**How to Study History: Relativist Historicism, Scientific Naturalism, and Pragmatic Objectivity**

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Introduction: The Problem with History

The prominent debate in the philosophy of history in the last 150 years could be − perhaps anachronistically − generalized as the juxtaposition between naturalist and historicist conceptions of historical knowledge. Naturalist thinkers such as Hempel, Gardiner and, to some extent, Popper have searched for covering laws or methods resembling those of the natural sciences in order to inquire into past events and actions objectively. Their historicist challengers, on the other hand, have emphasized the normative and historicist preconditions of both the study of the past and the object of that study. The methodological key question has been whether historical inquiry requires explanatory modes that significantly differ from those of the natural sciences. And if they do, what sort of epistemic status history should be granted. Has it any claim to objectivity? Can we know what happened and why it was made to happen in the past, or are we limited to our present viewpoint?

In the more recent discussions, the strictly positivist take on historical knowledge has given way to a wider adoption of a more general naturalism. However, the so called "scientific naturalism" still collides with the more relativistically oriented philosophies of history and other accounts that recognize normativity, value-ladenness and perspectival conditioning as inescapable obstacles to achieving objectivity in historiography. In this paper, I try to outline some possibilities for pragmatism to step beyond the dichotomy between the naturalist ideal of objectivity and the historicist relativism in the common attempt to explain and understand past events and actions. Due to the brevity of this paper and the plausibility of the idea, I'll take for granted Davidson's disputable point that reasons and other intentional states of human agents can be also causes.

The Historicist Challenge to Objectivity

Historicist accounts of knowledge of past events and actions position historiography close to the relativistic or subjectivist end in the imaginary scale between absolute subjectivity and absolute objectivity (see Nagel 1986). The inquiry into and the presentation of past events and actions is considered to be constrained by the historians conceptual scheme, ethical stance or, in general, her cultural and temporal presuppositions (see e.g. Burr 2003; Carey 2009; Searle 1996). If the historian tries to describe and explain the past with the aim of making it understandable, the achievable and verifiable facts do not suffice for making sense of the past. The historian cannot escape value-ridden interpretation in charting the fragments of past events and actions.

With regard to the question of relativism, the historian thus faces a double challenge: not only is historical knowledge at least to some extent a construction relative to the historian's own tradition, also the object of her research − the historical and archeological evidence such as documents and architecture − is cultural and possibly quite foreign construction. Hence, historiography deals not so much with cultural construction as cultural re-construction of past events and actions. This epistemic distance from the object of inquiry would imply, in Dummett's (2004, ix) words, the "repugnant" view that "statements about the past, if true at all, must be true in virtue of the traces past events have left in the present". (See e.g. D'Amico 1989.)

A pragmatist outlook on historiography would and should incorporate moderate historicism while finding sufficiently strong arguments against radical historicism and its relativistic consequences (Haskell 1998).

A Tentative Response to the Challenge 1

Already Nietzsche pointed out that historical objectivity requires evaluation of what is worth telling and what is not. This normatively guided practice of selection of historical facts for historical narratives was clarified by Richard Rorty, who positioned himself as both a naturalist and a historicist (Rorty 2000; 1989; Brandom 2000). Rorty's disgust with the concepts of 'objectivity' and 'truth' aside, his examination of different ways of inquiring into history is useful for estimating the degree of objectivity in different forms of historiography (Rorty 1998, 247−264). The most viable pair in his taxonomy is that of historical and rational reconstruction of history. Rorty spoke of the history of philosophy, but the philosophy of history can equally gain from it.

The historicist challenge to historical objectivity often attacks "rational reconstructions" of the past, i.e. the looking for historical evidence that has relevance in light of today's problems. For example, historical inquiry may set − as it did in the post-Enlightenment era − its aims with reference to standards such as constitutional liberties or political rights (Haskell 1998). Later the scope of aims widened, and rational reconstructions of history were to include economic and social ends (Rubinoff 1991, 150). The histories of "capital" or "health" are normative due to their ends. It should be no surprise that rationality is normative (Davidson 2004).

However, rational and hence normative reconstructions of history require "historical reconstructions" as their material. Applying Rorty, historical reconstructions inquire into the past life-forms different from our own. Thus, the task becomes to chart past events and actions as they really happened and were taken − objectively. Historical reconstructions could distinguish necessities from historical contingencies (Rorty 1998, 248−249). The purpose of historical reconstruction is to keep rational reconstruction truthful (cf. Williams 2002). In the practice of historiography, well studied microhistories have the function of keeping macrohistories honest.

The Naturalistic Challenge to Objectivity

Nietzsche noted that "rational reconstructions" too easily fall into the trap of teleological beliefs of progress, as if the present day was always the highpoint of history, THE viewpoint. Hence the importance of Rorty's "historical reconstructions": in the scale of subjectivity and objectivity it is the historical descriptions and explanations that are closer to objectivity, albeit both types of reconstruction involve interpretation. The pragmatically posed epistemological question is: How to make the interpretation as objective as possible?

When seeking epistemic objectivity, historiography among other human and social sciences also needs to answer to the challenge presented by scientific naturalism. Objectivity is usually, if at all, contributed to the causal or law-like explanations provided by the natural sciences, which exclude normative and interpretive phenomena such as actions, intentions and decisions, and normative and interpretive items such as reasons, meanings and values. But a historical reconstruction is not explanatory nor understandable without them.

Does this mean that historical knowledge is deprived of objectivity? It has been suggested that scientific naturalism is, indeed, committed to doctrines that leave normativity out. Ontologically, the world including its past consists, fundamentally, only of causal fats that only "successful scientific explanations" can reveal. Methodologically, other "alleged forms of knowledge [...] or understanding are either illegitimate or are reducible to scientific knowledge or understanding" (De Caro & Macarthur 2010,4). This excludes history.

Philosophers of history have tried to overcome this barrier by imposing covering laws to history. Others have tried to comprehend history as a value-free enterprise and historical selection of facts as purely causal, based on "causal importance" alone (see Van der Dussen & Rubinoff 1991). The interpretive and hence normative mode of historical inquiry, however, has left the accounts far from the requirements of scientific naturalism.

A Tentative Response to the Challenge 2

Rorty tried to bridge the seeming gap between naturalism and normativity with his notion of "vocabularies" (Rorty 1989). Due to his conception's antirealist and relativist problems, it may be more plausible and more fruitful to start form naturalism per se. As opposed to scientific naturalism, the notion of liberal naturalism does not exclude the normatively and historiographically relevant phenomena such as reasons and values (see De Caro & Voltolini 2010). In a pragmatist vein, liberal naturalism modifies the idea of naturalism to incorporate normativity. In its varies forms, liberal naturalism includes the completely natural way of being which in humans' case includes values and other historically and socially malleable norms governing them.

Liberal naturalism is thereby broader than scientific naturalism. It acknowledge the limitations set by laws of nature and the rest of the physical world, while stressing the importance of other forms of understanding than the strictly scientific ones, such as "conceptual analysis, imaginative speculation, or introspection" (ibid.). A look at some actual practices of the natural sciences shows that other forms of knowledge are, indeed, part of the scientific method itself, of which is are an example "conjectures" in Popper's fallibilism (Popper 1992).

The epistemological narrowness of scientific naturalism comes into view through the plurality of different successful epistemic practices, for example the best journalism, historiography and sociology on the planet. As for ontological commitments, the liberal naturalist can remain scientific. It is not necessary, for her, to argue philosophically for the irreducibility of such phenomena as reasons, intentions or values to biology or physics, albeit some liberal naturalists find the endeavor worthwhile (see Papineau 1993). It may, even with history, suffice it to say that normativity is an empirical fact of natural human life (cf. Putnam 2002).

If historiography is to seek understanding of the past, its explanations must answer questions such as "why?".

A Tentative Methodological Response

The historian pursuing objective facts and − eventually − a truthful account of past events and actions is not an objectivist looking for covering laws, nor a relativist serving an a priori interest or a culturally fixed goal (cf. Pickering 1994). The natural scientist must take her research through the "mangle" of the material world, whereas the historian with her conceptual and social practices − in her own practice and her object of study − faces the evidence of a possibly very different kind of conceptual and social practices. The question then is, what kind of explanatory reasoning is required for objective interpretation and selection of historical facts.

Evidence − such as historical documents, archeological findings and anthropological knowledge − is to be analyzed, selected and interpreted to synthesize the relevant facts into a historical narrative. Individual and separate facts do not count as knowledge. They are simply "facts" or "truths", but the goal is truthfulness of the entire historical report (Williams 2002). In order to get from facts or truths to truthfulness, the historian must practice historical reasoning. It has been suggested, interestingly, that Peirce's notion of abduction may be employed in making evidence-based statements that refer to the past (Van der Dussen 1991). Allegdly, this would provide historiography with − broadly speaking − experimental and logical tools for inference.

The statements would be logical (although without following the rules of logic) due to the inferential logif of abduction, i.e. inference from evidence to the best possible explanation. Also, an historical account could be experimental in the sense that all of its statements about the past should cohere with the factual evidence.

If we accept that reasons (intentions) can be causes, the explanatory toolbox of historiography is expanded.

Pragmatic Objectivity: Naturalism with Normativity

Liberal naturalism can approve of the inclusion of reasons (motives, desires and beliefs etc.) of the historical actions by historical agents into the wider framework of causal reasoning (Haskell 1998; cf. Menzies 2010). For example, "abduction" as a method of reasoning may be thoroughly normative, but the same could be said about the "anti-normative" doctrines of scientific naturalism (Macarthur 2010). Since classical pragmatism, this endeavor has not been considered unsurpassable a problem for thinkers inclined to regard normativity as embedded in all human practices. If historiography as a normative epistemic practice is to be objective, it may have to rid itself both of objectivist scienticism and historicist relativism. With all their temptations, neither one can fulfill the philosophical, and especially pragmatist, dream of synthesizing naturalism and normativity. This lack of achievement would leave us with less knowledge about our past and of ourselves.