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On OBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTIVITY *and* RELATIVITY in the Writing of History

by

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IN the realisation of historical knowledge, just as in the case of Natural Science, there is interaction between the subject (investigator) and the object (a past reality or a natural phenomenon). Without the activity of the subject, no knowledge can come into being. The question is: what share has the subject in the creation of knowledge? If the *knowledge* is completely congruent with the *reality* it represents, i.e. independent of the subject, it is called objective. In this sense we refer to the *objectivity* of knowledge. If, on the other hand, the knowledge is not completely independent of the subject, i.e. if the subject, as it were, leaves an imprint of himself on the knowledge, then it is subjective and in this sense we talk of the *subjectivity* of knowledge.

In the case of the scientist who places his object in a laboratory test-tube and observes it there, the relativity of the subject can be completely eliminated by the experimental method. The object can be observed accurately and to the best advantage and general and essential knowledge in complete agreement with the reality of the natural phenomenon is achieved. The subject in this case is a medium, and is completely unconnected with the resulting knowledge. This type of scientific knowledge can therefore be completely objective.

The science of history presents a different picture. In order to be able to discuss the possibility of objective knowledge, we should first examine the nature of the object and subject and then discuss their relationship with each other.

Regarding the *object,* we know that the past is not completely expressed in documents, and this makes a complete knowledge of historical events an impossibility. Secondly, our access to the past is indirect: the document is our key to the past. The past cannot be placed in a test-tube and repeat its course in order that we may observe it directly. The realisation of historical knowledge depends upon the quantity and quality of the available documents. The intellectual life of the past is expressed in the document. The content of the document is coloured by the emotions, desires, partiality and prejudice of those who compile it. It expresses certain values, objectives, ideals and conceptions of a nation, church or party. These are facets of mental life that reflect the past.

As for the *subject,* this is always a person, i.e. a spiritual being having the same defects as the object of the science of history. These weaknesses consist in the fact that he is limited by his own personality, aptitude, character and qualities. He may be inclined to falsify, to seek sensation, to lie or to be careless. In this connection we may say that he is bound by his own personality. In the second place the subject is tied down by his social environment, i.e. his community, nation, church or party. He aspires to certain values, has certain ideals or a preference for the point of view of his own people. In this sense he is group-bound. In the third place the subject is tied to the time in which he lives. Unconsciously he is imbued with the views of his time. He is born into a spiritual climate and way of thinking, which we call *a philosophy of life* or world-view. This influences his attitude towards the reality within which he moves or with which he comes into contact. In this sense he is time-bound.

Thus we see that object and subject are linked by a common medium: the human mind. The object is not purely material as in the case of Natural Science. In the realm of the Science of History we have, as it were, one mind penetrating another. The

process of achieving knowledge is also totally different. In Natural Science the object is observed in a test-tube *outside* the subject: in the science of history the subject enters into the object, i.e. loses itself in the object. Object and subject become one, yet they must at the same time be separate if knowledge is to be attained. Through this fusion the past is mentally resurrected: the past takes on form by virtue of the fact that the subject re-lives it; it is re-awakened, and comes to life once more in a 'second now'. It is 'observed' by the subject who describes it and transforms it into ideas. The image of it that exists in the mind of the subject is conveyed to our minds. This image is not explained but *understood*. Natural Science explains its phenomena in terms of laws. Once the law has been formulated the phenomenon has been explained and the problem it posed has been solved. The science of history understands its object by reliving it. This mental activity is called the interpretation or the explanation of the meaning of historical phenomena.

There is obviously a possibility that, since the relation between subject and object is a relation between mind and mind, the mind of the subject may fuse so completely with that of the object as to make it almost impossible to distinguish them from each other. The subject may be prompted by his personal inclination to make a deliberately partial selection of documents or to transmit his own prejudice, carelessness and misrepresentation to the object. The fact that he is group-bound may cause him to identify his own concepts of value, his ideals and aspirations with corresponding values of the past. The fact that he is time-bound may cause him to use his own philosophy of life as the criterion for the evaluation of past events, without being conscious that he is doing so. Thus the historian's person, group or time may pervade the object. Naturally the complete truth about the past cannot be reached. The sort of synthesis that is achieved is neither purely objective, i.e. in agreement with reality, nor purely subjective, i.e. in agreement with the subject. The resulting knowledge, therefore, stems from both subject and object.

Is truly objective historical knowledge possible? We should be very pessimistic indeed if we were to answer that it is not. On the other hand, we should not be over-optimistic. Despite our most earnest attempts at achieving objectivity, historical knowledge, because of the nature of both object and subject, cannot be absolutely objective. In order to be able to express an opinion on objectivity we must first explain the various degrees of subjectivity that exist.

In the first place we have *avoidable* or eliminable subjectivity. When a historian approaches the past encumbered by a preconceived objective or party bias, he may be expected to select his documents to suit his point of view or his cause, in which case the resulting knowledge will be one-sided, false and subjective. He deliberately enslaves the past to his cause, i.e. he enlists it to promote his own interests or the interest of his group. His emotions come into play and his attitude is partisan. He finds in the past what he wishes to find there for the promotion of his own ideals. He represents the past as he thinks it should have been and not as it really was. His representation of historical reality cannot therefore be 'true'. We call this form of subjectivity avoidable, because it can be eliminated by strict self-discipline and the will to seek the truth.

Secondly we have *unavoidable* subjectivity or the subjectivity that is inherently characteristic of the human being and that cannot be completely eliminated. Whereas the subject or historian is able, by strict self-discipline, to free himself from his personal and group ties, it is virtually impossible for him to free himself from the influence of his time or from his adherence to a particular philosophy of life. A philosophy of life implies a particular point of view or position from which phenomena are observed and because of which they assume a certain colour and are interpreted in a certain way. Elements of a philosophy of life *unconsciously* pervade historical knowledge. This pervasion is not therefore altogether imputable to the historian. Relations or connected systems are involuntarily assessed in the light of the spiritual climate in which the subject finds himself at a specific moment. Because contemporaries move in the same medium, they themselves remain unaware of it. Posterity is able to discover the defects as a result of the distance that separates it from the original work. In the light of a new philosophy of life or changed spiritual climate, incongruities contained in the original work are easily perceptible. Distance lends perspective and makes one aware of the limitations of historical knowledge. The fact that the historical interest of the Afrikaner has centred in the Great Trek and Anglo-Boer War, illustrates what I mean.

No one, then, can give an absolutely objective account of historical reality. What, therefore, should be the historian's aim when he approaches the past, and what are the conditions with which he should comply in order to attain the highest degree of objectivity? In the first place he should show a sense of responsibility—towards the past as well as towards his own time. He should examine himself before he becomes involved with the past and should try to eliminate any element that might contribute towards the distortion and misrepresentation of past reality, i.e. he should be determined to reproduce the truth and no more or less than the truth. He should present the truth about the past as he finds it and not as he believes it ought to have been. He should be prepared at all times to subject his conclusions and judgments to the test of the indubitable facts of reality, i.e. he should aim at achieving critical insight into the past. That is his most important task. By showing respect both for

the past and for his own time, he can minimise his personal and group limitations. The truth of the facts that he relates therefore depends largely upon his own integrity.

The historian should be made aware of the limitations imposed upon him by the fact that he is time-bound, and should try to see both himself and his subject in perspective. He should see the past with which he has become familiar, from a new angle. Moreover, he should bear in mind that the values and criteria of the past differ from those of his own time. Therefore contemporary criteria of values should not be applied to the assessment or judgment of the values of the past. A false criterion gives rise to an unreliable image of the past. It is inevitable that the past should be approached from particular points of view. It is permissible for a historian to take a personal point of view provided that he is able under all circumstances to justify it scientifically. Man's mental faculties are limited and these limitations also handicap his knowledge of historical reality. The nature of knowledge of the past is such that it can never be represented with absolute objectivity. Man can only strive for objectivity and truth, which although unattainable can yet be approached.

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We have seen that Natural Science establishes general and essential knowledge that everywhere and always, i.e. irrespective of place and time, serves as a valid explanation of natural phenomena. This knowledge is absolutely objective and dissociated from the subject that produces it. In Historical Science the knowledge of historical phenomena is, to a certain extent, dependent upon the subject, who is bound to time and place. The knowledge that it tries to realise is unique, cannot be repeated and is non-recurrent. Whereas the knowledge of Natural Science is absolute, historical knowledge is *relative* and moreover dependent on perspective. This means, for example, that knowledge of a phenomenon that was valid a hundred years ago may not be valid today, or that the historical picture that is 'true' for an Afrikaans-speaking South African, may not be true for an English-speaking South African. What is the basis of this relativity of historical knowledge?

The relativity is connected with the manner in which historical knowledge is acquired. If Historiography consisted in the compiling of dates or the drawing up of chronicles, absolutely objective knowledge would be possible. These, in fact, are *all* that *can* be presented objectively. History, however, embraces more than chronicles, facts and dates. To illustrate, it is an absolute and objective truth that war broke out between Britain and the Transvaal Republic on 11th October, 1899; but the historian is not interested in this isolated fact. He wants to "understand" the war. The fact and the date tell him nothing. In order to understand the war, he must connect this isolated fact with the events that preceded and followed it. It is this that gives it meaning, and this is of primary importance to the historian. His object is to explain and interpret the war. To be able to do this, he must discover a significant sequence of events. This leads him to consider motives and causes, and thus to arrive at an image of the whole which is meaningful and makes sense. To interpret means to determine the connection. Without this there can be no reconstruction of the event. In evaluating an event, the historian forms an image of it. This image is a product of the mind.

The image is built up from description and interpretation, i.e. narration and evaluation. The basic facts remain unchanged but their interpretation is liable to change. The realisation of a historical image depends upon two things: the *available material* and the *problem* as posed. A historian writing immediately after the War about its causes, course and results, is limited in his interpretation by the amount of material available. Official documents are released by the archives only about fifty years after an event. It is obvious that if more material becomes available, a new representation of the War will differ from the image of it that was formed immediately after its conclusion. The new representation will be more complete, more exhaustive and more detailed. It will supersede the old image, which will no longer be valid.

With regard to the *problem as posed* to the past, this is inclined to differ with the course of time. Fifty years after an event, people may have achieved a higher standard of development, and a shift of interest may have taken place. They may be faced with new social and political problems propounding their own questions to the past. Every period poses its own kind of problem and the answer is also dependent upon the spiritual climate of the period. A historian writing immediately after the War may interpret it from a nationalistic point of view as an 'injustice' inflicted with 'fraud and cruelty' upon the Afrikaner, with the purpose of 'exterminating and destroying' him. Another historian of the same period may see it as a necessary war that had to be waged in order to overcome 'backwardness and suppression' with a view to establishing a united South Africa. After fifty years the same Afrikaans historian may see the war as a blessing in disguise and as a victory for nationalism. A second historian may possibly see it in the light of international politics and give a rational explanation of the causes. The War can also be approached from various other points of view, for example, the economic, the national, the imperial, etc., each of which will give rise to an individual portrayal of events.

As time passes, the points of view from which the past is seen are apt to change, so that the perspective is altered. Being aware of the results of an event makes it possible to see the event against a wider background, across a longer period of time and in a larger frame. Judgments are therefore influenced by life itself, by existing ideas and by the prevailing philosophy of life. The picture of the Reformation presented by modern historians differs completely from that presented by writers living during that period.

This means that even though the documents remain the same, they do not represent an immutable entity. They contain various aspects of reality and provide new answers to new questions. The object of History is therefore not a static reality, but one which changes as new documents are discovered or new problems develop. Since the subject, too, changes in the course of time, it is obvious that historical knowledge can never be absolute and general. It changes as a result of changed points of view and situations. The historical picture is constantly being filled in, new touches are added and new perspectives develop. Every generation revises and rewrites History. As early as the 19th century Goethe and Ranke remarked that World History should be rewritten periodically and Croce alleged that all true History was the History of the present. By that he meant that historical knowledge provides an answer to the problems that arise as time goes on. This does not mean, however, that everybody is his own historian as some Americans have alleged. We have seen that there are certain norms to which Historical Science should conform. What is undoubtedly true, however, is Huizing's conclusion that History is the form in which a culture considers its past.

Of its very nature, historical knowledge is preliminary and open to supplementation and correction. No historical picture is finally completed. This implies that a historian can also write the History of Historiography, i.e. can present a picture of how changing times have influenced the way in which the past has been viewed at various stages in the course of history. Today it is possible to write a History of the Historiography of the Great Trek. From all this we may infer that historical truth has many facets. The more aspects our research and interpretation elucidate in the course of time, the more nearly we approximate the truth. Since the knowledge of the past is to a certain extent affected by one's philosophy of life, by personal points of view and by the fact that we are place-bound, it cannot be determined finally but is incomplete and represents, to us an expression of Prof. P. Geyl, 'a never-ending discussion'. Since this incompleteness is of a piece with our human imperfection the limitations of historical knowledge need not make us sceptical.

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