of affairs dealt with are presented in chronological order. The second feature of this position is that the relation between a "story" and an "explanation" is mysterious. On the one hand, a story is self-explanatory. On the other hand, we only need an explanation when the story becomes difficult to follow. Is the story an explanation or not?

Gallie certainly believes that a story is an explanation. But he holds that its explanatory nature is largely a function of the understanding on the part of the *reader*. If the reader's subjective puzzlement is removed or kept at a distance then the story is explanatory; otherwise not. If the story becomes difficult to follow, if it deviates from what is expected as normal, then there is a need to provide an additional explanation to remove the puzzlement.

Gallie assumes that the additional explanation is *intrusive*: it is a different kind of thing from the self-explanatory story itself. According

to him, the intrusive explanation can be (but does not have to be) an explicit, scientifically founded causal explanation. (He analyses causal explanations as being necessary conditions.) We can understand the difference between the self-explanatory story and the intrusive explanation in the following way: each is explanatory according to a different criterion of explanation. A story has to pass a test for being an explanation which is set by the subjective capacity of a reader to follow it. The intrusive explanation has had to pass a test for being an explanation which is set by some objective standard of what reality is, for example, a standard provided by a natural or social science. That an intrusive explanation is objectively explanatory, however, does not alone warrant its place in the story, for it must yet meet the primary requirement which is (in Gallie's view) the essence of history, that it ensures by its presence an acceptably followable story.

A necessary (but not sufficient) condition for written historical presentation, on this approach, is that the matters described are selected and presented in a chronologically ordered, subjectively explanatory story. If we suppose, with Gallie, that historical writing is essentially of this form, it follows that historical writing must, whatever else it does, present matters in a chronologically ordered way. However, as Rolf Gruner has noted,<sup>9</sup> historical writing is frequently not of this form. Certain classic examples of historical writing describe states of affairs at a given time in an analytical rather than a chronologically ordered fashion, for example Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, first published in 1860, and Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, first published in 1924. Kenneth M. Stamp's *The Peculiar Institution* is also like this, as are many other works of traditional history describing the slave and slaveholding ways of life. Surely they are not all to be excluded from proper history?

We would indeed be required to exclude them if it could be shown that the nature of historical method or subject matter was of such a kind as to necessitate chronologically ordered subjectively explanatory story writing. Our selection of an example of the traditional narrative historical approach would have to be made on this basis. But, as Gallie presents the nature of a story, we have no reason to think that history must be like this. A story, on Gallie, is essentially a mode of presentation to a given readership. It is structured according to what that audience happens to find explanatory, and while many lay people in our culture find storylike presentations especially followable, there are in practice other intelligible modes of presentation: the analytical approach, film (itself structured in various ways), maps, graphs and even statistical tables. The narrative approach to history, however, is not just a claim about *presentation*.

But is there a more powerful argument than Gallie's in favour of his important claim that history is *essentially* storylike in form? While we may be gripped by a story which pulls us almost against our will, it may not be a purely subjective matter of successful presentation. While a story's success may depend on our capacity to follow it, it is also true that a scientific theory must be intelligible to us, and we would not regard that as an argument for the subjectivity of science. We might wish to say that the power and followability of storylike presentation derives from some objective source, and that is why a story has the explanatory force it does. It is these supposed *objective* storylike connections or features of reality which would warrant the claim that historical writing must, to be truthful to history itself, be storylike in form.

Gallie offers no criterion for an objective storylike reality beyond chronological ordering. And while historical events may be in reality chronologically ordered, they may at the same time be chaotic, and there is nothing objectively explanatory about stringing an arbitrarily selected muddle of events along a temporal line. The other two analytical philosophers of narrative whom we have mentioned, White and Danto, both offer causation as the solution. On their view, narratives are nothing more than modes of writing which string together implicit causal explanations of the sort that were described in chapter 3, thus committing these philosophers to the metaphysics of covering law theory. But while such causal links may be selected in chronologically ordered fashion and thus used to support (rather than intrude into) a story, they do not need to be presented in this way. The objective regularity of events may be presented in either storylike or analytical form. While it is the objective regularities give the story an objective explanatory force, they do not *necessitate* a storylike mode of presentation, so that the story is not essential to history.

Plainly we may question whether White and Danto are correct about this. We may wish to identify objective storylike connections or features of reality which will mark the story as *essential* to historical reality. These connections or features will supply a reason to recognize the story as alone having an objective explanatory power, a power which accords with its subjective followability better than causation and much better than mere chronological ordering. One suggestion that occasionally has currency is that stories themselves — with beginnings, middles and ends — exist as objective entities in the real world.<sup>10</sup>

The medieval philosopher William of Ockham stated the rational requirement that we not suppose things to exist without necessity. This requires us to be parsimonious in our metaphysics, and as it stands the suggestion that stories exist objectively is metaphysically incontinent, for there is no apparent limit, other than that naturally imposed by our imaginative powers, to the range of stories which may be written about

a historical episode. Each one, supposedly, will have its complement in reality. We shall not say that it is impossible for epistemological and metaphysical sense to be made of this proposal. But we suggest that there is no need to travel such inconclusive and barely understood paths while our interest is in historical knowledge rather than literary theory.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the very subjectivity of a story is of importance here. It is plausible to say that individual people understand themselves to be part of a story, in that they make their own lives (and the lives of those around them) intelligible to themselves in the form of a story, through constituting themselves as the persons they are in virtue of beliefs about their past and their intended future, which beliefs they organize in a chronologically ordered storylike way.<sup>12</sup> States and other organizations, as well as individuals, may constitute themselves as essentially narrative structures, so that the public conception and recognition of the organization (which determines its existence) is of an entity progressing in a storylike way. If this is what real people and societies are like, then it may be appropriate for historians to represent their subjects' lives in storylike form.

But there is still no *necessity* for this. If the human world is storylike in form, it does not follow that knowledge about it is necessarily or even usefully expressed in storylike form. To assert that the development of some state has the form of, say, a tragic story is not in itself to tell a tragic story: analytical histories may well be (and have been) written of the Renaissance, a historical entity constituted in a storylike way with beginning, middle and end. Additionally, even if people do understand themselves in a storylike way, they may not be right. A person may believe himself to be acting in accordance with a storylike plan of his own devising, and yet really be subject to determination by, for example, external economic forces. Historians must not limit their understanding of what is going on to the modes of understanding used by those they are talking about. On the contrary, the *critical* evaluation of, for example, a person's diary or letters, including that person's conception of what kind of person he is or reasons for doing what he did, is one of the first lessons for historians to learn. Moreover, it is a historical question whether people have always understood themselves or the world in storylike ways, and plausible to suggest that they have not.<sup>13</sup> We conclude, therefore, that while history may properly be presented in storylike form, it is not essential that it be so presented.

Thus, while the historian may typically use a "plot" or storyline as a contextual device to provide an explanation in traditional historical writing, the usefulness of "plot" as a mode of analysis of history is a matter which does not affect the epistemological and metaphysical issues which concern us here. It is not the type of storyline which marks the contrast between traditional and econometric history. Rather, as we shall



see later, it is in the model of human action that we find the contrast between econometric and traditional presuppositions about human nature, and views of human nature that express the contrast between econometric and traditional modes of writing history.

The traditional approach we are concerned with was described above as the “narrative” approach to historical writing involving the recovery of meaning from written records. When historians talk about the traditional “narrative” approach they do not usually mean a particular form of presentation, but rather a conception of human beings and how they are to be understood, which can be, but does not have to be, expressed in the form of a followable story. Chronological ordering of presentation is not the issue, and was not the issue discussed between the traditional and the cliometric historians at the Philadelphia conference. We shall avoid the associated problems (and equally beg no questions) by choosing an example which, while “traditional,” is not a chronologically ordered story.

Our example is a brief passage taken from Kenneth M. Stamp’s *The Peculiar Institution*. Fogel and Engerman, opposed to the “traditional interpretation,” describe Stamp’s book, with respect to this interpretation, as “retaining only the proposition that slavery provided extremely harsh material conditions of life for slaves.” However, they note that some two thirds or more of his book is concerned with this issue of the material treatment of slaves rather than with the issues of profit, economic viability, efficiency and economic growth, and they quote a number of works which recognize Stamp’s concentration on the question of the material conditions of life.<sup>14</sup> Two thirds of Stamp’s book is thus clearly “traditional” in terms of the argument at the Philadelphia conference, and our example is derived from this part of the book. In Stamp’s chapter IV, entitled “To Make Them Stand in Fear,” we find the following passage, one of many which together are intended to reinforce the claim that slavery was harsh:

Beyond this were cases of pure brutality — cases of flogging that resulted in the crippling, maiming, or killing of slaves. An early nineteenth-century Charleston grand jury presented “as a serious evil the many instances of Negro Homicide” and condemned those who indulged their passions “in the barbarous treatment of slaves.” “Salting” — washing the cuts received from the whip with brine — was a harsh punishment inflicted upon the most obstinate bondsmen. Though all but a few deplored such brutality, slaveholders found themselves in a dilemma when nothing else could subdue a rebel.

If a master was too squeamish to undertake the rugged task of humbling a refractory bondsman, he might send him to a more calloused neighbour or to a professional “slave breaker.” John Nevitt, a Mississippi planter not averse to the application of heroic remedies, received from

another master another chattel “for the purpose of punishing him for bad conduct.” Frederick Douglass remembered a ruthless man in Maryland who had a reputation for being “a first rate hand at breaking young negroes”; some slaveholders found it beneficial to send their beginning hands to him for training.<sup>15</sup>

What metaphysics and mode of explanation does Stamppp’s style of writing here involve? As with covering law theory, we need to unravel the matter to reveal the assumptions about what it is that exists. We have no commitment about these assumptions independent of Stamppp’s account itself, which offers plural descriptions of individual people and their actions. Stamppp’s passage can thus be regarded, like covering law theory, as embodying the assumption of atomism.

But for Stamppp’s passage to be a contribution to knowledge, the covering law theorist requires that the many things referred to make connected causal sense, requiring the interleaving of covering law arguments. Covering law arguments are therefore required to explain the individual actions involved.

Let us, for the first action, take one of the “cases of pure brutality — cases of flogging that resulted in the crippling, maiming or killing of slaves.” The covering law theorist may hold flogging to be an event which can be regularly associated with others, and thus be the kind of thing which can be admitted to his version of a mechanistic universe. However, these cases of flogging are also described as being of “pure brutality.” The words imply strong moral disapproval on the part of Stamppp, and he allows that all but a few slaveholders equally deplored such behaviour. Deploping something, or expressing moral disapproval, are actions which might be held by a covering law theorist to be regularly associated with other events. But the traditional theorist would believe, against this, that moral disapproval of a chosen action entails the denial of mechanism.

We note, further, that “[i]f a master was too squeamish to undertake the rugged task of humbling a refractory bondsman, he might send him to a more calloused neighbour or to a professional ‘slave breaker.’” Here we are offered a reason for a master sending a difficult slave to a slave breaker, but “reason,” as a traditional theorist understands that word, marks an entity which the mechanist cannot admit to his universe: for the covering law theorist, a “reason” (in the traditional sense) cannot be explanatory.

However, if “reason” is explanatory, then, on the covering law theorist, it must be regarded in a non-traditional way as involving, or being part of, a regularity. The covering law theorist can choose to regard the quoted sentence as expressing the appropriate regularity: “whenever a master is too squeamish to humble a slave, then he sends him to a slave breaker.” Here there is no “reason” as ordinarily understood, only a regularity. We are able to recognize the “cause” in this: squeamishness.

The slaveowner being a person like us, it is important for the plausibility of the covering law explanation that we be able to empathize with — recognize and understand — such a cause, and no doubt we can empathize with a person's squeamishness, to a sufficient extent.<sup>16</sup> Mental reasoning is superfluous; the covering law theorist's claim is that any slaveholder would have behaved in this way, if he were squeamish enough; and this is a not implausible suggestion.

Next we read that "John Nevitt, a Mississippi planter not averse to the application of heroic remedies, received from another master another chattel 'for the purpose of punishing him for bad conduct.'" Here we have the adoption by a slave master of a specific purpose. One could perhaps regard the adoption of a purpose as yet another event to be causally explained, but we shall not argue for or against that here; the point is rather that the explanation of the slave's move from his master to John Nevitt is cast in terms of this purpose, regardless of its source. If this explanation is to be squared with the covering law theory, the covering law theorist has to account in his terms, not just for the adoption of a purpose, but for the transfer of the slave given the purpose.

Just as with a "reason" discussed earlier, so "purpose" is not an entity to be admitted in its own right to the covering law theorist's interpretation of a mechanistic universe. If it is explanatory, it must be regarded as involving, or being part of, a causal connection, which is a regularity. The covering law theorist might recast the explanatory sentence in the form of a regularity, as follows: "Whenever a slave master wishes to punish a slave for bad conduct, he sends him to a slave breaker."

The difficulty with this regularity is that it is clearly not true. While the slave master may have achieved his purpose by sending his slave to the slave breaker John Nevitt, that action was not the only way of achieving his purpose, and the narrative does not suggest that it was. In other words, the passage purports to explain the slave's move to John Nevitt, given the adoption of his master's purpose to punish him, even though it is not being asserted — and it is certainly not plausible — that there is a regular association of events involved here.

Simply, therefore, the traditional theorist holds that something *A* can be a reason for action *B*, or purpose *A* can be achieved by performing action *B*, without it being true that whenever *A* then *B*. Nor need it be true that whenever *B* then *A*; a purpose can be used in a narrative to explain a certain action even though that action was not one which achieved the purpose, but was only part of a number of possible routes to its achievement, or even a failure. *A* need be neither necessary nor sufficient for *B*. Given this, it follows that the passage quoted from Stamp does not square with covering law theory. It is, indeed, essential to the traditional approach to history that this be so. Covering law

theorists, and other causal theorists, offer accounts of “reasons” and “purposes” which seek to bring these notions under the mechanist umbrella, but, on the traditional approach, the burden of proof is on them to succeed in such a causal analysis. It is not a burden that has, on the traditional view, yet been discharged.

If we accept the mechanistic metaphysics involved in covering law theory, then it follows at once that Stampp is talking about kinds of entities which do not, and never did, exist, characterized as they are as being the kinds of thing which act for reasons or with purposes, notions for which a causal analysis is denied on the traditional approach. Thus Stampp’s account, like any other account which uses such notions, cannot be admitted as a contribution to knowledge, given the covering law approach. Since these notions are typical of much traditional historical writing, it follows that such traditional historical writing is, as Catherine Morland said, sheer invention, since the entities purportedly referred to do not exist.

However, we are only forced to accept this conclusion if the premises are true, if the mechanistic metaphysics is to be accepted. The argument for the covering law theorist’s interpretation of mechanism is an argument for conceiving the world as being of many things in regular relationship with each other. “Many things” is a notion which we may keep. It is the causal relation, the relationship of regularity, which is problematic. Against this, we shall next specify more clearly the metaphysics which is involved in the traditional approach to historical writing.

There are, it is commonly expressed, two “worlds,” one of nature, and one of man. This common expression is misleading. It need be supposed that there is only one world, with two kinds of entities in it. One kind of entity is that which occurs in inanimate regular association with others of a like kind, and this is the world of nature already expressed in the mechanism of covering law theory. Against mechanism, however, there is also another kind of entity, which operates on other entities (whether animate or not) in ways which are not to be characterized in terms of regularity, nor in terms of the mechanistic alternative, randomness. These entities are persons, and they operate with purposes and for reasons, although, since they impinge on the natural world and it on them, they can arrange to enter into ordinary causal relationships too.<sup>17</sup>

On this view there is an animate side to reality, an “ideal” side. To accept this metaphysics is thus to be an *idealist*, but it is an explanatory idealism contrasting with mechanism, and not a full metaphysical idealism contrasting with realism, such as that introduced in chapter 2. The two idealisms are often confused, but they are not necessarily linked. We know about these animate entities, and understand and can explain their operations, not by relying upon empiricism, but in a special way

deriving from the fact that we *are* those entities. We *empathize* with other people, and this is a mode of knowledge which is both special and appropriate for the subject matter.

There is no *theory* of empathy to give.<sup>18</sup> We *know* what we are like, and need only be reminded of what is involved in the understanding of action when we are mistakenly led to adopt alien modes of explanation, such as that required by covering law theory. The covering law theorist complains that historians typically do not spell out the laws and theories supporting what purport to be historical explanations. The reason why historians do not spell out the theory behind their explanations is that there is no theory, and hence no need; the giving of reasons and of purposes bears its full explanatory weight alone, without need for further theoretical support.

Nevertheless, we do need to be reminded of the empathetic form of understanding which lies at the heart of the traditional narrative approach to history, and one of the most powerful expressions of the position is that offered by W. H. Dray in his book *Laws and Explanation in History*.<sup>19</sup> What we typically want, he points out, is a reconstruction of a person's calculation of the means to be adopted towards his chosen end in the light of the circumstances in which he found himself. This calculation gives the person's reasons for acting as he did, and it shows that what was done was the thing to have done for the reasons given. The action is thus displayed as having been an "appropriate" thing to have done, rather than the thing always done. In this way we may understand the action of the slave master who sent his slave to John Nevitt for punishment: this action was an appropriate thing to have done, given his purposes and beliefs as to the situation in which he found himself — purposes and beliefs which, of course, we need not share. We may use this system to understand the master who is just squeamish, too; but we are not forced to if, say, he was himself unable to master his own squeamishness. "We give reasons if we can, and turn to empirical laws if we must."<sup>20</sup> Calculating is not something which we take time to do before every intended action, but there is a calculation which could be provided for every such action, and we often understand our own actions after the event by thinking them through in this way, Dray reminds us.

When we empathize in this way with another, we are able to project ourselves into their mental position, and see things from their point of view. We readily grasp the metaphors which have just been used, for empathetic understanding is so familiar to us, and these metaphors remind us that the mental position or point of view of another person is very likely not the same as our own. Distinguish, therefore, "empathy" from "sympathy": with empathy there is no sameness of mind, as sympathy would require. To empathize with another is not necessarily

to sympathize with him or her, and thus empathetic understanding does not entail approval: to understand is not necessarily to forgive. Empathy is like sympathy with a suspension of acceptance.

We *can* empathize with others, and thus such knowledge is available to us, and we can separate our understanding of action from moral judgement of it. Nevertheless, there may be moral problems intrinsic to empathetic understanding, in that perhaps we ought not to engage in it in certain cases. It may be argued that, although we *could* come to understand, by empathetic means, a particularly horrific action carried out by some slaveholder, we would nevertheless be better not to do so. One reason for this might be a supposed effect upon us, the knowers: perhaps we ought not to grasp the means enabling us to recognize just when a horrific action might be appropriate, for we are corrupted thereby.<sup>21</sup> Another reason for this is that the perpetrator of some horrific action may not be *deserving* of empathetic understanding. To regard such a person as undeserving is not to imply that he is irrational, in that his action could not have been "appropriate"; on the contrary.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly the slaves, and the anti-slavery movement in the Northern states, did not think that to understand was to forgive. They wished others to understand slavery the better to judge it. Understanding a slave master and the punishment of his slave, we may blame him; and we do so, given the conception of human nature outlined here, for one of two reasons. First, the slave master may be blamed, for example, for supposing blacks to be innately inferior, such that slavery was appropriate to them. He ought not to have had this false belief. It was a failure of his own empathetic understanding that he did so. We blame, and yet we empathize; had we shared this false belief, no doubt we could have acted similarly. Second, the slave master may not have had an explicit belief in the inferiority of blacks, but perhaps no explicit belief in their nature at all; given this, he may be blamed for acting for profit to himself, when this conflicted in the case of slavery with acting out of respect for a natural morality regarded as binding on all. We blame, and still we empathize: we know what it is to act wrongly, carelessly ignorant of the claims of others.

In blaming the slave masters, we suppose that they had a choice. We do not, on the conception of human nature presented here, regard them as determined to act and believe as they did by unblamable factors external to themselves. This marks a contrast with mechanism. We face here one of the fundamental issues in philosophy, that between "free will" and "determinism." The nature of this issue itself depends upon which solution to it is adopted. The problem exists for each of us, in how to understand what kinds of being we are. On the present view, we are able, in part, to constitute ourselves as being what we are through individually choosing what the answer to the issue is to be, and acting

and taking responsibility accordingly. We are, moreover, *moral* beings. There are moral constraints upon our choice of metaphysics, which require us not to regard ourselves or others as mechanically determined to act. We are not to escape responsibility. If we regard others or even ourselves as machine-like, then we are morally at fault.

The metaphysics of human nature outlined here permits many different approaches to the explanation of human action. Lawrence Stone appropriately observes that

the individual is moved by a convergence of constantly shifting forces, a cluster of influences such as kinship, friendship, economic interest, class prejudice, political principle, religious conviction, and so on, which all play their varying parts and which can usefully be disentangled only for analytical purposes . . . the relative importance of the various background characteristics will vary from culture to culture and nation to nation and time to time.<sup>23</sup>

All these and other “forces” operate on individuals through being *accepted* by each individual, consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and habitually, as part of his circumstances, and taken into perhaps weighty consideration in the calculation of appropriate action, given that individual’s purposes and beliefs.

We now have a sufficient outline of the theory of human nature which is involved in the quotation from Stamp. But the discovery of the metaphysical assumptions involved does not end here. For the “traditional” approach adopted by Stamp and others is the “narrative” approach to history, described above, which involves the recovery of meaning from written records. This element of the recovery of meaning from written records, this traditional interpretation of evidence, has still to be understood.

I shall pick out from the passage quoted from Stamp a typical reference to that evidence which is offered as warrant for it. We find that “Frederick Douglass remembered a ruthless man in Maryland who had a reputation for being ‘a first rate hand at breaking young negroes’; some slaveholders found it beneficial to send their beginning hands to him for training.” The proffered source for this claim is stated as “Douglass, *My Bondage*, p. 203.” This reference is to Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in New York in 1855. Such a document is “evidence.” This is not an *original* source, however. For exactness, we should remember that this book of Douglass’s was written somewhat later in his life and is more distant from the original events than his first attempt at expressing those events. His first attempt, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*,<sup>24</sup> was published in 1845, seven years after his escape from slavery. It brought him international prominence and a political career. This career

flagged in due course, and the publication of *My Bondage* was an attempt to regain public attention, which was not successful.

How is such a basic source for the historian as Douglass's *Narrative* to be interpreted? Here is a passage from it:

One of my greatest faults was that of letting his horse run away, and go down to his father-in-law's farm, which was about five miles from St. Michael's. I would then have to go after it. My reason for this kind of carelessness, or carefulness, was, that I could always get something to eat when I went there. Master William Hamilton, my master's father-in-law, always gave his slaves enough to eat. I never left there hungry, no matter how great the need of my speedy return. Master Thomas at length said he would stand it no longer. I had lived with him nine months, during which time he had given me a number of severe whippings, all to no good purpose. He resolved to put me out, as he said, to be broken; and, for this purpose, he let me for one year to a man named Edward Covey. Mr Covey was a poor man, a farm-renter. He rented the place upon which he lived, as also the hands with which he tilled it. Mr Covey had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him. It enabled him to get his farm tilled with much less expense to himself than he could have had it done without such a reputation.<sup>25</sup>

It is very easy to read through this passage. But merely by reading it one has already jumped to a conclusion of very great importance. That conclusion is that this passage is a meaningful piece of writing. Not for a moment would we suggest that this is false. But it is nevertheless a considerable metaphysical jump to get to this conclusion, and it is necessary to explain what has to be assumed in order to achieve it.

What are the characteristics which Douglass's *Narrative* has? Like every other ordinary object it has colour, shape, position, weight, and so forth. We can describe how, as a book, it can be opened, and our attention may be drawn to the marks on the paper of which it largely consists. We will certainly find it difficult to see these marks as *marks* rather than as the *words* which we normally interpret them to be. But this only shows how engrained in our nature is our capacity to interpret certain marks as symbols. A traditional historian used to working with nineteenth century archives will find it quite unrealistic to refuse to interpret such marks as symbols. But no archaeologist or historian working with unfamiliar or unknown peoples will make such a move without careful thought and much evidence. Perhaps one finds a scratched piece of pottery, of an unfamiliar style, in a new Middle Eastern site of historically mysterious date. Are the scratches writing, or just scratches? The evidence of your own eyes alone will not tell you.

It is a historical, and not a philosophical, problem how to warrant the conclusion that the scratches are, or are not, symbolic. But a crucial



philosophical point is assumed in this historical problem: it is assumed that a contrast can properly be drawn between that which is symbolic and that which is not. To take scratches to be symbolic, which one is historically warranted in doing in many cases, is to take them to have been deliberately made with the intention that some future reader (perhaps only the author himself) could understand what they meant and could recognize the intention that they convey meaning, that they be understood.

What we are therefore required to assume here is that a past author had an *intention* that his marks be capable of being understood. Writing and reading thus involve the ascription of intentions to other people. The historian who interprets Douglass's *Narrative* as a piece of meaningful writing is thereby committed to the ascription of certain intentions to its author. He is thus committed to a metaphysics which includes people who are intentional or purposive entities, and who act in the appropriate ways when they wish to convey or register their intentions. This does not, of course, entail that one must swallow Douglass's assertions uncritically or accept everything he says as true, even about his own intentions. (His writings had a political purpose, after all.)

The successful interpretation of evidence as meaningful provides an important constraint upon our specification of the metaphysical assumptions involved in traditional historical writing. The traditional narrative approach which involves the recovery of meaning from written records requires a commitment to a metaphysics which permits the recovery of meaning. This in turn commits the historian to a metaphysics which assumes people to be purposive entities. Stamp's interpretation of the writings of Douglass and others commits him to a metaphysics of human nature which is consistent with the metaphysics which he assumes when he writes his own narrative.

This consistency is crucial. Note that one cannot interpret evidence on the basis of one set of metaphysical assumptions and then use that interpretation to support a historical account which uses metaphysical assumptions which are inconsistent with it. For example, one cannot assume in one's historical narrative a metaphysical theory such as a version of mechanism which entails that people cannot engage in meaningful or purposive actions and at the same time interpret the evidence for one's account as itself a meaningful product of the purposive action of writing. The principles used in the interpretation of evidence must be the same as those used in the written narrative, on pain of inconsistency.

Historians have to describe and explain the historical world, given assumptions as to what that real world is. The questions they ask, their procedures, descriptions and explanations are contributions to knowl-

edge if they are well founded rationally. We have adopted and conditionally defended, in our developing argument, a reliance upon empiricism, assuming that knowledge comes only from experience, unless we are forced to conclude to the contrary. We have been so forced: we have noted that empiricism requires an associated metaphysics, and that these metaphysical claims are not themselves derivable from experience. Rather, what we take experience to be experience presupposes such claims. Metaphysical assumptions have to be made, and these also require a rational defence. This rational foundation cannot be a simple appeal to experience, even as mediated through historical evidence, for we have seen that the interpretation of historical evidence itself presupposes metaphysical assumptions.

By means of our comparison of Stamp's writing with the metaphysical assumptions of atomism and mechanism involved in covering law theory, we have now said sufficient to characterize the metaphysical assumptions which are central to the historical approach examined in this chapter, that of the narrative approach which involves the recovery of meaning from written records. In summary, we have a metaphysics which permits at the minimum two kinds of entities: those in the natural world which are causally related, and those in the human world which are individual persons. The natural and human worlds co-exist and interact. Each kind of entity has its associated theory of explanation: for the natural world, covering law theory; and for the world of individual persons, empathetic understanding.

Can historians provide knowledge about reality? Our answer to this question must in part tell us whether the cliometric approach to history is a possible way of achieving knowledge. As part of this, we wish to know whether answering the question "was slavery profitable?" is a way of achieving knowledge, so that the issue can be disposed of once and for all. We must next ask two questions: first, does the question "was slavery profitable?" fall under the metaphysics of the traditional approach which has now been outlined, or is the cliometric approach fundamentally distinct? and, second, is the choice of the metaphysics involved itself rationally warranted? The next two chapters will address the first of these questions.

#### NOTES

1. *Time on the Cross*, vol. II, appendix C, p. 169.
2. *Time on the Cross*, vol. I, pp. 4-6.
3. Frederick L. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* [1861], (Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed.), New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.
4. John E. Cairnes, *The Slave Power*, London: Macmillan, 1863.
5. Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* [1918], Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959.

6. Kenneth M. Stampff, *The Peculiar Institution*, New York: Random House, 1956.
7. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1964; M. G. White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, New York: Harper and Row, 1969; A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1968.
8. Gallie, pp. 22, 107.
9. "Comment on Mandelbaum on narratives," *History and Theory* 2, 1969, p. 275ff.
10. See Dale H. Porter, *The Emergence of the Past*, University of Chicago Press, 1981.
11. One outstanding guide is Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.
12. See David Carr, "Narrative and the real world: an argument for continuity," *History and Theory* 25, 1986, pp. 117–131, who would disagree.
13. See Paul Veyne, *Writing History*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, [1971] 1984, p. 80.
14. Fogel and Engerman, vol. II, pp. 218ff.
15. Stampff, *op. cit.*, pp. 187–188, noting as his own sources "Henry, *Police Control*, pp. 67–68; Nevitt Plantation Journal, entry for June 5, 1828; Douglass, *My Bondage*, p. 203; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, pp. 69–70."
16. For current thinking on the relationship between causes and reasons, begin with Donald Davidson, "Actions, reasons and causes," reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press, 1980. See also T. Abel, "The operation called *Verstehen*," and other essays in M. Truzzi (ed.), *Verstehen: Subjective Understanding in the Social Sciences*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1974.
17. It is not clear that a regularity interpretation of causation can be given here. See R. G. Collingwood, "On the so-called idea of causation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 38, 1937–38, p. 85.
18. G. R. Elton leads the defence of the view that history is to be written without theory. See his *The Practice of History*, London: Fontana, 1969, and *Political History: Principles and Practice*, London: Allen Lane; The Penguin Press, 1970.
19. Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. 122–124.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
21. That knowledge may corrupt is an idea that dates from the Garden of Eden.
22. Refusal to empathize may be right; yet consider a refusal to empathize with the leadership of a foreign country which has committed an act which seriously offends against human rights. War may be the outcome, and perhaps our own leaders ought to take upon themselves the personal moral dishonour of empathy in such a case, for the benefit of the rest of us. This is one of the problems of "dirty hands" in politics. See *War and Moral Responsibility*, M. Cohen, T. Nagel and T. Scanlon eds., Princeton University Press, 1974.
23. Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present*, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 65.
24. Benjamin Quarles ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

## CHAPTER 5

### Rational Economic Man

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**C**LAIMS TO KNOWLEDGE, INCLUDING CLAIMS TO historical knowledge, require rational justification if they are to be admitted. The standard for rational justification which has been conditionally adopted in this book is empiricism, but we have seen that empiricism needs to be supplemented by background metaphysical assumptions — assumptions not themselves based on experience — which tell us what experience (particularly, historical experience) is experience of. In chapter 4 we introduced the background metaphysical assumptions associated with the traditional narrative form of historical writing involving the recovery of meaning from written records. This metaphysics permits at the minimum two kinds of entities: those which are regularly ordered (causally related) in the natural world, and individual persons. Each has its associated theory of explanation: for the natural world, covering law theory, and for individual persons, empathetic understanding. Historical writing, on the traditional view, will be written in the light of such assumptions. It will be a contribution to knowledge, first, insofar as it correctly applies those assumptions, and, second, if those assumptions are themselves rationally justified.

In chapter 1 we compared and contrasted in an elementary way the traditional approach to history with the econometric approach. In this and the next chapter we shall examine the econometric approach, and do so by considering whether the question “Was slavery profitable?” is to be admitted as a proper question within the traditional metaphysics of human nature now outlined. If this question is wholly admissible within the traditional metaphysics, then this will show that the differences between the traditional and the econometric approaches to history are not metaphysically fundamental: that, through sharing the same assumptions about historical reality and thus complementing each other, both approaches can in principle make contributions to historical knowledge, so long as the traditional metaphysics itself is rationally justifiable. For historians, this final question of the justification of the

traditional metaphysics would then only be of abstract interest, since a decision on the matter would not affect the choice of “approach” they actually had to make. On the other hand, if the question “was slavery profitable?” is not to be wholly admitted as a proper question within the traditional metaphysics of human nature, then this will show that the traditional and econometric approaches to history make different metaphysical assumptions. If this is so — as we shall see that it is — then the question of the justification of one’s choice of metaphysical assumptions becomes crucial to historical practice. This last issue will be considered in chapter 7.

Is the question “was slavery profitable?” to be admitted as a proper question within the traditional metaphysics of human nature? “Slavery” does not name a person or a set of persons, but a practice or social institution: it summarizes in some complex way a number of actions of a similar kind. For the question “was slavery profitable?” to be admissible, we shall need to make general sense of practices and other social institutions within the terms of the traditional metaphysics.

One way in which sense can be made of such social matters is by admitting them to reality as a third kind of fundamental entity, in addition to natural objects and individual persons.<sup>1</sup> It would then be supposed that such social entities as “slavery” have a life or causal process of their own. While this approach — a major contrast with the traditional approach — is metaphysically possible, our conditional adoption of empiricism precludes it. Given empiricism, we are required to claim no more than is empirically warranted, unless we are forced to. There is a clear sense in which we can directly experience individual people while we cannot directly experience social institutions.<sup>2</sup> Empiricism, and the traditional approach to history, require us, therefore, to make sense of social matters in terms of those relevant observable entities which we have already admitted to reality, namely individual persons. Slavery must thus be taken to be a set of related actions undertaken by individual people, and it is to be explained only in terms of the understanding of those individuals.

Individual persons have been taken to be empathetically understandable. They do not *have* to be understood in this way; as Dray observed, we give reasons if we can, and turn to empirical laws if we must. However, the traditional metaphysical position may seem to be ambiguous: should we turn to empirical laws *only* if we must, or not? We shall adopt an interpretation which insists that we turn to empirical laws *only* if we must, for this seems best to reflect that attitude towards human understanding embodied in the traditional approach. To take human beings seriously as persons requires an empathetic approach. On this view, individuals must be understood, where possible, in empathetic terms, and so, it follows, must the social practices and social

institutions which comprise those individuals. An alternative approach to human nature and history will be discussed in chapter 6.

We have to ask whether "profitability" can be found a place within the traditional metaphysics interpreted in this way. Frederick Douglass noted that "some slaveholders thought it not much loss to allow Mr Covey to have their slaves one year, for the sake of the training to which they were subjected, without any other compensation."<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that we can readily empathize with a slaveholder who acts for profit or to avoid loss, and so there is no need to fall back on empirical laws here. (To "fall back on empirical laws here" would amount to understanding people mastered by the profit motive in the same way as if they were under the influence of drink.) "Profitability," empathetically understood, may thus be straightforwardly admitted to the traditional metaphysics. We may conclude that the question "was slavery profitable?," *if interpreted in the ways just described*, is an admissible question within the traditional metaphysics.

If we insist that social reality be understood, where possible, in empathetic terms, then the profitability of slavery is not to be understood in abstraction from the individuals engaged in it. Slavery was profitable if the individual actions involved were profitable, and the individual actions were profitable insofar as they could be empathized with as such. "Profit," "loss" and associated notions therefore appear, in the present interpretation, not as existing entities in their own right, but as objects merely of *belief* or of *purpose*. Some slaveholders "thought it not much loss" to act in a certain way, and hence they so acted.

In chapter I we suggested how an argument about the profitability of slavery might be used: if slavery was profitable, then "we are to understand why the slaveholders engaged in and continued with slavery until they were forcibly stopped. It was in their interests to do so." In this chapter we shall introduce one important problem with this explanation. The traditional view holds that individuals are influenced by many "constantly shifting forces" in addition to, or as an alternative to, any desire for profit which they may have, and individuals may well deliberately act otherwise than where they perceive their profit to lie. The mere fact (if it is a fact) that slavery was profitable would not then explain the actions involved, for we would still need a further explanation why the slaveholders all selected profit as a motive rather than acted on the basis of one of the many other possible desires. It is the imperfect rationality and many-sidedness of human beings which makes "slavery was profitable" unacceptable as a complete explanation in terms of the traditional theory of human nature. Knowledge, on this traditional view, involves empathy with real individuals in all their complexity.

There is no doubt that we may want more than just an explanation of many individual actions in terms of the desires and beliefs the

individuals involved actually had. Having empathized, in the way just mentioned, with a slaveholder who acted for profit, we may still want to know why he acted for profit rather than, for example, out of respect for a moral duty to treat his slaves well. We can provide the beginning of an explanation here: via the traditional approach, we merely delve a little deeper into the slaveholder's character and work through a calculation displaying the appropriateness of his choice of the profit motive, in addition to working through a calculation displaying the appropriateness of the profitable action itself. At the point of empathetic understanding at which we stop, we simply know what kind of person the slaveholder was. We may discover that, in his choice of ends, he is ultimately to be understood as an evil person. On the present view there are moral kinds of people, and no explanation is to be sought for this. The differences between people ultimately lie in themselves, and are apparently not susceptible of further explanation. People do not have to be as they are; they just are what they are.

Slavery, however, existed as a way of life. Apparently an entire slaveholding class all acted for profit, even though it conflicted with what we may suppose to be a natural morality. The traditional metaphysics requires us to say that we cannot go on asking for a cause of every choice: if some people in certain circumstances act out of respect for profit instead of morality, then that is just the way they are, and the rest of us just differ (we can empathize with them all). But this ultimate appeal to the varied nature of individuals ("it takes all sorts to make a world") does not fit a situation where large numbers of people behaved in a certain way, in being inclined to act from one principle of action rather than another.

Either individuals did not, in the slaveholding class of the white South, share the complexity of human nature supposed on the traditional approach (which offends against the metaphysics, and requires further explanation), or they indeed had a complex nature, but their many different desires and purposes were massively overridden by something — something which overwhelmed the usually supposed moral differences between people, and overwhelmed the many different beliefs and motivations which usually guide people in different ways (which again offends against the metaphysics, and requires further explanation). One may blame a slaveholder for acting as he did, but praise and blame are only easily applicable notions when some people deserve the one and some the other. They lose their meaning when, as may be, a whole way of life is at fault. Individual responsibility is then lost; and with it, the existence of the slaveholders as complete and undetermined empathetically understandable moral individuals (which, again, offends against the metaphysics).

We note that the slaveholders displayed an unindividualistic *similarity*: they formed a *kind* of person, with characteristic actions distinctive not of all humankind but distinctive just of a particular time and place and social system. Such kinds of thing, we recognize, need explanation. Perhaps individual actions can be explained by empathetic understanding, but how are we to account for the similarities between slaveholders, which made their actions into a way of life? Why did so many act for perceived profit and not from respect for other human beings?

We therefore do not yet have a sufficient explanation. "Sufficiency" of explanation, however, is a misleading notion. We must distinguish between an objective and a subjective sense of sufficiency, as follows. Objectively, an explanation of some event or action *E* specifies a sufficiency if it provides us with another event *C*, the occurrence of *C* being sufficient for the occurrence of *E*. To say that *C* is sufficient for *E*, in this sense, is to say that whenever *C* then *E*. Demand for a sufficient explanation may then be interpreted as a demand for an explanation involving a regularity — in other words, we have here an insistence upon covering law theory. Thus the desire, which we all share, for a "sufficiency" of explanation may make plausible the view that, fundamentally, we should understand people in mechanistic terms. It may suggest that the point has come to fall back on empirical laws, not just occasionally, but for all explanation and understanding.

But sufficiency is better understood in a subjective sense, as follows. The demand that an explanation be sufficient is, in a subjective sense, no more than a demand that it provide whatever is sufficient for us, the hearers, to understand the thing explained. We understand something just insofar as our puzzlements are removed. Against covering law theory, we often are satisfied with a "calculation" covering a person's action. A "calculation" is often sufficient. But, against the point drawn from Dray's *Laws and Explanation in History*, more than his notion of empathetic understanding is required for the present problem of why so many acted from a desire for perceived profit rather than from respect for others.

There are two ways of dealing with this question. One way is to provide some further level of explanation which accounts for why or how some motives come to dominate others for so many individuals. Empathetic understanding, which rests with given motives, cannot succeed here, and yet the required further level of explanation cannot be causal, for, if we were caused to have the motives we have, this would characterize persons as essentially deterministic entities, which would offend against the traditional metaphysical assumptions. There is little prospect of success in this causal direction within the traditional approach. A



second way of dealing with the question is to dissolve it, so that it does not need an answer. Such dissolution would remove our puzzlement, while we would retain the view that individuals must be understood in empathetic terms. A digression is in order here, to show how questions can come to be dissolved. It is an important move in philosophical discussion.<sup>4</sup>

Newton's first law of motion is as follows: every body perseveres in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a straight line, except insofar as it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed on it.

Suppose we fire, from our space station, a rocket, the fuel of which is soon expended. We observe its path through space. It may well be in a straight line, and we shall suppose that it is very far from anything which might exert some force upon it. The rocket is behaving in accordance with Newton's first law. Let us ask why it is travelling in a straight line, once its fuel is expended. This is not a proper question: given the law, it is simply natural that it do so. There is no explanation to seek. Suppose, however, that the rocket's path is a curve. Given Newton's first law, we know that some force must be impressed upon it. It is proper to ask what that force is. When a body travels in a straight line in space, there is nothing to ask. When it travels in a curved path, there is something to ask.

Return to a pre-Newtonian approach, in particular one which understands the earth to be the centre of the universe, and the heavens, in an astronomical sense, to be the domain of God. It was commonly believed, partly on the basis of observation, that the natural path of a heavenly body, being naturally perfect, was a perfect circle. This being so, there is no question to ask as to why some heavenly object should travel in a circular path: it is simply natural that it do so. On the other hand, should such an object travel in a straight line (for example, a harbinger of evil like a comet), then we must seek an explanation. On this Ptolemaic understanding, when a body travels in a straight line in space, there is something to ask. When it travels in a curved path, there is nothing to ask.

In this simple example we can see how a question can depend for its existence on some presupposed belief, and we can see also how a question can be dissolved by moving from one system of beliefs to another. A child may be puzzled by both questions about curved and straight motion, but whichever system he learns will show him either how to answer a question, or how to dissolve it. In that sense each astronomical system of beliefs is minimally complete.

Our metaphysics of human nature must either permit an answer to the question why so many acted for profit rather than morality, or show that the question can be dissolved. Otherwise we find that the

question “was slavery profitable?” is indeed not wholly admissible within the traditional metaphysics. Underlying the econometric approach which was mentioned in the first chapter is a claim that people *always*, in a sense, act for profit. If we adopt a theory of this sort, then we will be able to dissolve the question. We shall explain and examine the foundations of this econometric approach by referring to one of the examples presented by the economist Milton Friedman. It should be clear that we shall be referring to Friedman’s *philosophy* of economics, and not to his economic theories themselves.

Friedman asks us to think of a tree, with leaves, in the sunlight. Consider the density of the leaves around different parts of the tree. “I suggest,” says Friedman, “that the leaves are positioned as if each leaf deliberately sought to maximize the amount of sunlight it receives, given the position of its neighbours, as if it knew the physical laws determining the amount of sunlight that would be received in various positions and could move rapidly or instantaneously from any one position to any other desired and unoccupied position.”<sup>5</sup> This suggestion — Friedman stresses that it is no more than that, a mere *hypothesis* — does not state that leaves deliberately act in these ways, but rather, as he again stresses, *as if* they did. It is only a hypothesis, but it is a plausible one: perhaps leaves do behave “as if” they had such knowledge and skill. Given this, we can predict how the leaves will move as the sunlight alters in intensity or direction, and we will be right. It is in such a sense that we may treat individual people as so-called “rational economic men.” Thus we have the “economic hypothesis that under a wide range of circumstances individual firms behave *as if* they were seeking rationally to maximize their expected returns (generally if misleadingly called ‘profits’) and had full knowledge of the data needed to succeed in this attempt.”<sup>6</sup>

A rational economic man is, first of all, rational. “Rationality” here is understood in a special way, so that the following are true:

- (1) For any individual A and any two options X and Y, one and only one of the following is true: A prefers X to Y; A prefers Y to X; A is indifferent between X and Y.
- (2) A’s preferences among options are transitive. (This means that, if X is preferred to Y, and Y is preferred to Z, then X is preferred to Z; and if A is indifferent between X and Y, and indifferent between Y and Z, then A is indifferent between X and Z.)
- (3) A seeks to maximize the utility of his or her options, where the utility of an option X is greater than the utility of an option Y for A if and only if A prefers X to Y. The utilities of options are equal just in case the agent is indifferent between them. (In other words, more of what you think is good for you is always preferred to less.)

One becomes rational economic man rather than just rational man simply by recognizing that among the options available to us are the acquisition of commodities, so that the following is true:

- (4) If option X is acquiring commodity bundle X' and option Y is acquiring commodity bundle Y', and if Y' contains at least as much of each commodity as X' and more of at least one commodity, then everybody prefers Y to X.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the following assumption is made:

- (5) The more you have of something, the more of it you will be willing to give up in order to get something else you want. (An additional bag of gold means less to a millionaire than it does to a beggar, for example.)

If you imagine the beggar becoming richer bit by bit, then each additional bit of wealth he has means that little bit less to him. Each additional bit of wealth occurs at the "margin" of the wealth that the beggar, at that point, already has. Economists thus call this situation the "diminishing marginal utility" of a commodity. Our assumption (5) may thus be expressed as: the marginal utility of any commodity diminishes as the quantity increases.<sup>8</sup>

Following the argument of Alfred Marshall, we should note an additional tacit assumption which modifies assumption (5). "It is that we do not suppose time to be allowed for any alteration in the character or tastes of the man himself. It is therefore no exception to the law that the more good music a man hears, the stronger is his taste for it likely to become . . . ."<sup>9</sup> Parallel assumptions are required for the proper understanding of assumptions (1), (2) and (3), also. Thus (1) holds that it cannot be the case that A both prefers X to Y and Y to X. But we do not wish, by this, to rule out A's changing his mind, and preferring X to Y at one time, and Y to X at another. Assumptions (1), (2), (3) and (5) take a person's preferences as given. Nothing here requires us to have some preferences rather than others, in order to be rational, and nothing requires us to be consistent over time in what we prefer.

The specifically economic assumption (4), however, may be thought to be different from the others. It states that everybody, in certain circumstances, prefers option Y to option X, where Y is the acquisition of a certain commodity bundle Y'. But what if it is, say, illegal to acquire Y' over X'? Here we should attend to the exact form of assumption (4). It is a conditional statement: it has the form "if P and Q and R, then S." Such a statement can be true even though P and Q and R are false. Thus this book, if it were a raven, would be black. This statement is true; that this book is not a raven is irrelevant to its truth. Option Y is defined, in assumption (4), to be the acquisition of commodity bundle

Y'. If one wishes to state that the situation is one of acquisition of Y' together with a *risk of punishment* (owing to the illegality of the acquisition), then one no longer has option Y as defined, and assumption (4) says nothing about the resulting preference.

If a businessman were to choose X over Y, in such circumstances, then he would not *irrationally* be preferring commodity bundle X' to commodity bundle Y' (where X' contains less than Y'), but rather (on the basis of assumptions (1), (2) and (3)) *rationally* preferring X' to Y', including in the latter the risks associated with its acquisition. The cost of a commodity is to be understood in terms of what has to be given up for it. Maybe it costs \$100 (and thus other things costing that amount are foregone), but the price, in terms of our assumptions, is more than that, for it includes also, for example, the risk of punishment if an illegal transaction is undertaken, or even the opportunity cost of the time required to justify to one's family that it was worth buying. X' and Y' thus each express a *net* evaluation, which is the result of a calculation of the desire for a perceived benefit set against the perceived associated cost. The preference for X' over Y' is similarly a net preference, the result of the total calculation.

It is easy, therefore, to hold assumption (4) to be true, for it does not imply that there ever is a choice between options which are nothing but the pure acquisition of different commodity bundles. It just says that, if there were such a choice, then it would go to more rather than less. Nevertheless, while one might wish to stress that real life options are more complex than those of pure acquisition (and include assessments of risk or reputation or love, for example), the point of (4), when used by an economist, is to hold that indeed we may, without loss of significant truth, treat many choices as if they were just matters of pure acquisition or disposal. It is plausible for the economist to say this because we live in a society where there is a large element of freedom to trade. In a free market, constraints or options other than the simple choices of acquisition or retention or disposal of commodity bundles may be ignored as irrelevant. This defines, in fact, what a free market is. This is why we described assumption (4) as "specifically economic," for it determines the scope of the subject matter of economics.

It should be noted that, in current political debate, the notion of a "free market" is less clear than this. Strictly, it means freedom to trade where the only options are between commodity bundles. In practice, there is no such thing. Every exchange carries consequences of a different sort, and the law regulates carefully the existence and activities of firms and their agents. Even without the law, matters like reputation and perceived generosity and revenge may determine preference, independent of the size of the commodity bundles involved. A situation is described, politically, as a "free market" when there is minimum gov-

ernment interference with the freedom of exchange of commodities. The economist claims to be able to model such exchanges using the assumptions now specified.

There are, at present, a number of attempts by Western governments to extend the assumptions specified by the concept of "rational economic man" into areas beyond the free exchange of commodities, into, for example, law or health care or education or the provision of information. Whether health care, say, should be treated as a commodity is a topic outwith the scope of this book, but it should be noted that the notion of "freedom" disappears, if we understand a free market to be one where every option is freely exchangeable or chooseable (not, that is, merely those options concerned with the acquisition of commodity bundles in the ordinary sense). Every state of affairs is then a free market. Thus, in a central State regulated economy, such as used to exist in the Soviet Union, there is a free market, in that one always has a free choice whether to follow instructions, or to trade in a capitalistic manner and be imprisoned for it. In effect, political freedom — the absence of unjustified State interference — is here assimilated to mere freedom of the will, where man is free in everything he does, even in a labour camp or a slave plantation. This is not a proper interpretation of the notion of a free market. What ought to count as a "commodity" — slaves? — is a political issue, which is not determined by assumption (4).

Following Milton Friedman, the hypothesis is that people behave as if they were rational economic men. The concept of "rational economic man" is specified by our assumptions (1) to (5). Thus the hypothesis is that people behave as if assumptions (1) to (5) were true. Thus people behave, it is hypothesized, as if they *preferred* one thing to another, in accordance with assumptions (1) to (5). But what is it to behave as if you preferred one thing to another?

The formulation "A behaved as if he preferred X to Y" implies nothing about whether A really did prefer X to Y. We would use such a formulation, appropriately filled in, in ordinary conversation, to imply that we did not know whether A really preferred X to Y. But in ordinary conversation we would be supposing, at least, that A was the kind of entity which had a preference, or was indifferent, about the matter. The formulation, however, exactly understood, does not imply that A is such an entity. A could, after all, be one of Friedman's leaves.

But even if we leave open the question what kind of entity A is, the reference to preference in the above formulation is not empty. A firm link between preference and behaviour is implied by the formulation, namely this: if A prefers X to Y, then A will choose X over Y.

Notice the conditional form of this statement. In conditional statements, which have the form "if P then Q," nothing is said about whether

P or Q are true. Only if we know, in addition, that (say) P is true, can we deduce that Q is true. Formally, it is correct logic to move from "if P then Q" and "P" to "Q." But we cannot rationally move from "if P then Q" and "Q" to "P." It is a deductively invalid step. So, in the present example, we may know that, if A prefers X to Y (being the kind of entity that can have preferences), then he will choose X over Y. Thus "A behaved as if he preferred X to Y" means that A chose X instead of Y. But it does not follow from the fact that A chose X instead of Y that A preferred X to Y. Nor does it follow that A is the kind of entity which can have preferences between options.

So it can be true even of an inanimate entity which does not have preferences between options that, if it preferred X to Y, then it would choose X over Y. Logically, this has the same status as the earlier remark that this book, if it were a raven, would be black.

Statements like these are known as *counterfactual* conditional statements. "Counterfactual" does not mean "false," for they are commonly true; it means just that the first part, or "antecedent," of the conditional is false. What makes a counterfactual conditional statement like "if this book were a raven it would be black" true is that, simply, all ravens are black. We noted in chapter 3 the distinction between the "accidental" and the "universal" senses of a generalization. We saw that the universal sense of the conditional "whenever C then E" covers possibilities as well as actualities. A counterfactual conditional is thus an example of the application of a universal conditional to a non-actual logical possibility. If we can rationally demonstrate that "all ravens are black" is true, then we can conclude that the counterfactual conditional statement "if this book were a raven then it would be black" must also be true. In spite of the problem of induction, we showed, in chapter 3, on the basis of the assumption that the world is a regular place, how we might rationally come to accept the truth of a universal generalization. It is indeed reasonable for us to hold that all ravens are black.

A parallel argument to the above has to be produced to support the claim that, if this entity (not being one which has preferences between options) preferred X to Y, then it would choose X over Y. This counterfactual conditional has to be supported by the truth of the following generalization: whenever an entity prefers X to Y, then it will choose X over Y. This generalization could be assumed directly as a metaphysical assumption, but our conditional adoption of empiricism does not allow us to do this unless we are forced to, so we must proceed by finding an empirical foundation for it. Because of the problem of induction, we cannot observe such a regularity for every possible entity at every possible time. We have to confirm the generalization by checking it against actual situations of preference accompanied by actual situations of choice — testing it — and finding nothing to disprove it. Thus it

would be disproved by just one case of preference not being followed by choice. Suppose, however, we find no such disproof in our actually experienced cases. We may then come to believe the generalization. Given this, we may say of the leaves around Friedman's tree that, if they prefer X to Y, then they will choose X over Y. We may then plausibly hypothesize — without, that is, offending against logic or intelligibility — that the leaves behave as if they prefer X to Y.

It should be noted that a counterfactual conditional cannot enter into the testing process of a universal generalization. Thus, here, we cannot test “whenever an entity prefers X to Y, then it will choose X over Y” by looking at what Friedman's leaves do. Testing a universal generalization, which has the form “whenever C then E,” requires us to look for cases of the form “C and not E.” But the claim about the leaves being a counterfactual claim amounts to saying that the “C” in the “whenever C then E” is not true of them. It is thus impossible to find the “C” in the “C and not E,” either, and therefore such a counterfactual case cannot possibly provide a test of the generalization. We must necessarily refer to real cases for testing, actual cases, cases which provide independent characterization of preference, and independent characterization of choice. Then we can examine how regularly they are associated. Leaves cannot provide this test, but *people* can.

In fact, only people, as entities, do provide us with evidence bearing on the question whether it is true that “whenever an entity prefers X to Y, it will choose X over Y.” It follows that this last generalization cannot apply counterfactually to people, even if it may do so to leaves. The generalization cannot apply *counterfactually* to every entity, or it is empirically empty, and would be empirically meaningless even as a metaphysical assumption. Some entities must provide a test, or at least a meaningful reference, and persons are the only candidates for the position.

When we say of a person, rather than of leaves, that “A behaved as if he preferred X to Y,” then we are assuming that A is the kind of entity which has preferences between options. Assumption (1) then turns out to be stronger than a mere hypothesis which people behave “as if” they followed. When we are dealing with an entity (a person) which is characterized as having preferences between options, then, given assumption (1), one and only one of the following is true of it: A prefers X to Y; A prefers Y to X; A is indifferent between X and Y. This exhausts the logical possibilities of preference. We have seen that we cannot derive, from the fact that A chooses X over Y, that A prefers X to Y, because of the logical nature of a conditional statement. But given assumption (1), we can deduce that it is not the case that A preferred Y to X, for if he did he would have chosen Y over X. We can conclude, from A choosing X over Y, therefore, that either A prefers X to Y, or

A is indifferent between X and Y. The rational economic man hypothesis is no longer to be understood as a hypothesis that people behaved "as if" they followed; rather, it is a hypothesis about the preferences people actually have. The "as if" has disappeared. It is still a *hypothesis*, of course. There is sufficient "ifness" in that fact. There is no need to double the degree of abstraction.

It follows, on the rational economic man hypothesis, that a person never does what he prefers not to do. There is therefore a sense in which preference is demonstrated in behaviour. We may often come to know what a person prefers, in a given situation, simply by observing the choices he actually makes. Thus if a person says he prefers running to cycling, but whenever he is given the choice he opts for cycling, then we will insist that he really prefers cycling to running after all. Nevertheless, it remains the case that, in common-sense understanding or ways of speaking, we sometimes allow that a person may do what he prefers not to do. Thus he may do his duty instead. It may seem as if this fact falsifies the hypothesis that a person never does what he prefers not to do, but it is not quite so simple. The thesis is, rather, that people attempt to satisfy to the maximum their desires as such, whatever those desires or preferences are. A person who acts morally may be taken to demonstrate a preference for moral against immoral action: he prefers morality to immorality, and acts so as to maximize his return, measured in the satisfaction of that preference.<sup>10</sup>

Note, however, that acting morally does not *prove* a preference for morality; as shown earlier, "A behaved as if he preferred X to Y" means that A chose X instead of Y, but it does not follow that A preferred X to Y. He might be indifferent between them, or the rational economic man assumption may be false. The "demonstration" of preference in behaviour is a mere common assumption, which the economist calls "revealed preference." For real-life economic problems, revealed preference often provides the only evidence for what actual preference is. It is *evidence* for preference, however, not *proof*. To hold revealed preference to *prove* preference would be to hold it to *define* preference, and this would make the rational economic man assumptions collapse into an empty definition of words.

A person may well prefer to do his duty, but equally well he may prefer not to (but do it anyway), and the hypothesis that a person never does what he prefers not to do could be held falsified by many cases. Many more cases plausibly falsify the hypothesis of rational *economic* man, where preferences are taken to be for the acquisition of commodity bundles, and no economic theorist will think that the complexities of real life can be fully represented by this ideal model. But it does not matter, for the rational economic man hypothesis is a *hypothesis*, and it is the task of the theorist to discover just when this hypothesis is



applicable. In a situation which approximates that of a free market in commodities, it works. In a monastery, it doesn't. It is open to scientific test, as outlined in chapter 3, just how far the hypothesis is applicable between these two extremes.

If we suppose that the slaveholders in the Southern states were indeed, as Fogel and Engerman suggest, acting "profitably" in an efficient system, then we are to understand them as attempting to maximize the satisfaction of their preferences, in accordance with the assumptions we have specified and discussed. The question asked earlier in this chapter: why did so many act for perceived profit and not morality? may then be dissolved, for we have now seen the sense in which "morality" has been assimilated into "profit," as being just one preference among others. Nevertheless, there remains a clear sense in which this move simply forces the question one step back, only to reappear: why did so many people prefer material improvement in their circumstances, rather than preferring not to enslave other human beings? But this question is not a difficult one for rational economic man theory.

Against what might be expected on the "traditional" view, slaveholders displayed an unindividualistic similarity, with characteristics distinctive not of all humankind but distinctive just of a particular time and place and social system. On the economic approach now presented, the preference to engage in and continue with slavery was a net preference: the outcome of a calculation which took into consideration a range of understandable desires, including moral considerations and those for material well-being and improvement, together with estimates and expectations of associated costs. What distinguishes us from the slaveholders, even the evil ones, is not that we have noble desires which they didn't, but that they had costs which we don't. Our net preferences differ from theirs, because our own cost-benefit calculations differ from theirs, and these calculations differ not in terms of our having different desires, but in terms of our having different costs. We don't have to enslave people to achieve the normal desires for material improvement which we share with the slaveholders. It was thus the social system that was distinctive and not the characteristics of the people involved.

The problem we found with the "traditional" approach was that it seemed necessary to explain why people had the desires they did, and yet impossible to provide the explanation. The economic approach now outlined, while consistent with the supposition that individuals be understood solely in empathetic terms, shows that we can properly leave desires unexplained, for these no longer matter when it is a difference of cost, and not a difference of desire, which carries the weight of the explanation. There may be variations in preferences between different people at different times, but it need not be the case that it is differences of desire which provide the explanatory foundation. Similar desires with

varying costs will explain equally well. The economic approach does not preclude explanation in terms of distinctive desires, however, if the historical evidence indicates that these were the cause of some state of affairs. To this extent the economic approach can duplicate the empathetic approach. It can also improve on it. On the economic approach we do not have to explain why people had the desires they did, and the problem can be dissolved, as we have seen. It may be thought that we nevertheless have to take desires as given, whether we adopt the earlier empathetic approach or the economic version of it, but rational economic man theory, while it can assume desires to be given, can also explain why we have the desires that we do.

The economic theorists George J. Stigler and Gary S. Becker<sup>11</sup> have shown that we may hold that desires or "tastes neither change capriciously nor differ importantly between people." They argue that examples of what purport to be simple changes of desire can be understood as cases of stable desire. One such example was quoted earlier from Alfred Marshall, that "the more good music a man hears, the stronger is his taste for it likely to become." This, when discussing the diminishing marginal utility assumption (5), was interpreted as a simple change of taste not covered by the assumptions specifying the rational economic man hypothesis. Such a change in taste is supposedly not explainable, but Stigler and Becker suggest an economic mode of explanation for it.

One's desire for music depends upon the time allocated to it, and also on the training and other characteristics which are conducive to the appreciation of music. This training and so forth Stigler and Becker call "music capital." An increase in music capital increases the productivity of any time spent listening to music; "the marginal utility of time allocated to music is increased by an increase in the stock of music capital."<sup>12</sup> The appreciation of music increases with exposure to music because the marginal utility of the time spent on music rises with exposure, even though there is no change in desires. "The effect of exposure on the accumulation of music capital might well depend on the level of education and other human capital . . . This would explain why educated persons consume more 'good' music (i.e., music that educated people like!) than other persons do."<sup>13</sup>

Differences between people here, to put it simply, depend, not on different tastes, but on the "human capital" involved — training, knowledge, and so forth — resulting in different costs. It is the cost of appreciating "good" music which makes some choose it and others not, a cost which is lower and thus more easily met by those with educated "human capital." It is the cost of freedom for others that makes a man or keeps a man a slaveholder, not a desire for slavery. Costs are a function of capital, and it is not just the absence of machinery or the

quality of land or the distance of markets that are relevant here, but human capital, which may be represented in tradition or education. The cost of new information permitting a change in what is believed from the traditional may be prohibitive. The cost of moving from a false belief to a true one may be prohibitive. It is painful to change a tradition or a habit. We may have exactly the same desires as the slaveholders (and the slaves), but different costs. It may be that what counts as a desire for the purpose of one cost-benefit calculation is itself the net preference outcome of a prior cost-benefit calculation, and therefore explainable in terms of that calculation. Empathetic understanding perhaps works because, at bottom, we have *exactly* the same desires as others.

With the help of the rational economic man assumptions we find we have been able to provide further analytical detail for Dray's notion of a "calculation." We can empathize with another person, for we can work through a calculation which displays the net preference and consequent choice as appropriate given that person's desires and beliefs as to his circumstances. These desires and beliefs characterize the calculation as being a cost-benefit analysis. In these terms we can make sense of the question "was slavery profitable?," and we have thus outlined a version of the economic approach which is consistent with the traditional approach to history. In chapter 6 we shall continue with a different problem for the consistency of the two approaches.

#### NOTES

1. Other entities may also be admitted to reality, of course. God, for example.
2. The relationship between experience and background assumptions even in "direct experience" is nevertheless problematic, and will be discussed in chapter 7.
3. Douglass, *Narrative*, p. 87.
4. There is a tradition, deriving from the work of Wittgenstein, that philosophical problems only arise through a misunderstanding of the use of words, and are dissolved by a proper attention to their correct use. We eschew this position here: fundamental philosophical problems do not arise through such inattention, and the dissolution which we speak of here is not sought through linguistic analysis but through attention to presupposed beliefs.
5. Milton Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics," originally in his *Essays in Positive Economics* (University of Chicago Press, 1953). Quotations here are taken from the sections appearing in Frank Hahn and Martin Hollis eds., *Philosophy and Economic Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1979).
6. Friedman, pp. 30, 32. For a detailed discussion of Friedman's views, and an excellent introduction to the philosophy of economic theory, see M. Blaug, *The Methodology of Economics*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.
7. There are a number of ways of expressing the assumptions of rational economic man theory. The present version is an expansion of that appearing in Daniel M. Hausman, "Are General Equilibrium Theories Explanatory?," in J. C. Pitt ed. *Philosophy in Economics* (D. Reidel, 1981), p. 18.

8. C. Dyke, *Philosophy of Economics*, Prentice-Hall, 1981, pp. 35, 51.

9. Referred to in George J. Stigler and Gary S. Becker, "De gustibus non est disputandum," *The American Economic Review*, March, 1977, p. 78.

10. The rational economic man theorist may not be committed to interpreting morality solely in terms of preference, although this is usual; and see M. Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96, 1987, pp. 36–61, and D. Lewis, "Desire As Belief," *Mind* 97, 1988, pp. 323–332. Still, while we are assumed to be desiring beings who can have preferences, we are also assumed to have *beliefs* as to what our circumstances are, and it is possible in principle to regard morality as a "factual" matter. Such a view is presented in chapter 7. For a discussion of the general relationships between ethics and economics, see A. Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987. There is a useful bibliography.

11. Stigler and Becker, p. 76. Economists have investigated "human capital" at length in many publications in their discipline's learned journals.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 79.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 80.

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## CHAPTER 6

### Economic Reality

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**W**E WERE ABLE IN CHAPTER 5 TO DEVELOP the traditional metaphysics of historical writing in a direction which permitted the basis of economic theory — the rational economic man assumptions — to be used. The contrast between the traditional and economic approaches, on this axis of interpretation, is not so marked as might be thought. We found that we could continue to suppose that the human world consists of desiring and purposive individual persons who have to be understood in empathetic terms. Dray's account of empathetic understanding in terms of a "calculation," which displays the appropriateness of an action given the individual's beliefs and purposes, was refined by characterizing the calculation as a cost-benefit analysis.

There is, however, an important limitation to this understanding of economic theory and its application within the traditional metaphysics. We may again recall from chapter 1 how an argument about the profitability of slavery might be used: if slavery was profitable, then "we are to understand why the slaveholders engaged in and continued with slavery until they were forcibly stopped. It was in their interests to do so." In chapter 5 we worked through one problem which this explanation involves: we have seen that, on the version of the traditional approach without the rational economic man assumptions, there remains a need to explain why people acted on the basis of the particular desires they did. We have dissolved this problem, while keeping the view that individuals must be understood empathetically, by noting that it can be costs and not desires which provide the foundation of the explanation. There remains, however, another problem still to be considered, which may yet prevent the question "was slavery profitable?" from being fully admitted to the traditional metaphysics. This is because the answer to this question operates in terms of people's *interests*, which is still an unclear notion. How is "interests" here to be understood?

Suppose that you have a desire — to own a Rolls-Royce, for example — which you judge to be of a certain strength. You judge that desire to have an associated cost. You perform a cost-benefit analysis and arrive at a net preference which is different from the desire. You choose to act according to the net preference. Your action has a consequence, which is in your interest. What does “interest” mean?

First, it may mean that the consequence is in your interest just because it is the fulfilment of your net preference, just because it is the expression of the result of your cost-benefit analysis.

Second, it may mean that the consequence is indeed the fulfilment of your original desire and not just of your net preference. If you accept that this consequence is in your interest then you are logically required to accept that you have miscalculated, misjudged what your desire was, misjudged its strength, or misjudged the amount of the cost. You will then be able to produce a cost-benefit analysis which displays the consequence (which is the fulfilment of your desire) as also a new net preference. This entails that your interest is the fulfilment of your net preference.

Third, it may mean that some other desire not in the original calculation is satisfied and with hindsight you prefer it that way. Again, if you accept that this is in your interest then you will have to allow that your desire is not what you thought, you will have to revise the original calculation, which again entails that your interest is the fulfilment of your net preference.

Fourth, it may mean that the consequence is the fulfilment of a net preference which you are *deemed* to have. If you accept this assessment of what your net preference is, then you must revise your calculation as appropriate, which again entails that your interest is the fulfilment of your net preference. If you do not accept the assessment then the claim that the consequence is in your interest is only true if there is a cost-benefit calculation displaying that it is.

Fifth, it may mean that the consequence is the fulfilment of a desire which you are deemed to have. If you accept this assessment of what your desire is, then you must revise your calculation as appropriate, which again entails that your interest is the fulfilment of your net preference. If you do not accept the assessment then again the claim is only true if there is a cost-benefit calculation displaying that it is.

In the first, second and third analyses of “interest” we find your interest to be your own net preference. If “interest” has this sense then we can, consistently with the traditional metaphysics, believe that slavery was in the interests of slaveholders, we can similarly believe that this explains why they engaged in it, and we can base these beliefs on our capacity to empathize with the slaveholders, through being able to work through their cost-benefit calculations of their net preferences.

The fourth and fifth analyses, by contrast, suggest that it is possible that there can be a cost-benefit calculation different from your own, one that you are “deemed” to have. This will differ from yours in three possible ways:

1. It is a valid calculation which can be worked through where yours cannot. However, to suppose this would be to deny the assumption that you are rational, so this is ruled out on the present traditional approach, since we assume on this approach that we must be able to “work through” a person’s calculation (unless they are under the influence of drink or something similar which requires reference to causation).
2. This external calculation differs from yours in the assessment of the strength of your desire. However, the “strength” of your desire is measured by the cost you are *prepared* to pay to satisfy it, of which surely you are the only proper judge (even if you accept a different assessment later, you must still adopt it as yours), so we come to:
3. The external calculation differs from yours in the assessment of the cost which will *need* to be paid to satisfy it.

The difference between the external or “deemed” cost-benefit calculation and your own, therefore, is the difference between the externally assessed cost and the cost as you yourself perceive it. The externally assessed cost is sometimes called the “real” cost. The “reality” of this cost is warranted by the truth of the economic theory which is used as the basis for the external cost-benefit assessment. Your “interest” is thus the net preference defined in terms of that economic theory, and this need not agree with your own calculated net preference. It is essential to recognize that the cost-benefit analysis with which we *empathize* is entirely in terms of *perceived* costs and benefits. “Interests,” by contrast, are now suggested to be real net benefits and not just perceived net benefits. The mark of the “reality” of benefit or cost is given by the economic theory itself.

The suggested explanation we quoted from in chapter 1 is as follows: if slavery was profitable, then we are to understand why the slaveholders engaged in and continued with slavery until they were forcibly stopped. It was in their interests to do so. If “interests” here is in terms of *perceived* net benefits, then the explanation is acceptable on the traditional metaphysics, for the desires and costs involved are the kinds of thing we can empathize with.

But we must recognize that, when we say that it was in someone’s “interests” to do something, we may well mean “interests” in some objective sense, and we may well not include as a person’s “interests” some haphazard set of desires and imprudently judged considerations which he just happened to have. “Interests” here may be better measured



according to some independent standard of profitability, typically one derived from economic theory.

We have seen that, on the traditional approach, individual persons are to be taken to be essentially understandable in empathetic terms, and so, we have noted, must be the social practices and social institutions which comprise those individuals. Thus, if we are required to empathize with social reality in this way, we must question what is meant by "real" profit, question what room there is for an "independent" standard of profitability, question what relevance an "objective" economic theory or cost-benefit analysis can have to historical understanding. We can empathize with profitability. The profitability of slaveholders' actions is characterizable and explainable *only* in terms that the individual people themselves intend: in terms of *their* desires and beliefs about costs. *Believed* profit, therefore, is alone to be allowed on the traditional approach: one's actions are profitable just in so far as one finds them to be so, in one's own assessment.

But may not one's own assessment here be wildly irrational? Surely if a slaveholder gave away all his property, then he was bound to have acted unprofitably? To draw these conclusions requires an independent standard of profitability derived from accounting or economic theory. However intrinsically superior this independent and imposed standard of profitability may be supposed to be, unless it exactly matches the judgments of the individuals concerned, it is a worthless abstraction, for they are not acting in accordance with it. It is the individual person's *actual* beliefs and purposes, however foolish, which are alone real on the traditional approach, for they alone are to be empathized with. Only the actual beliefs and purposes are relevant to the understanding of profitable action, on the traditional assumptions made about human nature. Historical reality lies with actual beliefs and purposes, not with ideal rational ones. How else are people to be taken seriously as persons?

Notice, however, that it may well be proper to persuade a person to act in accordance with some independent standard of profitability, and the slaveholder who was a good businessman may well have adopted an efficient standard for himself. We may use such an independent standard in judgment of a person's foolishness: a person who accepts appointment as a trustee, say, will have a duty to act profitably in certain circumstances. Again, however, imposed and independent duties and standards are irrelevant to the explanation of action unless they are adopted or accepted by the person concerned, and it is then their adoption or acceptance which makes them relevant, and not their independent reality, if any. We may *blame* a trustee who acts unprofitably by adopting for himself a foolish standard of profitability, but we *understand* his action on the basis of the foolish standard, not on the basis of a proper one. Similarly (unless we hold him blameless because of the costs he

faced), we may blame a slaveholder for falsely supposing blacks to be innately inferior and suitable for enslavement, yet we understand his actions on the basis of this false belief, not on the basis of a true one.

It follows from this that economic theory can be used in history in two ways: first, individual people are assumed to be believing and desiring purposive beings with whom we *must* empathize. This is the traditional approach. We then use the rational economic man assumptions to characterize the calculations of these people. We insist that social reality be understood in terms of such individuals. An argument such as "if slavery was profitable then we are to understand why the slaveholders engaged in and continued with slavery until they were forcibly stopped. It was in their interests to do so" may then be used, but only if "interests" is understood in terms of the actual adopted net preferences of the people concerned. This is because we can empathize with these calculations.

But the second way of using economic theory is to specify an economic reality which is to some extent independent of individuals, a reality of practices or institutions or "firms." We are not required to assume individual people to be believing and desiring purposive beings with whom we *must* empathize. Here we have an explicit contrast with the assumptions made by the traditional approach, for on this second view we can choose to ignore what people thought, we can refuse to take seriously their own understanding of how they acted, and we can explain their actions on independent "objective" grounds. These grounds may be anachronistic in that they might be unintelligible to the people concerned, and express our ways of understanding rather than theirs.

Understanding social reality we may now hold to involve the provision of cost-benefit calculations of "interest" which are in principle independent of those actually adopted by the individual persons who constitute the practice or institution or firm under study. While people may still be assumed to be believing and desiring purposive beings — for there is no requirement here that this be denied — their actual calculations are not regarded as explanatory of the consequences of their actions, unless they happen to coincide with the "real" calculations. Given this, empathetic understanding is neither necessary nor sufficient for historical explanation, and the historian who is committed to the traditional view that we *must* understand individuals in empathetic terms cannot use the economic approach in this second way.

This second approach thus denies the traditional view that it is necessary to empathize with economic or social reality. Social and economic matters have a kind of reality (which "objective" economic theory helps us to understand) which is explained independently of the perceptions of the people involved. But, while the economic reality of practices, institutions and firms which is here referred to is *explained*

independently of individual *perceptions*, it does not follow that it is a third kind of metaphysical entity, one which is independent of individual people in its entirety. "Individualism" as a social theory has many elements, and we should distinguish the view that *explanation* must be in terms of individual perceptions from the view that *reality* consists only of individuals. The former view, at this point, may be denied, but the latter need not. There is, of course, yet a third position here: Marxism for example, which denies that social reality consists only of individuals, and indeed sees economic reality as having a life or causal progress of its own.

We noted earlier (in chapter 5) that the traditional approach required "slavery" (for example) to be understood in individualistic terms, so that we should not suppose social reality to have a life or causal progress of its own. Firms and other social institutions are sometimes said to "cause" things to happen, and it is true that, from a metaphysical point of view, any entities which bear causal relations to each other must be among the fundamental entities of the world. However, the individualist, while permitted to deny the need for empathetic understanding, will hold that talk of "causation" by firms and the like is just a manner of speaking and no more than shorthand for the operations of individual people: firms we should understand to exist as functions of individual people and their actions, in the following way.

A firm comes into "existence" through a number of people coming together with shared beliefs and desires in pursuit of a common stated purpose or set of purposes. The "purposes" of the firm are specified real purposes of individuals. Once specified or adopted, however, members of the firm and outsiders ascribe a personality to the firm (one which legal systems can recognize),<sup>1</sup> and the original specified real purposes of the constituent individuals are also fictionally ascribed to the firm, which remains a hypothetical entity. The firm thus exists as a hypothetical entity in virtue of the actual beliefs and desires of real individuals. The individuals involved have formed the firm (typically) by explicit agreement, by contractual articles of association, and the firm thus exists in virtue of what is called in political theory a social contract.<sup>2</sup> The "consent" which may be supposed to warrant the creation of a State or similar large-scale social institution other than a firm is standardly described as "tacit." The existence of a social institution does not require explicit agreement rather than, for example, habitual behaviour or tradition. Firms are not metaphysically better placed than societies.

The contract or contracts (whether explicit, tacit or working through habitually co-ordinated behaviour), which create or continue the firm, involve a commitment on the part of individuals to act in accordance with the stated beliefs and purposes of the firm, even though their actual beliefs and purposes may be different or may change. The

rules, roles, purposes and offices which the creation of the firm specifies are matters of belief and desire which founding and subsequent members of the firm adopt for themselves insofar as they are members. The firm may then have purposes which differ from those of the constituent individuals in the following way: the "purposes of the firm" are actually purposes which the individuals involved are *deemed* to have. This "deeming" may be by the managers of the firm, the customers, the shareholders, or a court; or it may be by historians generations after the actions at issue. The individuals involved are deemed to have them in virtue of their commitment (an expression of a shared expectation) to have them, which commitment is a consequence of their obligation under the terms of the contract, or a consequence of habitual features of their way of life. The carrying out of an obligation to the firm is itself a net preference of the individuals involved, although the desires and perceived costs which warrant the individual's net preference here are matters outside the firm's stated range of proper considerations.

The cost-benefit calculation which the individual *actually* has will thus typically be different from that of the firm, and thus different from the cost-benefit calculation which this individual is *deemed* to have as occupying an appropriate office in the firm. Thus the individual's actual net preference might well depend, for example, on his personal assessment of the risk of loss of reputation (or even affection) for breach of contract of employment, whereas this could not be included in the cost-benefit calculation of the firm "itself." The cost-benefit calculation on the part of the firm is a model which the members of the firm are deemed to share, and it is a calculation which is "real," where "reality" is determined by the truth of an objective economic theory. It is possible for the firm to be characterized by all involved, including historians of it, as being an entity of which the rational economic man assumptions are true. In so far as the individuals of the firm carry out its stated purpose they act according to a real cost-benefit analysis, whether or not they know that they are doing so.

In conclusion, we explain people's actions, on the non-traditional yet individualist approach, not necessarily in terms of beliefs and desires we can actually empathize with, but in terms of the beliefs and desires we deem them to have in the light of an independent economic theory. We are warranted in doing so by their commitment to or tacit acceptance of the actual practices of the institution of which they are members, which institution is a social construction in terms of individuals' beliefs and desires, a construction which is assumed by us, on empirical grounds, to be formulated in terms of the rational economic man assumptions.

We wish to know whether answering the question "was slavery profitable?" is a way of achieving knowledge. "Profitability" may now

be interpreted in two ways, matching the two senses of "interest" now explained. Where interest can be empathized with, then knowledge is founded on that basis, given that the traditional metaphysics which understands people as purposive beings is itself rationally justifiable. Where "interest" is given a full economic interpretation which does not necessarily involve empathizing with the calculations of individual people, then the claims that are made are based on an economic theory which must itself be rationally founded in some way.

So far as the first interpretation goes, we showed in chapter 5 the sense in which "is slavery profitable?" is to be admitted as a proper question within the traditional metaphysics. It only remains to discuss the rational justification for that metaphysics, and this will take place in chapter 7. We need to be clear how the second approach, that using economic theory, can be warranted, however.

Friedman described the assumptions of rational economic man theory as having the status of a scientific hypothesis. We have interpreted this so far, as broadly speaking Friedman would wish us to do, in terms of the Popperian approach to science outlined in chapter 3. On our conditional assumption of empiricism, we have treated rational economic man theory as empirically testable, and not as itself a metaphysical assumption. We have said no more than that it presupposes a metaphysical assumption, namely that people are purposive beings.

Unless we take the claim that "if  $A$  prefers  $X$  to  $Y$ , then  $A$  will choose  $X$  over  $Y$ " to be an empty definition, we have seen that we need to understand this claim by specifying an independent characterization of preference and an independent characterization of choice. However, preference is not empirically observable. We can introspect it in ourselves, and we can empathize with it in others, but it is not to be known about in any other way. Preference is a notion which is essential to the understanding of others as desiring and purposive beings, and stands or falls with the metaphysical assumption that persons are such beings.

The attempt to make preference equivalent to revealed preference, which is actual choice, makes it empty. It is sometimes thought that this is worth doing because choice, at least, is empirically observable. However, the supposition that choice is empirically observable is also quite wrong. How can we tell that some entity is choosing  $X$  over  $Y$ ? We have to supply our experience of the facts here, to achieve this result, with some prior notion of what the alternatives facing the entity are. Let us suppose our entity is moving along a road, which forks. It "chooses" road  $X$ , say. We can only say, firstly, that this is a "choice" at all if we suppose that it *could* have done something else. If it was impossible for it to do anything else, then we must revise our description. The entity may be a tramcar, for example, running on rails in the road which do not fork. Whether the entity could have done other than it did

is a question about *possibilities* for it, and we saw in chapter 3 that we cannot observe possibilities.

Nevertheless, suppose our entity is a choosing entity and does make a choice in the circumstances. It does not follow that, in choosing road *X*, the entity is choosing road *X* over road *Y*. This only follows if taking road *Y* is a perceived alternative for that entity. If the alternative perceived by the entity were retracing its path, *Z*, then its actual choice is not of *X* over *Y* but of *X* over *Z*. Again, however, we cannot observe the perceived alternative for that entity. Nor can we observe whether there was just one perceived alternative, or how long the list was. In fact we have to import a very great many complex background and a priori assumptions if we are to describe some experienced event as being a choice of *X* over *Y*. The so-called "revealed preference" for *X* over *Y*, which we earlier allowed, may sometimes be the only evidence for actual preference, is not actually *revealed* at all.

Neither preference nor choice are terms describing what is purely empirically observable. To apply the notions of preference and choice to experience requires background metaphysical assumptions about the kinds of entities we are dealing with, and further assumptions about the information they have and how they deal with it. It turns out that we are forced to treat the rational economic man assumptions as not deriving from empirical evidence alone, for the empirical evidence is interpreted in the light of the assumptions. That an economic theory constructed on the basis of these assumptions is empirically testable does not mean that experience alone warrants the truth of economic theory.

We find that the rational justification for the use of economic theory presupposes some interplay between empirical and metaphysical assumptions, some interplay between experience and the a priori assumptions we bring to experience. Knowledge, we have seen, requires rational justification. We are called upon, if we seek knowledge, to justify the metaphysical assumptions involved. Our use of the economic approach to history thus needs rational justification. This use embodies certain traditional metaphysical assumptions which have now been made clear. The traditional and the econometric approaches to history embody different fundamental assumptions which need justification if either approach is to provide knowledge. Moreover, we have seen that historical approaches can conflict, and thus the question of the justification of the relevant assumptions is crucial to historical practice. The rational justification for such assumptions will be examined in the next chapter.

## NOTES

1. While the analysis of a "firm" is particularly relevant here because it is the economic approach which is being examined, this is not the only grouping which may have legal personality. For a different analysis, see Roger Scruton, "Corporate persons," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume LXIII, 1989, p. 239, and the response by John Finnis in the same volume.

2. There are many kinds of social contract. Begin with T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651. Recent works in the tradition are J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, 1972, and D. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

## CHAPTER 7

### Conclusion

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**T**HIS BOOK BEGAN WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF A dispute between historians which demonstrated the necessity, for the practice of historical writing, of making a choice between different available approaches to history. If historians were to provide knowledge about reality, then a justification would be needed for their choice of approach. Thus the practice of history has to assume a solution to certain theoretical problems in the philosophy of historical knowledge. What, then, would be proper justifications for our exemplified approaches, for the traditional or for the cliometric approach to history? We needed, first, to understand how historical knowledge was in principle achievable before we could understand what the different approaches were and how they might be justified.

Empiricism initially set us the standard for rational justification, but its own irrationality became apparent when it appeared that it set a standard which could not be achieved, since it could not be applied without further background assumptions about what experience is experience of. These background assumptions could not themselves be directly derived from experience, but were, if known at all, known a priori. Metaphysical assumptions about experienced reality thus have to be made. Historians, therefore, have to describe and explain the historical world, given a priori non-empirical assumptions as to what that world is. It is these assumptions which frame the questions historians ask, and frame their procedures, descriptions and explanations. A historical approach, embodying such assumptions, requires a rational defence if historical knowledge is to be constructed on the basis of it.

In chapters 4 through 6 we analysed and compared the traditional and cliometric approaches in order to recover the fundamental assumptions each made about historical reality. On the traditional approach, we have a metaphysics which permits at the minimum two kinds of entities: those in the natural world which are causally related, and those in the human world which are individual persons. The natural



and human worlds co-exist and interact. Each kind of entity has its associated theory of explanation: the natural world is to be understood in terms of covering law theory; and the world of individual persons must be approached in terms of empathetic understanding.

While we were able to provide an analysis of empathetic understanding in terms of a perceived cost-benefit analysis, we saw that the economic approach embodies a further dimension: we need to be able to explain people's actions, not necessarily in terms of the beliefs and desires we actually empathize with, but in terms of the beliefs, desires and costs we deem them to have in the light of an independent economic theory. This economic theory is used to specify an economic "reality" involving cost-benefit calculations of "interest" which are independent of the calculations of the individuals involved. Our choice of historical approach thus depends on the decisions we make about what historical reality consists in and how it is to be understood. Historical knowledge requires that our choice be justified.

We may recall from the exposition of philosophical issues concerning knowledge and reality in chapters 2 and 3 that we have offered two standards for justification for knowledge claims: rationalism and empiricism. Our choice of standard must itself be justified, for the justification of knowledge requires the justification of the foundation adopted. But how can the standards themselves be justified? For rationalism, while arguing for the permission of a priori metaphysical assumptions, has provided no justification for them, while empiricism has been shown to involve metaphysical assumptions which require justification on non-empirical grounds. Whether we adopt empiricism or rationalism, justification of our metaphysical assumptions is required, and yet neither standard shows us how such a justification may be provided.

It may then appear to be an arbitrary choice, or a mere matter of unfounded opinion, which metaphysical assumptions we make. If this is so, then it will also be an arbitrary choice how we interpret our evidence and write our narratives. If it is an arbitrary choice, then it may seem that, in the end, Catherine Morland is right: history is sheer invention, because we are apparently writing about arbitrarily invented entities.

If, therefore, we write our historical accounts partly on the basis of, for example, the following central belief: "human beings are the kind of entities which must be empathetically understandable," then, if we seek historical knowledge, we face the problem of justifying how that belief can be known to be true. In chapter 2 the grounds of truth were explained at length; at the most elementary, we saw that beliefs (statements) were either analytic ("true by virtue of meaning") or synthetic ("true by virtue of fact"). To say "human beings are the kind of entities which must be empathetically understandable" is not to say

something analytic, for if it were, it would be true by definition and empirically empty; moreover, how would you be able to tell that a person was a human being? You could not tell just by looking at them, on this supposed definition, because you cannot tell just by looking at some entity whether or not it is empathetically understandable. Furthermore, to say that "human beings are the kind of entities which must be empathetically understandable" is not to say something synthetic and necessarily true, for it might well be false, since alternative metaphysical views are available to us. Is it, then, to say something synthetic and known a posteriori, known on the basis of simple experience? We have seen that it cannot be so; there is no single experience which could warrant this belief, no single fact in virtue of which it can be experienced to be true.

Yet need "true by virtue of fact" require a single independently experienced fact to make a synthetic statement true? In chapter 2 we noted an idealist theory of truth. "True by virtue of fact," for the idealist, cannot mean "true by virtue of *independent* fact," and this has to be understood in some more complex way. We noted that the idealist often speaks of synthetic truth as being assured by the place of a synthetic statement in a vast web of beliefs, the acceptability of which depends upon its internal coherence, consistency and comprehensiveness, and the whole of which expresses (mind-dependent) reality. It is a so-called "coherence" theory of truth of this kind which will be outlined in this chapter as the best solution yet available to our epistemological problem.

The truth of the claims we make about reality depends partly on the experiences we have, and partly on the background "a priori" assumptions which we bring to experience. We have many experiences and make many assumptions. In other words, the truth of the claims we make about reality depends partly on our many experiences and partly on the truth of many other beliefs. We cannot separate, within our total set of claims to knowledge, certain particular beliefs which meet experience, "copy" experience and are checkable by experience independently of the rest of what we believe. Strictly speaking, because of the presence of kind-words, no statement is "true by virtue of fact," where "fact" is understood as an atomistic Humean simple impression. Even to describe something as "blue," it will be recalled, is to liken it to other things not now present to us.

The American pragmatist philosopher W. V. Quine suggests that, when we try to make sense of the experienced world, there is room for adjustment regarding which statements we propose to hold true and which we propose to discard as false.<sup>1</sup> The following example is one way of clarifying this point. Imagine an ornithologist, firmly convinced "a priori" that all swans are white, who travels to Australia and discovers a black one. There is a clear conflict between his knowledge claim and his

experience. But must he discard as false his belief that all swans are white? Not necessarily. Two inconsistent beliefs are in the forefront of his mind at the relevant point: "All swans are white" and "This is a black swan." These beliefs are inconsistent with each other. One of them has to go. But neither logic nor experience tells us which it should be. He can keep the belief that he has before him a black swan, and discard the belief that all swans are white. Equally, he can keep the belief that all swans are white (treat it as "a priori"), and discard the belief that this is a black swan. (He can, if he wishes, discard both beliefs, but he has, so far as the example goes, no reason or need to do so.)

Is whiteness essential to swans, or not? To hold that it is not permits the ornithologist to deny that all swans are white, but the removal of colour as part of the criterion for being a swan may lead to the removal of colour as an important part of his taxonomy of birds, which might have far-reaching effects for his understanding of the rest of biology. On the other hand, one way in which the ornithologist might justify to himself keeping the belief that all swans are white, and discarding the belief that the object before him is a black swan, would be by holding that, since this thing before him is black, it cannot be a swan (since all swans are white). It must, then, be some other kind of bird. To make this move would again require consequential changes to his taxonomy of birds, changes which might be extremely far-reaching. Whichever belief the ornithologist decides to discard, it is a matter for human decision and not of particular experience, and it is a decision which has consequences for the rest of his beliefs to a lesser or greater extent.

This example is merely one instance of a general point. No one of our beliefs is so fully and directly related to experience that we are forced to keep or amend just that one if experience requires it. Equally, what we choose to treat as "a priori" is not a matter independently given to us. It is open to us to amend our knowledge claims as we find pragmatically convenient, and there are in principle many ways of effecting any required change. Quine notes, "any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system."<sup>2</sup> The history of science seems to show the wide range of possibilities which are open to us here.<sup>3</sup> Quine's position, while empiricist (for it is still experience which provides the ultimate ground for what we can rationally claim to know), understands experience as *holistically* rather than (with Hume) *atomistically* related to our beliefs: that is, all our beliefs meet all of experience as a body, and not on a one-to-one piecemeal basis. It is this *holistic empiricism* which we adopt in this chapter.

All the assertions which we make are warrantable on the basis of their coherence with the rest of our claims to knowledge, together

with experience. If a certain so-called “metaphysical” set of beliefs, together with the other beliefs which we have, fails to make sense of experience for us, if it leaves us with unexpected experiences or unsolved puzzles, then this set will need to be revised in favour of another. But the revision is neither total nor arbitrary; it is a matter of pragmatic convenience for us all. Thus the central belief that “human beings are the kind of entities which must be empathetically understandable” is warranted, if it is warranted, in virtue of the crucial place it appears to occupy within the entire set of our beliefs about all of reality in all of its guises, a set of beliefs warranted in so far as it makes sense of all experience for us. Yet we have seen that puzzles remain, puzzles which economic theory may have to be added to remove. Such an addition can push empathetic understanding from its original central place. Yet this is not easy: the coherence which we require between all our beliefs is a massive demand. The constraints upon our choice of metaphysics are many, for convenience requires that we save as much understanding as we can.

We have noted that in principle there are many ways of effecting the changes which puzzling experiences may demand of our system of beliefs. Even so, some beliefs may not be possible to hold, given what else we want to believe. For example, it may be (it is a central philosophical question) that a belief in Hume’s and Hempel’s mechanism means that we cannot make sense of persons engaging in meaningful activities, and that pragmatically we prefer to jettison the belief in Hume’s and Hempel’s mechanism rather than the belief in the possibility of meaningful activities. In principle we could make the opposite choice. Yet we saw in chapter 4 that there can be moral constraints upon our choice of metaphysics, which may require us not to regard ourselves or others as mechanically determined to act. We are not to escape responsibility. On the traditional view, if we regard others or even ourselves as machine-like, then we are morally at fault. Value, therefore, can enter into choice of belief, can enter into metaphysical choice.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the requirement mentioned above, that we “save as much understanding as we can,” may itself be interpreted as an evaluative demand which places merit on conservatism and simplicity.<sup>5</sup> Does the room for evaluation and the many ways in which even metaphysical beliefs may be changed mean that, ultimately, what we believe is arbitrary, and thus knowledge unfounded? Our final task in this book is to examine the place of value in our decision what to claim to know.

There is no doubt that we do ordinarily make a distinction between factual matters and evaluative matters. The central question for us is that of knowledge, however. Why should the introduction of evaluative considerations preclude the possibility of a claim to knowledge being well-founded? The only plausible reason is that evaluative claims are

themselves mere matters of opinion, which cannot be rationally founded. Is this true for moral and other evaluative judgements? With our conditional commitment to empiricism, we have only one answer to questions about how statements are to be rationally supported: such knowledge must be derived from experience.

It is a famous observation of David Hume's that we cannot derive an "ought" from an "is."<sup>6</sup> More generally, factual statements cannot be used to prove moral statements, unless we assume other moral statements also. This distinction between fact and value is widely accepted among scientists and others brought up in the Humean empiricist tradition. Milton Friedman, for example, when introducing the example of the leaves (used in chapter 5), insisted on distinguishing normative questions about what ought to be done from factual questions about what is the case.

If knowledge must be derived from experience as Hume requires, then one quick answer to the problem of the epistemology of evaluation is to say that evaluative judgements are neither true nor false, and are thus not the kind of thing that can be known. This is a familiar empiricist route, and Hume sometimes spoke as if this were his view: "morality," he said, "is more properly felt than judg'd of."<sup>7</sup> It is sometimes said that moral judgements are expressions of taste, of approval or disapproval. If it is rationally arbitrary judgements like these which importantly go towards determining our choice of metaphysical belief, then it might well be appropriate to hold that knowledge is not achievable.

But Hume also states that the "ought" relation is an *affirmation*, and thus that we do judge of it. On this view, which is surely closer to common sense, some of our beliefs are moral beliefs; we can reason with them, they can be true, and, given empiricism, if we know them, then we know them on the basis of *experience*.

If moral affirmations share, as for the empiricist they must, the same kind of empirical warrant as do non-moral or factual claims, then the epistemological contrast between descriptive and evaluative statements must, if it exists, derive from a contrast between different kinds of empirical sources. Hume could properly assume this because his was an atomistic empiricism. On this view, we must distinguish between external experiences (which warrant the factual beliefs) and internal moral experiences (which warrant the evaluative beliefs). This Hume did.

But if atomistic empiricism is false and is best replaced by the holistic empiricism now described, then we cannot make this move. The situation is then this. Moral beliefs are either true or false. Our claims to knowledge include moral claims. Moral beliefs are supported epistemologically just as any other statement is supported epistemologically. Since the entire system of beliefs is supported by experience as a whole,

then the moral beliefs are similarly supported by experience as a whole. But although the moral beliefs are supported by experience, they are supported in a holistic way, and not supported by atomic moral experiences which are given to us already labelled as such. Thus the fact/value distinction is not epistemologically fundamental.

There may therefore be moral or other evaluative constraints upon our metaphysical theorizing or choices of factual description, constraints which raise no additional epistemological problems. We have already noted that the requirement that we "save as much understanding as we can" may be interpreted as an evaluative demand which places merit on the convenience of conservatism and simplicity, and thus affects our choice of theory. It is sometimes held that we have a duty to be conservative of the existing belief system. Quine himself, who did not venture into moral philosophy, merely observed, correctly, that we have a natural tendency to preserve the existing system, and we may further note that new information has a cost.

We may conclude that these conservative tendencies involve a pragmatic commitment to the view that what requires justification is not so much belief as rather *change* in belief. Knowledge is therefore not, as so often said, "justified true belief,"<sup>8</sup> for to suggest this would be to hold that what requires justification is belief itself, rather than just change in belief. By contrast, knowledge should be understood as consisting in any system of beliefs which is the consequence of a justifiable series of variations upon an earlier set of beliefs accepted as true. We are not to ask by what title truth was originally claimed. The justification of truth is thus partly historical.

Thus we see that evaluative constraints like appeals to morality or simplicity or conservatism may properly exist in our theorizing. When we "deem" a person to have a certain net preference, and construct our historical approach to his actions on the basis of this, we are introducing evaluative considerations. We may defend our evaluation by pointing to the obligation or commitment which a member of some firm or institution has undertaken, or we may refer to desires and beliefs which we think that, as a "rational" being, he "ought" to have. We saw in chapter 1 how the historical assessment of slavery may be affected by evaluative considerations. This need not be simple irrational bias, however. The truth in morality, as within the rest of our beliefs, is warranted in a revisable fashion by the totality of experience together with the rest of what we believe.

We have to achieve an equilibrium in moral judgment and factual judgment, not just within the realm of the moral or just within the realm of the factual, but across the entire system including both.<sup>9</sup> Moral matters can thus rightly constrain our choice of historical approach, our metaphysics and our choice of factual description. Perhaps on moral grounds

we should reject a mechanistic or deterministic conception of people. Value thus does enter into our decision about the proper metaphysics for history, about the correct theory of human nature, but value is ultimately as well-founded as any factual matter, and our decision is not a rationally unfounded opinion. Value provides an input into our total claim to knowledge, but not in a way which should cause us special doubt. The system of knowledge itself is historically warranted, and historical research supplies an essential and large-scale input into and constraint upon our overall understanding, constraining fact and value and metaphysics.

In conclusion, is answering the original question "was slavery profitable?" a way of achieving knowledge, so that, once answered, the issue is disposed of *once and for all*? It was the *disagreement* between historians which first gave us reason to suppose that perhaps historical knowledge was not possible. Is disagreement, in principle, avoidable? It seems not. For knowledge, on the approach adopted here, consists in any system of beliefs that is the consequence of a justifiable series of variations upon an earlier set of beliefs accepted as true. Knowledge is thus relativized to the earlier beliefs, and the best we can do is improve on what we now believe. But "what we now believe" is not unambiguously identifiable; moreover, there is more than one way of making an improvement, and pragmatic convenience is the sole constraint upon it.

The most that could be claimed (although it is not claimed here) is that the cliometric approach is the best we have, and the necessarily holistic defence of, or attack on, this claim has to be undertaken in part by economists and historians, who are in the empirical front line, and in part by philosophers, who are professionally committed to a synoptic view of the presuppositions of the many disciplines and sciences. Philosophical and historical understanding are entwined. We never have access to some touchstone which will assure us that we have now achieved truth, and need never change our beliefs again. Thus historical knowledge should not be understood as being inconsistent with the possibility of disagreement, for that would set an impossible and useless standard. The issue is never "disposed of, once and for all."

#### NOTES

1. See W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *From a Logical Point of View* (2nd ed.), New York: Harper and Row, 1961.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
3. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
4. Quine does not extend his holistic approach to evaluative considerations. The argument in this part of the chapter is partly expressed and extended in J. L.

Gorman, "Philosophical Confidence," in J. D. G. Evans ed., *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 71.

5. Perhaps we should be more radical in such matters, and even deliberately create alternative sets of claims, as Paul Feyerabend suggests. See his "How to Be a Good Empiricist," in P. H. Nidditch ed., *The Philosophy of Science*, Oxford University Press, 1968, and *Against Method*, London: New Left Books, 1975.

6. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, [1739] (Selby-Bigge edition), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888, p. 469.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 470.

8. See A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956.

9. This is not, therefore, the current notion of "reflective equilibrium" which is used in moral philosophy. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, 1972; M. R. DePaul, "Two Conceptions of Coherence Methods in Ethics," *Mind* 96, 1987, p. 463; and M. G. White, *What Is and What Ought to be Done*, Oxford University Press, 1981.



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