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THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL EXPLANATIONS

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I

ALTHOUGH the literature on the logic of historical enquiry is already vast and still growing, it continues to polarise overwhelmingly around a single disputed point—whether historical explanations have their own logic, or whether every successful explanation must conform to the same deductive model. Recent discussion, moreover, has shown an increasing element of agreement—there has been a marked trend away from accepting any strictly positivist view of the matter.¹ It will be argued here that both the traditional polarity and the recent trend in this debate have tended to be misleading. The positivists (it will be conceded) have been damagingly criticised. But their opponents (it will be suggested) have produced no satisfying alternative. They have tended instead to accept as proper historical explanations whatever has been offered by the historians themselves in the course of trying to explain the past. But a further type of analysis must be required (and will be attempted here) if some account is to be given of the status, and not merely the function, of the language in which these explanations are offered. Such an analysis, moreover (it will finally be suggested) has implications of some importance in considering the appropriate strategy for historical enquiries.²

¹Recent anti-positivist discussions: Carey B. Joyst and Nicholas Rescher, 'The Problem of Uniqueness in History', *History and Theory*, I (1961), pp. 150-162; Alan Donagan, 'Historical Explanation: The Popper-Hempel Theory Re-considered', *History and Theory*, IV (1964), pp. 3-26. Recent attempts to provide a logic of historical explanation independent of positivist assumptions: W. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford, 1957)—attacks even the attenuated positivism of P. Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Oxford, 1952); W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London, 1964)—plea for focus on special function of explanations in history.

²Two earlier versions of this paper were read at research seminars in Cambridge

II

There is a sense, of course, in which the positivists' attempt to assimilate historical to scientific explanation must be correct. To insist on the uniqueness of every idea or event could make it impossible to explain anything. Historians undoubtedly make use of abstract explanatory hypotheses, in the form of general propositions, which they then attempt, like the scientist, to test and substantiate (or at least falsify) by further research. The positivists' central assumption, however, that to give any explanation must in effect be to look for uniformities, such that individual cases become instances of some known general rule,¹ is equally certainly open to damaging objections from the practising historian's point of view. It wears the rather *a priori* air of an attempt to vindicate the necessary uniformity of all scientific procedures rather than the air of an empirical enquiry into the historian's craft. It assumes a necessary uniformity of relationship between antecedents and event, and so ignores the conditional form of many of the explanations given even in the natural sciences.² It seems inappropriate in any case that the historian should be asked to work with a logic of explanation interchangeable with prediction. The enterprise seems excluded by the nature of the data with which the historian has to work. Explanations of the type that state individual instances of 'covering laws'³ are established by the exact repetition of the given situation. But the student of past events can never be in a position to provide such experiments. It also seems false to the historian's characteristic view of his own activity. The aim in establishing historical generalisations seems not to be the statement of general laws but rather the illumination of particular facts or events. The result of an historical investigation is not usually a statement about observed frequencies, but rather a highly specialised account of an individual situation.

This line of attack on the positivists' assumptions has been mounted not so much by their traditional enemies, the idealist philosophers, whose emphasis on the impossibility of classification has tended to make their views about historical explanation difficult to discuss,

University. I have benefited very greatly from the guidance and criticisms of Dr John Burrow, Mr Peter Laslett, and especially Mr John Dunn, who will shortly be publishing a partly similar argument.

¹Classic formulation by C. G. Hempel, 'The Function of General Laws in History', *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXIX (1942), pp. 35-48. See also K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, 2 vols., 1945), II, pp. 248-252 and 342-3.

²On the 'context bound' character of historical explanations see Michael Scriven, 'Truisms as the Grounds for Historical Explanations', in P. Gardiner (Ed.), *Theories of History* (Glencoe, 1959), p. 450. See also Gardiner on 'contextual reference' in *Historical Explanation*, cited by Dray, p. 20.

³Terminology is Dray's suggestion, p. 1.

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but rather by the so-called 'reactionist' philosophers of history.¹ The characteristic of 'reactionist' discussion has been to focus attention less on the status and more on the allegedly special function of explanations in historical discourse. The trend in the recent literature has thus been away from analysing what it *must* be that historians are doing when they offer explanations, and towards a description of the procedures actually adopted by historians in the course of trying to explain things. It has become the fashion to point out as a paradox of positivism that 'few of the innumerable explanations found in the writing of historians appear to accord with it'.² 'The right way of tackling the question', it is suggested instead, must be 'to begin by examining the steps historians actually take when they set out to elucidate an historical event or set of events'.³ Characteristically the 'reactionists' attack the 'persistent neglect of the pragmatic aspect of explanations in history',⁴ the 'gross misunderstanding' which is said to result from restricting the discussion merely to 'the strength of historical explanations from the logical standpoint'.⁵ Characteristically they insist instead on following the 'criteria of "giving an explanation"' accepted and acceptable in historical studies',⁶ and on analysing the 'context' within which historical explanations occur, the 'functions which they are intended to fulfil'.⁷

This form of anti-positivism has undoubtedly done much to dispose of the notion that explanatory procedures must be uniform to be valid. It is difficult, however, to feel at all convinced by the conclusions reached at this now fashionable stage of discussions about the philosophy of history. It is not clear that anything like a satisfactory alternative account of the status of historical explanations has been provided. The satisfaction offered by the strictly positivist account was that by its provision of a paradigm to which all explanations had to conform it proposed a test for the status of any alleged explanation that might be offered. It seems a critical weakness of the 'reactionist' case that a purely pragmatic investigation of the functions of explanation in historical discourse has now come to usurp the place of any such analytical investigation of their philosophical standing. The argument is uncompleted. The two 'sides',

¹Usefully so labelled by Maurice Mandelbaum, 'Historical Explanation: The Problem of "Covering Laws"', *History and Theory*, I (1961) pp. 229-242, to distinguish analysis in conformity with historians' statements from typically Idealist analysis of the alleged uniqueness of historical events.

²Donagan, p. 14.

³W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (London, 1951), p. 23.

⁴Gallie, p. 107.

⁵Ibid., p. 123.

⁶Dray, p. 21.

⁷Gallie, p. 107.

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to put the matter at its crudest, do not seem to have been discussing the same point. The positivists' assimilation of historical to causal explanation¹ was no doubt an inappropriately rigorous test of philosophical standing. But the 'reactionists' restriction of the analysis to what historians actually do seems to ignore the question of philosophical standing altogether. If it is agreed, however, that historical explanations cannot function as laws, it seems all the more necessary to establish tests—different, perhaps more elaborate tests—by which to distinguish successful from partial or implausible historical explanations. This is not intended to re-introduce some covert positivism into the argument. It is not implied that the historian is obliged to aim at some particular philosophical manner. But it still seems essential to be able to decide whether the types of explanation typically offered in historical discourse do in fact perform successfully the functions assigned to them—whether they really succeed in removing doubts about possible relations between given ideas or events in the past, whether they do seem to result in unequivocal understanding of the issues being thus connected together.

III

It will be convenient to begin by following the abstract accounts of historians' explanatory procedures which 'reactionist' philosophers of history have typically concentrated on supplying. They have agreed in seeing that the historians' criteria for providing an explanation are of a logically much more looselimb'd character than the positivists had tried to impose. The criteria seem to be based less on any strict concept of causality than on a wider and less formal set of notions concerned with analysing together what are judged to be the most outstanding or influential features of a given historical situation. The term 'cause' is thus said to have, for the historian, 'its own peculiar logic'.² It stands merely for the fact that an historian can 'judge in a particular case that there was a necessary connection between the event and the circumstances cited to explain it'.³ The historian's approach is 'to look for certain dominant concepts or leading ideas by which to illuminate his facts'.⁴ His results are stated in the form of 'inner connections' traced between ideas or events, to suggest not a causal relation but just that they 'belong together in a specially intimate way'.⁵ It is indeed the 'peculiarity of historical

¹The aim of Popper's original discussion in *Logik der Forschung* (1934) was to propose a general theory of explanation. See the translation, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1959), pp. 59-60.

²Dray, p. 112.

³Ibid., p. 158.

⁴Walsh, p. 62.

⁵Ibid., p. 23.

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thinking' to be able to establish in this way the 'inner connections between certain historical events'.¹ The historian's typical 'significant narrative' is thus said to be built up as the description of a pattern of influences bearing on an idea or event and constituting of itself an explanation.²

The 'reactionist' analysis undoubtedly seems to trace closely the procedures actually followed by historians. Historians of ideas, for example, are seldom found to ask what *caused* a poet or a philosopher or a composer to elaborate his most characteristic ideas. But they very often ask about the influences at work on his style, and assume that it may be possible to help explain his characteristic ideas in terms of those influences. Historians of events, similarly, are seldom found to ask about 'the cause' of a war or revolution. They tend to ask instead about 'the various causes' at work in the society which led to such a result, and assume that to offer a description of such allegedly 'influential' features will be in great measure to supply an explanation of the subsequent events. A group of historians who have self-consciously examined this issue have even been led to conclude that the concept of causation in historical analysis is best regarded 'as a convenient figure of speech, describing motives, influences, forces and other antecedent interrelations not fully understood'.³

There seems to be a lacuna, however, in the 'reactionist' argument that such a procedure will necessarily result in uniformly successful explanations. The function of isolating what are thought to be leading influences and tracing out connections in terms of them is certainly clear enough: it seems a good means of abridging the enormous range of facts with which an historian or social scientist is typically confronted. The philosophical status of this activity, however, is by no means so self-evidently clear: the problems thus raised form the subject of the ensuing analysis.

IV

1. The historical method which the 'reactionists' describe undoubtedly commands a measure of intuitive assent. There seems to be no intellectual problem about the claim to have discovered that event E_1 influenced E_2 , nor any problem about the similar claim of, say, historical personage P_2 that he had been influenced by P_1 . There seems no doubt that in each case the propositions help to explain the

¹Ibid., pp. 23-4. See also Dray's full-scale attempt (Ch. V) to supply abstract accounts of historians' actual procedures.

²Walsh has defended this idea in 'Plain' and 'Significant' Narrative in History', *Journal of Philosophy*, LV (1958), pp. 479-484.

³'Theory and Practice in Historical Studies', Bulletin no. 54 of the American Social Science Research Council, p. 110, cited in Dray, p. 89. For a similar view see Gallie, p. 113.

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idea or event concerned. The logical form of such propositions is none the less somewhat peculiar. The inner connection between two ideas or events, such that one is said to have influenced the other, has to be shown on the one hand to be sufficiently close to be separable from chance. The historian is expected to provide a ranking of the more or less influential features of a situation—to give 'a list of causes' 'whose relative importance it is his duty to assign'¹—and not merely to present random collections of facts which might seem to bear on it. The connection has to be sufficiently loose-limbed on the other hand to be separable from causality. The historian is not expected to provide a totally determined account of any situation, but to allow both that his assessment of the influences at work could always be disputed by the interpretation of another historian, and that his own explanation could always in principle be upset by the discovery of new facts. It seems, then, to be intended to point out something at once rather obvious and yet curiously difficult to grasp—that one idea or event is in some sense dependent on another yet not entirely dependent; and that they are thus alike yet not exactly alike.

2 : 1. An analysis of the procedures followed by historians in speaking of such influences reveals moreover that the concept, as an explanatory hypothesis, is habitually regarded as sufficiently loose to cover two different and logically separate modes of historical investigation. It has even been assumed, in the course of the general retreat from positivism, that the concept of influence may represent the sole explanatory hypothesis with which the historian needs to work,² and that its usage may legitimately be extended to provide explanations of any type of historical relationship. It seems essential, then, to discriminate at the outset between these various possible usages, and to establish whether the concept does remain of equal validity in each case as a mode of explanation.

2 : 2. In one usage the historian is typically in the position of claiming to have discovered by his own investigation an inner relationship between two historical facts (ideas or events) such that he claims to have demonstrated the influence of the one, P_1 , on the other, P_2 . In the other usage, however, the historian may only claim to be corroborating some inner relationship already thought to be established by independent testimony. In this case the historian is in the position of agreeing that when, say, historical personage P_2 himself

¹W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Eng., 1963), p. 10.

²E.g., Walsh, *Introduction*, p. 63, remarks, 'I say nothing about the origin of the ideas on which the historian seizes; it is enough for me that those ideas were influential at the time of which he writes'.

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remarked that he was influenced by personage P_1 , this was to provide testimony on which an investigator may rely. In each case the relationship between the facts is said to be given and established by the concept of influence. The usages, none the less, are obviously dissimilar, and seem to require separate analysis.

3 : 1. The second case, however (to consider it first) does seem simple: it seems to provide evidence of an inner connection at its least equivocal form. If historical personage P_2 points out or admits the influence on him of P_1 , and if the rest of the evidence about P_1 makes this seem plausible, it looks as if we may quite fairly accept the alleged influence as evidence. Historians, of course, habitually do accept such admissions. The political biographer notes, say, that Bismarck (correctly, in his view) saw reflected in his own policies the 'guiding principle' of Frederick the Great;¹ the historian of philosophy, that the utilitarians (again correctly, in his view) admitted their large debt to the influence of Hume;² the historian of literature that Henry James (again correctly, in his view) recognised in his own work the 'clear influence' of Jane Austen.³

3 : 2. The danger of this usage, however, lies in the confusions that may arise over what it is that the historian has properly accepted. He has accepted in each case that P_2 claims to have been influenced by P_1 . But he has not necessarily accepted that the claim is in any sense true. It is true, of course, that if the historian is concerned with personage P_2 he will undoubtedly regard his claim to have been influenced by P_1 as testimony to be seriously considered. The fact that P_2 alleged this relationship and believed in it may well have had an important effect on his outlook and behaviour, and become a component of his ideas and attitudes. It is difficult, however, to see how this could be regarded as establishing any sort of historical relationship between P_1 and P_2 . It provides at most a clue to the intellectual biography of one of them. But in order to base any assertion about their intellectual relations on this type of testimony it would still be necessary not only to have a theory about why P_2 admitted to the influence of P_1 , but to attempt proof of it in terms of saying that the admission could only have been made by P_2 because he believed it, correctly, to be true.

3 : 3. It will be in the nature of the evidence, however, that this enterprise will be excluded. A number of different theories about the testimony of P_2 can be constructed with equal plausibility, and there cannot be any procedure by which to choose between them. We might wish to be completely (and, one might think, properly)

¹A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck, The Man and the Statesman* (London, 1955), p. 35.

²J. Plamenatz, *The English Utilitarians* (London, 1949), pp. 41-2 and 66-7.

³F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London, 1962 Edn.), pp. 142-3.

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sceptical, and to point out that it has yet to be established that P_2 genuinely had any contacts with the source by which he claimed to be influenced. We might base a good theory (in principle, or indeed for any of the examples cited) on the assumption that P_2 was lying about his intellectual connections. He might have heard about P_1 's views from a number of intermediate sources. He might none the less want to cite P_1 alone—perhaps if this enabled him to boast of rapport with a greater or more fashionable authority. He might alternatively want to cite P_1 in the hope of deceiving people—perhaps if this meant that he could disguise other more relevant but less interesting sources for his opinions, or some dangerous ideological commitment which he might hope to neutralise by the incantation of P_1 's name.

3 : 4. When testimony about inner historical connections is supplied by the subjects themselves we seem to pass beyond the capacity of the historian to make convincing use of the evidence in any one explanatory hypothesis. There seems to be no procedure available for converting testimony about intellectual relationships into evidence about the relationships themselves. The best result of this type of investigation could only be the guess that the available testimony was not obviously false. The most likely result would be to give an explanation which was arbitrary and probably incorrect.

4 : 1. It is the other usage, however, which is undoubtedly found more widely and perhaps more convincingly in the explanations offered by historians. The historian claims to have discovered and established by his own investigation an inner connection between P_1 and P_2 such that he feels able to assert (to put the point in its most usual form) that it must have been by P_1 that P_2 was influenced. It certainly seems of surpassing importance to be able to state in such cases that the explanation of some given historical event must lie in its relation with some particular antecedent influence, or that certain features of a statesman's or philosopher's or artist's approach to a given problem can be explained by invoking the idea of an influence from some earlier figure engaged on a similar task. This usage is of course very familiar in the works of historians. The historian of events will in this case typically assert, say, that we may help explain the English¹ (or the French,² or the Russian³) Revolution by considering the influence of the intellectuals. The historian of ideas will similarly assert, say (over the short run), that we may explain the structure of Locke's political philosophy by considering

¹E.g., Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965).

²E.g., Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la révolution française, 1715-1787* (Paris, 1933).

³E.g., E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (London, 3 vols., 1950-53), Vol. I, Part I.

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the influence of Hobbes,¹ or even (over an immensely long run) that we may trace the influence of Aristotle on Hegel, or of Plato on ourselves.²

4 : 2. All such propositions reduce to the same abstract form. Such a re-statement, moreover, will make clear the type of investigation needed for the validity of such explanations to be established. To identify the one idea or event P_1 as the necessary source for an influence said to be observed in a later idea or event P_2 presupposes first the isolation and investigation of P_1 's most characteristic features. The judgment that the influence on P_2 must undoubtedly have derived from P_1 cannot otherwise be made without risk of confusion with other possible antecedent ideas or events (P_3 , P_4 , P_5 , . . . P_n) similar to P_1 . The judgment that P_1 influenced P_2 seems in effect to entail that we see repeated in P_2 the elements which also give to P_1 its characteristic form.

4 : 3. The usage is subject, however, in the first place to large practical limitations. The historian's documentary raw materials are usually incomplete, sometimes systematically misleading, and hence in many cases incapable of sustaining any one convincing explanatory hypothesis. Consider the example of an historian wishing to suggest some relationship between two men engaged on the same intellectual task. He might wish to suggest that P_1 influenced P_2 by increasing his general awareness of the issues at stake. But he might wish alternatively to suggest that P_2 had been influenced by P_1 if both had been trying to solve the same intellectual puzzle and if P_1 's efforts had in some way helped P_2 towards substituting correct information for some earlier misconceptions. The second type of claim will in practice be impossible to substantiate. The evidence about intellectual relationships arising out of attempts to solve puzzles is usually impossible for the historian to recover, and tends in any case to be of the systematically misleading kind. The point is perhaps of special importance in establishing the limits of plausible explanation in subjects like the history of science. A writer, for example, on some long-standing scientific puzzle who remained unable to solve it might none the less have departed completely from the methods tried in earlier attempts. All the evidence, however, would tend to assimilate his work to the history of the earlier failures. A writer who solved some such puzzle, on the other hand, would leave evidence only about his correction of earlier misconceptions. The historian might still wish to suggest that there were close intellectual links with earlier efforts. But all the evidence

¹E.g., C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962), p. 270.

²Popper, *The Open Society*, II, pp. 20-24.

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would tend to suggest that no such links could ever have existed.

4 : 4. Even in the case of complex historical relationships, however (of the type not easily repeatable or reducible to puzzles), the historian's explanatory concepts of influence and inner connectedness are open to decisive criticism. The proposition that P_2 was influenced by P_1 , based on corroborating their characteristics, cannot in principle explain P_2 with any degree of proof. It will always remain open to the sceptic, confronted with such an explanation, to claim that the correlations are random, that the features of P_1 have been repeated in P_2 by chance, that no necessary inner connection has been demonstrated at all.

4 : 5. There is always a purely practical value to be gained from adopting the sceptic's point of view. There is a tendency in all historical discourse for coincidences to be raised to the level of positive connections at any point where explanations seem hard to find. When it is known that particular events did happen, or that particular ideas were cherished, it is always easy to think of many possible connections to explain them. The sceptic's standpoint, however, is also grounded on more serious methodological doubts. It is difficult to make any correlation between P_1 and P_2 seem strong. They represent only two items out of an aggregate which is not merely immensely large, but in which it is excluded (it has been seen) that the historian could ever be in a position to improve the standing of his claims by performing any of the repeated or controlled experiments which a scientist in similar difficulties might typically undertake.

4 : 6(i). The historian's typical lines of defence against such scepticism seem unconvincing. The first defence lies in bringing more evidence to bear. Challenged in his claim, say, that Locke was influenced by Hobbes, the historian typically tries to build up a more and more detailed picture of his case. As well as trying to show that the doctrines most characteristic of Hobbes are also found in the writings of Locke, he may try to provide something like independent testimony—to show, perhaps, that Locke owned Hobbes's works and was known to have read them; and perhaps that Locke often wrote or was known to have spoken specifically about Hobbes. The counter-argument typically culminates in effect with an appeal to the type of probabilistic world which we inhabit. To refuse to be convinced, it is assumed, would itself be to adopt a perverse and unconvincing point of view.

A position in argument which relies on treating all opposition as perverse scarcely commands any immediate measure of assent. It seems certain nevertheless that the historian will be bound to convince the sceptic in the end. He might end up—to take an example of the extreme case—by showing the sceptic that every idea and

attitude found in Locke's writings could also be found, expressed in identical language, in the works of Hobbes. But this would not in fact complete the case. Even if the claim were true (and in this example it is of course very obviously false—as indeed would be every one of the intermediate stages of suggested proof) there remains a paradox. For the result cannot possibly be what the historian, in invoking the concept of influence, had intended to point out. The whole purpose of using the concept seems to be that the historian wishes to show how an attitude or situation may be grounded rather than caused, how an influence may be genuine yet covert or partial. The capacity to make the concepts of influence and inner connectedness meaningful must entail the capacity to distinguish them from examples of mere adoption or paraphrase. But the more the historian has to insist on the inevitability of an event or the reasons why a writer could not have performed other than as he did, the less does this suggest any place for the special concepts which historians use: the more it seems to be to assert a simple causal relation.

4 : 6(ii). The historian's best defence against the sceptic is thus to revert to his commonsense position. There must at least come a *point* (it seems sensible to insist) at which it would become arbitrary not to concede that the character of idea or event P_2 might be best explained by describing the influence of P_1 . But this is neither a simple nor self-evident claim. It depends for its persuasive force on an implied set of assumptions about proper procedures in historical explanation. These further assumptions remain unstated, but they can be shown to be entailed, and to be arbitrary where they are not simply false.

The commonsense view depends first on assuming that there need be no difficulty in principle about stating what are the most characteristic features or doctrines of idea or event P_1 . This is commonly regarded as quite uncontroversial, but there is an obvious though apparently elusive sense in which such an assumption is bound to be false. To see historical relationships in terms of repeated patterns of thought or action is to imply not merely that thinking or acting are uniformly purposive, but that they do characteristically result in patterns. There is thus a very strong predisposition, particularly evident in histories of thought, to ignore the difficulties about proper emphasis and tone which must arise in making any sort of paraphrase of a work, and to assume instead that its author must have had some doctrine, or a 'message', which can be readily abstracted and more simply put. There is even a quite metaphysical tendency to suppose that any apparent contradictions in a writer's doctrines (making paraphrase difficult) cannot be real contra-

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dictions but must have some alternative explanation.¹ The historian's interpretation may thus be based not merely on extracting but even on constructing doctrines more abstract than any which the writer in question might seem to have held, in order to dispose of inconsistencies in his opinions which would otherwise remain.

This whole enterprise (quite apart from outrageously ignoring the principle of Occam's razor) seems false to all our experience of what it is like either to be a part of some situation or to try thinking out a problem. They do not seem to be activities which either form or can be reduced to discernible patterns. They seem more like a series of attempts, often varying in success at different times, to grope towards a number of hopefully compatible actions or judgments. It is a commonplace, for example, in our attempts to think out problems that we spill over the limits of our intelligence and get confused; we attempt syntheses of our views which may reveal disorders as easily as doctrines; we change our minds over the same issue in different moods and at different times. It is a commonplace, however, of which the commonsense notion of thinking or acting as the elaborating of doctrines or set principles can take no account.

The commonsense view further has to depend on assuming that it must be from his leading doctrines that the major influences of an historical figure will derive. Again this is commonly regarded as uncontentious, and again the assumption is particularly critical in histories of thought, political, philosophical, scientific. But there can be nothing necessary about the assumption that it must be from the major contours of a writer's thought that his influence will derive. The assumption itself requires a further defence and explanation which it seems never to receive. For it must be at least equally plausible to suggest that a writer's influence could derive from a chance remark, or even a misunderstanding of a remark, being taken up and developed. To recognise this possibility, however, is in effect to concede that the attempt to trace influences must be irreducibly arbitrary. If we cannot assume that the alleged influence must derive from a leading doctrine, we shall have to concede that it might derive from any point whatever. The evidence required to supply any single convincing explanatory account is thus impossible to recover. The available evidence about an apparently close set of intellectual links might always be misleading; the irrecoverable evidence about apparently chance connections might always be the crucial point.

¹E.g., Macpherson's comment on his own method of dealing with internal contradictions in a philosopher's work. They can be 'examined and used as clues to the thinker's implicit assumptions; so treated, the contradictions pointed to a fuller understanding of the whole theory'. (Preface.)

4 : 7. The commonsense view of historical relationships entails assumptions which must make explanations in this mode at best not evidently convincing and often evidently false.¹ It is not an enterprise capable of resulting in successful explanations—capable, that is, of resulting in the removal of blockages to the understanding of an issue. The historian is in effect committed irreducibly to the language of betting and guessing. There seems to be no decisive procedure by which the inner connections between ideas or events can be traced out without involving either the covert use of causal language or being liable to the charge of elevating coincidences into positive connections.

5 : 1. It is open to the historian to restore the usefulness of his explanatory concepts by re-formulating, in a looser form, the types of relationship which they are taken to be capable of explaining. The suggestion (4 : 2) that to establish the influence of P_1 must be to trace in P_2 the most characteristic features of P_1 might be abandoned as excessively strict. It might be suggested instead that the relation between P_1 and P_2 is one of vague hints, echoes, reminiscences, but nothing more. The historian of events might thus refuse to feel committed to saying that the views of some intellectuals may have helped to *cause* some revolution. He might only wish to suggest the influence of different *kinds* of view on certain *degrees* of political commitment. The historian of ideas, similarly, might not be discouraged in his claim, say, that Hobbes influenced Locke by the discovery that Locke scarcely read, seldom cited but often attacked Hobbes's works. He might only wish to suggest a connection between their general outlook or to suggest the influence merely of a certain *ambience*.²

5 : 2. This alternative usage, however, is simply without content. The strict formulation at least had the merit of being able to insist specifically on P_1 as the necessary source for the influence on P_2 . The alternative, looser formulation makes it impossible to establish any such necessary connections. It is conceded in this case that the elements of resemblance between P_1 and P_2 are less than the elements which give either its characteristic form. But this is to concede in effect that such elements are held in common in a number of historical situations $P_3, P_4, P_5, \dots, P_n$. It is thus made impossible, or at least entirely arbitrary, to claim that P_1 must necessarily be the source for the alleged influence on P_2 . If the suggestion is now made,

¹Though claims of 'influence' can of course be falsified in a commonsense manner—e.g., the claim that P_1 influenced P_2 is falsified when it is shown that P_2 lived earlier.

²E.g., the view of Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953) that although not closely familiar with his works (p. 211) Locke 'followed the lead given by Hobbes' (p. 221).

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for example, that it was Hobbes who influenced Locke, it becomes quite unhistorical. There can be no sufficient reason for pointing to Hobbes's work—rather than to a large number of similar doctrines—as the necessary source for the influence on Locke. All that can be unarguably demonstrated on this formulation is something that the historian must already have known: that similar situations or interests tend to presuppose similar language or directions of effort, and that apparent but perhaps quite illusory historical patterns will tend in consequence to arise.

5 : 3. The claim to have discovered an influence of P_1 on P_2 becomes on this formulation a remark neither about P_1 nor P_2 but about the observer himself. The observer in effect asserts that in studying P_2 he is sometimes *reminded* of P_1 . This may, however, represent nothing more interesting than an implied confession of ignorance. It might be that if the observer had also studied the ideas or events P_3 , P_4 , P_5 , . . . P_n some of them would have reminded him of P_1 even more strongly. It is in any case clear that on this formulation it will be impossible to assign any unambiguous meaning to the concepts of influence and inner connectedness as explanatory hypotheses, short of a complete knowledge about all of the relevant items in the aggregate of historical information.

V

The historian's commonsense explanatory concepts seem too ambiguous, however formulated, to result in successful explanations. Although the historian may still feel intuitively able to trace some influences and inner connections between ideas and events, the status of such claims can be no higher than a bet or guess. Two further implications follow from this conclusion, both of some relevance to the practising historian. Many of the pictures typically built up by historians in the course of trying to explain things must tend to be actively misleading. The assumption that successful explanations can be constructed out of tracing influences has tended to result in histories both of ideas and events written merely in terms of the biographies and alleged impact of a conventional canon of leading historical figures. The appropriate perspective for explaining the politics of an age is thus taken to be the biography of its leading statesman; for explaining the political or scientific or philosophical thinking of an age it is taken to be the linked analysis of the most important and influential texts. The approach is misleading not only for the obviously arguable reason that to use biography as a methodological category is naive or at least partial without some consideration also of more general social, economic and ideological conditions; it is also misleading simply because it involves an

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identifiable mistake. The mistake lies in supposing that the history of an idea or event can ever be adequately written in terms of its leading actors. Yet the point is systematically ignored by all social, political and intellectual histories which explain by linking together a conventional canon of either persons or texts. Consider again the paradigm case of an intellectual history based on linking figures together—say from Hobbes to Locke—on the assumption that all of them were concerned with the same theme.¹ This theme is then typically described as the *leading preoccupation of political theorists* in that age. It is then typically made to serve as the explanation of the intellectual preoccupations of any one of the figures described.² All that has been suggested, however, is that this theme was the *pre-occupation of the leading theorists*. As a work of exegesis this might be illuminating, but as a history it will be systematically misleading. The level of abstraction of the history is dictated by the small number of writers included, but the grounds for their inclusion are not their typicality of the age but their intellectual pre-eminence. It seems a major paradox in much currently fashionable historical writing that such histories can attain the status of standard works while all the research required even to make them histories of anything is still left undone. For it simply cannot be characteristic of any activity in history that it is everywhere carried on at the level of abstraction reached by its most systematic exponents.³ If we wish to know about the history of an activity—if we wish to know, say, what the qualities and objects of political thinking were *mainly like* in the seventeenth century—the one thing we may be sure of is that they were not *like* the works of Hobbes and Locke, not *like* the most systematic writers. The mistake lies in failing to concede that the qualities of intelligence and presentation which make a writer the best illustration in a philosophical picture will make him in an historical picture the worst.

The analysis also implies a view about the appropriate strategy for historical enquiries. The historian wishes to gain assent for his appeals to similarities. His commonsense concepts, however, fail to provide such means of explanation without ambiguity. The appropriate strategy must then be not to begin by abstracting leading ideas or events, but rather by describing as fully as possible the complex and probably contradictory matrix within which the idea or event to be explained can be most meaningfully located. If it is not possible to

¹The theme of Macpherson's book: see *Possessive Individualism*, Preface.

²E.g., *Ibid.*, Ch. VI.

³For development of a similar point see J. G. A. Pocock, 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry', in P. Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society, Second Series* (Oxford, 1962), 183-202.

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claim that it was clearly the influence of P_1 which explains the form of P_2 , the only approach to an understanding of their possible relations must be to construct a complete account of the historical situation within which both P_1 and P_2 can be located and thus explained. The aim should not be to attempt to tighten up any further the categories of historical analysis, but rather to make them as wide and as inclusive as possible. The primary aim should not be to explain, but only in the fullest detail to describe.

The suggestion is unfashionable: it bears all the marks of the crudest perceptual theories about the historian's task. Just as we perceive the facts about the world around us, it is said, so the historian is concerned with the facts of the past. The theory is said to collapse when we consider what historians actually do: they seem not content to describe past facts; they also seek to explain them.¹ But the criticism itself is too crude. There is no good reason for supposing that to deny a primary place to explanations in history is to empty historical investigations either of specific direction or of intellectual content. There might always be good reasons in the first place for giving historical enquiries a particular focus quite apart from any attempt to supply explanations. We might want to have historical information in order to test some generalisation in social science, or as the means of trying to understand the arts or sciences bequeathed by some particular society. There is in any case no good reason for supposing that when the historian focuses on such descriptions there must be no place for explanations left. The assumption that the line between describing and explaining is rigidly demarcated is indeed a part of the strictest and most criticised form of positivism. It is a commonplace of the more advanced sciences that an explanation can be the result merely of establishing the most precise correlation between all possible variables. It is more than arguable that very precise and complete historical descriptions might stand of themselves as explanations in a similar way.²

The historian needs perhaps to consider more seriously the question of what it is that he may be capable of explaining without ambiguity. He does not seem to be capable of providing successful explanations by tracing out influences and inner connections outside a total historical context. He is clearly capable, however, of examining and describing the context itself in the greatest detail. A complete description, moreover, provides a perspective from which the elements which seem most significant can then be abstracted. This

¹Walsh, *Introduction*, p. 16.

²For development of this suggestion see P. H. Nowell-Smith, 'Are Historical Events Unique?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, LVII (1957), pp. 107-160.

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process may then result of itself in a successful appeal to similarities, and thence to an understanding of why the given historical situation was as it was and not otherwise. It is true that historical explanations attempted on this model would be bound to look much more provisional than is usual in the history books; it is true that an infinitely greater amount of historical research (especially of a statistical character, and of countless minor social and intellectual biographies) would be needed in order to provide them; it is also true that the type of research needed has in most areas of the discipline scarcely been begun. The procedure would however at least promise histories of real entities and activities rather than the linked abstractions which the philosophers of history seem currently content that the historians should regard as sufficient grounds for explanations. If the commonsense language of historical explanations is insufficiently rigorous, there seems at least to be a strong case for abandoning as misleading any explanatory model which aims so much at logical rigour, and for adopting instead a more descriptive, more inclusive, perhaps even much more metaphorical language for the whole business of trying to provide explanations of the past.

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