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Historical Understanding

4 pp. All headed 'Historical Understanding.' The letter 'B' is at top of each, in pencil. 'A' is at top of 860, and 'C' at top of 862.

Transcription by R. Doran

Historical Understanding

1 Any understanding: data, inquiry, imagination, insight, formulation, reflection, reflective understanding, judgment – cumulations over time.

2 Understanding in time of objects in time.

Time (a) *numerus et mensura* ... (b) *nunc entis mobilis*. esse nat.: same substance, potencies; developing habits; successive acts; esse int.: same subject, successive acts, one field of objects with ever shifting division into future, present, past

insight, anticipative of future, = foresight = set of possibilities with respective probabilities and provision for events according to probabilities
insight, retrospective of past, = hindsight, some possibilities have become events: possibility to actuality, probability to certainty, rest eliminated
coming events cast their shadows before

for foresight they are only shadows (possibilities), there are many alternatives, one cannot pick winners with certainty

for hindsight, they are realized possibilities, de facto intelligibilities
intelligibility: not necessity, not arbitrary, natural in physics, chemistry, bio1ogy, informed by intentional in sensitive and intellect

man is moral inasmuch as individually responsible for life he leads, and men are historically conscious inasmuch as collectively assume responsibility for world in which they live their lives.

[not genesis of history but unfolding of elements in understanding of historical understanding]

3 First approximation to history: life, diary, memoirs, biography.

Living to diary: exercite signate, vécu thématique, existenziell existenzial, experiential and knowledge; unless most of life in keeping diary, diary abbreviates, selects, sketches, indicates; large implicit context obvious to contemporaries, intimates

Diary to memoirs: as diary advances, retrospect lengthens, more, and more remote, possibilities realized, earlier events acquire fuller significance, earlier judgments need to be qualified, corrected, unmentioned events have to be recalled, inserted – if rewritten, then memoir, autobiography: new units of organization (day by day, period by period: period determined by centre of organization, types of dominant concern, types of task, problem, types of personal relations)

Memoirs to biography: from outside; not ‘I thought, felt ...,’ but a, b, c, seem to show he thought, felt ... – memory yields to research – no personal involvement – subject and contemporaries equally third person – more attention to situation (Life & Times) – more explanation to later generation – add retrospective intelligibilities not realized in lifetime.

4 Second approximation: Individual to Community

Set of biographies on contemporary subjects and their successors overlap; they share a common field – the same field was shared by many others, whose biographies might be written, and by many more whose biographies won’t be written – there emerges a viewpoint in which the ‘lives’ are part of the ‘times,’ the individual life a life in community, individual deeds part of community undertakings – one inquires into the history of the community, the city, the state, the nation, the set of interdependent nations.

There occur the same type of transpositions from vécu to thématique, from constitutive to retrospective intelligibility, from shorter to longer units of organization, as in first approximation but

the material basis is far larger in extent, far more complex, less direct, less accessible

the centre shifts from individual to group, from private events to public events, from course of a life to course of affairs of community.

Still what is community, how do its affairs emerge, develop, proceed? An answer to such questions is necessary to understand what history is about; but the answers are not directly obtainable by historical methods; and the necessity of answers does not appear except by the trial and error of writing history without bothering about such answers.

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5 Naive Narrative History (NNH).

For NNH the community is the conspicuous community (state, church) – its vehicle is narrative, ordered recital of events -- it recounts who did what, when, where, under what circumstances, from what motives, with what results – its principal function tends to be existential.

The victim of amnesia does not know his name, occupation, property, obligations, etc. ... A community unaware of itself as a community cannot function as a community ... The simplest vehicle of such common self-awareness is narrative – the larger the community and the longer it lasts the greater the need for NH, and the more the materials to be worked up.

Such narrative is not a list of bald facts: it is artistic (selects, orders, describes), ethical (apportions praise, blame), apologetic (corrects false and tendentious accounts), explanatory (accounts for existing institutions by narrating their genesis, for non-existing by how they became antiquated), prophetic (a present exercise of foresight in light of past).

6 Critical Narrative History (CNH)

NNH is multiple: same persons and events appear differently in different NNH of each country, faction, sect, generation; but the real persons and the real events were under principle of contradiction; CNH aims at the unique ‘real’ person, event, sequence, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.

CNH proceeds from base of exhaustive research: all relevant documents.

CNH is critical: does not postulate documents to have been impeccable products of CNH; rather inclines to view that it can arrive at the facts though all witnesses lying and all clues planted (history science not belief).

CNH is documentary: it makes no factual assertions unsupported by critically evaluated documentary evidence.

CNH is explanatory: it reduces the manifold of documents to a coherent intelligible narrative supported at each point by reliable evidence.

CNH is progressive, cumulative: as modern science, it is not certain and definitive, but through ever fuller research, ever new perspectives, ever more complete checking, it aims through probability to reach an ever more complete, balanced, accurate, and probable picture.

7 The Crisis of CNH. Dilthey, Becker, Heussi, Marrou, Aron, Richardson

CNH is philosophically naive: (a) object of history (b) human knowing.

(a) The constitutive intelligibility of events, lives, is not *thématique* but *vécu*, not yet determinate by subsequent events but indeterminate in host of possibilities, not in one mind but in many groups of different minds, not only what

was thought but also what was overlooked, not immediately accessible to us but only mediately through a chance and scattered mass of later thematized and retrospective intelligibilities grasped by different persons with different viewpoints, purposes, at different places and times. ‘Wie es eigentlich gewesen’ would be total recall of all (selected) memories; minimal thematization would be stream of consciousness narrative.

(b) For the naive realist knowing is not answering but looking; *thématique* if true is *vécu* over again; retrospective if true must have been already there (it was but in potency and many others); unification (selection, importance) must have been there or false, subjective.

The philosophic (unconscious) naive realism of CNH postulates an historical object, and the critique of possible historical objects and operations reveals the object to be unattainable.

CNH has to be stripped of mythical object: complete, vivid, detailed, omniscient reconstruction of the past is not science, not scholarship, but the art of historical fiction. It can serve heuristic purpose, as images of electron, electromagnetic field.

Once stripped of naivete, the historian has to face philosophic issues: cognitional, is knowing looking or answering; epistemological, is foundation the ‘out there’ or truth qua transcendent (what is true in any context can be truly stated in any other sufficiently developed and *known* context); is man object of behavioral science or *Geisteswissenschaften*?).

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8 Differentiated History. Basic and Special.

Basic history is concerned with the common field of special histories. It provides the mapping and dating of events, the identification and distinction of persons and groups, the external public description of persons and events, the more obvious to everybody interconnections.

Special history combines specialized knowledge with historical techniques: history of culture (language, art, literature, religion), institutions (family, morals, society, education, state, law, economy, technics, churches), doctrines (mathematics, natural and human sciences, philosophy, history, theology), movements (from meaning to common meaning on potential, formal, full, realized levels; organicity, genesis, dialectic).

Differentiated history (a) transposes distinction between conspicuous (state, church) community and minor communities to a distinction between conspicuous categories (external, public, obvious) in basic history and categories of specialized knowledge in special history;

(b) transposes the distinction between history and biography (public concern vs private opinion, taste) to a distinction between common and external events and (potentially or actually) common meanings – in the long run it is not politicians and churchmen but ideas that rule the world (Keynes, General theory, employment, interest, money 1936)

(c) takes the unformulated historic sense of CHN (commonsense grasp of common sense of earlier period) and formulates it in the history of developing cultures, institutions, doctrines, movements

(d) integrates historical dimension with other branches of specialized knowledge (only a mathematician can write history of mathematics) and simultaneously extends other specialized knowledge into knowledge of history.

9 Integrated history

Development is from undifferentiated whole to differentiated parts to integration of differentiated parts; second stage must be considerably advanced before third becomes clearly recognized possibility; possibility advances through trial and error to actuality.

History of cultures, institutions, doctrines is history of meanings becoming common meanings in movements, organically complementing one another, developing and expanding, dialectically opposing one another, etc.

Basic history of events is the fate of history of meanings; by history the *vécu* of experience becomes the *thématique* of experiment; but the experiment is instructive rather than decisive – the conditions for recurrence do not recur or can be eliminated.

10 Fragestellung (Fs)

Every Fs occurs within transcendental and relative horizon (TH RH). Within different TH every statement has a different meaning, for they differ on reality, knowing, objectivity – change of TH is intellectual conversion (naive realism, idealist, critical realism); conversion may follow reflection on written histories but it is not produced by historical methods. Ditto, faith as *Aufhebung* of natural TH.

With every advance of human and to some extent natural science, of institutions and cultures, a fuller RH becomes possible.

TH and RH define horizon of possible experience, understanding, evidence. What is beyond one's TH is manifest nonsense; what is beyond one's RH may cause unease, concern, in open person, but is not accurately apprehended.

Differences in TH and RH not to be eliminated by historical methods; an extrinsic cause of differences in historical problems, views, conclusions, presentations.

Fs may begin from anywhere, but one must let it, encourage it, to be modified, corrected, transformed through intercourse with data: one has to discover the problems of past and its potentialities to see events as the realization of potentialities, of some [and] not others.

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Lower FS concerned with short-run intelligibility of data; it is analogous to determination of empirical law; the FS is right if it raises the questions that the data can answer; if questions and answers hit the bull's-eye by leaving no proximate further questions to be answered.

Higher FS is concerned with long-run intelligibility of data; same criterion of no further questions on higher level; stands to a set of lower FS's as system to empirical laws; it is the higher context that embraces into a single view the many lower FS. Butterfield on Origins of Modern Science, compared with specialist studies on individual thinkers from 1300 to 1800.

Lower FS more what people were thinking of, higher FS more what people were overlooking, what despite their limitations they were bringing about.

To work out heuristic structure of integrated history has not been properly thought of – Toynbee's Study suggestive of HS.

The difficulty is that true knowledge of past can be attained but the conditions of attaining it are not recognized.

For the naive realist, understanding is projection; for him history is an endless mass of more or less unintelligible data; he always smuggles in some understanding (his own).

For the positivist, legitimate questions cannot rise above level of behavioral science; he can do basic history, but he usually succumbs to conventional or revolutionary propaganda, or settles for edition, index, etc.

The relativist, idealist, essentialist flings open the doors to understanding, *Geisteswissenschaften*; but he has no criteria or techniques for judgment; he produces a manifold of equally good (from his viewpoint) illuminations, interpretations.