

# Epistemic Respectability in History

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# Preface

This work investigates the epistemology of claims that are made within historical accounts in order to make sense of the past.

The broad plan is as follows. There is some scene-setting in chapter 1. Then in chapters 2 and 3, we explore how historians make sense of the past and what is achieved when they do so. In chapter 4, we set out the concept of epistemic respectability. In chapters 5 and 6, we move on to the application to historical claims of variants of long-established epistemological approaches.

Debts to other authors are recorded in the footnotes. There is also a great debt to the staff of the British Library and Cambridge University Library, to those who keep the world wide web running, and to those who create and maintain online repositories of academic papers. The author is entirely responsible for all defects in the work.

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*Preface*

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Work in epistemology is not normally treated with the caution that is appropriate when work has commercial significance, but the author declares that he has not received any funding and has no competing interests.

*Richard Baron*  
*Cambridge, 2019*



# References

References have been given in the form of chapter and section numbers, or chapter numbers and section titles, when doing so serves to identify passages precisely enough. This approach should be increasingly useful with the rise of the electronic text. Roman numerals have been converted to Arabic numerals when they merely give volume, chapter or section numbers, rather than being parts of titles or numbers of prefatory pages. Non-English words for “volume”, “part”, “chapter” and “edition” have been translated into English in footnotes except when they occur within titles of such components of works rather than as external markers.

Some of the books to which we refer exist in several editions. Material may appear, disappear or move around from one edition to the next. If a reference does not appear to point to the right place, the first step is to check the bibliography to see which edition to use.

Cross-references within the text are given by section number. A reference to a general line of argument is to the whole section. For example, a reference to section [2.1](#) is a reference not only to what comes immediately under the heading so numbered, but also to what comes under the headings numbered [2.1.1](#), [2.1.2](#) and so on. But when a

reference is to some specific point, the point will be found in the material that comes immediately under the heading. Thus if reference were made to a specific point in the form “section 2.5”, the point would be found before the heading numbered 2.5.1.

The PDF file of this work at <https://rbphilo.com/> is searchable, so there is no index. Some software will not find a phrase in a PDF file when it runs over two lines, or a word when it is hyphenated over two lines. But a search for the start of the phrase or word will usually suffice.

This study has grown out of some parts of Baron, *Confidence in Claims*, particularly chapter 5 and section 8.3 of that work. At various points we shall borrow material from that work. But when one borrows from oneself, specific citation at every turn would be excessive. Citation from that work is therefore limited to occasions on which additional material that might be useful here may be found there.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 The project

The project of this work is to propose an epistemic standard for certain historical claims. The claims in question are those that offer to make sense of events, states of affairs or ways of life. They may for example state that certain events led to other events or that in certain circumstances, certain developments were not surprising.

(We shall refer to claims rather than beliefs, and to the making of claims rather than the formation or holding of beliefs, because our concern is with an academic discipline that is generally practised within a community. Beliefs only matter when they become accessible to other historians as claims, whether explicit claims or implicit ones that other historians can identify if they think about the implications of what has been written.)

An epistemology sets out an understanding of good qualities of claims. It will typically state standards for them to be justified, and in turn for them to amount to knowledge. This can improve our understanding of concepts such as those of justification and knowledge. It can also discipline the making of claims. Those who make claims may be influenced by epistemic standards. And even if they are not, external commentators can apply such standards when they reflect on the claims made. Finally, an epistemology can improve our understanding of what is achieved when claims meet the relevant standards. When the claims fall within the scope of an academic discipline, this can improve our understanding of what the discipline achieves.

We shall set out why it is worth proposing an epistemic standard that is tailored to claims which offer to make sense of the past in sections 1.3 and 1.4. Broadly, the objective is to have a standard which can be of use in relation to claims that are perfectly sensible but may well be contested, as well as in relation to claims that are not likely to be contested. In order to achieve this, we shall propose a standard of epistemic respectability in place of the usual standard of justification.

## **1.2 The claims that interest us**

### **1.2.1 The contents of the claims**

The claims that interest us are not claims that merely report evidence, make obvious deductions from evidence or catalogue events, but claims that offer to make sense of the past. They will do so by setting out why certain events occurred, or why certain states of affairs or ways of life

prevailed, arose or died out. The claims may mention causes and effects under those labels, or they may set out how events, developments and conditions made other events, developments or conditions unsurprising. We shall use the phrase “the claims that interest us” specifically to refer to claims like this, even though claims of other sorts may also be of great interest to historians.

The claims may not even be spelt out. A historian may give detailed descriptions of people and events, and leave it up to her readers to make causal or other connections explicit in their own heads.<sup>1</sup> The epistemic standard we shall develop does apply to specific claims, so they must be identified. But it may be applied to implicit claims so long as we first make them explicit. One should proceed with caution when tempted to attribute implicit claims to historians. But if one seeks to judge the claim rather than its author, claims may be spelt out and judged without fear of unfairness.

We have already excluded from our range of interest claims that merely report evidence, make obvious deductions from evidence or catalogue events. We shall make one more exclusion, at the opposite extreme. We shall not try to formulate an epistemic standard for very large-scale claims about how a period of history or some general phenomenon should be viewed. Such claims have for example been made as to ways in which views of the history of Europe in the third to eighth centuries AD should or should not be influenced by the concept of late antiquity.<sup>2</sup> Other such claims have been made as to whether and in what sense we should see a scientific revolution in the early modern

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<sup>1</sup> An example is provided by an account of Thomas Cromwell’s involvement with various evangelicals, an involvement which contributed to his fall and execution: Brigden, “Thomas Cromwell and the ‘Brethren’”.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of debates see Escribano Paño, “El concepto de decadencia y la Antigüedad tardía”.

period.<sup>3</sup>

We exclude such claims because they would require their own special type of standard, if indeed they could have one at all. They are prone to be too general and wide-ranging to be open to judgement by reference to specific facts about the past. Historians may be limited to judging such large-scale claims to be interesting or fruitful, or the reverse.

There will of course be hazy boundaries between the class of claims that interest us and the two classes of excluded claims.

### 1.2.1.1 Making sense

Having indicated which claims interest us, we can say what we mean by making sense of the past. Making sense is a matter of showing that events, states of affairs, actions and ways of life had their origins, their interactions and their consequences, rather than forming a mere jumble connected only by time and place.

This does not mean that any indication of origins, interactions and consequences is as good as any other. Some claims may go deeper than others. Some claims may assert connections between events, states of affairs, actions and ways of life that are more plausible than connections asserted by others. And some claims may reflect the available evidence more extensively than others.

Setting out origins, interactions and consequences may involve claiming causal connections of the type that can be supported by reference to laws of nature. But it is more likely to involve drawing on the everyday resources

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<sup>3</sup> Heilbron, “Was There a Scientific Revolution?”

we exploit to understand people's conduct, including our everyday psychological understanding of people (our folk psychology) and the thick concepts we use to describe human situations and conduct, concepts such as those of an obligation, a goal, an opportunity, a danger, kindness, revenge, legislation, and military attack. (We shall use the term "thick concepts" to refer to concepts with substantial descriptive content. We shall not insist that they also have evaluative content, although many of them will have that.) When resources like folk psychology and our thick concepts are exploited, connections can be claimed without recourse to laws of nature, laws which in any case are in short supply when the subject matter is human actions and ways of life.

## 1.2.2 Examples of claims

We shall now give some examples of claims that interest us. In each example, we shall draw attention to how a general understanding of the ways in which people think and act helps to make the claim plausible. We do this here because we shall remark on this phenomenon in section 2.1.1.1.3.

It has been claimed that a desire by Christian Roman emperors in the fourth century AD to secure the position of a single official religious organization and harmonize belief played a key role in the development of a vicious policy of enforcement, and was also a precondition of radicalization and intolerance of dissent among Christians.<sup>4</sup> The account holds together and the claims are supported both because of the evidence cited, and because it is easy to see the political appeal to emperors of a single religious organization as a potential tool of government, to see the

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<sup>4</sup> Hahn, "The Challenge of Religious Violence: Imperial Ideology and Policy in the Fourth Century", pages 379-384.

need for harmonized belief because if diversity were allowed, people would explore options and the grip of a single organization would lessen, and to see how people can get carried away and start to enforce uniformity once they have come to the view that it is important.

The Defenestration of Prague in 1618 has been explained (without any claim that the event was inevitable) as a consequence of pressures brought to bear on Protestants by Catholics in preceding years.<sup>5</sup> The explanation gains its power both from the assembly of examples, including interference in the process of granting citizenship and pressure to hand over churches, and from our understanding that the rebels could care deeply about their beliefs, would resent interference and threats to their communal property, and could easily be provoked to action as soon as they found that the ultimate authority (in this case the Emperor) showed no inclination to heed their complaints, so that they had no hope of an improvement in their lot through normal channels.

Increasing difficulties in the government of Scotland in the early seventeenth century have been explained by reference to a diminution in communication and consultation at a less formal level than that of parliaments between the King and significant elements of the population, particularly those who did not have court connections.<sup>6</sup> The argument is supported by a compilation of evidence. And it is rendered acceptable by our awareness that consultation breeds consent, while its lack breeds both resentment among the governed and a lack of awareness by the ruler of what people really think which increases the risk of the ruler's taking decisions that will not be accepted.

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<sup>5</sup> Mortimer, *The Origins of the Thirty Years War and the Revolt in Bohemia, 1618*, chapter 7.

<sup>6</sup> MacDonald, "Consultation and Consent under James VI".



The desire of some liberals in Belgium in the mid-nineteenth century to keep the franchise very limited, while others wanted to extend it, has been explained by reference to fear within the former group that an extension of the franchise without the prior secularization of education would lead to the Catholic faction's returning to political power, while some in the latter group saw extension as a way to achieve important liberal ends.<sup>7</sup> The explanation derives its force in the minds of readers both from the evidence assembled, and from their own familiarity with the fact that it is possible for someone in a reforming frame of mind either to restrain himself for fear of wrecking the whole project or to press ahead because he believes that bold action is the way to get results.

The existence of sumptuary legislation in England in the fourteenth century has been explained as a way to mark status and preserve social structure, at a time when the availability of traditional ways to structure society was declining.<sup>8</sup> Evidence is cited to support this claim. And the claim resonates with modern readers both because they are familiar with the use of clothing to signal status, even if scales of status are no longer as well-defined as they used to be, and because they are familiar with the human capacity to fear changes in the social order.

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<sup>7</sup> Gould, *Origins of Liberal Dominance: State, Church, and Party in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, pages 32-36.

<sup>8</sup> Hinton, *Gold and Gilt, Pots and Pins: Possessions and People in Medieval Britain*, pages 217-219.

## 1.3 Justification and respectability

A claim may be justified in the sense that an expert with full access to the evidence who regarded the claim as correct could not sensibly be argued to run a significant risk of error. This is the sense of justification we shall adopt. It sets a high bar. But that is appropriate if we want to pick out the type of justification that is standardly taken to be one of the main requirements for knowledge.

When this standard of justification is met, that can suffice to endorse the claim as one which should be made.

It would however be very difficult to regard a claim as justified when there was or could easily be significant disagreement among experts as to whether it should be made. Disagreement over a claim or scope for disagreement would indicate that neither side had decisive arguments, even if individuals thought that arguments in favour of their own views were decisive. And such disagreement can easily arise in relation to claims that interest us. We shall say in some detail why this is so in section [4.1.3](#).

It is not that historians lack ways to test claims. They can verify evidence, check reasoning from evidence to claims, and ask whether accounts make sense as wholes. But the tests are not as decisive as tests that are typically available in the natural sciences. The extent of disagreement that sometimes exists among historians, even when there is plenty of evidence, reflects this lack of decisiveness.

We shall refer to the claims that are or could easily be objects of disagreement as contestable claims. We shall only use this term where there is reason to make a claim, but

there is still significant scope for disagreement over the claim on reasonable grounds. That is, the source of actual or potential disagreement is the scope to disagree over the interpretation of evidence, over how one should reason from the evidence to conclusions, or over how well a claim fits in with a wider understanding of the past, rather than the source's being a paucity of evidence that would open the way to speculative claims.

(This is a general restriction on our project. We shall not concern ourselves with cases in which evidence is in such short supply that the only options open to historians are to speculate or to limit themselves to recounting such evidence as there is. We shall also not concern ourselves with cases in which the scope for disagreement is insignificant. This may be insignificance of the number of historians who might disagree, when disagreement would require the pursuit of a very tendentious line of argument, or insignificance of the size of disagreement, when reasonable disagreement would only relate to minor details of a claim. And we shall not concern ourselves with claims that there is no reason to make in the first place.)

We shall also refer to non-contestable claims, meaning those where there is reason to make the claims and no significant scope for disagreement on reasonable grounds. (We do not use the alternative word "incontestable" because it would suggest that certainty as to the correctness of a claim was the only reasonable attitude.) When a claim is regarded as mistaken and there is no significant scope for disagreement, its contradictory will be a non-contestable claim.

Contestable claims may make up only a modest proportion of claims, but they include significant claims that are intended to help make sense of the past. This creates a problem for the epistemic standard of justification. It is

perfectly usable in relation to non-contestable claims, most if not all of which will be justified, but contestable claims simply get labelled as not justified. This is safe, but it means that the standard can do nothing to discipline the making of a number of potentially significant claims.

We shall develop a standard to discipline the making of contestable claims that will also function perfectly well for non-contestable claims. Conveniently, ensuring that it functions for both types of claim will save us from having to concern ourselves with where to draw a boundary between contestable and non-contestable claims. It would be difficult to draw such a boundary, given that we do not require there to be no scope to disagree for a claim to be non-contestable, only that there be no significant scope. Ensuring that our standard functions for both types of claim will also protect us against the risk that some non-contestable claims may fail to meet the standard of justification, so that it would not be usable to discipline the making of them. The standard we develop will be available, just as it will be available for contestable claims.

Our main move will be to shift from asking which claims are justified to asking which claims it is acceptable to make. We shall identify the acceptable claims by saying that they are epistemically respectable, and shall call the corresponding quality epistemic respectability. We shall henceforth speak simply of claims being respectable and of respectability, omitting “epistemically” and “epistemic”.

For a claim to be respectable there must be evidence that can be interpreted in a reasonable way to support it and no weighty evidence that definitely speaks against it, the claim must cohere with the account within which it is made, that account must be internally coherent, both the claim and the account must cohere with the background supplied by other

accounts, for example accounts of related periods of history, and claims which provide support that the claim needs in order to be respectable must themselves be respectable.

We shall fill this out in chapter 4. As we shall see there, a claim may be respectable even if it is contestable. And all non-contestable claims will be respectable.

## **1.4 Our plan of work**

The examples we gave in section 1.2.2 are of claims that promise to make sense of the past. Historians can arrive at appropriate claims by exploiting various resources, which we shall discuss in chapter 2. We shall group them together under the heading of humanistic resources. This term will cover folk psychology, our thick concepts, social conventions, narrative practice, and abilities such as being able to work out what it would be or have been rational for someone to do in given circumstances. Then in chapter 3 we shall look at the sense that can be made of the past. What we say in these two chapters will reassure us that claims that interest us can be perfectly solid. Solidity might be placed in doubt by the exploitation of humanistic resources, an exploitation which makes the process of historical research unscientific. If we examine how humanistic resources are exploited and what kind of grasp of the past may be gained, we may be able to lay such doubts to rest or at least contain them.

In chapter 4 we shall set out the need for our standard of respectability, then set out and explore the standard itself. The picture of historical work that we shall paint in chapters 2 and 3 will provide context for our discussion in chapter 4. That picture will be of a way of working that

is disciplined but also flexible and far from scientific, and of the corresponding results. This will make it unsurprising that claims are contestable and that the application of our standard of respectability will require judgement rather than being mechanical. But there will be little reference back to details of that picture to account for details of what we say in chapter 4. Rather, the link will be from whole picture to whole discussion.

Our definition of respectability will lead us to make connections with epistemology more broadly. In chapter 5 we shall consider how evidence for claims can support their respectability, making connections with foundationalism, and how the fitting together of claims and accounts can support the respectability of the claims, making connections with coherentism. In chapter 6 we shall consider how ways of working to arrive at claims can be relevant to the attitudes of historians who might want to make use of claims made by others, where the historians who might make use of the claims have not examined the evidence in detail themselves. We shall consider reliable methods, the virtues of authors, and epistemic communities.

# Chapter 2

## Making sense of the past

### 2.1 Humanistic resources

Human beings are complex. They are also thinking and emotional creatures who interpret the world, other people and themselves, and who act more or less rationally under the influence of their thoughts and their social environments.

The practical way for historians to make progress despite the complexity and the varying degrees of rationality of human beings is to make use of the implicit wisdom as to how people think and act that has been built into human thought and language over the centuries. On the basis of this wisdom, the fact that certain circumstances make sense of certain conduct is simply obvious. This means that when sense is made of the past, much need not be worked out by historians or spelt out for their readers.

Historians tap into this accumulated wisdom by exploiting several resources: folk psychology, thick concepts, social conventions, narrative practice, and social abilities. We shall call these humanistic resources.

Humanistic resources are useful because the people studied, the historians who study them, and the readers of historical accounts have a very largely common human nature. Without commonality of human nature there would be no useful folk psychology to be had, and similarly for the other resources (apart from social conventions that were easy to make explicit and thick concepts with contents that could likewise easily be made explicit, such as the concept of a military attack). The resources might still exist, but either they would be appropriate to the people studied and ill-adapted to the patterns of thought of historians and their readers, so that they would not provide shortcuts to making sense of the past because much would need to be worked out and spelt out, or they would be inappropriate to the people studied, in which case they could not be exploited effectively.

In section [2.1.1](#), we shall set out the various resources. Then in section [2.1.2](#) we shall note the points at which they are effective, in guiding historians in their work and in making accounts satisfying for readers. In section [2.1.3](#) we shall consider the choice of resources. In section [2.1.4](#) we shall note that the normal resources may need supplementation and adjustment.



## **2.1.1 The resources**

### **2.1.1.1 Folk psychology**

#### **2.1.1.1.1 The nature of folk psychology**

Our everyday psychological understanding may be set out in a folk psychology. By this we mean a set of psychological principles which can be used to make sense of what people do, and sometimes to predict what they will do. Examples are the principle that people who have a great desire for something will work hard to get it, and the principle that people will be very concerned when their future prosperity is uncertain.

Such principles are far from being laws of nature, but when someone is seen to have acted in accordance with them it is easy to see their actions as making sense. Indeed, a demand for more to be said about why they acted as they did might well be regarded as inappropriate.

#### **2.1.1.1.2 The scope of folk psychology**

We shall take folk psychology to include our everyday understanding of how groups behave, as well as our understanding of how individuals conduct themselves.

We shall also not limit folk psychology to principles that are likely to be of universal application, such as the principle that someone with a great desire for some given result will work hard to achieve the result. We shall take it to include principles that only have much prospect of playing significant roles in accounts when those accounts relate to certain times and places, such as a principle that the members of a privileged class may easily form a collective

view that they deserve their privileges.<sup>1</sup> We shall also take it to include principles that were relevant in the societies studied but that would now be regarded as *passé*, such as a principle that people defer to other people on the basis of social class (the principle that they do defer, not that they should defer).<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1.1.1.3 Examples

If we look back at the examples we gave in section 1.2.2, we can see principles of folk psychology at work. In the example of Christian Roman emperors, the principles that political leaders are keen on institutions that will cement their power and will be inclined to oppose any diversity that would undermine those institutions, that diversity of views encourages questioning, and that people convinced of an idea can easily become zealots, sustain the account. In the example of the Defenestration of Prague, the principles that people can care deeply about their beliefs, can resent interference and threats, and can take drastic action when no other route to a remedy is in sight, are put to work. In the example of the government of Scotland, the principle that people like to be consulted is at work. In the example of liberals in Belgium, work is done by the familiar fact that different people with the same objective, unsure of what will produce the best results, can take different decisions about what to do and can be sufficiently convinced of the soundness of their decisions to act in irrevocable ways. Finally, in the example of sumptuary legislation, the fact

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<sup>1</sup>That principle is for example at work to underpin the historical account given in Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution*, particularly chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup>Such changes in the relevance of principles can be a result of complex processes. For the example of deference see Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000*.

that people like to signal their status and the fact that they often fear social change are at work to make the account satisfactory.

### 2.1.1.2 **Thick concepts**

Historians can make sense of the past by characterizing states of the world and what happened using thick concepts that reflect the nature of human life from the point of view of human beings. They may for example identify obligations, goals, opportunities, dangers, acts of kindness, acts of revenge, acts of legislation, and military attacks. This sort of characterization comes naturally to historians by virtue of both the resources of the languages in which they write and their attunement to what is salient for human beings with the normal ranges of hopes, fears and desires. And it makes actions comprehensible by showing them to be natural or at least unsurprising in the circumstances.

Two uses of thick concepts are involved here.

The first use is to make connections with underlying characteristics that are attributed to agents. An action may for example be described as one of kindness or revenge, or as performed in order to satisfy curiosity or in a depressed mood. Such descriptions allow connections to be made with characteristics such as a kindly or a vengeful disposition, or a tendency to curiosity or depression. Peter Goldie has made the case that this is a good way to make sense of actions.<sup>3</sup>

The second use is to set actions in a social context which allows an action and responses to it to be seen as what we would expect of human beings generally, or of human

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<sup>3</sup> Goldie, “There are Reasons and Reasons”, section 6.3.

beings in a particular setting. Thus if someone in business installed new machinery, that might be characterized as a move to increase profit. That would make sense both of the action and of any response by people in similar businesses to do the same thing.

Both uses of thick concepts may be in play when making sense of the same action. And the same thick concept may be put to both uses, for example when an action is described as the fulfilment of an obligation. A connection may be made with the character of the agent, as the kind of person who takes obligations seriously. Sense is also made of the action by setting it in a social context in which we would expect obligations to be fulfilled, perhaps a context in which there were legal or social penalties for non-fulfilment.

The case for using thick concepts in either way extends to actions where there is no counterparty to respond to the action who is identifiable at the time. This is obvious for the first way: psychological dispositions can take effect in such cases. It is less obvious, but still the case, for the second way. For example, those who introduced printing may have had no expectation that any specific people would make use of it, even though they would have expected it to be used by people in general. But as soon as a historian characterizes printing as a way to share information efficiently (a characterization so obvious that it might not even be stated), government responses, both to use printing to disseminate their own material and to control its use by others so as to limit the dissemination of other material that was thought to be undesirable, make perfect sense.<sup>4</sup> Sharing, information and control are all thick concepts which embody ideas of how human beings may

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<sup>4</sup>Egan, “To Count Grains of Sand on the Ocean Floor: Changing Perceptions of Books and Learning in the Song Dynasty”, sections 1 and 4.

very well behave.

Thick concepts also play a valuable role in the characterization of circumstances or events that were not items of human conduct at all and of their physical and biological consequences, when the task is to make sense of human responses. For example, once historians have characterized a sequence of events as a climatic change and a consequent effect on agricultural yields that was sufficiently adverse to lead to famine, human responses in the form of rebellions, local declarations of autonomy, and invasions of countries with weakened governments by countries that maintained strong central governments can be seen as perfectly natural.<sup>5</sup> The connection between natural events and human actions can be made because the identified consequences of natural events are characterized in ways that give them obvious relevance to human desires – in the case of famine, the desire for food.

Our remarks so far on the use of thick concepts relate most obviously to writing the history of sequences of actions and events. But similar things may be said when the task is to understand a society, how it functioned, and why people lived as they did. The complexity that lay behind the generation of the day-to-day responses of people to their circumstances can be handled by seeing the lives led and the circumstances in human terms, using appropriate thick concepts. For example, Mogens Herman Hansen has made sense of the classical Greek city-state way of life by considering social, economic and military needs, and the understanding people had of their political communities. He uses thick concepts such as those of the public sphere, cults, trade, and civil war.<sup>6</sup> These thick concepts are obvious

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<sup>5</sup> Serels, “Food Insecurity and Political Instability in the Southern Red Sea Region During the ‘Little Ice Age,’ 1650-1840”.

<sup>6</sup> Hansen, *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State*.

ones to use. But beneath the surface they hold information about how human beings and human societies operate, and about which connections between actions and actions, and between circumstances and actions, should not surprise us. This information beneath the surface helps historians to cut through the complexity of human beings.

### 2.1.1.3 Social conventions

Sometimes historians can make sense of past actions by drawing attention to social conventions, or (if the conventions are familiar to current audiences) merely by using concepts that will remind audiences of the existence of those conventions.

Quentin Skinner, in the course of arguing that we can make sense of actions against the background of conventions and without looking inside people's heads, has pointed out that we can interpret someone's arm-waving as a warning because we are aware of the convention that arm-waving can be used to warn.<sup>7</sup> We can extend the argument to more sophisticated conventions. For example, acts of retaliatory violence between individuals that would strike many people today as unwise can make sense when they are interpreted as defences of personal honour that were required by the conventions of the time.<sup>8</sup> Such bygone conventions will generally need to be spelt out by historians, and claims

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Hansen discusses the public sphere in chapter 20, cults in chapter 19, trade in several chapters but particularly in chapters 14 and 24, and civil war in chapter 21.

<sup>7</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 1, Regarding Method*, page 97.

<sup>8</sup> Liliequist, "From Honour to Virtue: The Shifting Social Logics of Masculinity and Honour in Early Modern Sweden", section "The Social Logics and Emotional Practices of Honour and Manliness" (pages 46-49).

that they existed will need to be supported by evidence, but they can still suffice to make sense of conduct. The general principle of folk psychology that people can feel bound by conventions secures the link from convention to actual conduct. A historian is only likely to need to do more work when a convention strikes modern readers as utterly bizarre. We shall consider such cases in section 3.1.3.

Having brought social conventions into the discussion, we can set out a related role for thick concepts. Some thick concepts allow actions to be labelled with the significance they had in the relevant contexts, where their significance was in turn determined by social conventions. A waving is brought under the thick concept of a warning, or a walk by a group of politicians through an area that was called a voting lobby is brought under the thick concept of bringing down a government. In that way the significance of an action is presented on the surface when the action is mentioned. This greatly facilitates the location of actions in narratives that show how circumstances, events and actions were connected.<sup>9</sup> Many of the thick concepts that do this kind of work will be specific to the ways in which particular societies and their institutions functioned.

#### 2.1.1.4 Narrative practice

Daniel Hutto has argued that the process of understanding other people is centrally a matter of narrative practice.<sup>10</sup> Having learnt this practice by listening to stories in childhood, we enter into the practice ourselves. For our purposes we may see the practice itself, considered separately from

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<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the use of concepts to bring out the significance of actions see Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man”, part 2.

<sup>10</sup>Hutto, “Folk Psychology without Theory or Simulation”.

actual narratives, as a humanistic resource. It is a way of working which tends to generate accounts that we find satisfactory. They satisfy because the practice is one of giving accounts that would if analysed be found to respect the principles of folk psychology. This is not to say that a narrator consciously applies folk psychology. The narrator does not use folk psychology as a tool. Rather, narrative practice should be seen as a direct act of making sense. In addition, there are aspects of the practice that could not be reduced to principles of folk psychology even if one were to analyse the practice in a detached way. For example, there is the tendency of good narrators either to supply information that makes actions appear reasonable or to explain apparently unreasonable actions, and their tendency to give neither too much nor too little detail.

Narrative practice is, in Hutto's view, primarily a second-personal practice in which understanding can develop through conversation.<sup>11</sup> But the practice is not exclusively second-personal. We may therefore extend the idea to the historian's comprehension of individuals from the past, even though that looks decidedly third-personal. (Talk of conversation with the past is not to be taken literally.)

#### 2.1.1.5 Abilities

Another conception of how people make sense of other people's conduct has been put forward by Adam Morton,

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<sup>11</sup> For the primacy of the second-personal see Hutto, "Folk Psychology without Theory or Simulation", section 7.2. See also Stawarska, "Persons, Pronouns, and Perspectives", introduction (before section 5.1), on the distinction between conceiving the task of making sense as one undertaken from a third-personal, spectatorial standpoint and conceiving it as one undertaken as a second-personal practice in which the interaction of two people itself yields mutual understanding.



who sees the achievement as depending on the use of a range of abilities which are grouped together largely by the fact that they are brought to bear on the task of making sense.<sup>12</sup> The abilities include being able to sense someone else's mood and being able to work out what it would be or have been rational for someone to do in given circumstances. Given that these abilities are acquired by living in societies and that their worth depends on human nature's being as it is, we may see the abilities as a humanistic resource.

The abilities in question are primarily practical, to be used when one interacts with others. One happy result, which may not be an explicit goal, can be a satisfactory afternoon or a satisfactory life.

The results of the exercise of the abilities in question need not include any explicit conclusions about why people acted as they did or how they might act next. It is therefore not obvious how we should see these abilities as put to work in the writing of historical accounts, even if we have no doubt that they are put to work. But we can set out two possibilities.

The first possibility is to see them as put to work in mental re-enactment. It can be argued that re-enactment is required in order to understand the actions of historical figures. This line was taken by R. G. Collingwood, whose ideas have been sympathetically expounded and developed by William Dray.<sup>13</sup> Re-enactment would help the historian to see, from the point of view of a historical figure, how that figure's actions made sense. And success in re-enactment would require possession of abilities of the kind that Morton

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<sup>12</sup> Morton, "Folk Psychology does not Exist".

<sup>13</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History, Revised Edition with Lectures 1926-1928*; Dray, *History As Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History*.

mentions.

The second possibility is that an awareness of the importance of such abilities in the societies that a historian studies may help her to make sense of the past. An example is given by the claim that social abilities, including the ability to network and the ability to obtain people's trust, were significant in building the power of royal secretaries in Sweden.<sup>14</sup> In such cases it is not the historian's own abilities that are put to work, but her awareness of why such abilities matter, an awareness that will have been born of her own experience of putting them to work in everyday life.

### **2.1.2 Points at which the resources are effective**

Humanistic resources are put to work, in closely related ways, at two different points in the process of making sense of the past.

The earlier point in time is this. When historians set out to write accounts, they think about the people studied in ways that would be recommended on the basis of folk psychology. They do so even though they may be unconscious of doing so, and even though principles of folk psychology may not in themselves feature even in the unconscious parts of their reasoning. (They might not feature if, for example, some form of simulationism were an appropriate characterization of historians' mental processes.) Historians also draw on their repertoires of thick concepts, see conduct in the light of social conventions of which they are aware, exercise their own abilities, notice the exercise of specific abilities by

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<sup>14</sup>Hakanen and Koskinen, "Secretaries as Agents in the Middle of Power Structures (1560-1680)".

historical figures, and write in ways that follow the implicit guidance provided by narrative practice. Exploitation of all of the humanistic resources, or processes of thought which have the same effects as the exploitation of those resources would have, will guide historians both in their selection and analysis of material and in their writing of finished accounts. The task of writing historical accounts is thereby made feasible.

The later point in time is one we indicated in section 1.2.2. In our examples there we noted how a general understanding of the ways in which people think and act can sustain historical accounts. In the best cases, such an understanding helps to make accounts compelling and specific claims thoroughly convincing. But even when that is not achieved, the understanding at least helps to make accounts flow, to convince readers that sense really is being made of the past, and to make specific claims plausible. Such a general understanding may be captured both in folk psychology and in a repertoire of thick concepts. Sometimes the general understanding will be brought to bear on examples of conduct automatically, and sometimes it will only be brought to bear when the conduct is presented as being in accordance with social conventions that are spelt out by historians. Finally, the abilities that readers exploit to make sense of people in their own lives can be put to work to help them make sense of the past when accounts do not spell everything out.

### **2.1.3 The choice of resources**

There is debate as to which resources should be used. Any particular choice of resources would have some bearing on the epistemic standing of historical accounts. On the one

hand it would be attractive to have no need to enquire into the states of mind of historical figures, states of mind for which there is often no direct evidence. On the other hand it would be attractive to make some contact with the minds of historical figures, both in order to garner information and so as to avoid writing accounts that would seriously misrepresent those figures. Such contact would seem to depend on achieving some empathetic rapport with historical figures.<sup>15</sup>

We shall not try to resolve the question of which resources should be used. In practice historians must do what they can, using whatever resources are available, and then reflect on the epistemic standing of whatever accounts they write. But the debate should be noted, and the effects of the use of different resources should be borne in mind when we consider the respectability of specific claims. We shall therefore sketch a couple of positions in the debate here.

### **2.1.3.1 Thick concepts and social conventions**

One point of entry to the debate is provided by the reasons for the exploitation of thick concepts and social conventions we set out in sections 2.1.1.2 and 2.1.1.3 respectively. Those reasons not only show that thick concepts and social conventions help to make the past intelligible. They also suggest that when understanding historical figures, historians need not engage with the inner workings of agents' minds, or at least not with their detailed workings on specific occasions once some appropriate general characteristics have been attributed.

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<sup>15</sup> For a survey of views on concepts of empathy that is set in the context of work on the teaching of history see Endacott and Brooks, "Historical Empathy: Perspectives and Responding to the Past".

The implications would however be limited. Even if this line of thought were successfully pursued to the point of showing that states of mind did not need to be mentioned at all in historical accounts, that would not make an understanding of human beings in folk-psychological terms irrelevant. Rather, folk psychology would operate behind the scenes. The thick concepts we have discussed capture principles of folk psychology. For example, the concept of a warning (Skinner's example of a convention, but also a thick concept) captures the principle that people will respond to certain signals by taking evasive action, and will do so for good reason. The concept of curiosity captures the principle that people may seek to gather information for no apparent reason, perhaps learning something interesting or annoying other people in the process. The concept of sharing, as in the example of printing, captures the principle that people can grasp that other people might benefit from access to resources and may then choose to provide access. The concept of famine captures the principle that people become distressed to the point at which they may take drastic action when food is short. And the concept of a cult, as used by Hansen in relation to Greek city-states, captures the principle that people may feel comforted by affirming beliefs in the presence of others who affirm the same beliefs.

We can look at this from the other direction. Not only do such thick concepts capture various principles of folk psychology. Our grasp of folk psychology allows us to be happy that characterizations of circumstances, events and actions which use the concepts can indeed help to make sense of the past. We feel comfortable using the concepts because we appreciate that they are generally appropriate to ways in which people actually think, feel and act. So we do not fear that an account which used the concepts might misrepresent the psychological connections that were

in play. Moreover, it is a historian's (usually unconscious) application of folk psychology, or her execution of mental processes that have the same effect, which leads her to select circumstances, events and actions appropriately and to characterize them using appropriate thick concepts. She looks for a way to make sense of the past in human terms. That goal guides her work of selection and characterization.

### 2.1.3.2 Engagement with minds

Another position in the debate over the choice of humanistic resources is that historians should engage directly with the minds of historical figures. Two views in particular would encourage such engagement. The first view is that of R. G. Collingwood, who argued that mental re-enactment was required.<sup>16</sup> The second view is that of Karsten Stueber, who argues that empathy is central to the understanding of other people.<sup>17</sup>

We should however note that neither of these two views in favour of direct engagement would require historians to engage in explicit discussion of the states of mind of historical figures. The failure to require this indicates that the positions in the debate over the choice of resources we have sketched here do not fall into two directly contradictory camps: “do not discuss states of mind” versus “discuss states of mind”. Rather, the contrast is between seeking evidence in external facts and seeking to be guided by empathetic contact that is far from entirely governed by publicly accessible evidence. This lack of total government

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<sup>16</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History, Revised Edition with Lectures 1926-1928*; Dray, *History As Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History*.

<sup>17</sup> Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*.

by publicly accessible evidence does not however preclude several historians reaching the same conclusions through the use of empathetic methods. Moreover, historians who use empathetic methods will also make extensive use of publicly available evidence.

### 2.1.4 **Supplementation and adjustment**

Humanistic resources as they are used in contemporary society are not always enough. Both supplementation and adjustment may be needed. Our concern here is with supplementation and adjustment in ways that preserve the central importance of humanistic resources – and we shall merely note the topic of adjustment, deferring discussion until section 3.3.3. We shall look beyond humanistic resources when we discuss systematic psychology in section 2.3.

#### 2.1.4.1 **Supplementation**

Technical concepts may need to be put to work. For example, it has been claimed that a particular interaction between cultural background and spontaneity is what gave Willy Brandt’s kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970 its great impact. The claim is supported through the use of technical concepts such as those of orders of audience and the Chancellor’s two bodies, one as the representative of his country and the other as an individual human being.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Rauer, “Symbols in Action: Willy Brandt’s Kneefall at the Warsaw Memorial”. For orders of audience see pages 260-261. For the Chancellor’s two bodies see pages 275-276. Conclusions are set out on pages 274-277.

One could debate whether the use of technical concepts added something wholly new, or simply brought out the analytic power which was latent in everyday thick concepts and folk psychology. While the answer would not really matter for our purposes, there is an argument in favour of the latter view. This is that the technical concepts used can often be explained in everyday terms, even though they are not habitually used in everyday life. To return to the example of Willy Brandt, we do not often think in terms of orders of audience, but we have an easy grasp of the distinction between those who witness an event directly (the first-order audience), the media that represent the event (second-order), and those who see the event as it has been packaged and presented by the media (third-order). Similarly, while we do not often think in terms of two bodies, we have an easy grasp of the fact that someone can live in an official role while also having their private thoughts.

#### **2.1.4.2 Adjustment**

Both the thick concepts used to characterize circumstances, events and actions, and the folk psychology which supports their use in making sense of the past, may need to be adjusted when studying times and places other than one's own. We shall discuss this topic in section 3.3.3. We defer our discussion to that section because it is there that we shall discuss the dangers of inappropriate adjustment and how adjustments may be controlled. We shall do so in the context of a discussion of concerns one might have about historical claims.



## **2.2 The quality of humanistic resources**

### **2.2.1 Principles and practice**

We started our list of resources with folk psychology. Other resources bear various relationships to the principles of folk psychology, principles such as the ones we gave by way of example in section 2.1.1.1.3. Thick concepts capture principles. Social conventions must accord with principles in order to be adopted (unless they are imposed with threats of punishment for non-observance), and may themselves amount to principles specific to their societies once they have been internalized. Narrative practice requires narration in accordance with principles. And the exercise of abilities, whether by historical figures or by historians, has the same effect as the exerciser's putting principles to work.

These links between folk psychology and other resources need not be visible in practice. Even if we view human interaction as a matter of the application of folk psychology itself, we are unlikely to think that principles of folk psychology are often made explicit. Even those who advocate a theory theory of how people make sense of other people's conduct would not claim that people were continually conscious of principles of folk psychology, and those who prefer simulationism might deny the principles themselves any effective role in either conscious or unconscious mental processes that led to responses to other people's conduct. Likewise we are usually unaware of principles that are captured by thick concepts, and it could be argued that the principles themselves played no effective role in either conscious or unconscious mental processes involved in narrative practice or the exercise of abilities. For such

reasons we speak of according with principles and having the same effects as putting principles to work. We want to allow both for the possibility that the principles themselves are at work, and for the possibility that it is merely as if they were at work.

Principles of folk psychology may not often appear on the surface, but they can be made explicit. So when we speak of these principles, we mean principles that historians would make explicit if challenged to do so. From the point of view of theory theory, that would amount to uncovering what was already somewhere in their minds. If the process of making sense were viewed in a simulationist way, or as the use of thick concepts, as engagement in narrative practice or as the exercise of abilities, it would mean working backward from the processes thought to be used to principles that would, if put to work, produce comparable results. We should also note the approach of Peter Godfrey-Smith, who sees folk psychology as a model rather than a theory.<sup>19</sup> Under this approach the task of working backward would amount to discerning the principles with which such a model could be seen as complying.

There is a question as to whether such working backward would yield even roughly the same set of principles regardless of how the process of making sense were viewed (simulationism, thick concepts, narrative practice, abilities or a model), who did the work to identify the principles, or whose performance in making sense of other people's conduct was used as the starting point. But we may reasonably hope that the results of different pieces of work of this type would not differ unacceptably, or at least that they would not if all the working backward were carried out by people within the same culture and they started with the performance of people within a single culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Godfrey-Smith, "Folk Psychology as a Model".

Those who analyse processes by which people make sense of other people's conduct tend to argue that their preferred views of the processes (views such as theory theory and simulationism) are the appropriate ones. We, by contrast, have not approached the topic as a quest for the appropriate view. Rather, we have mentioned several different resources which may be exploited when writing historical accounts. We have no need to prefer any particular view of the mental processes of exploitation.

### **2.2.2 The quality of folk psychology**

Although we do not claim any primacy for the resource of folk psychology, the links between its principles and the other resources mean that we should take a special interest in the quality of folk-psychological principles. While there might be no need to derive such principles from practices of simulation, thick concepts, narrative practice, abilities or models, and while any purported derivation might be disputable, it would be hard to see an account as satisfactorily making sense of the past if it were arrived at in a way from which principles could easily be derived when the derived principles would strike people as unacceptable. The unacceptability of the principles would give rise to a *modus tollens* challenge to the methods that had been used to arrive at the account.

Our notion of the quality of principles is ill-defined, but it is broadly a notion of being appropriate to the task of making sense of people. We shall not try to derive all sorts of possible principles and then check them to see whether they would be satisfactory. Instead we shall enquire into the quality of the folk psychology we actually use, this being a more practical if less comprehensive way to address

concerns about quality. If we have reason to think that our folk psychology is of good quality, then we may take it that when historians rely on humanistic resources that are closely tied to it, the accounts they write will have a good prospect of making sense of the past without serious misrepresentation.

Our usual folk psychology is far too ill-defined to be supported in the ways that a scientific theory might be supported. Fortunately, we can find another way to support the view that the principles of folk psychology are a broadly appropriate resource to exploit when making sense of the past. Having said that, there are risks.

### **2.2.2.1 Support from effectiveness**

Folk psychology gains support from its effectiveness in everyday life – or the effectiveness of thick concepts that capture its principles, social conventions that accord with its principles or amount to principles that are specific to particular societies, narrative practices that accord with its principles, and abilities the exercise of which has the same effects as putting its principles to work. We can work and play together, and we can navigate around difficult people. If we systematically screened out important considerations we would not get on as well as we actually do, and the failures of human beings when they interacted with other people would be a good deal more numerous than they actually are. This suggests that when historical work is consciously or unconsciously guided by folk psychology or related humanistic resources, considerations that were important to historical figures, whether as conscious motives or otherwise, will tend to get noticed. Then there is a good prospect that the significant reasons for their conduct will be mentioned in historical

accounts.

This is not to say that human beings never overlook important considerations in their practical lives. It is obvious that they sometimes do. Sometimes their failures are very serious, for example when diplomacy fails and war ensues. But folk psychology and related humanistic resources still do their everyday job reasonably well.

We may add two points that come to the fore when historical accounts are written. Both points support the exploitation of folk psychology and related humanistic resources.

The first point is that folk psychology contains within itself the germ of historical thought. Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger both explored consequences of the fact that human beings live in time and understand their lives within a temporal framework.<sup>20</sup> This central role of time permeates folk psychology and related humanistic resources. People are seen as reacting to events in the past, as planning for events in the near or distant future, and as having a sense of the course of their lives laid out in time.

The second point is this. In the course of his work on historical understanding, Dilthey claimed that the human sciences rested on the relationship between lived experience, expression and understanding, and that development of the human sciences required a deepening of experience.<sup>21</sup> Such claims would suggest, although they would not prove, that the human sciences had to be conducted in ways that

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<sup>20</sup> Dilthey, “Die Kategorien des Lebens”, translated as “The Categories of Life”; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, translated as *Being and Time*, sections 61 to 83.

<sup>21</sup> Dilthey, “Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften”, page 131, translated as “The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences”, page 153.

respected the content of folk psychology. If they were not so conducted, they would lose touch with human experience. They would do so because the exploitation of humanistic resources is the only practical way to link human experience and work in the human sciences, and those resources can only be exploited effectively when work is conducted in terms that respect the content of folk psychology.

### 2.2.2.2 Scope for error

We should not suppose that folk psychology will be free of error.

For example, it is natural to think that people who have attitudes to certain conduct, either favourable or unfavourable, will govern their own behaviour in accordance with those attitudes. Thus someone who says they are against cheating should be very unlikely to cheat. But psychological research indicates that this is not so, and that people will act at variance with their expressed attitudes.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore helpful for historians to keep an eye on psychological research, in case folk psychology and thick concepts that are closely related to it need to be corrected in various ways. In this example, the thick concept of cheating carries within it the idea of disapproval of cheating by anyone, including cheating by the person who uses the concept to describe other people's conduct. The principle of consistency of attitude at work in this case might need to be adjusted so that potential disapproval of oneself was more open to being overridden than potential disapproval of others. This might however be a systematic adjustment across a range of concepts, with the effect that

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<sup>22</sup> Myers and Twenge, *Social Psychology*, twelfth edition, chapter 4.

the application of any concept within the range to one's own conduct showed greater tolerance than would be extended to other people.

While adjustments of this nature may be needed, there is no sign that folk psychology and thick concepts that are closely related to it will turn out to have given us a fundamentally inappropriate way to think about human conduct.

### **2.2.2.3 A remaining risk**

Despite the everyday effectiveness of folk psychology and related humanistic resources, there is a risk to consider. People studied might be seen in a particular way in order to make them fit modern folk psychology and thick concepts, when those modern resources were not quite appropriate to them. Then a historical account would not make sense of their way of life or their conduct in a satisfactory manner. It would instead convey a false picture of them.

The hope must be that detailed investigation would reveal that evidence had been misconstrued or inconvenient evidence had been ignored. But we cannot be wholly confident that this hope would be fulfilled. The risk will be lower, the greater the commonality of human nature across different times and places, because then divergence that would be great enough to make modern folk psychology and thick concepts inappropriate would be less likely. We shall discuss the extent of commonality in section [2.4.2](#).

## 2.3 Systematic psychology

We shall now note some ways in which systematic psychology might help historians to make sense of the past.

### 2.3.1 Psychohistory

Psychohistory has been conducted for many decades, both in biographical studies and in other types of work. But it is hardly scientific, and it has plenty of critics.<sup>23</sup> We should therefore not assume that psychohistory will help historians to make sense of the past in ways that will yield acceptable accounts, although we should not reject its contributions out of hand either.

### 2.3.2 Social psychology

Social psychology focuses on the thoughts and conduct of people in relation to other people.<sup>24</sup>

One stream of work in social psychology is not relevant to our project. This stream concentrates on abstractions that do little or nothing to make sense of specific events.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For a brisk survey see Hunt, “Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Historical Thought”, pages 338-341.

<sup>24</sup> One useful introduction and survey is Myers and Twenge, *Social Psychology*.

<sup>25</sup> See for example the papers in *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, volume 46, number 4, 2012, a special issue entitled *Bridging History and Social Psychology*. Even the papers in the collection that do engage closely with specific events, such as Sandall, “Representing Rebellion: Memory and Social Conflict in Sixteenth-Century England”, tend to provide social-psychological



Social psychology has a role that is more relevant to our interests in a second stream, the one in which it is used to show how certain events could have taken place where those events are ones that challenge the explanatory capacities of folk psychology and our usual thick concepts.<sup>26</sup> In such cases it can add to the power of folk psychology and our thick concepts to make sense of the past. The process of making sense of the past does however remain dependent on our folk psychology and thick concepts, for two reasons.

The first reason is that our folk psychology and thick concepts are needed to allow the fluent use of concepts used by social psychologists, such as the concepts of prejudice and of the media's influence on people's beliefs.<sup>27</sup> These concepts do not have contents that it would be practical to formulate without drawing on our everyday grasp of life in human societies.

The second reason is that claims of social psychology about how people conduct themselves are seen as plausible against the background of our folk psychology and thick concepts.

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interpretations rather than directly making sense of events. Sandall offers possibilities for making sense of events (for example in the discussion of memories on pages 563-564), but does not on the whole go on to convert them into accounts that actually make sense of events. Moreover, when accounts that do make sense of events are offered, they are ones that could easily have been given without drawing on the resources of social psychology. An example is the discussion on page 565 of the Mousehold Articles, the contents of which help to make sense of the fact that Kett's Rebellion occurred.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Overy, "‘Ordinary Men,’ Extraordinary Circumstances: Historians, Social Psychology, and the Holocaust”.

<sup>27</sup> The example of prejudice is taken from Dixon, Durrheim, Kerr and Thomae, "‘What’s So Funny ’Bout Peace, Love and Understanding?’ Further Reflections on the Limits of Prejudice Reduction as a Model of Social Change”. The example of media influence is taken from Happer and Philo, "The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change”.

The claims could only be made plausible without reliance on that background if a great deal more evidential data than are in fact available were provided.

There is no conflict between this second reason and the point that recourse to some of the claims of social psychology may be needed when it is otherwise very hard to make sense of events. Claims of social psychology are individually plausible in the light of our folk psychology. For example, we would happily accept that people sometimes focus on details of a task and ignore the bigger picture.<sup>28</sup> The individually plausible claims then come together to make sense of extraordinary events.

### 2.3.3 Personality psychology

Personality psychology overlaps with social psychology, but its main interest is in people individually.<sup>29</sup>

Personality psychology might be expected to play a substantial role in making sense of historical events that were triggered by the actions of powerful individuals. There might for example be scope to show that conditions around an individual, either at the time or earlier in life, encouraged suspicion or impulsiveness. Such traits could usefully be mentioned in giving accounts of actions that would otherwise seem strange. But in fact, personality psychology is far from being able to play that sort of role in relation to specific individuals. Results obtained are statistical, rather than definitely applying to given individuals, and even the statistical links found can be

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<sup>28</sup> Overy, “‘Ordinary Men,’ Extraordinary Circumstances: Historians, Social Psychology, and the Holocaust”, pages 521-522.

<sup>29</sup> One useful introduction and survey is Larsen and Buss, *Personality Psychology: Domains of Knowledge About Human Nature*.

of poor quality.<sup>30</sup> A historian could rely on such work to claim that in a specific case, given conditions might have encouraged given traits, but that would only amount to speculation about a possible explanation that might be inappropriate in the instant case.

Personality psychology is more likely to be useful when the task is to make sense of the behaviour of a substantial group of people, whether politicians or citizens generally, rather than the conduct of individuals who are of particular interest.<sup>31</sup> But the personality traits that are normally identified in such work are the same as, or very close to, traits as they are identified in folk psychology. And even when the traits are not close to traits identified in folk psychology, concepts of the traits would not make sense to us if we did not have a background of folk psychology. So yet again there is considerable reliance on folk psychology.

## 2.4 Commonality of human nature

We started this chapter by drawing attention to the value of humanistic resources. Their exploitation allows historians to cut through complexity and make sense of the past. But the resources are only useful because the people studied by historians, the historians themselves, and their readers have a largely common human nature.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, there is an unsurprising negative correlation between perceived availability of social support and neuroticism, but the correlation coefficients found only range between  $-0.3$  and  $-0.5$ : Swickert, “Personality and Social Support Processes”, page 531.

<sup>31</sup> An idea of what can be achieved may be gleaned from Caprara and Vecchione, “Personality Approaches to Political Behavior”.

We shall now explore the nature and extent of this commonality, and then ask whether commonality is essential.

### **2.4.1 The nature of commonality**

The commonality of human nature that concerns us is a commonality of both biology and culture. For our purposes, human culture is part of human nature. The role of culture means that we must expect there to be limits to commonality. Cultures differ from one another, so commonality is never perfect and may be far from perfect. But biology is overwhelmingly common.

The common human nature in question is not limited to first-order elements, shared tendencies of people to react to situations that appear to them simply as states of the world. It includes an important second-order element, a common appreciation of oneself and other human beings as subjects who think, act, interact, and think of one another as subjects. Such an appreciation of the nature of other people as subjects with mental lives like one's own has an effect on thought and conduct. The appreciation of other people in general that someone has may be expressed in the folk psychology that can be attributed to them on the basis of their thoughts about others and their use of thick concepts.

### **2.4.2 The extent of commonality**

There is evidence for commonality, but there is also evidence of its limits. Areas covered by evidence and research include social values and behaviour, the usefulness across different cultures of a common set of factors to

identify when analysing personality, amounts of variation within and between cultures as measured by reference to those factors, and emotions and associated phenomena.<sup>32</sup>

Some areas of lack of commonality would not be predicted on the basis of common sense, and are only identified through systematic research. This cautions us not to assume commonality just because it seems likely. It is for example important not to assume that all cultures have the same notions of the senses and their relative importance, and to recognize that the social significance of various senses can differ from one culture to another.<sup>33</sup> There are however concerns about methods of research and the drawing of conclusions.<sup>34</sup> These concerns should lead us to be cautious about assessments of the extent or the limits of commonality.

The extent of commonality that can be regarded as established is however enough to make it plausible that there should be a largely commonly usable folk psychology and set of thick concepts. It is also plausible that current narrative practice should be appropriate when writing about the past. And we may expect current social abilities both to be useful to historians when writing about the past and to have been useful, perhaps in modestly modified forms, to historical figures. Social conventions look as though they should be more readily open to change, but fortunately old conventions are reasonably easy for

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<sup>32</sup> For studies that tell us about commonality and its limits see Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis and Sam, *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications*, third edition, chapters 4 (social values and behaviour), 5 (personality factors), and 7 (emotions).

<sup>33</sup> Low, "The Social Life of the Senses: Charting Directions", pages 271-273.

<sup>34</sup> For a survey of concerns see Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis and Sam, *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications*, third edition, chapter 12.

historians to identify and explain to modern readers.

Support for the view that there is extensive commonality, at least across a range of current societies, may come from the establishment of commonality of factors in personalities. It is usual to identify five of them and to call them neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness.<sup>35</sup>

Having said that, the evidence is mixed. For example, when Chinese ideas of personality are studied, some limits of an analysis in terms of the usual five factors emerge. A sixth factor, interpersonal relatedness, seems to be required.<sup>36</sup> The fact that this additional factor is not needed in the west indicates a limit to commonality. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to write accounts of how people behaved in non-western societies which make sense to westerners with their own conceptions of how people are likely to think and act. We may take as an example an account of how, in Ming Dynasty China, families handled the obligation imposed on them to provide soldiers. The adjustment of inheritance rights within a family to compensate those who became soldiers when several members of the family could serve but only one was required makes perfect sense to modern western readers.<sup>37</sup>

Such examples may be adduced to oppose any argument that since most of the direct evidence of commonality relates to current societies, historians should not rely on

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<sup>35</sup> Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis and Sam, *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications*, third edition, pages 112-113; McCrae and Costa, "The Five-Factor Theory of Personality", pages 159-162.

<sup>36</sup> Cheung, Leung, Zhang, Sun, Gan, Song and Xie, "Indigenous Chinese Personality Constructs: Is the Five-Factor Model Complete?"

<sup>37</sup> Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*, chapter 1.

commonality between the present and the past. However, as examples, they cannot supply a positive demonstration that commonality is the norm. The success of the accounts in making sense of the past indicates commonality in the relevant instances. Commonality is not established first in order to argue for the worth of the accounts.

One form of commonality which is especially likely to be restricted is commonality of social culture at the level of mores. Mores can change over less than a century, even within a single culture with a continuous history that does not include any disruptive merger with another culture. Mores of sexual conduct and of concern for the natural environment are recent examples.

Finally, it should be noted that we have discussed evidence for and against the putative fact of commonality. We have not discussed work on how mechanisms analogous to those of biological evolution might have steered human nature in similar directions in different societies on account of the widespread occurrence of the relevant evolutionary pressures, although much work has been done on the evolution of features of societies.<sup>38</sup> We have also not discussed work on the relative roles of innate nature and acquired culture in the formation of human beings fit to live in society.<sup>39</sup> Our focus on the putative fact of commonality reflects our need to ask whether there is enough commonality to support the exploitation of humanistic resources. In our context, we do not need to ask how commonality is to be explained.

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<sup>38</sup> Guala, “The Evolutionary Program in Social Philosophy”; Lewens, “Cultural Evolution: Integration and Skepticism”.

<sup>39</sup> For an outline of this topic see Bloch, *Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge*, chapter 4.

### **2.4.3 Is commonality essential?**

It is not obvious that making sense of the past requires that the people studied and the people studying them have a largely common human nature. Indeed, strictly speaking that might not be required. But the use of folk psychology and many of our thick concepts in a way that allows historians to work efficiently does require commonality. At least, we have not found any way to get the job done in the absence of commonality. We shall now elaborate briefly on this point, and then note some views put forward by other writers which suggest that commonality may be needed for reasons more fundamental than the need to work efficiently.

#### **2.4.3.1 Efficiency**

It is commonality of human nature that allows historians and their readers to see straight away that certain circumstances could motivate certain actions or make certain ways of life appealing or acceptable. (We shall say more about this in section 3.1.1.) They do not need to think through how psychological mechanisms work. They can apply principles of folk psychology, use their normal thick concepts, exercise their own social abilities, and recognize the significance of those abilities in the lives of historical figures, all without stopping to spell out what they are doing.

Another reason why commonality matters is that the concepts that are put to work in folk psychology, such as motive, fear, and ambition, and many of the thick concepts in everyday use, are somewhat loose – although the concepts of folk psychology are only seen to be loose if one pauses to make those concepts explicit. The appropriate



application of concepts, whether concepts of folk psychology (some of which will count as thick concepts) or thick concepts generally, is best achieved by having a grip on the concepts from the inside, the grip that comes with a human nature and a human life in which the concepts are routinely put to work. Without this grip, historians would get bogged down in worries about whether people and events fitted the conditions of application of concepts. It is true that with this grip such potential difficulties are glossed over, but at least the progress made has a good prospect of being sensible and not leading historians into serious error. If a historian were to go badly wrong, it is likely that either she or other historians would think “Hang on, this account is not convincing”. That thought would prompt revision or withdrawal of the account.

Some support for the significance of commonality in comprehension comes from a study which found coupling between the brains of the narrator of a story and the person who was listening, where stronger coupling was associated with greater comprehension.<sup>40</sup> That study related to an exercise which was rather different from that of the past speaking to historians through documents and other evidence, so we cannot draw any robust conclusions in our context, but there is a clear suggestion that commonality should be important in historical work.

#### 2.4.3.2 More fundamental reasons

Quite apart from the practical consideration of efficiency, it is arguable that commonality is required in principle if we are to make use of our thick concepts. Broadly, the

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<sup>40</sup> Stephens, Silbert and Hasson, “Speaker-Listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication”.

argument is that a human nature is required in order to grasp those concepts. Specifically, the concepts are argued to have a normative content that needs to be grasped in a way that is only feasible if one has the appropriate nature.

For example, a human being sees directly that if someone else has assisted him in the past, that is a reason to help her when she is in some difficulty. There is a direct appreciation that this would be the right thing to do unless there were good reasons not to help. A non-human creature could be given information about the concepts of assistance and obligation, and could calculate that when two human beings had interacted in a certain way in the past and were in certain current situations, certain labels would apply to their mental states and they would act in certain ways. But such a diversion via laborious computation could be argued to change the contents of the relevant concepts, in this case the concepts of assistance and obligation. Specifically, if the computational route were followed, the question “Why should someone help someone else who had previously helped them?” could always be asked. A variant of G. E. Moore’s open-question argument would have practical force, rather than being safely confined to philosophical debate.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand someone who, as a human being, grasped the relevant concepts directly, would not see such a question as arising, whether in their own mind when it was their situation or in the mind of a historical figure who had been in such a situation.

Several philosophers have thought along these lines, and we shall now give some examples. These philosophers have however put their ideas forward in various ways and in the context of various arguments, so we should not freely attribute to them the line of thought about the importance of commonality that we pursue here.

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<sup>41</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, chapter 1, section 13(2).

Bernard Williams argued that several evaluative concepts are only properly grasped by people who either have the interests that support use of the concepts as guides to conduct, or at least see those interests as interests. People who did not even see them as interests would not see how to apply the concepts in novel situations.<sup>42</sup> Possession of the relevant interests, and perhaps even the ability to see them as interests, would be likely to depend on possession of a human nature. This matters in the context of historical studies because evaluative terms are used to describe the motives and actions of people in the past, for example when an action is seen as prompted by a felt slight to someone's honour and is seen as re-establishing their honour.

Charles Taylor sets out connections between the concepts we use that allow us to see those concepts as evaluative in a sufficiently strong and direct way for them to guide our conduct. He takes as an example the concept of shame, and shows how shame can be taken personally by a subject because the significance of certain actions or characteristics as shameful is embedded in the subject's culture. He also argues that the concept can only have any sense at all so long as shame is experienced as significant.<sup>43</sup>

Alan Millar argues that a grasp of normative commitments plays a vital role in seeing actions as motivated by reasons, and hence in understanding why people acted as they did in particular circumstances.<sup>44</sup> A grasp of commitments which saw them as normative would come most easily to a creature with a human nature.

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<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pages 141-142.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals", part 2, section 1.

<sup>44</sup> Millar, *Understanding People: Normativity and Rationalizing Explanation*. The argument builds up right through the book, but chapter 1, section 4.5 and chapter 8 are particularly relevant in our context.

In addition to such arguments that relate to the use of thick concepts, it is arguable that commonality is required in principle in order to exploit folk psychology itself.

Karsten Stueber has argued for the essential role of a form of empathy in which we re-enact the thought processes of the person understood. This kind of empathy allows us to appreciate that person as an agent and to see the reasons they had for their actions as reasons, and not merely as causes.<sup>45</sup> Among his conclusions are that emotional attunement is needed in order to see which aspects of a situation appeared to a subject as salient, and that we can only identify people's thoughts as reasons for action if we treat them as thoughts that could have been our own thoughts.<sup>46</sup> Both of these conclusions would seem to exclude understanding actions as being for reasons unless the person gaining the understanding shared a human nature with the agent.

Wolfgang Spohn has argued that researchers in the human sciences must engage in normative discourse from the perspective of the people studied, people who themselves accepted the relevant normative demands.<sup>47</sup> The possession of such a perspective would require possession of a human nature in common with the people studied. (Spohn's precise argument is however entwined with a view of human history as a struggle for improvement.<sup>48</sup> This makes his

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<sup>45</sup> Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*, pages 21, 40-45 and 152-171; Stueber, "Understanding versus Explanation? How to Think About the Distinction Between the Human and the Natural Sciences", section 3.

<sup>46</sup> Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*, pages 160-165.

<sup>47</sup> Spohn, "Normativity is the Key to the Difference Between the Human and the Natural Sciences", sections 2 and 3.

<sup>48</sup> Spohn, "Normativity is the Key to the Difference Between the Human and the Natural Sciences", page 248.

argument most obviously appropriate in the context of Whig historiography, although it could be applied outside that context.)

The arguments we have cited in this section do not add up to a decisive demonstration that commonality of human nature is essential, either for the use of thick concepts or for the exploitation of folk psychology. Our own conclusions should be tentative. It could be argued that if one were to allow that questions such as that of whether there was at least some reason to help someone who had been helpful in the past would be reasonable questions to ask, that would not really amount to a change in the content of the concept of an obligation. Normativity might be argued not to be a type of content at all. Instead it could be regarded as an external feature of the use of concepts by human beings which could be replaced by a factual assertion that in certain circumstances certain mental predicates would apply to human beings, with consequences for conduct which could be explained by the fact that those predicates applied. We have also not said enough to rule out theory theory in favour of the simulationism which bears a positive, if indirect, relationship to the idea of needing to have a direct grasp of the evaluative nature of concepts. In particular, we have not said enough to rule out theory theory in a context such as academic history, in which reflection is permitted and actions are limited to publishing accounts and doing more research. These features of academic history add to the plausibility of theory theory's being appropriate. We have no desire to settle the debate between theory theory and simulationism. But even without doing so, we can still appreciate the importance of commonality of human nature.

## **2.5 Reasons to exploit humanistic resources**

We shall now set out some reasons why the exploitation of humanistic resources is widespread in the humanities and the social sciences.

We shall range over the humanities and the social sciences, even though our focus is on history, because the points we shall make can be made across most of that range. There are however areas in the social sciences, and to a lesser extent in the humanities, to which the points we shall make in this section would not apply, or would only apply with very limited force. Those parts of economics in which the focus is on the construction of tidy theoretical models would be examples.

### **2.5.1 Practicality**

We have already set out one reason for the widespread exploitation of humanistic resources. Such exploitation makes it feasible to get work done. It allows researchers to cut through the complexity of human beings and societies. Then they can write accounts that make sense of the human world.

### **2.5.2 A shortage of laws**

We shall now turn to another reason for the widespread exploitation of humanistic resources, the shortage of laws of nature at the human level.

Laws of nature are very helpful when writing accounts that explain the course of events. A common goal of explanations in the natural sciences is either to bring phenomena under laws, or to set out mechanisms that reliably give rise to the phenomena. The identification of a reliable mechanism is in turn most powerfully explanatory if we are shown why the mechanism can be expected to work as advertised. That is most easily done by pointing to laws that govern how the parts of the mechanism will act and interact. When laws and mechanisms are invoked, the resulting accounts connect facts with one another in a compelling way.

Useful laws of nature are in short supply in the humanities and the social sciences. People are governed by laws of nature, but there is a shortage of laws that govern human conduct which describe it at the level of conduct – that is, at the level at which actions, social interactions, and circumstances as they appear to people are picked out, rather than at the level at which neuronal activity or anything comparably physical or biological is picked out.<sup>49</sup>

It is not that laws at a human level are wholly unavailable. Economics can provide several examples, such as the law of diminishing returns, although the applicability of any such law to a given real-world situation should always be checked. It has also been argued that in the social sciences more widely there are plenty of useful generalizations which have at least some of the flavour of laws.<sup>50</sup> But the availability of laws, or even of generalizations that resemble laws, is far too patchy to allow laws to predominate in accounts that make sense of human life and conduct.

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<sup>49</sup> For reasons why laws should be in short supply see Baron, *Confidence in Claims*, sections 3.4.1 and 5.5.1.

<sup>50</sup> Goertz, “Descriptive-Causal Generalizations: ‘Empirical Laws’ in the Social Sciences?”

Given the shortage of laws of human conduct and laws of society, it is not easy to invoke laws and mechanisms to support claims of connection between events, actions and features of environments. It is then natural and sensible to compensate for the shortage of laws by drawing on our accumulated implicit wisdom as to how human beings think and act. This can be done by exploiting humanistic resources, which in their various ways capture much of that implicit wisdom.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the shortage of laws, it is sometimes possible to give accounts that rely heavily on laws and mechanisms. In economics, for example, theories can be used to set out how values of different economic variables associated with the production of goods and services are apt to be related to one another, and consideration of the technicalities of production and of how producers are assumed to think can explain why they should be related in those ways.<sup>52</sup> There is also scope to explain by reference to mechanisms in the social sciences more generally.<sup>53</sup> And there is scope to blend generalizations and particular facts through the construction of analytic narratives.<sup>54</sup>

Having said that, even in economics explanations are not often of the quality that is commonly available in the natural sciences. Components of identified mechanisms and

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the lack of laws and of reliance on an understanding that is founded on experience of human life see Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History”.

<sup>52</sup> This can be seen from any economics textbook, for example Lipsey and Chrystal, *Economics*, chapter 5 (in the thirteenth edition).

<sup>53</sup> Examples can be found in the chapters of Manzo (ed.), *Analytical Sociology: Actions and Networks*. Mechanisms are especially conspicuous in chapter 3, Wikström, “Why Crime Happens: A Situational Action Theory”; chapter 8, Grossman and Baldassarri, “The Impact of Elections on Cooperation: Evidence from a Lab-in-the-Field Experiment in Uganda”.

<sup>54</sup> Alexandrova, “When Analytic Narratives Explain”.



interactions of those components are likely to be described in ways which do not specify all of the details that might make a difference to the operation of the mechanisms or the outcomes. This incompleteness, along with the typical lack of a full set of laws which are anywhere near exceptionless, will mean that widespread exceptions to the normal operation of a given mechanism often cannot be ruled out. (Exceptions might not in fact be widespread, but it would often not be possible to be sure in advance that they would not be widespread.) Such difficulties may be eliminable, and explanation of the highest quality may be achievable, within a theoretical model such as a simplified model of an economy in which everyone has perfect information and everyone makes economically rational decisions. But such an account would not represent the real world accurately.

In the humanities, the prospects for explanations of comparable quality to those given in the natural sciences are even slimmer than they are in the social sciences. Even when generalizations and particular facts fit together nicely, we may be concerned that generalizations have been tailored and particular facts have been selected to produce this happy result. In that case success should not be taken to show that an author has really got to grips with the workings of the world.<sup>55</sup>

### **2.5.3 Flexibility**

The exploitation of humanistic resources leads to work that falls far short of the precision and the conclusiveness (so far as reasonably foreseeable) of much work in the

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<sup>55</sup> This concern would for example apply to the open formulae approach set out in Alexandrova, “When Analytic Narratives Explain”, section 3.6. Sections 3.2 to 3.4 of that paper discuss the extent to which idealization may be a problem.

natural sciences. When everyday concepts and principles guide work, this is to be expected. But the looseness of everyday concepts and principles can also be helpful. Looseness means that researchers are not driven to write about human beings and their societies in one precisely specified way. Rather, humanistic resources open up a range of possibilities. This allows researchers to be flexible. They do not need to impose caricatures of human beings, like that of *homo economicus*. Such caricatures might well be necessary if tightly defined concepts and tightly formulated principles were to be used.

We should not claim that looseness of concepts and principles, and flexibility as to how to write, are good things in themselves. If the goal is to understand the world aright, their opposites are in general preferable. But we can still note that looseness and flexibility have their advantages as well as their disadvantages. These advantages give an additional reason to exploit humanistic resources.

## **2.6 Hermeneutics**

We shall now turn to hermeneutics, an approach to historical work that has a long tradition. It is of interest to us because it offers a way to carry out work of the kind that relies on the exploitation of humanistic resources in a disciplined fashion. Such a source of discipline is particularly valuable because the strict tests of claims which are often available in the natural sciences are only rarely available in relation to claims in the humanities that do more than merely report evidence, make obvious deductions from evidence or catalogue events.

### 2.6.1 The tradition

The hermeneutic tradition is a rich source of methods of work that are appropriate when a historian must feel her way into her subject matter, repeatedly reviewing her interpretations of evidence.

The tradition is a long and complex one.<sup>56</sup> We shall be selective, and shall not try to be faithful to the tradition as a whole. While a great deal of the hermeneutic tradition is concerned with historical work, thinkers within the tradition have made recommendations as to how the past should be studied which vary too much for us to want to endorse views that are specific to individuals. They also vary too much for an endorsement of the whole set of recommendations to be meaningful.

In addition to selecting to suit our own requirements, we shall abstract from the specific recommendations of various thinkers and consider the general idea of careful work back and forth between interpretations and evidence, and among interpretations which need to fit together. This idea is widespread across the tradition.

Conveniently, our approach of selecting and abstracting will save us from having to commit to any view that the methods of the human sciences must, by virtue of the role of meanings, be quite different from the methods of the natural sciences. There are arguments that such a view would be

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<sup>56</sup>For a detailed history of hermeneutics see Detel, *Geist und Verstehen: Historische Grundlagen einer modernen Hermeneutik*, part 1, "Geschichte der Hermeneutik und Theorie des Geistes". For a critical survey of hermeneutic thought see Forster, *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*, chapter 9. For a brief summary set in the context of the study of history see Makkreel, "Hermeneutics".

mistaken.<sup>57</sup>

The approach of the part of the tradition that is relevant to our concerns is to make sense of a text both by identifying meanings of its parts, the words and sentences which have meanings given by the rules and the usage of the relevant language, and by identifying meanings of the whole text. This part of the tradition is associated with Herder, Schleiermacher, Droysen and Dilthey.<sup>58</sup> Details varied considerably as between these authors, and further variations were introduced later.

A central concern of this part of the tradition is that the initial reading of a text should not be the final reading. The initial reading is likely to involve comprehending each sentence first and then assembling the sentences into a whole, with this first stage being heavily influenced by a modern outlook and probably not taking much account of the complexities of the circumstances in which the text was written. There need to be several more readings, if the meanings of parts and the meaning of the whole as they stood at the time when a text was written are to be identified with sufficient accuracy. These subsequent readings will take place within a process in which the reader goes back and forth between readings of parts, readings of the whole, and information about the context, repeatedly

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<sup>57</sup> Mantzavinos, *Naturalistische Hermeneutik*, translated as *Naturalistic Hermeneutics*.

<sup>58</sup> For an account of the development of the relevant kind of hermeneutics in the hands of Herder see Michael Forster's introduction to Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, pages xiv-xxi. For Schleiermacher see Hausheer, "Three Major Originators of the Concept of *Verstehen*: Vico, Herder, Schleiermacher", section 4. For Droysen see Maclean, "Johann Gustav Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics". For Dilthey see Bulhof, *Wilhelm Dilthey: A Hermeneutic Approach to the Study of History and Culture*, chapter 4; Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Pioneer of the Human Studies*, chapter 10.

making adjustments to the meanings attributed to parts and the whole until a satisfactory equilibrium is reached.

The context includes the author's entire body of writing, the ways in which the relevant language was used by others at the time and, in some versions of the tradition, the author's actions aside from writing and the non-linguistic historical context. Attribution of a meaning to a text as a whole is constrained both by the latest meanings attributed to parts and by the wider context, especially elements that would indicate the author's psychological traits. These constraints allow some potential meanings to be attributed to the whole, while ruling out other meanings. Attributions of meanings to parts are likewise constrained both by the latest meaning attributed to the whole and by the wider context, especially the state of the relevant language at the time. These constraints allow some potential meanings to be attributed to parts, while ruling out other meanings. Moreover, it is not only attributions of meaning to the whole and to parts which can be adjusted. There may be scope to make adjustments to background theories, principles of interpretation that are put to work, and views of the context.

## **2.6.2 The extension to ways of life and conduct**

### **2.6.2.1 Using the tradition**

A historian may well juggle views of the events or ways of life studied and interpretations of the evidence. But her task will often not be limited to, and will sometimes not even include, establishing the meanings of texts. Despite this, there is scope to make use of the hermeneutic tradition. A

general form of procedure, the juggling of overall views and repeatedly reinterpreted detailed evidence, can be found both in the interpretation of texts and in other work that aims to make sense of the ways of life or conduct of people in the past. The central figure among those within the hermeneutic tradition who have seen it as applicable to the writing of history generally, and who have done so while still highlighting systematic ways of working, is Wilhelm Dilthey.<sup>59</sup>

Moving on to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, we find two other things that are of great interest to us and are applicable to the writing of history generally. (What we say about them here reflects our own purposes just as much as it reflects Gadamer's own ideas as set out in the places cited.)

The first thing of interest is a discussion of the role of the historian's starting position and her consequent ability to make judgements as to meaning in advance of a full consideration of all the sources. We might be tempted to stigmatize such judgements as liable to bias historical research, but they are essential tools with which to come to an understanding. Such judgements must however be tested against the sources, and the historian needs to be aware of her judgements made in advance.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See in particular Dilthey, "Das Verstehen anderer Personen und ihrer Lebensäußerungen", translated as "The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Manifestations of Life".

<sup>60</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, volume 1, part 2, section 2.1.a.a, "Heideggers Aufdeckung der Vorstruktur des Verstehens", translated as *Truth and Method*, part 2, section 2.1.a.1, "Heidegger's Disclosure of the Fore-Structure of Understanding". See also volume 1, part 2, section 2.1.c, "Die hermeneutische Bedeutung des Zeitenabstandes", translated as part 2, section 2.1.b.3, "The Hermeneutic Significance of Temporal Distance", which expands on this topic and also sets the stage for the next thing we shall mention, the process of the fusion of horizons.

The second thing of interest is a characterization of the process of achieving understanding as involving a fusion of the horizons of the historian and the people studied into a single expanded horizon, a task that should be performed with full awareness of the historian's initial horizon and its difference from the horizon of the people studied.<sup>61</sup> (A related approach is that of Charles Taylor, when he argues for the use of a "language of perspicuous contrast" in which members of one society can come to understand another society.<sup>62</sup>) Gadamer's discussion of the historian's starting position and his idea of a fusion of horizons are of more interest in our context than his wider reflections on how it is possible to understand the past.<sup>63</sup>

### 2.6.2.1.1 Differences

While the general form of hermeneutic procedure may carry over from the study of texts to a wider range of historical work, some details are different when the objective is not to interpret texts but to make sense of human conduct. We shall note a few differences here.

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<sup>61</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, volume 1, part 2, section 2.1.d, "Das Prinzip der Wirkungsgeschichte", translated as *Truth and Method*, part 2, section 2.1.b.4, "The Principle of History of Effect (Wirkungsgeschichte)"; volume 1, part 2, section 2.3.c, "Der hermeneutische Vorrang der Frage", translated as part 2, section 2.3.c, "The Hermeneutic Priority of the Question".

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity", part 2. The idea of such a language is introduced on page 125, and the connection with Gadamer is made on page 126.

<sup>63</sup> These wider reflections are found throughout Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, volume 1, part 2, "Ausweitung der Wahrheitsfrage auf das Verstehen in den Geisteswissenschaften", translated as *Truth and Method*, part 2, "The Extension of the Question of Truth to Understanding in the Human Sciences".

One difference is that in the interpretation of texts, the evidence is primarily the words of the texts on which the interpreter comments, whereas in other work pieces of evidence may play merely supporting roles, rather than leading roles, in the accounts that historians write.

A second difference is that the range of types of evidence will in general be wider when the task is to make sense of human conduct. Pieces of evidence will include written records, material remains, information about the state of technology, geographical information, and many other things to which historians pay attention.

A third difference is that when the task is to make sense of human conduct, the range of types of view taken by historians will in general be wider. Views will sometimes be of what people meant when they said or wrote certain things, but they will often be of which circumstances, events, and actions of other people led the people of immediate interest to act in certain ways (whether on specific occasions or generally), or how people of some relevant type thought at the relevant time, or what they valued or found unacceptable.

Finally, as we noted in section 2.1.3, there is an approach to historical work that seeks to avoid exploring the minds of historical figures. There is a contrast here with thinkers in the hermeneutic tradition who have seen such exploration as important. Schleiermacher is the leading example, although his interest in the exploration of minds arose out of the fact that his subject matter was the meanings of texts.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik mit besonderer Beziehung auf das Neue Testament*, “Hermeneutik: Einleitung” and “Hermeneutik, zweiter Theil: Die psychologische Auslegung”, translated as *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, “Hermeneutics: Introduction” and “Hermeneutics, Part Two: Psychological Explication”.



Dilthey, whose interests extended beyond the meanings of texts to the interpretation of the past generally, also started by attaching particular importance to the exploration of minds, to be conducted in empathetic ways. While he gradually moved away from using the individual mind as a starting point to using the visible social world of meanings, expressions and actions as a starting point, he did not go so far as to abandon empathetic approaches.<sup>65</sup>

### 2.6.2.2 Benefits of the tradition

A historian's awareness of the hermeneutic tradition and her being influenced by it as she works may increase the proportion of the claims she makes that are respectable, both by encouraging her to keep referring to the evidence and by encouraging her to work toward a view which is internally coherent. There are several reasons why the tradition may be helpful, but reasons that derive from ideas about textual interpretation differ from reasons that derive from ideas about historical work in general, although the two sets of reasons do overlap.

We shall start with ideas about textual interpretation. The tradition of textual interpretation has been developed over a long period and in a self-critical way, so its recommendations as to how to juggle overall views and interpretations of detailed evidence have been put to the test. We may reasonably hope that these well-tested recommendations will be of use in historical work generally. The tradition encourages authors to consider a wide range of evidence, covering not only the people of immediate interest but also their contexts. The tradition also supplies

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<sup>65</sup> On both Schleiermacher and Dilthey see Kögler and Stueber, "Introduction: Empathy, Simulation, and Interpretation in the Philosophy of Social Science", section 5.

a model for thinking systematically about different types and levels of work, about objectivity, and about circularity in reasoning.<sup>66</sup> It has indeed been argued that systematic approaches borrowed from the natural sciences can be employed in the interpretation of texts.<sup>67</sup> And even without making such a connection with the natural sciences there is scope to say that a form of objectivity is available, even if not the kind of objectivity that is available in the natural sciences.<sup>68</sup>

One useful effect of awareness of the tradition should be to restrain any impulse to explain someone's conduct by reference to their general attitudes and characteristics until it has been confirmed that the attribution of those attitudes and characteristics is supported by evidence drawn from a context that is wider than the immediate context of the conduct in question, and that the attribution does not conflict with other evidence drawn from any such wider context.

Turning to ideas about historical work in general, we again find a useful emphasis on the need both for the historian to work systematically and for her to be aware of how she works. The hermeneutic tradition tends to make procedures of coming to understand explicit.<sup>69</sup> This

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<sup>66</sup> Seebohm, *Hermeneutics. Method and Methodology*, chapter 6.

<sup>67</sup> Mantzavinos, "Text Interpretation as a Scientific Activity". Mantzavinos's line of argument does however place him outside some parts of the hermeneutic tradition. It moves him away from the view that the role of meanings in the human sciences requires their methods to be quite different from the methods of the natural sciences.

<sup>68</sup> Betti, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*, translated as "Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*". Betti had significant disagreements with Gadamer, but fortunately we merely borrow from the tradition so we do not need to resolve such disagreements.

<sup>69</sup> Kögler, "Empathy, Dialogical Self, and Reflexive Interpretation: The Symbolic Source of Simulation", section 1.

encourages reflection as to what can be worked out at each stage and on what basis. Consciousness of procedures and reflection on what can be worked out and why should increase the probability that mistakes will be noticed.

We also find reflections on the role of judgements made in advance and on the process of coming to an understanding of the past, and a reminder that it is important for the historian to be aware of both her judgements in advance and the role of her own position in the process of coming to an understanding. This philosophical work does not supply the historian with detailed methods to use, but awareness of it should alert the historian to the danger of being led astray by the content of her own starting position. In particular it should help the historian to avoid presentism, that is, reading her own perspective back into the past.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the work of Gadamer to which we have referred should reassure the historian that she should not even try to wipe her mind clean of her existing views before she starts work.

Finally, we should note that our emphasis here has been highly selective. This reflects our approach of drawing attention to what happens to be useful in the hermeneutic tradition. Specifically, we have concentrated on what reflection and a methodical approach can do to control the work of historians. We have for example not drawn on arguments related to objectivity, realism and relativism that are based on the general nature of interpretation.<sup>71</sup> Such arguments operate at too abstract a level to serve our purpose. We first take it that the claims that interest us are

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<sup>70</sup> Hunt, "Against Presentism", decries the vice. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, pages 135-140, analyses it.

<sup>71</sup> For a survey of some arguments of that nature and a discussion of their limitations see Detel, *Geist und Verstehen: Historische Grundlagen einer modernen Hermeneutik*, section 10.2.

not irremediably subjective. We then enquire into the ways in which historians come to make claims, and the forms of reassurance as to specific claims that may be available.

# Chapter 3

## The sense that is made

In this chapter, we shall consider the end result of the historian's work. In section 3.1, we shall consider the influence of commonality of human nature on how historical figures are perceived. While this section is in itself about the process of making sense, we include it here because it provides a setting for section 3.2. In that section, we shall explore the tradition of seeing historical accounts as providing *Verstehen*. Then in section 3.3, we shall turn to some concerns we might have about claims that are made when sense is made of the past in the ways we discuss.

### 3.1 Commonality and perception

Commonality of human nature has considerable influence on how historical figures are perceived.

### 3.1.1 Human ways

When a historian writes an account of human conduct, she considers the available evidence in the light of a view of the people studied as having had human ways comparable to her own. This view will usually be implicit, but it will still affect her and her readers' perception of the people studied.

The people studied will be seen as having been motivated to act in certain ways by specific considerations, whether events, circumstances, or the actions of others, and those considerations will be ones that could have motivated the historian or her readers, either as they were or as they might have been, to act in the same ways. (We shall discuss what hypothetical modifications of historians and their readers are allowed in sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3.) The people studied will also be seen as having been able to feel comfortable in certain habitual behaviour for certain reasons, and the reasons will be ones that might also have allowed the historian or her readers, either as they were or as they might have been, to feel comfortable in the same habitual behaviour. Seeing historical figures as so motivated or able to feel comfortable will allow a direct humane comprehension of them, of their actions and of their attitudes to events and the actions of others.

We do not claim that historians or their readers will be conscious that the considerations could have motivated them or that the reasons might have allowed them to feel comfortable. They might be conscious of those things, but even if they were not, the common ground between the people studied, the historian and her readers would still help historical accounts to flow and make sense of the past.

We also do not argue that historians should work by standing in the shoes of the people studied. We only note

from our external perspective that historians and their readers could have been motivated or might have been able to feel comfortable, given their internal perspectives. Standing in shoes is however not excluded by the fact that our own aim is limited in this way.

Finally, in the phrases “act in the same ways” and “feel comfortable in the same habitual behaviour”, the words “the same” are important. It is not enough that the motives and the reasons of the historical persons might have had some influence over historians and their readers, so that they could have been motivated to do something or other, or might have been able to feel comfortable in some habitual behaviour or other. We require that the motives and the reasons would have been capable of motivating the same actions or allowing comfort in the same habitual behaviour.

### **3.1.2 Ranges of motives and reasons**

The references to considerations that could have motivated the historian or her readers and to reasons that might have allowed the historian or her readers to feel comfortable may appear to be rather restrictive. But “could have motivated” and “might have allowed the historian to feel comfortable” allow considerable latitude. We only require that motivating considerations be ones that could have motivated the historian to act in the same ways, either as she was or if she had been different in ways she could imagine. Likewise we only require that the reasons might have allowed the historian to feel comfortable in the same habitual behaviour, either as she was or if she had been different in ways she could imagine. This allowance for the historian’s having been different in ways she could imagine extends to her readers and their capacity for imagination.

We again do not argue that historians should work by standing in the shoes of the people studied. That might be thought to follow from the introduction of historians' and their readers' imagination as to how they might have been. But no actual imagination is required. We merely propose hypothetical imagination so as to identify the scope of the differences allowed.

### 3.1.3 Limits to comprehension

There are limits to the range of differences we envisage, which in turn set limits to the ability to comprehend historical figures and events in the way we are considering here.

“Different in ways she could imagine” is restricted to what the historian could imagine from the inside, with an empathetic grasp of the alternative character. It is not meant to extend to detached thoughts that she could in theory have had certain characteristics which would have allowed appropriate motivation or feelings of comfort, when her actual self would not be able to have an inner grasp of what that would be like. The same limit would apply to her readers.

The consequent existence of limits on the scope to comprehend in the way we are considering here is comparable to the existence of imaginative resistance.<sup>1</sup> That phenomenon is mainly associated with fiction and with ethical imaginability. It could however be extended to factual accounts, in which the difficulty of the historian or the reader might

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<sup>1</sup> Imaginative resistance is analysed in Gendler, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance”; Gendler, “Imaginative Resistance Revisited”; Stueber, “Imagination, Empathy, and Moral Deliberation: The Case of Imaginative Resistance”.



be captured in the words “That is how it really was, but I cannot relate to the people involved”, and to a broader range of difficulties than ethical ones.

While the difficulties may not be limited to ethical ones, the ethical incomprehensibility of certain conduct is an important type of limit. There are instances in which we cannot see any way to regard the conduct in question as acceptable. The question “How could they have done that?” may be felt to have no answer that modern people could regard as providing justification. How, for example, could a modern historian relate to people who would bury the members of a ruler’s harem (alive or killed for the occasion) in the ruler’s tomb?<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that no sense can be made of such conduct. It is just that it may not be possible to see the people studied as having been motivated by considerations that might also have motivated us to act in the same way. For example, sense has been made of ritual human sacrifice by reference to the role it can play in supporting social stratification.<sup>3</sup> But that piece of work relies on careful statistical analysis, rather than on laying out information in a way to which the reader could relate by seeing that he too might have been motivated to engage in human sacrifice.

It is sometimes possible to see people who acted in ethically incomprehensible ways as motivated by considerations that

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<sup>2</sup> One example of this kind of procedure is set out in Ssu-ma Ch’ien, *The Grand Scribe’s Records, volume 1: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, “The First Emperor of Ch’in, Basic Annals 6”, section 265, page 155. Human remains consistent with that account have been found: Cao and Zhang, “Emperor Qin Shihuang’s Mausoleum site in Xi’an”, page 42.

<sup>3</sup> Watts, Sheehan, Atkinson, Bulbulia and Gray, “Ritual Human Sacrifice Promoted and Sustained the Evolution of Stratified Societies”.

might have motivated us to act in the same ways. There may be scope to see historical figures as motivated by such considerations, but within a context which meant that the consequences of their acting as they did strike people outside that context as unspeakably evil. An example is given by attempts to explain how large numbers of people could willingly have participated in the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> The explanations tend to be reasonably closely related to an everyday understanding of human nature, for example in drawing attention to the willingness of people to follow orders when a system that encourages obedience has been created. Motivation by orders can make perfectly good sense to historians and their readers. They may come to see how actions which would normally not even be considered may become possible for people in certain contexts. It may even be possible for a historian or her readers to say “I might have done that in those circumstances”.

Looking beyond the ethical, perceived irrationality in the thought of people studied can also present obstacles to comprehension. Special approaches are needed to deal with such cases.<sup>5</sup> Even the initial diagnosis of error in the thought of the people studied can require considerable care.<sup>6</sup>

Even in cases of perceived irrationality, it may be possible for a historian to see motivations that she and her readers would actually share. Consider for example the consultation of oracles in order to determine the best course of action.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a survey of explanations, set in the context of a discussion of the relevance of the Milgram experiments, see Overy, “‘Ordinary Men,’ Extraordinary Circumstances: Historians, Social Psychology, and the Holocaust”.

<sup>5</sup> For a critical introduction to such approaches see Lukes, “The Problem of Apparently Irrational Beliefs”.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd, *Being, Humanity, and Understanding: Studies in Ancient and Modern Societies*, chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> There are examples in Herodotus. For a discussion of these which

We now recognize that such activity is entirely pointless if it is predicated on the staff of oracles having access to the gods rather than their having human and natural sources of information, except perhaps when the point is to have one's confidence bolstered rather than to improve decision-making. But a historian can still see both the people studied and herself as wanting to know the likely consequences of alternative actions and as inclined to use whatever seems to be a useful predictor. The fact that ideas of what may be a useful predictor have moved on does not detract from that. The historian could easily see that if those ideas had not moved on, she too could have been motivated to consult an oracle.

## 3.2 Verstehen

There is a long tradition of thought about historical work that is centred on the concept of *Verstehen*. An exploration of some aspects of that tradition will give us a way to look at the sense that historians make of the past. In setting out what is involved in *Verstehen*, we shall draw on what we have said in section 3.1 about the perception of historical figures.

In section 3.2.1, we shall indicate what we mean by *Verstehen*. Then in section 3.2.2, we shall look at the traditional contrast between *Erklären* and *Verstehen*.

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makes it clear that we should not see the Delphic Oracle simply as an ancient version of a modern source of information see Fairbanks, "Herodotus and the Oracle at Delphi". For examples from the Dodona Oracle see Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks*, chapter 5 and appendix 1.

### 3.2.1 The concept of Verstehen

The concept of Verstehen has a complex history. There is no precise and universally agreed content of the concept. Rather, the content tends to emerge from uses that are made of the concept.<sup>8</sup> But the general idea is that a historian and her readers achieve Verstehen when they achieve a humane understanding that is of a broadly empathetic nature.

An account that confers Verstehen will connect events, states of affairs, actions and ways of life in such a way as to make sense of the actions and ways of life. It can make that sense when the historian and her readers see the people involved in the light we set out in section 3.1.1. Then the historian and her readers will see agents as having been motivated by certain considerations, where those considerations could also have motivated them to do the same things, and they will see the people studied as having been able to feel comfortable in certain habitual behaviour for certain reasons, where those reasons might also have allowed them to feel comfortable in the same behaviour. (As before, there is no requirement for the historian or her readers to be conscious that the considerations or the reasons might have worked for them too. And as before, limited hypothetical modifications of the historian and her readers are permitted.)

We should however not read back into our earlier remarks details of what Verstehen involves that some authors have proposed. For example, some authors propose reading the minds of the people studied.<sup>9</sup> But nothing in what we have

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<sup>8</sup> A concise indication of the complexities involved is given by Scholz, “Verstehen”.

<sup>9</sup> For a form of mind-reading see Detel, *Geist und Verstehen: Historische Grundlagen einer modernen Hermeneutik*, section 8.1.

said requires that it be appropriate to see the historian as doing that, although we have not excluded mind-reading either.

### 3.2.2 **Erklären and Verstehen**

We have not defined *Verstehen*. It is hard to do more than indicate its nature. But we can fill out the concept by saying something about the traditional contrast between *Erklären* and *Verstehen*.

*Erklären* and *Verstehen* are two things that an account of some phenomenon may offer. The customary translations of “*Erklären*” and “*Verstehen*” are “explanation” and “understanding” respectively. We shall however use the German words, both so as not to import assumptions through the act of translation and so as to keep the English words available for more general use.

*Erklären* is the usual goal of the natural sciences, although it may also be available in other disciplines. An account that offers *Erklären* will typically explain a phenomenon by reference to regularities and reliable mechanisms that are found in the world. Such accounts often invoke, or at least implicitly rely on, laws of nature in order to make good the claims that regularities exist or that mechanisms will reliably function in the ways that are needed for the accounts to be explanatory. (Mechanisms may be regarded as reliable when they would work as advertised and lead to the advertised results on a high proportion of occasions on which the initial conditions for them to operate were satisfied.)

Writing such an account tends to involve a detached consideration of phenomena, describing and analysing them

as objectively as possible. The human nature of those who write or read the explanations tends to be irrelevant, even when human beings are the objects of study (for example, in a study of human biology).

Accounts that offer *Verstehen*, on the other hand, are conspicuous in the humanities and the social sciences, disciplines in which accounts make sense of human ways of life or conduct. The consideration of phenomena is not so detached, and the human nature of the writers and readers of accounts is important.

Accounts that are given in reliance on their authors seeing the people studied in the way we set out in section 3.1.1 can easily be given in the absence of the well-defined regularities in the operation of the world that are generally needed to provide *Erklären*. A shared grasp of what it is to have certain characteristics and desires, and what it is to choose what to do, adds a richness of unstated detail which makes up for the absence of well-defined regularities.

It is possible for a historical account to offer *Erklären* or something close to it, while its success in doing so still depends on a broadly empathetic grasp of human nature of the kind that is more normally the route to *Verstehen*. This can happen when the acceptability of a claim that a reliable mechanism was at work depends on such a grasp of human nature.

Consider for example an account of the Industrial Revolution that sets out mechanisms of innovation and investment, and then shows how their efficacy was underpinned by levels of trust and standards of conduct that allowed people to work together on substantial enterprises and have confidence that their businesses would not be taken from

them dishonestly.<sup>10</sup> Readers will grasp empathetically how trust and standards of conduct played vital roles, because they are central to so many human interactions and their absence unnerves people directly.

Another example is provided by an explanation of the economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s which is given partly in terms of institutional arrangements that offered fixed exchange rates, thereby making it easier to make long-term investments in fixed capital rather than hold capital in more liquid form.<sup>11</sup> A common human nature allows us to see that this part of the explanation makes sense. It is human nature to take such precautions as appear to be necessary, and then to take opportunities to make money when risks have been reduced by institutions. But the substance of the explanation falls squarely within technical economics, rather than psychology. (It should however be noted that this is only part of the explanation offered. Other parts, for example those that set out the attitudes of the leaders of trades unions and the reasons for those attitudes, succeed in making sense of the past primarily by exploiting a common human nature.<sup>12</sup>)

Additional examples may be found in comparative-historical analysis.<sup>13</sup> This field is largely populated by social and political scientists rather than historians, but there are examples in which the aim is to make sense of specific historical events rather than establish general principles. Thus a study of how institutions of central and local

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<sup>10</sup> Mokyry, "The Institutional Origins of the Industrial Revolution". Mokyry sets out the importance of trust and standards of conduct in section 2.3.

<sup>11</sup> Marglin, "Lessons of the Golden Age: An Overview", section 1.3.

<sup>12</sup> Marglin, "Lessons of the Golden Age: An Overview", sections 1.1 and 1.2.

<sup>13</sup> For a survey of this type of work see Mahoney and Thelen (eds.), *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis*.

government developed in the early modern period examines both the backgrounds against which institutions developed and interactions between institutions.<sup>14</sup> Interactions are described at the institutional level rather than as acts of individuals working within the institutions. This holds out the promise of identifying mechanisms which would not need to be seen as dependent for their operation on the idiosyncrasies of individuals. Evidence to support such accounts must of course make reference to what individuals did, in order to show how institutions actually had their claimed effects. And it will be an empathetic grasp of human beings that will allow accounts of what individuals did to be seen as plausible independently of the fact that those accounts contribute to accounts of institutional change. But there may be a degree of abstraction from identified individuals, in that claims may be made about the conduct of holders of particular offices or types of office generally. Such abstraction will move accounts a little closer to giving Erklären.

Mechanisms set out in historical accounts are likely to be loose ones. As we noted in section 2.5.2, there is a shortage of laws of nature, and indeed of regularities that might be comparable to laws of nature, which characterize the world in terms that are normally used when studying human individuals and societies. This shortage makes it hard to have confidence that any identified mechanisms would be reliable ones. So while it might be possible for a description of a situation, processes and some conduct both to be couched in human terms and to amount to the description of a mechanism which led to the conduct, it would not usually be appropriate to see it as describing a mechanism that would be of general application, whether actually (if the initial conditions for its operation actually recurred)

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<sup>14</sup> Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*.



or hypothetically (if we must imagine those conditions recurring). We shall give an example of the potential for mechanisms not to be of general application in section [4.1.3.4](#).

## **3.3 Concerns about claims**

Concerns may be raised about claims that are made following work in the ways outlined in chapter [2](#), or while viewing the people studied in the way indicated in section [3.1.1](#). In this section, we shall consider some concerns.

### **3.3.1 Direct seeing**

We need to consider whether reliance on seeing directly that certain facts were motives for actions or reasons to feel comfortable in certain habitual behaviour might undermine historical claims. After all, the process of seeing directly is not open to checking in the way that reports of primary sources are open to checking.

In fact, direct seeing's playing a role in the process of making sense of the past need not undermine the claims made at the end of that process. The nature of the claims would provide some defence against undermining, because a claim that some given circumstance motivated a given action, or was a reason why people found some habitual behaviour comfortable, would state a purported fact. It would not indicate an internal sensation of the person making the claim. So even when direct seeing is a route to claims, it is not an element in those claims. Moreover, the fact that direct seeing is a tool of limited capacity and

application would not count against the claims made, any more than the fact that we rely on specific sensory tools which have their limits and to which there are conceivable alternatives undermines statements of information we have acquired through the use of our senses. A tool may be effective even if it has limited capacities or there are alternatives. We do not deny that the exploitation of specific humanistic resources may sometimes lead us astray. We are indeed about to consider, in sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3, some ways in which things may go wrong. But we can say that the mere involvement of direct seeing in the exploitation of humanistic resources does not undermine the claims made.

We should also note that there is no loss of the identity of the historian or her readers. They all remain well aware that they are distinct from the people studied. This preserves a distance which facilitates critical thought. We may draw a parallel with the point made by Peter Goldie that when the task is to understand another person, it can be important to keep one's own position separate from that of the person who is to be understood.<sup>15</sup>

### **3.3.2 Mistakes about normative attitudes and dispositions**

Another concern about historical claims might arise out of the fact that normative attitudes and dispositions of historical figures may have played a vital role in connecting those figures' circumstances to their conduct, in particular by determining which elements in their circumstances operated as motives. This significance of normative attitudes and dispositions means that historians and their readers

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<sup>15</sup> Goldie, "Dramatic Irony, Narrative, and the External Perspective".

must often have a reasonably accurate, even if often only implicit, grasp of those attitudes and dispositions if they are to make sense of historical figures' conduct in a way that represents the figures without distortion.

The uncritical exploitation of current folk psychology and thick concepts implies an assumption that the relevant attitudes and dispositions were pretty much the same as they are at the time when the historian writes. That assumption could be mistaken. If it were mistaken, there would be a risk of claiming connections between events, states of affairs, actions and ways of life which should not be claimed. The danger would be all the greater because the nature of the error would automatically make the claims plausible, both to their author and to her readers. They would be plausible precisely because they would be supported by current folk psychology and thick concepts.

The possibility of this kind of mistake need not however undermine historical claims, so long as appropriate precautions are taken. Careful work on recorded conduct, written sources and material remains can allow historians to get a reasonable idea of normative attitudes and dispositions that prevailed in the past.<sup>16</sup> If such work is carried out, the risk is greatly reduced.

### 3.3.3 Adjustments for different societies

We have just noted the risk of making mistakes about normative attitudes and dispositions. More generally, it may be necessary to make adjustments to current folk psychology and thick concepts for different times and

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<sup>16</sup> For an example see Hölkeskamp, *Reconstructing the Roman Republic: An Ancient Political Culture and Modern Research*, especially chapters 4 and 5.

places. (The expression “the adjustment of thick concepts” will cover both adjustment of the whole set of concepts in use by adding or removing concepts, and adjustment of the contents of individual concepts.)

Any such adjustments need to be controlled. In this section we shall say something about the need for adjustment, the danger of inappropriate adjustment, and how adjustments may be controlled.

Our attention is here limited to folk psychology and thick concepts, and does not range over the other humanistic resources. As regards social conventions, it may very well be necessary to recognize conventions then no longer exist, but they are likely to be well-evidenced. Any challenging adjustments would be adjustments to folk psychology or thick concepts which had to be made in order to see how the conventions might have had a hold on people (assuming that they were not imposed with threats of punishment for non-observance). As regards narrative practice and social abilities, their contents are either parallel to folk-psychological principles or too ill-specified to make it easy even to identify changes that are less than drastic.

### **3.3.3.1 The need for adjustment**

We are well aware that people in the past differed from us in various ways. We may even be getting close to a neurological understanding of certain types of cultural difference, although such work is in its early stages.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Immordino-Yang, “Studying the Effects of Culture by Integrating Neuroscientific With Ethnographic Approaches”. For the whole field of neural correlates of affects see Armony and Vuilleumier (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Affective Neuroscience*.

It would be too quick for historians to refrain from exploiting humanistic resources in order to write accounts merely because they did not think that they themselves, as they actually were, would have been at all likely to have responded to circumstances in the ways that the people studied responded. It is important to allow for differences, particularly differences between what people valued or found unacceptable in the past and what they value or find unacceptable now. If appropriate adjustments to current folk psychology and thick concepts are made, it may turn out to be perfectly possible to exploit humanistic resources and still write good accounts.

We set out a wide but limited scope to adjustments to the mentalities of historians in section 3.1. There we spoke of the people studied being seen as having been motivated to act in certain ways by specific considerations that could have motivated the historian, or as having been able to feel comfortable in certain habitual behaviour for reasons that might also have allowed the historian to feel comfortable. As we noted there, we let “could” and “might” allow for the historian to have been different from her actual self in ways she could imagine from the inside.

The adjustments to folk psychology and thick concepts we have in mind here are ones that would, if imagined by a historian as being made for the purposes of her own life, amount to changes to her own mentality within this scope. (We emphasize again that this procedure of hypothetical imagination does not require the historian to stand in the shoes of people studied. She need not actually adjust her own mentality, even temporarily and purely for the purposes of her research.) Wider adjustments may sometimes be appropriate, for example to deal with extreme cases of the type we mentioned in section 3.1.3, and we do not rule them out. But such wider adjustments would

move the historian away from the conduct of historical work through the exploitation of humanistic resources supported by the existence of a largely common human nature.

We can illustrate the process of adjustment within the limits we have set out by reference to two examples in which historians have drawn attention to ways of thought that are no longer current in order to help make sense of the past.

Our first example is this. It has been argued that in order to understand how the Roman Empire worked despite the limits of straightforward coercive force, we must recognize the significance of the fact that Romans responded to the demands of honour, both as possessors of it and by respecting it, in ways in which we would no longer respond.<sup>18</sup> The idea that honour is to be valued has not disappeared from our thought. But the idea is much weaker now than it was in the past, and ideas of what might be required to defend one's honour have changed considerably. Thus the current thick concept of honour, and the folk-psychological principles that it captures, need adjustment in order to see how honour could have played a key role in the functioning of the Roman Empire.

Our second example is this. An understanding of some medieval ideas of who counted as foreign and of what it meant for someone to be a foreigner can help to make sense of attitudes to heretics and people of other religions.<sup>19</sup> In order to make sense of the past in the way proposed, we must adjust the thick concept of foreignness and the folk-psychological principles that it captures.

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<sup>18</sup> Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World*.

<sup>19</sup> Connell, "Foreigners and Fear", sections A and B.

### 3.3.3.2 The danger of inappropriate adjustment

The need for adjustment gives rise to a concern. If we were to allow uncontrolled adjustment or non-adjustment, all sorts of poor accounts might come to look like good ones. A historian might accidentally suppose a way of thought that was not in fact close to the way in which the people studied thought, but that made it easy to write accounts that were plausible because everything seemed to fit together well.

One risk is that a historian might start from her own folk psychology or set of thick concepts but fail to tweak them in the right ways or to the right extent. Another risk is that she might suppose some fresh folk-psychological principles or thick concepts, believing them to be appropriate when they were not.

In relation to thick concepts, the difficulty of adjustment is evidenced by the fact that anthropologists need to take great care when identifying and giving content to concepts that would be appropriate to an emic approach, an approach that sought to reflect the ways of thought of the people studied.<sup>20</sup> There is also a risk that modern languages may not have the words to indicate concisely and accurately the contents of some concepts, contents that were perfectly clear to the people studied, so that historians may either misrepresent the contents or mistakenly conclude that they

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<sup>20</sup> For the emic approach, and the contrasting etic approach that seeks to identify and give content to cross-cultural concepts, see Barnard, “Emic and Etic”; Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis and Sam, *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications*, third edition, pages 23-24. The latter text notes the benefit of using a careful iterative approach. For difficulties in making use of concepts that would be appropriate to an etic approach and in grasping concepts that would be appropriate to an emic approach see Helfrich, “Beyond the Dilemma of Cross-Cultural Psychology: Resolving the Tension between Etic and Emic Approaches”, pages 133-138.

were more or less indeterminate.<sup>21</sup> A further risk arises in connection with concepts that the people studied used but that suffered from incoherence. Historians may deny the incoherence in the interests of doing supposed justice to the people studied, and may thereby misunderstand both the concepts and the culture.<sup>22</sup>

Such concerns should not drive us to regard the task of adjustment as impossible. There is always a risk of error, but the incidence and the magnitude of errors may be reduced to tolerable levels. We shall now consider ways in which reductions may be achieved.

### 3.3.3.3 A rule against ad hoc adjustment

One control over adjustments is to observe a rule that they should not be ad hoc. They should be supported by evidence from beyond the current account.

For example, when Richard W. Kaeuper wished to make sense of some patterns of violence in the high middle ages by drawing attention to how knightly status was heavily invested with the meaning of prowess in combat, he undertook a detailed study of texts that set out the deeds of both real and fictional characters in order to support the argument that knightly status was so invested.<sup>23</sup> Thus

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<sup>21</sup> For an example in relation to the interpretation of texts see the discussion in Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 1, Regarding Method*, pages 48-49, of the concept of *virtù* as used by Machiavelli and his contemporaries.

<sup>22</sup> Gellner, “Concepts and Society”, sections 15 to 17.

<sup>23</sup> Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*. Chapter 7 sets out the association with prowess, and Kaeuper makes the case that there was a strong association in real life as well as in literature from page 139 onward.



attribution of the appropriate content of the thick concept of knightly status was not ad hoc.

### 3.3.3.4 The study of concepts

Adjustments can also be controlled by making a careful study of the history of concepts, based on the interrogation of evidence. Such a study can expose areas of risk and can help to bridge the gap between past and present.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, if a historian can get the contents of thick concepts right, that should also encourage appropriate adjustments to folk psychology and deter inappropriate ones. A folk psychology will only be appropriate if it fits well with the contents of the thick concepts in use at the time and place studied.

Cultural history is of particular interest here.<sup>25</sup> The very fact that cultures and mentalities can be studied systematically, allowing good historical work to be sorted from bad, gives reassurance that it is possible to understand past mentalities well enough to support the making of appropriate adjustments to current folk psychology and thick concepts. Error is not ruled out, but there is scope to reduce both the number and the magnitude of errors made.

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<sup>24</sup> Koselleck, “Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte”, especially section 3, “Zur Theorie der Begriffsgeschichte und der Sozialgeschichte”, translated as “*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History”, especially the final section, “On the Theory of *Begriffsgeschichte* and of Social History”; Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>25</sup> For an outline of the field see Burke, *What is Cultural History?*

# Chapter 4

## Respectability

We said in section 1.3 that for a claim to be respectable there must be evidence that can be interpreted in a reasonable way to support it and no weighty evidence that definitely speaks against it, and that in addition the claim must cohere with the account within which it is made, that account must be internally coherent, both the claim and the account must cohere with the background supplied by other accounts, and claims which provide support that the claim needs in order to be respectable must themselves be respectable. In this chapter, we shall say more about respectability.

## **4.1 The need for the standard**

### **4.1.1 The disciplining of claims**

The standard of respectability is intended to apply to the claims that interest us. The standard should impose discipline on the making of claims and give guidance as to which claims should be regarded as reasonable following debate among historians. Historians might not think out loud in epistemological terms, but one may expect claims that are broadly accepted by serious historians to qualify as respectable, and claims that are generally rejected by them not to qualify as respectable. Some but not all of the claims in the middle ground, accepted by some historians but rejected by others, may qualify as respectable.

It might be thought that the standard of justification would suffice. We could simply say that claims should be made, and should be allowed to stand following debate, if and only if they were justified in the sense that regarding them as correct could not sensibly be argued to carry a significant risk of error. But when we look at the claims that interest us, we find that this would not suffice because some important claims are contestable and cannot be regarded as justified.

These contestable claims could usefully be brought within the scope of a standard of respectability for the sake of the discipline it would impose on the making of claims. Some contestable claims would meet the standard, but others would fail it. The fact that any contestable claim would be supported by some reason to make it would not suffice. The standard would determine whether the reasons to make it were good enough for it to be reasonable to make the claim. The standard of justification, on the other hand,

would not be so discriminating. Its use would simply lead to the rejection of contestable claims for failure to meet that high standard.

### 4.1.2 Evidence of the need

Evidence that it is worth introducing a new standard, more relaxed than that of justification but not too relaxed, can be found in the fact that disagreement over how to interpret given sequences of events or given periods in history is widespread. There are published collections of disagreements.<sup>1</sup> And some fields, such as the historiography of the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain, are a rich source of examples.<sup>2</sup>

If we look at such examples, the impression given is that the claims in question would generally not count as justified by traditional epistemic standards. Certainly it would be very hard to accept that rival claims on the same point were all justified. And yet rival claims on a given point can all be reasonable ones to make, and to put to work in conducting further research. Historians who reject a claim may still recognize that it is not an outlandish claim. At the same time, they would not allow that all claims made by serious historians were reasonable. There is therefore a role for our proposed new standard.

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<sup>1</sup>One example is Lamont (ed.), *Historical Controversies and Historians*.

<sup>2</sup>There is an overview of the historiography, published in 2010, in Griffin, *A Short History of the British Industrial Revolution*, chapter 1. There is a more detailed account of the debates of recent decades, published in 1999, in Mokyr (ed.), *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective*, chapter 1 (the introductory chapter by Joel Mokyr).

### **4.1.3 Why some claims are contestable**

In chapters 2 and 3, we painted a picture of historical writing as the result of a process that is disciplined but also flexible and far from scientific. This makes it unsurprising that there are plenty of contestable claims. Now we shall consider some more specific reasons why claims may be contestable.

#### **4.1.3.1 Alternative interpretations of evidence**

There can be scope to interpret evidence in different ways. Different claims can appear to be supported under different interpretations. The risk of this happening is particularly great in relation to the claims that interest us, claims that do not merely give basic information but relate pieces of information to one another in order to make sense of the past. The links from evidence to such claims are complex, and each claim will typically be supported by a range of pieces of evidence. This gives scope for interpretation to have a proportionately greater influence, and straightforward reporting of evidence to have a proportionately lesser influence, than with claims that are supported by single pieces of evidence.

The existence of claims that offer different views of the same topic is not necessarily a problem. Claims may be complementary, rather than conflicting. But a given interpretation of pieces of evidence may leave some claims without much support. When there is scope for support to be lost in that way, claims may be open to being contested by historians who would favour interpretations of evidence that would lead to the loss of support. The same problem would arise when claims actually conflicted, but with the

added twist that questions of interpretation would have to be settled for any of the conflicting claims to be safe from contest. So long as questions of interpretation were not settled, the claims would all remain in play. Each of them would then be exposed to the risk that a good case might be made for a conflicting claim. (Conflict may amount to logical contradiction or some milder clash that is still serious enough to make the joint assertion of two or more claims come across as making no sense.)

We shall now look at some ways in which interpretations of evidence can vary.

#### 4.1.3.1.1 Pieces of evidence

Much historical evidence comes in the form of documents. These are sometimes open to different interpretations, and alternative interpretations may support different claims. An example is disagreement over the significance of the right to bear arms in the Declaration of Rights (later the Bill of Rights) put forward by the English Parliament in 1689. It might be claimed that the document had been designed to confer an individual right on people in general with the expressed restrictions not meant to be of significance, or alternatively that it had been designed to control the ownership of guns in the interests of the upper classes.<sup>3</sup>

When evidence is in the form of physical artefacts, there can also be scope to interpret it in different ways. Again, different interpretations may support different claims. An example is a reassessment of developments in Roman architecture in the second century AD. Its author argues

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<sup>3</sup> Schwoerer, “To Hold and Bear Arms: The English Perspective”. The two interpretations noted here are set out on pages 28 and 48 respectively.

that rather than a revolution in building methods, there was evolution based on expertise that had been developed over a long period.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.1.3.1.2 **The influence of an overall approach**

Not only can pieces of evidence be interpreted in different ways one at a time. Historians can also approach the periods they study from different perspectives, and can interpret whole bodies of evidence accordingly. Then they may see different claims as supported, and are likely to contest some claims that they do not see as supported.

Marxism is the most obvious example of an overall approach that can influence the interpretation of whole bodies of evidence. The tradition is too varied to allow an easy summary of the main biases introduced, but expressions of concern are not hard to find. One author has pointed out the dangers of historians under the influence of Marxist thought concentrating too much on working-class culture.<sup>5</sup> Another has set out the perils of a Marxist approach when tackling the history of hangings in London in the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> And a third author has set out how historians working under a Marxist regime took a particular and inadequate view of a rebellion in the ninth century.<sup>7</sup>

Marxism is however not the only approach that can

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<sup>4</sup> Mark, “Reinterpreting Ancient Roman Structure”.

<sup>5</sup> Bercuson, “Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing”.

<sup>6</sup> Reid, “Tyburn, *Thanatos*, and Marxist Historiography: The Case of the London Hanged”.

<sup>7</sup> Goldberg, “Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered”, pages 467-469.

influence the interpretation of whole bodies of evidence. It has for example been argued that a particular view of the rise of the state in early modern times has supported a view that the urge to violence was steadily tamed by the state, and that this latter view does not stand up to a thorough analysis of the evidence.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility that an approach may influence the view taken of a body of evidence as a whole raises a particular concern. When pieces of evidence are interpreted one at a time, without interpretation being heavily influenced by some overall approach, historians may well be open to the arguments of other historians that various interpretations should be considered. They may then recognize the relativity to their own interpretations of their individual verdicts on claims, and may be appropriately reluctant to dismiss other verdicts on the same claims. But when an overall approach guides a historian's interpretation of a large proportion of the evidence, she is likely to build a whole coherent picture of the period studied that is shot through with her interpretation, and to view any further evidence that comes to her notice accordingly. Then it may be hard for her to see that other interpretations sometimes deserve open-minded consideration. And if a substantial number of historians adopt the approach in question and come to see themselves as constituting a whole school of thought, they may happily become convinced that claims which are in fact only supported given their approach are simply justified independently of their approach. From the perspective of such a school of thought, the suggestion that claims were contestable might seem to be inappropriate. But from the outside we would see that there was significant scope to contest claims on reasonable grounds, since so much depended on whether a particular approach to the

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<sup>8</sup> Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*, Introduction and Conclusion.



past was appropriate.

#### **4.1.3.2 Selection**

There is often a large body of evidence available, so historians must make their selections from it. It would not be an option to give a single account that would make use of all the evidence at once. Doing so would make it impossible to give a coherent account that would convey a clear message, whether the account was a narrative or took some other form. The need to give a coherent account forces the historian to select pieces of evidence that will play roles in the account. Different selections may make different claims appear to be supported and not undermined by evidence. Then the claims that are only supported and not undermined given certain selections may well be contestable.

It is the absence of undermining that is most significant here. As we noted in section [4.1.3.1](#), it is not necessarily problematic if different but non-conflicting claims are supported under different interpretations of evidence. They may even all be justified so long as they all enjoy enough support under all reasonable interpretations of the evidence. But if a historian has not taken account of all of the available evidence, other historians who regard some claims made as dubious may look for, and perhaps find, evidence that undermines those claims.

It might be thought that this would not be a problem. The pieces of evidence not used would merely be checked to make sure that they did not count against claims made.

This would not however be enough. A historian may be able to review all the evidence briefly, but she will not have time

to develop all of its implications. Some challenges to her account might only emerge if some non-obvious implications were developed. In particular, a lot of development might be required to identify alternative interpretations of the past that were worth considering. Some interpretations might leave some claims looking decidedly inappropriate.

We also have no reason to think that selection would be neutral, a kind of random sampling that would allow accounts to be tested fairly by reference to the selected evidence. Sometimes a neutral sampling procedure would be practical. There might for example be a large collection of legal documents of the same type, such as transfers of land. But very often this would not be so. Pieces of evidence are often of diverse types. Then the idea of a single random sample from the whole body of evidence would not make sense, and a complete set of random samples from all of the groups of pieces of evidence of the various types would be too time-consuming to obtain.

Even leaving such difficulties aside, selection would often not be neutral because selection is closely entwined with interpretation. The pieces of evidence that are used create a particular view of the past. Once the process of interpretation has started, there may well be a snowball effect. As available evidence is reviewed, items may be chosen for use precisely because they fit well with an interpretation that has been developed already. Then evidence which would undermine that interpretation, and would thereby undermine some of the claims that depended for their support on the chosen interpretation, is likely to be ignored.

The concern is all the greater when selection has from the start been governed by an overall approach. This was for example a concern about the work of Christopher Hill. It was alleged that he could find what he needed to support

his interpretation of seventeenth-century England simply because there was so much evidence from which to choose.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.1.3.3 Imprecise terms

Another reason why claims that interest us may be contestable is this. Terms used are not always sufficiently precise to allow evidence to be used to refute the contradictories of the claims made. If for example it is claimed that a particular country was the dominant power in a region (where this is not immediately obvious from size and military strength), or that certain events were the main causes of other events (again, where this is not immediately obvious), it may well not be clear how to assess dominance, or significance in causation, in such a way as to be able to show from evidence that it would not be plausible to claim that the country was not the dominant power, or that the events were not the main causes.

#### 4.1.3.4 Claims that one thing led to another

Many of the claims that interest us set out how one thing led to another. There are some difficulties that are specific to claims of this type.

Manifestly causal claims are of this type. So are other claims in which the state of affairs and events at one time are described in order to make sense of how things were and what happened at a later time, without explicit assertions of causation being made.

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<sup>9</sup>Hexter, “The Burden of Proof. Christopher Hill: Change and Continuity in Seventeenth Century England”. Hexter’s attack on Hill has however been criticized in turn: Palmer, “The Burden of Proof: J. H. Hexter and Christopher Hill”.

Historians may well disagree as to whether a given body of evidence is enough to show that a claim of this type is correct. The disagreement is likely to make the claim contestable. We can get an idea of the sources of difficulty by looking at some examples.

Our first example concerns serfdom. A perfectly plausible mechanism for the development of serfdom has been set out, but it is frankly acknowledged not to do its work in making sense of the existence of serfdom without reference to exogenous factors, nor to apply everywhere it might have been expected to apply.<sup>10</sup> Imprecision as to the details of a mechanism, its failure to apply everywhere it might have been expected to apply, and the need to refer to exogenous factors can all make it hard to test a proposed mechanism's sufficiency in a specific case, and therefore to reach agreement on a claim that connections between circumstances and events in that case were indeed those of the mechanism. (Strictly speaking, sufficiency would not be enough to show that connections were those of the mechanism, because some other mechanism might also have been in play. But mechanisms are thin enough on the ground in history that a conclusion that a sufficient mechanism was the actual mechanism will often be reasonable.)

A second example illustrates how obstacles to reaching agreement on how circumstances and events were connected can arise both out of gaps in the evidence and out of the

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<sup>10</sup> Domar, "The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: A Hypothesis". An exogenous political factor is mentioned on page 21. A case in which the hypothesized mechanism does not seem to have operated as might have been expected is set out on pages 28-30. And while elaborations of the proposal by others, for example Rosa, "The Causes of Serfdom: Domar's Puzzle Revisited", may help, they still leave us with something which is far from having the firmness that is common in mechanisms that are set out in the natural sciences.

scope to interpret evidence in different ways. This example is given by debates over what lay behind the Viking raids in the decades around 800 AD and later Viking expansion.<sup>11</sup>

A third example is given by debates over the origins of the Thirty Years War. Different background understandings of the history of preceding decades and even centuries, and different views of what mattered to people and how they made their decisions, have encouraged different causal analyses.<sup>12</sup>

We should not be surprised that agreement is often hard to reach. The human world is complex, and events that attract the attention of historians are often multi-faceted. Beyond general complexity, there are specific difficulties that stand in the way of substantiating claims of causation by reference to patterns in data, even when numerical data are available.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, while techniques such as process tracing can be useful ways to discipline reasoning even when numerical data are not available, they still do not serve to resolve all disputes. This is at least partly because they rely on the availability of the right kind of evidence to discriminate between hypotheses.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Barrett, “What Caused the Viking Age?”

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, “The Causes of the Thirty Years War 1618-48”.

<sup>13</sup> For these difficulties see Franzese, “Multicausality, Context-Conditionality, and Endogeneity”.

<sup>14</sup> For process tracing see Bennett, “Process Tracing and Causal Inference” (the need for the right kind of evidence is noted in the conclusion); Mahoney, “The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences”.

## 4.2 Requirements for respectability

### 4.2.1 The maintenance of discipline

We want a standard of respectability that can be used to mark claims as acceptable to make without any requirement for them to be justified in the sense that it would not sensibly be arguable that regarding the claims as correct carried a significant risk of error. But we must not move away from ideals of rationality, or from the view that some claims are in better standing than others. There are two reasons why we must not do so.

The first reason is that if we were to move away from those ideals and that view, we would lose touch with a sense of working under the discipline of the external world and striving to get things right rather than wrong. That would mean giving up both an important source of motivation and a vital regulatory constraint.<sup>15</sup>

The second reason is that we want our concept of respectability to yield appropriate judgements when the relevant claims or their contradictories are non-contestable. Whatever concept of respectability we use should apply in such a way that the great majority of non-contestable claims are classified as respectable and the great majority of contradictories of non-contestable claims are classified

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<sup>15</sup> For a comparable role for the concept of truth see Price, “Truth as Convenient Friction”. Price takes the view that the norm of truth is a vital constraint on what people say, and that norms such as those of justification would not do just as well. He might therefore be suspicious of our use of the standard of respectability. But we shall leave it open to historians to aspire to make correct claims even when the claims they manage to make are contestable.

as not respectable. This would require the classification of claims as respectable or as not respectable in a disciplined manner that was governed by ideals of rationality. Any undisciplined approach would have little or no prospect of achieving the desired result for non-contestable claims and their contradictories.

There is an assumption here that our standard of respectability should be used to test all claims. This is however appropriate. It would be decidedly odd to prevent the approval of claims as respectable merely because their qualities made them non-contestable.

## **4.2.2 The requirements**

We shall say that a claim is respectable if and only if it meets all of the following requirements.

1. The claim has strong support from at least some of the evidence, under some reasonable interpretation of that evidence and making reasonable inferences. This will allow the claim to be supported in a foundationalist way.
2. There is no weighty evidence that definitely speaks against the claim.
3. The claim coheres with the account within which it is made, that account is internally coherent, and both the claim and the account cohere with the background supplied by other accounts. If this requirement is met, that will allow the claim to be supported in a coherentist way.
4. Any claims which provide support that the claim

needs in order to be respectable are themselves respectable.

#### 4.2.2.1 The first requirement: evidence in support

With regard to the first requirement, claims need not be implied by evidence as a matter of logic. That would be too demanding in history, or indeed elsewhere in the humanities and the social sciences, for two reasons that are related to each other.

The first reason is that claims, whether descriptions of pieces of evidence or other claims, can only be placed in patterns of logical inference that are truly secure if either the claims are very precise or the range of possibilities encompassed by an antecedent is so much broader than the range encompassed by a supposed consequent that notwithstanding lack of precision, correctness of the antecedent is bound to require correctness of the consequent. Many claims will not be precise enough, and there will often not be a sufficiently broad-to-narrow relationship.

The second reason is that there would often be scope to block a logical inference by identifying some special circumstance which was not ruled out by the evidence and which, if it obtained, would mean that a consequent did not follow inevitably from its antecedent.

These two considerations will often prevent the construction of extended patterns of logical inference, because it will often not be long before one reaches some point at which a logically watertight link cannot be made.

A looser standard of implication must therefore be adopted. But that is not problematic for historians. They have a



perfectly good sense of when it is appropriate to say that evidence interpreted in a particular way strongly supports a claim.

The first requirement only permits reasonable interpretations of evidence and reasonable inferences. Interpretations and inferences which were based on principles that other historians would not put to work in the study of any events or periods of history would be excluded. Thus claims that would only be made by people such as conspiracy theorists would not qualify as respectable. The application of tests of reasonableness will inevitably require judgement rather than the purely mechanical application of rules, even a complex set of rules, and there are likely to be borderline cases. But it should usually be practical to reach a widespread consensus, even if unanimity is out of reach.

The requirements of reasonableness are not merely restrictive. They also give permission to interpret evidence and make inferences in more than one way. Some reasonable interpretations and inferences might lead to the view that certain evidence supported a given claim, while others did not do so. Those who did not see evidence as supporting a claim might refuse to make the claim, or might even make some claim that contradicted it. But they could still see the claim as meeting the first requirement, in that they could see how one could reasonably interpret the evidence and make inferences in ways that would make the evidence supportive. Thus disagreement on respectability should be rarer than disagreement on which claims to make. And claims made by revisionist historians who abide by scholarly norms are not debarred from respectability.

Finally, the first requirement refers to strong support. This is to be read as requiring not merely a decent weight of evidence, but also any specific items of supporting evidence

that the claim requires. If some crucial piece of evidence is unavailable, a claim will fail the first requirement even if there is a lot of other evidence for it.

#### **4.2.2.2 The second requirement: a lack of contrary evidence**

The second requirement concerns only evidence that definitely speaks against a claim. The exclusion of evidence that would only debatably speak against a claim is motivated by a desire to allow for disagreement among historians as to whether evidence really does speak against a claim, disagreement which may well reflect different interpretations of evidence.

Evidence should be regarded as definitely speaking against a claim if the only way to prevent its doing so would be to adopt an unreasonable interpretation of it, or to reject normal rules of inference in order to block the derivation of an argument against the claim. Fantasists who seek to ensure that evidence does not demolish their strange theories need to rely on unreasonable interpretations or on refusal to make inferences that are permitted by normal rules.

Finally, the second requirement is not that there should be no evidence that definitely speaks against a claim, only that there should not be weighty evidence.

### **4.2.2.3 The third requirement: coherence**

#### **4.2.2.3.1 Claims, accounts and backgrounds**

Under the third requirement a claim must cohere with the account within which it is made, and that account must be internally coherent.

Both the claim and its account must in turn cohere with the background supplied by other accounts. These include both accounts of related historical periods or events, and accounts of different sorts that cover the same period or events as the account in question (such as an account of the economic situation, when the account in question is of political events).

In addition to background accounts like these that supply historical detail, there are background accounts that supply general principles. These include accounts of folk psychology and economic theory. What we say about background accounts in relation to the third requirement is intended to encompass background accounts of this nature, as well as background accounts that supply historical detail. Background accounts that supply general principles will however only play a prominent role in our discussion in sections [4.3.3](#), [5.2.4.2](#) and [5.2.5](#).

We shall speak of an account's or a claim's background, meaning the whole of the background supplied in this way. We shall also speak of parts of a background, meaning the parts that are supplied by particular accounts.

#### 4.2.2.3.2 Engagement and conflict

The third requirement is meant in both a positive and a negative sense. Claims must engage with at least some other claims in their accounts, and they must not conflict with other claims in their accounts or in any background accounts. Accounts must show a degree of internal unity, rather than merely being made up of claims that do not conflict with one another. (This internal unity will be given by the engagement of a good proportion of claims within an account with other claims in the same account.) And accounts must engage with at least some background accounts that supply historical detail, as well as not conflicting with any background accounts. We shall however not require specific claims of immediate interest to engage directly with background accounts. Indirect engagement, by virtue of their engaging with claims in their own accounts and those accounts engaging with background accounts, will suffice.

Engagement might involve inferential relationships between claims. Then antecedent and consequent would engage with one another. Or it might for example involve one claim's stating a causal connection, while other claims described the putative causes and effects in ways that made the claim of a connection credible. Then all of these claims would engage with one another. Engagement will often show, or contribute to showing, that events, states of affairs, actions and ways of life had their origins, their interactions and their consequences, a task we introduced in section [1.2.1.1](#) as making sense of the past.

An account will engage with another account through claims in the former account engaging with claims in the latter account. The claims that engage may or may not include specific claims of immediate interest.

Two claims conflict if they are inconsistent or if most historians would think it would make no sense to make both of the claims together. We adopt this definition of conflict despite its imprecision because logical inconsistency is not the only sign that something is amiss.

An account will conflict with another account if many claims or significant claims in the former account conflict with claims in the latter account. We here show a degree of tolerance. The third requirement may be met even when there are a few conflicts and they do not involve significant claims. We do not however extend this tolerance to conflicts within accounts. An account is under the control of its author, and she should eliminate internal conflicts.

When conflict does appear, the response that is most likely to be appropriate will be to amend or withdraw a claim or an account. But sometimes the appropriate response will be to eliminate the conflict by amending background accounts.

We shall say more about the notion of coherence in sections [5.2.2](#) and [5.2.3](#). And we shall discuss relationships such as those between a claim of a causal connection and claims that describe putative causes and effects in section [5.2.3.1](#), under the general heading of positive relationships.

### 4.2.2.3.3 Nesting

The nesting of accounts, requiring a claim to cohere with its own account and both the claim and that account to cohere with the background supplied by other accounts, deliberately allows for a degree of flexibility in the boundary between a claim's own account and other accounts.

If for example a claim about a particular event is made in the context of an account of an extended period of time, it

may be appropriate to see only the portion of the account that relates to the event and the period immediately surrounding it as the claim's own account, and to see the rest of the account as a background account. Any part of a large account in which a claim plays a significant role or which has some immediate bearing on the plausibility of the claim should be included within the scope of the claim's own account, but further reaches of a large account may be considered to supply background.

The reason for drawing a boundary between accounts in a particular place will often be convenience of argument. It is easier to see whether an individual claim coheres with a reasonably narrow context than with a very wide context. Then claims that fall at the first hurdle of coherence with their own accounts can be detected quickly and alternative claims can be given serious consideration. Given that a claim that coheres with its own account must still be tested for coherence with background accounts, and that whatever the extent of a claim's own account, engagement of that account with background accounts must be established, there should not be much scope to manipulate judgements as to respectability by moving the boundaries between accounts.

#### **4.2.2.4 Failing the third requirement**

Sometimes a claim will lose respectability by failing the third requirement – although given the imprecise nature of the notion of coherence, it may be debatable whether there is sufficient lack of coherence.

An example of an argument which could be used to show that a claim failed the third requirement is given by Jenny Wormald's discussion of whether the Casket Letters were

forged. (“Forged” here means wholly or very substantially forged, so that the letters should not have been used against Mary Queen of Scots. Minor emendations would not count.)

In Wormald’s view, there was only one group of people who would have had the opportunity to forge the letters. Wormald argues that it would make no sense to think of their having done so, given their other actions and the people they would have had to fool.<sup>16</sup> If Wormald’s argument were accepted, then a claim that the letters were forged would fail the third requirement because the claim would not cohere with an account of the context, specifically an account of the other conduct and the knowledge of the people who might have produced or ordered forgeries. Such an account of the context might be in the account within which a claim that the letters were forged was made. But if it were in another account, that account would clearly be a relevant background account.

A claim that the letters were forged would be a straightforwardly factual claim. Correspondingly, Wormald’s aim is to establish the fact that the letters were not forged. She even dismisses the debate over whether they were forged as unimportant in the wider context.<sup>17</sup> But if we look at John Guy’s account of enquiries into Mary’s conduct that were made in the period from 1567 to 1569, we can see that Wormald’s consideration of coherence has wider implications.

Guy portrays those enquiries as being driven forward by plotting by various parties to establish Mary’s guilt by relying on letters that were in Guy’s view forgeries, and

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<sup>16</sup> Wormald, *Mary Queen of Scots: a Study in Failure*, page 186, with the discussion running over pages 184-187 (in the 2017 edition; pagination differs in earlier editions).

<sup>17</sup> Wormald, *Mary Queen of Scots: a Study in Failure*, page 187 (in the 2017 edition; pagination differs in earlier editions).

despite the lack of any other clear evidence against her.<sup>18</sup> If Wormald's argument were to be accepted, Guy's account would unravel because it requires the letters to have been forged, and on the basis of Wormald's account a claim of forgery would not cohere with the context. Then a central claim which may be derived from Guy's account, the claim that Mary was treated unjustly on account of a coincidence of the desires of Moray and Cecil to have her seen as complicit in Darnley's murder, could not be seen as respectable unless some other support for it that did not involve the claim of forgery were provided.

The example of the Casket Letters illustrates one way in which claims that offer to make sense of the past can be tested to see whether they meet the third requirement. Straightforwardly factual claims that are presupposed by claims that offer to make sense of the past, and that therefore need to be in or be read into the same accounts as the sense-making claims, can be assessed for their coherence with background accounts. Argument via straightforwardly factual claims has the advantage that it is likely to be well-controlled. The need to identify specific purported facts, which can be set out in uncontentious ways even if their status as facts is disputed, holds out that promise. There may also be scope to conduct an entire argument as to coherence at some more abstract level where claims that offer to make sense of the past are considered for their coherence with one another without reference to concreta. But such arguments are likely to be contentious in themselves, with the criteria for their success or failure being both imprecise and of uncertain application.

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<sup>18</sup> Guy, *My Heart is My Own: The Life of Mary Queen of Scots*, chapters 25 and 26. Guy makes his case for forgery within those chapters. Another case for forgery is made in Warnicke, *Mary Queen of Scots*, chapter 7, section "The Inquiry into Mary's Restitution and the Casket Letters" (pages 173-185).



The scope to conclude that a claim is not respectable on the basis of a lack of coherence does give rise to a worry. If a claim were deemed not to be respectable, it would seem that the contradictory would have to be regarded as correct. That would be worrying because there might not be sufficient evidence either for the initial claim or for its contradictory.

In fact, the correctness of the contradictory would not follow. A claim may fail one or more of the tests for respectability without failure's showing that the claim should be regarded as incorrect and thereby giving good reason to regard the contradictory claim as correct. It may be that further work will turn up new evidence in support of the initial claim, or undermine evidence against it, or amend background accounts so as to remove incoherence with them. A judgement of lack of respectability is merely a warning that it would be foolish to make a claim with confidence. The claim may still be entertained as a hypothesis and be an object of further research, neither of which would be appropriate if the contradictory claim were regarded as correct.

### **4.2.2.5 The fourth requirement**

Claims need the support of other claims in order to be respectable. Sometimes claims that interest us will need only the support of reports of evidence. But sometimes they will also need the support of other claims that set out connections or that recount actions, events or circumstances in ways that go beyond merely reporting evidence. The fourth requirement demands respectability of such supporting claims whenever they are needed to make the claim of immediate interest respectable.

Sometimes the supporting claims will provide direct support for a given claim, whether by summarizing and characterizing evidence or by recounting actions, events or immediate circumstances. Alternatively the supporting claims may set out how people or things were in general, in a way that makes the supported claim more plausible than it would otherwise be.

Supporting claims that perform either function may be found either in the account that contains the supported claim or in background accounts. The fourth requirement therefore means that background accounts cannot simply be taken for granted. But this does not mean that everything in background accounts must be examined. Only the claims in them that provide necessary support for claims of immediate interest need be examined.

(Strictly speaking, the fourth requirement would also demand respectability of supporting claims that merely reported evidence. But that would usually be otiose. The insistence on reasonable interpretation in the first requirement should cover the case, and concerns about coherence that might arise out of application of the third requirement could not be allowed to displace uncontentious reports of evidence. The fourth requirement's coverage of supporting claims that merely report evidence is however harmless. It also has the advantage of not requiring us to draw a boundary between claims that merely report evidence and claims that do more. Any such boundary would be hazy and could easily classify claims inappropriately.)

The fourth requirement might be feared to give rise to a risk of circularity. The respectability of a claim might depend on the respectability of other claims, while the respectability of one or more of those other claims depended on the respectability of the first claim. But this risk is in fact small.

It is normal for claims that are more general or abstract to need the support of claims that are less general or abstract, and not the other way round. So it is normally possible to determine the respectability of claims that are less general or abstract first, and then pass the support they can provide upward.

There is however one area in which the impact of the fourth requirement may be lessened by a form of circularity. Sometimes claims come together to present an overall pattern, a phenomenon we shall explore in section 5.2.4.4. The presentation of such a pattern may contribute to the respectability of all of the claims, through the pattern's amounting to a form of coherence. If the respectability of many of the individual claims depended on the fact that a satisfactory overall pattern was presented, then it might not be feasible to establish the respectability of some claims and use the results to establish, via the presentation of the pattern, the respectability of others. Fortunately, it is not likely that there would be any great dependence of respectability on the presentation of an overall pattern. Evidence for specific claims would still play the leading role.

### **4.2.2.6 The missing fifth requirement**

We have not included a fifth requirement, that the account that includes a claim should not reflect any misreading of the past brought about by an unwise adjustment to folk psychology or thick concepts or by the adoption of an inappropriate general view of the period studied.

One might have expected such a requirement, given the concerns we expressed in sections 3.3 and 4.1.3.1.2. We have not added it because the work that it would do can be done by a combination of the four requirements we have already

laid down, with one exception that we shall set out shortly.

Specific adjustments to folk-psychological principles or thick concepts would imply claims that people studied should have certain mentalities attributed to them. They might very well be implicit claims, but they could be made explicit by analysis of an account that exploited the adjusted folk psychology or thick concepts. Suppose that claims of immediate interest needed the support of those claims about mentalities. For example, a claim of immediate interest might be that someone's conduct was a reaction to given circumstances. If those circumstances would not now provoke such a reaction, but would do so on the assumption of a mentality that was no longer current, the claim of immediate interest would need the support of a claim that past mentalities were different in the appropriate ways. Then under the fourth requirement, the claim that mentalities were different would need to have its respectability tested. Then under the first requirement there would need to be strong evidential support for that claim, under the second requirement there would need to be an absence of weighty evidence against it, and under the third requirement it would need to fit into a coherent view of the people studied. These three tests should suffice to weed out inappropriate adjustments. There would be no need for a fifth requirement.

Turning to general views, such a view is likely to incorporate or imply specific claims, for example about human nature or about how economies behave. Those claims might be implicit, but they could be made explicit. Then if claims of immediate interest needed the support of those other claims, those other claims would themselves need to be respectable under the terms of the fourth requirement. Then tests under the first three requirements would have to be made, and those tests would normally suffice to expose any

relevant wider defects in the general view. Again, there would be no need for a fifth requirement.

The one case not covered is that of the general view which provides support that is needed by claims of immediate interest, but where some or all of the required support is not provided through specific claims that it is practical to test. It is most unlikely that a general view of any worth would not incorporate or imply any specific claims that were of significance to an account written under its influence, but it is possible that support for the claims of immediate interest would operate through so many reasonably specific claims that it was not practical to test the respectability of all or even most of them, or that it would operate through some claims which were so general that their respectability could not be tested. Our tests of the respectability of claims do not guard against the possibility of an inappropriate general view that provides support for claims of immediate interest in such ways. To that extent, our concept of respectability does not in itself allow the construction of a complete guard against the making of inappropriate historical claims. It is however possible to live with that limitation. We may reasonably hope that historians who disputed the appropriateness of various general views which might skew specific conclusions would argue against the applicability of the general views.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Examples are Luebke, “Frederick the Great and the Celebrated Case of the Millers Arnold (1770-1779): A Reappraisal”, which challenges long-standing legalistic approaches to the case; Furet, “Le catéchisme révolutionnaire”, which challenges some Marx-inspired approaches to the French Revolution.

## 4.2.3 Other lines of thought

### 4.2.3.1 Warranted assertibility

Our concept of respectability has a fair amount in common with John Dewey's concept of warranted assertibility.<sup>20</sup> But the two concepts are not the same.

The reason they are not the same is that the concept of respectability does not redefine or replace the concept of justification. It sits alongside justification in order to be used as a regulative standard in relation to contestable claims, while also being usable in relation to non-contestable claims. For Dewey, on the other hand, the concept of warranted assertibility is used to give a definite meaning to the concept of knowledge, thereby making a connection with the concept of truth on the basis that only true beliefs can be knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

The difference can be brought out by a consideration of contradictions. Our approach would allow historians to accept that two contradictory claims were both respectable at the same time, although the contradiction would be a spur to further research. Dewey, on the other hand, would not be at all keen on saying that two contradictory claims could both enjoy the status of warranted assertibility at the same time. This is indicated by his exploration of

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<sup>20</sup> Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.

<sup>21</sup> Dewey, "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth", pages 169-170. We should also note that the wedge that is driven between norms of truth and norms of warranted assertibility in Smith, "Warranted Assertibility and the Norms of Assertoric Practice: Why Truth and Warranted Assertibility are not Coincident Norms", is of little or no significance in the context of academic disciplines, where it is expected that grounds for assertions will be provided.

contradiction as an engine of progress in research.<sup>22</sup>

We should however allow for the fact that outright contradiction is less likely to arise between historical claims than between scientific claims. Historical claims that interest us tend to be stated with less precision than scientific claims. A conflict between claims may therefore be less than a contradiction. That would ease the pain of regarding both of two conflicting claims as respectable at the same time.

### 4.2.3.2 Sanford Goldberg

Sanford C. Goldberg takes an approach that is comparable to our own. He sets out a concept of epistemic propriety, a property that beliefs may possess. In order to be epistemically proper, a belief must meet epistemic standards.<sup>23</sup> We may compare epistemic propriety to our concept of respectability. There are both similarities and differences.

The first major similarity is that Goldberg promotes what he calls coherence-infused reliabilism. Beliefs should be arrived at by reliable means, and the means should include a test of the coherence of new beliefs with existing ones.<sup>24</sup> Turning to our concept, the careful consideration of evidence which is the only approach likely to allow a claim to meet the first two requirements is a reliable way to arrive at beliefs, and the third requirement imposes tests of coherence. The parallel between Goldberg's approach

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<sup>22</sup> Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, chapter 10, especially pages 195-198.

<sup>23</sup> Goldberg, *To the Best of our Knowledge: Social Expectations and Epistemic Normativity*. Goldberg introduces epistemic propriety in section 1.1.

<sup>24</sup> Goldberg discusses coherence-infused reliabilism in *To the Best of our Knowledge*, chapter 4. He introduces the coherence test in section 4.3.

and ours is however not perfect. Goldberg's focus is on the process of arriving at beliefs. Subconscious monitoring for coherence with existing beliefs is an integral part of that process, making it more reliable. We envisage our requirements being imposed separately and consciously, once a claim has been presented for consideration.

The second major similarity is this. Goldberg sees requirements on epistemic agents as intimately related to social expectations, rather than as having come down from the sky.<sup>25</sup> And our requirements reflect the practice of historians, who insist on looking at the evidence, strive to paint pictures of the past that are coherent, and consider whether claims that support other claims are themselves satisfactory. Again, however, the parallel is not perfect. Goldberg defends the role that he gives to social expectations in defining epistemic propriety by reference to his theory of what he calls the reliabilist rationale.<sup>26</sup> We on the other hand do not develop any such theory.

Turning to the differences, Goldberg is concerned with knowledge in a wide range of areas, whereas we concentrate on historical work. Goldberg gives prominence to perception, and only has much to say about evidence in general near the end of his book, while evidence of all sorts, considered as evidence rather than as some form of sensory input, is central to our concerns.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Goldberg's project differs from ours. He is primarily interested in where our epistemic standards come from, their general

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<sup>25</sup> Goldberg discusses social expectations throughout chapters 3 to 7 of *To the Best of our Knowledge*, but particularly in chapter 5.

<sup>26</sup> Goldberg, *To the Best of our Knowledge*, chapter 3. The rationale is introduced in section 3.2, and the argument is brought to its conclusion in section 3.8.

<sup>27</sup> Goldberg discusses perception in several places in *To the Best of our Knowledge*, chapter 3. He discusses evidence in general in chapter 6.



nature, and how they have their effects on our epistemic assessments. We set out to use specific requirements on claims to discipline the conduct of historical work, and to make connections with epistemological traditions.

## 4.3 Norms

We have given requirements for respectability. In a discipline like history, it is not possible to test mechanically whether claims meet such requirements. Judgement is needed. But if the concept of respectability is to give historians a way to sort satisfactory claims from unsatisfactory ones, the exercise of judgement will need to be controlled.

One source of control lies in the norms of the discipline. Control is supplied if those who judge ask whether those who make claims have complied with those norms, so long as the judges are then encouraged (although not bound) to accord the status of respectability to claims when there has been full compliance and to withhold that status when there has been any significant non-compliance. Control arises from this source because the requirements for respectability reflect the goals of the norms.

Given that norms in the humanities are not as precise as many of the norms of the natural sciences (norms of experimental method and statistical testing, for example), and given that norms are largely implied by practice rather than set out in manuals, we must consider whether the available norms are strict enough and precise enough to ensure that the exercise of judgement can be controlled sufficiently to make the concept of respectability useful.

We shall now make some norms explicit, and for each one consider the contribution that checking for compliance might make to controlling judgements as to the respectability of claims.

### 4.3.1 Norms of evidence

There are technical norms that relate directly to the handling of evidence. For example, there are some precisely specified methods to be used in archaeological excavations.<sup>28</sup> There are also methods to use in historical work generally.<sup>29</sup> Methods are not norms in themselves, but when methods are specified there are associated norms that they should be used unless there is good reason to do otherwise. Checks for compliance with such norms should usefully control judgements as to respectability, because the methods that the norms enjoin are directed to ensuring a careful review and analysis of evidence. A failure to use appropriate methods should lead commentators on claims to refuse to judge either that there is enough evidential support for the claims, or that there is no weighty evidence against them. As a consequence, claims would not be judged to be respectable. (There might appear to be enough evidential support and an absence of weighty evidence against, but when technical methods should be used, failure to use them will give rise to the risk that evidence will be missed or misinterpreted.)

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<sup>28</sup> Roskams, *Excavation*; Martin, Harrod and Pérez, *Bioarchaeology: An Integrated Approach to Working With Human Remains*. The latter work is not a manual in itself, but it gives many references to publications that discuss methods and show their application in specific excavations.

<sup>29</sup> Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*.

There is also the less technical norm that a wide enough range of evidence should be considered. This norm may relate to primary sources, for example when the norm requires a political historian to read the surviving private correspondence of leading figures as well as official documents. It may also relate to secondary literature, which should be reviewed for evidence that may count for or against claims.

Again, judgements as to respectability should be controlled because if a historian has not visibly considered a wide range of evidence, anyone considering the claims made should hold back from treating the claims as respectable because they could not be sure that there was no weighty evidence against the claims, so that the second requirement might not be met. It might however still be possible to judge that there was enough support for the claims for the first requirement to be met.

### 4.3.2 Norms of argument

Norms that relate to arguments in favour of claims tend to be general guides rather than precise rules.

There is for example a norm that historians should avoid presentism, that is, reading their own perspective back into the past. There is also a norm that historians should minimize the effects of bias in the selection of sources and should compensate for biases that may have affected the contents of secondary sources. Methods are available to address the problem of bias.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Thies, “A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations”.

There are also norms that govern specific types of argument, for example arguments that some writers influenced others.<sup>31</sup> And there are norms of argument that apply in any field of work, for example the norm that one should not assume that if one event occurred shortly after another, the earlier event caused the later one.

Judgements as to respectability are to some extent controlled by checks for compliance with norms of argument. Such checks will direct attention to inferential links, thereby helping a commentator to decide whether the evidence adduced really does give adequate support to the claims made.

### 4.3.3 Psychological plausibility

Historical accounts should be plausible in the light of an appropriate folk psychology. This is so whether accounts concern individuals or people en masse.

If individuals are considered, it is important that accounts of why they acted as they did would be plausible for human beings in general, at least unless some explanation of why given individuals were psychologically odd is supplied.<sup>32</sup> And if an individual's conduct can be seen as natural in his or her circumstances, so much the better. (The adjective "natural" is meant to capture the idea that an

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<sup>31</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 1, Regarding Method*, pages 75-76.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Elton made a similar norm explicit when he called on historians to stand back from their completed accounts and ask whether those accounts were plausible, although his norm was not limited to occasions on which individuals would have thought about what to do and decided on actions, nor was it limited to questions of psychological normality or oddness: Elton, *The Practice of History*, second edition, page 78 (page 86 of the first edition).

individual's conduct can be seen as having flowed smoothly from his or her circumstances, without any feeling that more explanation should be supplied. It is not meant to suggest that the conduct should appear to have been inevitable.) Folk psychology may need to be adjusted for different times and cultures before the test of plausibility is applied to an account, but as we noted in section 3.3.3.3, such adjustments should be supported by evidence and should not be made ad hoc.

If people en masse are considered, accounts that are offered to make sense of the behaviour of groups need to be consistent with plausible motivations of the members of those groups. For example, a historian who considers food riots may see an ideology of traditional social organization and fair prices as having played a significant role.<sup>33</sup> Such a view is plausible because individuals can be inspired to action by claims that current social arrangements are unjust. If individuals were not at all likely to be inspired by such claims, it would be hard to see the ideology as having had any purchase at the level of individuals, and correspondingly hard to regard it as having had much to do with the occurrence of rioting at the level of the group.

Checking for compliance with the norm that accounts should be plausible in the light of folk psychology differs from checking for compliance with the norms related to evidence that we have mentioned. Checking for compliance with those norms would involve looking at how a historian had worked. One would ask whether she used appropriate special methods, and whether her review of evidence ranged widely enough. Turning to the norm of plausibility in the light of folk psychology, the focus is on finished accounts rather than on processes of compilation. This is a norm of

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<sup>33</sup> Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century".

product rather than of process.

Checking does provide a degree of control over judgements as to respectability. Plausibility in the light of an appropriate folk psychology is a vital aspect of coherence as set out in the third requirement, because a folk psychology will be part of the background to almost any account of human affairs. And historians who review the work of other historians are likely to have a good sense of what is and what is not plausible, a sense honed partly by their own experience of life and partly by their work on the people and societies studied. (We shall say more about the roles of background accounts that supply general principles in section 5.2.4.2.)

Having said that, there may be little to do here. Compliance with the norm of psychological plausibility is likely whenever historians rely on the fact that they share a human nature with the people about whom they write. If they rely on commonality, they are unlikely to think of people as having been motivated by considerations that it would be implausible to think would motivate a human being. So the norm will not often be breached. It is therefore unlikely that checks for compliance would lead to many claims being denied respectability. This is not in itself a problem. If claims routinely cohere with accepted accounts of human nature, that is to be welcomed. It does mean that we cannot see checking for compliance with the norm as routinely doing much work at the stage of consideration of the respectability of claims, but that is because the work checking could have done will by and large not need to be done.

### **4.3.4 Norms and judgement**

Overall, checks for compliance with norms can go some way to controlling judgements as to whether claims are respectable. The making of such judgements is however not a mechanical process. It remains possible for different historians to pass different judgements as to respectability, for example because they differ as to whether there is any reasonable interpretation of some given pieces of evidence under which the evidence would support a claim, or because they have different senses of what would amount to a claim's cohering with its own account or an account's cohering with background accounts. But we can reasonably expect that many judgements as to respectability would be widely shared. So the concept of respectability should be usable.

## **4.4 Degrees of satisfaction**

The requirements for respectability may be satisfied to varying degrees. We may see this by considering each of the first three requirements in turn. (The fourth one, being a requirement to re-apply the first three requirements, is of a different nature.)

1. Some claims will be better supported by evidence than others.
2. Some claims will have less evidence against them than others.
3. The extent to which claims cohere with their accounts, accounts are internally coherent, and claims and their accounts cohere with background accounts, will be a matter of degree. Moreover, a claim or

an account might cohere with some but not all background accounts, giving additional scope for satisfaction of the third requirement to be a matter of degree.

We should not however exaggerate the extent to which respectability itself may be a standard to be met barely or amply. Many claims might strike experts as respectable, while others struck them as decidedly lacking in respectability, but even a modest shortfall in satisfaction of a requirement would disqualify a claim from counting as respectable. If we suppose a scale of satisfaction in relation to each requirement from 0 to 1, with any value in the range from 0.9 to 1 showing sufficient satisfaction to meet the requirement, any value in the range from 0 to 0.6 showing a decided lack of satisfaction, and a middle ground ranging from 0.6 to 0.9, claims falling in that middle ground in relation to any requirement would not meet the requirement. Thus the variation in degrees of satisfaction among respectable claims in relation to any given requirement would only be from 0.9 to 1. (No such numerical scale would in fact be available in the humanities. Not only would there be no reputable way to determine values with precision. The meanings of values of 1 would need to be clarified. For the first requirement, perfect support might mean logical implication by indubitable claims. For the second requirement, perfection might mean the complete absence of contrary evidence. But for the third requirement, what would amount to perfect coherence? So we suppose a scale merely in order to assist our discussion of variation.)

In addition, we should not be greatly concerned about claims with mean degrees of satisfaction of requirements in the lower part of the acceptable range – say 0.9 to 0.95, to make use of our supposed numerical scale. The frequency



with which such claims counted as respectable would be reduced by the rule that a claim was not respectable if there was any requirement that it did not meet. So a claim that had values of 0.85, 0.95 and 0.99 in relation to the first three requirements in turn would not be respectable because 0.85 was less than 0.9, even though the mean of the values would be 0.93.

While the rule that a claim is not respectable if there is any requirement that it does not meet would reduce the frequency with which claims about which one might reasonably have concerns would count as respectable, this would be a useful side-effect of the rule. It would not be the reason for the rule. The reason for the rule is that it is necessary in order to make respectability a useful guide to action, and one that has much in common with justification in its role as a guide to action. If a claim is respectable under the rule then it is acceptable to make the claim, whether for its own sake or for use in work that may lead to the making of other claims. If it is not respectable under the rule then the claim should at most be entertained as a hypothesis. Likewise, if a claim is justified it is acceptable to regard it as correct, and if it is not justified it should not confidently be regarded as correct but may, unless manifestly incorrect, be entertained as a hypothesis.

In discussing hypothetical computations here, we have left aside the fourth requirement. We noted above that it is of a different nature to the other three, being a requirement to re-apply the first three requirements. But even if there were a need to explore hypothetical computations of the extent to which the fourth requirement was satisfied, it would not be clear what form such a computation should take. Computation would depend on being able to give overall satisfaction values to claims that the claim of immediate interest needed for support. That would raise the question

of how to combine values for each of those supporting claims under the first three requirements, and potentially under the fourth requirement too if there were an extended chain of support. And when a claim needed the support of several other claims, there would be the further question of how to combine their overall satisfaction values to obtain a value of satisfaction of the fourth requirement by the claim of immediate interest.

It is not that there would be no options. One option would be always to take the lowest value and pass it up the line, whether the lowest value of the three (or four) for a claim or the lowest value for any claim in a set of claims.

That would not be the only option. But there would be something to be said in its favour. It would align at least roughly with an intuitively useful rule which we can adopt. This is that if a claim needs the support of some other claim that is not itself manifestly respectable, that is enough on its own to deprive the former claim of respectability through failure to meet the fourth requirement. In that way, the pattern of failure by reference to any one requirement leading to the loss of respectability can be maintained.

## 4.5 Multiple accounts

One characteristic of history, and indeed of the humanities generally (and to a lesser extent of the social sciences), is that there is scope for there to be several accounts of the same subject matter. The accounts may between them give a fuller picture than any one account would give. We must recognize that this is so, and that so long as accounts are consistent with one another, the respectability of a claim is not likely to be impugned by the existence of accounts in

which the claim is not made. The respectability of a claim within one account may even be enhanced by the existence of a range of accounts, if they are mutually supportive. The support would come in the form of positive coherence. An account that included the claim would engage with the other accounts, rather than merely not conflicting with those accounts.

There are however situations in which the respectability of a claim might be impugned. If an account approached its subject matter in a way that was quite different from other accounts, the account in question might be somewhat isolated from other accounts. Then claims that were only made within it might fail to meet the third requirement because their account might not engage with any of the other accounts (which would count as background accounts). The account might then be regarded as missing the point. So while there might be evidence for the claims, it might be thought misleading to give the account that included them.

One concern we should not have is that the scope for there to be several accounts of the same subject matter might drive us to some form of narrative anti-realism.<sup>34</sup> There are two reasons why this should not worry us. The first reason is that we are concerned with the status of individual claims, rather than of whole narratives. The second reason is that we are concerned with the respectability of claims, rather than with their truth.

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of realism and anti-realism see Stueber, “Agency and the Objectivity of Historical Narratives”, pages 207-218.

# Chapter 5

## Foundations and coherence

We shall now consider relationships between long-established epistemological approaches and assessments of respectability. In this chapter we shall consider approaches that concentrate on how evidence can provide foundations for claims, and on coherence among claims and accounts. In [chapter 6](#) we shall consider approaches that concentrate on ways of working.

### 5.1 Foundations

#### 5.1.1 Foundationalism

The term “foundationalism” picks out a family of positions that are united by counting the belief that is stated by a proposition as justified if and only if one of two conditions

is met. The first condition is that the proposition is justifiably believed non-inferentially. The second condition is that it is inferred, whether directly or through chains of inference, from propositions that are justifiably believed non-inferentially.<sup>1</sup>

(Epistemologists tend to speak of propositions, but we shall continue to speak of claims. Claims are simply propositions that play the role of assertion in our discourse. And any proposition that a historian wants to put forward in support of a claim, for example a proposition that describes some piece of evidence, will itself be asserted by that historian and will be a claim.)

### 5.1.2 Relatively foundational claims

We shall not pursue a quest for claims that might justifiably be believed non-inferentially. Academically interesting claims are likely to be so far removed from any plausible candidates to stand in such a foundational role that the chains of reasoning would be too long and tangled for it to be clear how the claims were supported by the candidates.

Instead we shall consider the scope to support claims by reference to claims which, while they cannot justifiably be believed independently of other support, are relatively foundational. The most likely candidates are claims that simply report evidence.

Given that we shall only look for relatively foundational claims, we must not think that when claims are supported in the foundationalist way that we shall explore, they have the level of support that might come from being inferred from

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey see DePaul, “Foundationalism”.

claims that could justifiably be believed non-inferentially.

### 5.1.3 Support

Even when support comes from relatively foundational claims that are close enough to the claims to be supported that it is clear how support is given, two points must be borne in mind.

The first point is that the links in chains of reasoning will usually be looser than links of logical implication. The nature of the humanities and the social sciences ensures that, and we noted specific reasons why chains of logical implication should be relatively uncommon in section 4.2.2.1.

The second point is this. Given that we are interested in claims that go beyond merely reporting evidence or making obvious deductions from evidence, it will not always be obvious whether the claims that interest us are sufficiently supported. Judgement may be needed to decide how evidence should be interpreted, and therefore which claims would fairly report the evidence. And since inference cannot be restricted to logical implication, judgement may also be needed to decide what can be inferred from what. Disagreement as to whether claims are sufficiently supported is perfectly possible.<sup>2</sup> This is indeed the major reason why claims may be contestable.

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<sup>2</sup> An example of disagreement as to what the evidence supports is given by Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*, the comments on that book in Fried, “Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*”, and the response in Reynolds, “Susan Reynolds Responds to Johannes Fried”.

### 5.1.4 Disagreement and respectability

While there is scope for disagreement as to whether claims are supported, it does not follow that respectability is put in serious doubt whenever there is such disagreement. The first requirement for respectability is that a claim should have strong support from at least some of the evidence, under some reasonable interpretation of that evidence and making reasonable inferences. The chosen interpretation will be given by the claims used to report the evidence. The strong support does not need to exist under all reasonable interpretations. Even those who think that evidence does not support a given claim may recognize that the claim would have considerable support under some reasonable interpretation of the evidence and with the use of inferences that were reasonable.

The fact that we are concerned with respectability should also save us from having to worry about falsificationist or critical rationalist reservations about the possibility of establishing claims.<sup>3</sup> It is possible for a claim to be respectable even while it remains at risk of being discarded should fresh evidence be discovered or evidence already available be reinterpreted. As we shall note in section 5.1.6.3, respectability at a given time is real even though it may later be lost.

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<sup>3</sup>For the critical rationalism that Karl Popper rightly considered to be more appropriate than falsificationism outside the context of the natural sciences see Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, chapter 24, sections 1 to 3. The same use of criticism rather than falsification is visible in the work of Hans Albert: Albert, *Traktat über kritische Vernunft*, translated as *Treatise on Critical Reason*, particularly chapter 4, section 14 and chapter 7, section 28.

### 5.1.5 The use of evidence

When historical accounts are given, there is usually a conspicuous role for straightforward evidence that can be set out at a lower level of abstraction than the claims that interest us. The claims that report such pieces of evidence are then relatively foundational.

There is, however, often a role for the interpretation to which the first requirement refers. Sometimes a good deal of interpretation will be needed even before the process of making inferences can start. For example, a study of European parliaments over several centuries has made use both of the expression by the King of León of his willingness to regard himself as subject to law, and of expressions of concern by cities in his kingdom about debasement of the coinage. Such expressions are evidence of the nature of the context in which parliaments started to become significant. This evidence can support claims as to why they did so. But evidence of that nature must be interpreted carefully before it can be used properly. On the other hand, the same study uses the much more concrete evidence of numbers of years per century in which parliaments met. While the process of drawing inferences from that evidence is intricate and sophisticated, the meaning of the evidence itself is pretty clear without elaborate interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

It is not only evidence in the form of words that may be subject to interpretation. A piece of evidence in the form of a physical artefact may need or invite considerable interpretation, although such interpretation can easily shade into the drawing of conclusions because there is no

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<sup>4</sup> Van Zanden, Buringh and Bosker, “The Rise and Decline of European Parliaments, 1188-1789”. Expressions by the King and by cities are cited on page 838. The measure of numbers of years in which parliaments met is introduced in section 2.



obvious terminus of mere interpretation analogous to that of establishing the meaning of a sequence of words. (Even with texts, interpretation can shade into the drawing of conclusions, but there is a better prospect of establishing a tolerably clear boundary.) The importance of interpretation can be seen by looking at examples of the study of material culture.<sup>5</sup>

The need for interpretation is however not an obstacle to the provision of support for respectability that is of a foundationalist nature. Once an interpretation of evidence is adopted, a claim that embodies the interpretation can play a relatively foundational role. There is then scope to contribute to meeting the first requirement for respectability, even if the interpretation of the evidence is not universally adopted. All that is needed is wide acceptance that the interpretation is a reasonable one.

Beyond claims that report evidence, there are accepted descriptions of events which can likewise be relatively foundational and thereby provide support for claims. For example, it is accepted that we should describe some clashes in the British Isles in the 1640s as military battles in a perfectly straightforward sense. Claims that there were battles at specified times and places are among the foundations for claims that particular wars should be identified and should be seen as forming coherent wholes. Having said that, the foundations allow various visions of the period to be built on them, visions which may be summarized by using labels such as “the English Revolution” and “the Wars of the Three Kingdoms”. There is no consensus as to which labels should be used, and no

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<sup>5</sup>Lubar and Kingery (eds.), *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*; Richardson, Hamling and Gaimster (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*.

consensus as to which vision should be preferred.<sup>6</sup>

While there are relatively foundational claims other than those that report evidence, the ones that report evidence are the ones that will contribute directly to the respectability of other claims. They will do so because of the first requirement for respectability. We therefore concentrate on evidence.

### **5.1.6 Temporary support and temporary respectability**

We should not assume that evidence that supports claims will always do so. Particular pieces of evidence might be devalued in general. Alternatively they might no longer be seen as able to support particular claims, even though they remained available to support other claims. We shall now look at each of these two possibilities in turn, illustrating them with examples from existing historical work that once lay in the future. (Our concern when discussing these possibilities is with pieces of evidence in themselves, documents and artefacts, so we shall refer to evidence rather than claims that report evidence.)

After discussing these two possibilities, we shall turn to the potentially temporary nature of respectability as a topic in its own right. Finally we shall remark on another way in which historiography may move on, a way that is not connected so closely with the value of evidence as support for specific claims. This is reinterpretation of the past.

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<sup>6</sup> For this example of disagreement over labels see Bennett, “The English Revolution and the Wars in the Three Kingdoms, 1638-1652” (a review of the book of that title by Ian Gentles). For a discussion of the difficulty of classifying events and situations in the social sciences see Cartwright and Runhardt, “Measurement”.

### 5.1.6.1 Devaluation

Evidence might come to be devalued in general. A document or an artefact might turn out to have been forged or misdated. Then it might only remain useful as evidence that a forgery took place or as evidence for events or a way of life in its newly assigned temporal context.

Even if the authenticity of some piece of evidence is only disputed, and the question is not settled, it would be difficult for the evidence to contribute to the respectability of claims that it could only support if it were authentic. In particular, historians who were confident that the evidence was inauthentic could not see it as contributing to respectability in a way that would depend on its authenticity, because they would not be able to regard as reasonable any interpretation that implied its authenticity.

To start with documents, inauthenticity may for example be indicated by their making no sense in their supposed context of creation, or using language that was not in use when they was supposedly created or was otherwise wholly inappropriate, or including egregious mistakes that the supposed authors would not have been at all likely to make.

For example, the Tanaka Memorial has come to be widely, although not universally, regarded as inauthentic, partly on the basis of its stylistic oddity, its factual mistakes, and the fabrications and contradictions within it.<sup>7</sup> The many who regard it as inauthentic cannot allow it to be used to support the respectability of claims that the Japanese were planning extensive conquests as far back as 1927.

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<sup>7</sup>Stephan, “The Tanaka Memorial (1927): Authentic or Spurious?”, pages 740-742.

Similar things may be said about artefacts. Once an artefact is for example seen to have been made using techniques that were not otherwise evidenced as having been in use at the supposed time of manufacture, it would be very difficult to regard as reasonable any interpretation that located the artefact at its originally attributed date.

### 5.1.6.2 Ceasing to support certain claims

Evidence might cease to support certain claims.

For example, an examination of information about how builders were employed and paid in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been argued to require a reinterpretation of existing evidence of payments for building work. The new interpretation would leave the evidence unable to support a claim that wage rates in England were higher than in other countries, a claim that had been significant because it had been used in explanations of the course of industrialization.<sup>8</sup>

To take another example, it has come to be argued that the *Alexiad* is misleading on chronology at several hitherto unrecognized points, with serious consequences for the use that can be made of it in historical study.<sup>9</sup> It is however important not to let specific concerns slide into a more general attitude of suspicion, so that the document in question is not used even when it would be useful.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stephenson, *Real Contracts and Mistaken Wages: The Organisation of Work and Pay in London Building Trades, 1650-1800*.

<sup>9</sup> Frankopan, *The First Crusade: The Call from the East*, pages 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Buckley, *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth*, Introduction, section "Some bad weather" (pages 23-32).

These are examples where not all historians would come to agree that evidence could not be used to support given claims. But as with the view that some evidence is inauthentic, it may be difficult for those who subscribe to the view that the evidence cannot be used to support the claims to regard as reasonable any interpretation that glosses over the difficulties and thereby allows such use of the evidence. If the perceived problem with using the evidence is that it has previously been misread because it has not been set in the context of some other evidence (as with the example of the earnings of builders), mental gymnastics which those who perceived a problem would be likely to regard as implausible would be needed in order to ignore the context. Likewise, if the perceived problem is that the evidence has been found to be unreliable in certain ways (as with the example of the *Alexiad*), it may become difficult to regard as reasonable any use of the evidence that would require overlooking its unreliability.

### 5.1.6.3 Respectability may be temporary

Such reflections draw our attention to an important feature of our definition of respectability. It is couched in terms of currently available evidence (including evidence that bears on the interpretation of other evidence) and coherence with accounts that are current. Respectability is therefore respectability in the current intellectual environment, and a claim that is currently respectable might cease to be respectable in some future year. This risk does not however detract from the reality of current respectability.

The current intellectual environment would include foreseen developments, as when a new body of evidence was known to exist but had not yet been studied. But mere speculation about possible changes to the range of reasonable interpret-

ations of existing evidence would give no reason to hold back from regarding claims as respectable for the time being.

#### 5.1.6.4 The past might be reinterpreted

Sometimes there are significant changes to historians' views of events or periods of history. Such reinterpretations may not be adopted by all or even a majority of historians, but they may still be adopted quite widely.

One example is given by changes in historians' views on various aspects of the developments commonly grouped together as the twelfth-century renaissance, aspects such as the role of secularization and the cultural significance of the Investiture Contest.<sup>11</sup> Another example is given by the evolution of historians' views on the Industrial Revolution, and in particular views on the significance of various related developments.<sup>12</sup> A third example, in which changes of view on specific events or structures are to a large extent consequences of more general changes in ways of looking at the relevant periods of history, is given by the multifarious effects of postcolonial studies on the historiography of the British Empire.<sup>13</sup>

Any worthwhile view of some events or of a period of history will incorporate some claims which are so central to the view that they have to be sustained under the view. When there is a shift from an old view to a new one, we may expect there to be some new claims, not made under the

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<sup>11</sup> Melve, "The Revolt of the Medievalists'. Directions in Recent Research on the Twelfth-Century Renaissance".

<sup>12</sup> Horn, Rosenband and Smith (eds.), *Reconceptualizing the Industrial Revolution*. Chapter 1, the introduction by the editors, gives an overview of the rest of the book.

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire*, chapters 1 to 3.

old view, which have to be sustained under the new view. It is perfectly possible that some of those claims will be incompatible with some claims that were made under the old view. (The old claims might or might not be ones that had to be sustained under the old view.)

It might be thought that when this happened, there should be direct implications for the support that evidence available before the shift could give to old claims which were incompatible with claims that had to be sustained under the new view. If the evidence in question were not in some way deprived of its ability to support the relevant old claims, either by being devalued in itself or by being blocked from supporting those particular claims, then it might be expected to be evidence against claims that had to be sustained under the new view, removing their respectability and undermining the new view. So perhaps the adoption of a new view should somehow ensure that conflicting old claims lose their evidential support.

It would be very dubious to allow this as a route to the removal of evidential support for claims, distinct from the routes of the devaluation of evidence in itself and the blocking of support for particular claims by reference to considerations which were more specific than a general change of view. If such specific routes could not be identified, a high-level change of view would be unlikely to have a sufficiently direct connection to evidence that supported claims made under the old view for it to be comfortable to rely on the high-level change alone in order to reject the evidence in question or prevent it from supporting the old claims.

Uncomfortable it might be, but a direct conflict between claims which were supported under the old view and claims which had to be sustained under the new view could require

such drastic action. It would however be worth seeking an alternative. Two ways forward might well be available.

The first one would be to see the new view as changing the range of reasonable interpretations of the evidence, so that it could no longer be seen as supporting the old claims. Thus the general change of view would give rise to a specific change that would in turn deprive the old claims of support.

The second one would be to argue that the fact that evidence supported old claims which were at variance with new claims did not mean that the evidence inevitably undermined the new claims. Evidence in history tends not to lead with deductive inevitability to claims which it supports, certainly not to the claims that interest us, claims which offer to make sense of the past. So even if evidence supported the old claims, it would not force historians to accept those claims.

## 5.2 Coherence

### 5.2.1 Coherentism

Coherentism in epistemology comes in several forms.<sup>14</sup> Some coherentists argue that accounts can be justified by their coherence, and that claims within those accounts can thereby obtain a degree of justification at second hand.<sup>15</sup> Other coherentists argue that justification comes from a relationship of coherence between a specific claim

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<sup>14</sup> For a survey see Olsson, “Coherentism”.

<sup>15</sup> BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, section 5.2.



and a background system.<sup>16</sup> A third possibility is to develop a notion of justificatory coherence which combines consideration of the relationship between a claim and a system with consideration of the coherence of the system as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

We shall not choose between these forms of coherentism. Rather, we shall work with a broad notion of coherence and consider why coherence should support the respectability of claims. The support will come through meeting the third requirement for respectability, the requirement that claims should cohere with their own accounts, that those accounts should be internally coherent, and that claims and their accounts should cohere with the background supplied by other accounts.

We shall be concerned specifically with what is commonly called explanatory coherence, although we shall broaden the notion to cover all examples of the coherence that is seen when claims hang together, whether in small groups or in groups large enough to create overall pictures of the past, whether or not the organized groups of claims amount to explanations in the sense in which natural scientists would use that term. We shall use the single word “coherence” to refer to this broad notion.

We shall not concern ourselves with coherence of testimony, which exists when items of testimony from a range of independent witnesses all or mostly match up. Coherence of testimony is relevant to historical work. It is most reassuring when several pieces of evidence all point in the

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<sup>16</sup> Lehrer, “Justification, Coherence and Knowledge”, section 4. Lehrer defines the coherence of a specific claim with a background system in a particular way. Coherence exists when the background system provides someone who accepts the claim with resources to answer all objections to the claim. We shall not use that definition.

<sup>17</sup> Bartelborth, “Coherence and Explanations”, section 4.4.

same direction. But that is for our purposes something to be considered in the context of the first requirement for respectability, that there should be strong support from evidence. Coherence of testimony will add to the capacity of evidence to support claims, while incoherence of testimony will detract from it.

In section 5.2.2 we shall discuss the notion of coherence, then in section 5.2.3 we shall look at relationships between claims. In section 5.2.4 we shall consider why the coherence of historical accounts is valuable. And in section 5.2.5 we shall look at relationships between on the one hand claims and their accounts, and on the other hand the background supplied by other accounts.

## 5.2.2 The notion of coherence

### 5.2.2.1 Definitions and measures

We have a pre-theoretical notion of coherence, whether the coherence of one claim with some other claims or the coherence of a set of claims among themselves. One claim coheres with some other claims, for example claims that make up the account within which the first claim is made, if the first claim does not conflict with the other claims and engages with at least some of them. (As we noted in section 4.2.2.3.2, engagement may amount to there being either inferential relationships or other positive relationships. We shall discuss these other relationships in section 5.2.3.1.) And an account is coherent if the claims within it do not conflict and there is a decent amount of engagement between those claims.

While such a pre-theoretical notion will suffice to sustain our investigations, it would be reassuring to have judgements as to coherence disciplined to some extent, for example by spelling out conditions for coherence or by giving a way to measure it. In addition, such work would give more definiteness to a pre-theoretical notion.

There has been plenty of work on what to look for. One example is the work of Laurence Bonjour. Under his approach, the degree of coherence of a set of claims would be increased by a high number of inferential relationships between the members of the set, and decreased by division of the set into subsets that were relatively isolated from one another by a lack of inferential relationships between the members of different subsets.<sup>18</sup> Other authors have offered elaborate sets of principles to apply.<sup>19</sup> (It should be noted that authors tend to focus on inferential relationships, and do not pay much attention to other positive relationships. It would however often be possible to set out corresponding inferential relationships, for example when a claimed causal relationship could be seen as inferred from descriptions of the putative cause and effect. To that extent we may see parallels between work that focuses on inferential relationships and our remarks on other positive relationships, in addition to such work's highlighting the value of inferential relationships that exist independently of positive relationships of other kinds.)

Principles set out in such work can on the whole be invoked more easily in relation to scientific theories than in relation to historical accounts, but we can still extend some of them to the question of what makes a historical account coherent. It would for example be relatively straightforward

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<sup>18</sup> Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, section 5.3.

<sup>19</sup> Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action*, chapter 3; Bartelborth, "Coherence and Explanations", section 4.4.

to extend the principles set out by Thomas Bartelborth. Those principles concentrate on quality of explanation and on the extent to which there are inferential relationships.<sup>20</sup> Those of the principles set out by Paul Thagard that concern explanation in general, the priority of evidence, and the need to avoid contradiction could also be extended. But it would be harder to extend some of Thagard's other principles, because they reflect the use of hypotheses in the natural sciences and the desire for single explanations that is typical of those disciplines.<sup>21</sup>

There are also some mathematical measures of coherence, although measures that have been proposed have also been criticized.<sup>22</sup> Fortunately, we need not be wedded to the details of such proposals. We need only borrow their general idea and conclude that a notion of coherence that comes in degrees, rather than being merely a notion of logical consistency, need not be a vague or insubstantial notion. We also need not be deterred by Erik J. Olsson's argument that it is impossible to define a measure of coherence, a higher value of which would reliably indicate a higher likelihood that the beliefs that cohered were correct.<sup>23</sup> This is partly because we do not need perfect reliability of indication, and partly because we are concerned with the coherence that is shown when claims hang together within an account. The emphasis of Olsson's formal derivation is on the coherence

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<sup>20</sup> Bartelborth, "Coherence and Explanations", section 4.4.

<sup>21</sup> Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action*, chapter 3, section 1. The principles that it would be easy to extend are principles E2(a) and (b), perhaps E2(c), and E4, E5 and E7. The principles that it would not be easy to extend to historical work are principles E3, E6 and arguably E2(c). Principle E1 is not a principle to be applied in the same way as the other principles, but a claim about the coherence relation.

<sup>22</sup> Douven and Meijs, "Measuring Coherence", discusses some measures and considers some criticisms.

<sup>23</sup> Olsson, "The Impossibility of Coherence".

of different items of testimony – although this includes testimony from one’s own senses and memory, alongside reports from other people. His discussion of explanatory coherence does not yield a formal result.<sup>24</sup>

### 5.2.2.2 Claims and accounts

Under the third requirement a claim must cohere with its account, an account must be internally coherent, and there must be coherence with background accounts. As we said in section 4.2.2.3, we shall define coherence with and of accounts in terms of relationships between claims, whether the presence of relationships that show engagement or the absence of relationships of conflict. Claims must engage with at least some other claims in their accounts, and they must not conflict with other claims in their accounts. Accounts must show a degree of internal unity, through the engagement of a good proportion of claims within an account with other claims in the same account, as well as not containing claims that conflict with one another. Claims must not conflict with claims in any background accounts. And accounts must engage with at least some of the background accounts that supply historical detail and not conflict with any background accounts. An account will engage with another account through claims in the former account engaging with claims in the latter account. And an account will conflict with another account if many claims or

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<sup>24</sup>For the formal derivation and a discussion of the result see Olsson, “The Impossibility of Coherence”, sections 4 and 5. For a discussion of explanatory coherence and of the relationship between probabilistic and explanatory approaches see section 7 of that paper, and also sections 6.5 and 9.4 of Olsson, *Against Coherence: Truth, Probability, and Justification*. Angere, “Coherence as a Heuristic”, sections 4 and 5, discusses the usefulness of measures of coherence that are only imperfect indicators of the likelihood of correctness.

significant claims in the former account conflict with claims in the latter account.

The coherence relationship between accounts as thus defined is asymmetric. One account could cohere with another to a greater extent than the second account cohered with the first one. But this asymmetry does not matter, because our concern is the coherence of an account of immediate interest with background accounts, not the other way round. We could have said that one account would cohere with another if they would combine to form a single account that was internally coherent. That would have eliminated the asymmetry. But it would also have reduced the relative prominence of the account that was of immediate interest, and would have led to claims losing respectability merely because of incoherence in background accounts. We would not want either of those results.

The requirement that an account must not conflict with background accounts, together with the absence of a requirement for specific claims of immediate interest to engage directly with background accounts, might be thought to make the test of coherence of individual claims with background accounts redundant. But it would not do so because the no-conflict requirement may be met even when a few insignificant claims in an account conflict with claims in background accounts. The respectability of some of those claims might be of interest. Then their coherence with background accounts would need to be tested separately. In addition, the coherence of an account with a background and the coherence of individual claims with that background are rather different things. It is worth highlighting them separately, even if the work done to establish the former would both establish the latter for significant claims and show that the great majority of insignificant claims did not conflict with claims in

background accounts.

### 5.2.2.3 Coherence and foundations

Our task is to give and support requirements for claims to be respectable. We are at liberty to be eclectic when doing so. There is no need for us to choose coherence to the exclusion of foundations, or vice versa. It would indeed be foolish to discard one approach in favour of the other, given that of the first three requirements for respectability, the first two (evidence for and against) have a foundationalist flavour while the third one concerns coherence.

In being eclectic, we stay in line with some coherentist approaches that allow a foundational element. An example is Paul Thagard's theory of explanatory coherence, which gives reports of observations a degree of acceptability that is independent of their relationships to other claims.<sup>25</sup> An earlier example, on which Thagard explicitly builds, is Susan Haack's foundherentism.<sup>26</sup>

## 5.2.3 Relationships between claims

### 5.2.3.1 Positive relationships

As we have already indicated, coherence that is epistemically valuable requires rather more than the mutual consistency of claims. It requires engagement, in the form

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<sup>25</sup> Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action*, chapter 3, section 1, principle E4.

<sup>26</sup> Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology*, chapter 4; Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action*, chapter 3, section 1.

of what we shall call positive relationships between claims. These include inferential relationships, but we shall here concentrate on other types of positive relationship.

We are concerned with the respectability of claims that help to make sense of the past. But we shall here consider relationships of those claims to claims that merely recount events, actions or features of environments. Our main concern is still the respectability of claims that help to make sense of the past. We shall however take a direct interest in claims that merely recount in sections [5.2.4.3](#) and [5.2.4.4.4](#), where we shall be concerned with the characterization of events, actions and features of environments.

Claims that help to make sense of the past may bear positive relationships to claims that merely recount because the claims that help to make sense set out causal connections, while the other claims describe the putative causes and effects in ways that make the claims of causal connection plausible. Or claims may help to make sense of the past by setting out reasons for actions, while other claims describe the reasons and the actions in ways that make the claims of reason-giving connection plausible. (When we refer to reasons we shall mean reasons that it is plausible to think of as actually having motivated the agent, whether consciously or unconsciously. We are not concerned with reasons that merely should have motivated the agent.) Finally, claims may help to make sense of the past by setting out connections that led from features of an environment to events or actions, for example when they set out connections between features of a political environment and events or actions that can be seen as unsurprising given those features, while other claims describe those features and the events or actions in ways that make the claims of connection plausible.



(On a point of terminology, we shall speak of relationships between claims and connections between actual events, actions and features of environments.)

Positive relationships of such sorts would amount to engagement between the claims that interested us and claims that recounted the relevant events, actions or features of environments, and also engagement between the recounting claims themselves. This would be so whether the recounting claims were in the accounts that included the claims of interest or in other accounts. We should also recall the point made in section 1.2.1 that a historian will not always make claims of causal or other connection explicit. She may recount events, actions or features of environments in sufficient detail and in an appropriate sequence to ensure that appropriate claims of connection arise in the minds of attentive readers. If it is clear which claims are implicit, it will be possible to assess those claims for coherence with the account and with background accounts, and to assess the whole account, including the implicit claims, for internal coherence and for coherence with background accounts.

Environments are different from events and actions. We generally think it appropriate to mention an event or action as a whole, while only specific features of an environment should be mentioned. We shall however not let that concern us. The difference from events and actions is not really very great. Claims about events and actions also pick out specific features of them. It is just that we have a sense that such a claim is about the whole event or action, while it is clear that a claim about an environment is far from being about the whole of the environment unless it is very narrowly defined, such as the environment of fiscal pressures on a government.

Claims that events, actions and features of environments are connected in the ways we have mentioned capture relationships between claims that recount those events, actions and features of environments, and between the claims of connection and the claims that recount. But claims of connection may also be related to one another. For example, each one of several claims of connection may set out a link in a chain which as a whole convincingly connects an earlier situation with a later one. The success of the whole chain in doing so would indicate that the links all hung together. That in turn would indicate engagement between the claims that set out the links.

### 5.2.3.2 Examples

We shall now give a few examples of claims that events, actions and features of environments were connected.

#### 5.2.3.2.1 Causes and effects

A shift from the dispensation of patronage through established relationships of obligation to its dispensation for money has been offered as a cause of weakening of the government of the Roman Empire.<sup>27</sup>

Changes in the production of precious metals, patterns of movement of those metals around the world, and developments in the availability of financial instruments have been put forward as explaining both the fact and the timing of price changes in Europe in the sixteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome*.

<sup>28</sup> Munro, *The Monetary Origins of the 'Price Revolution': South German Silver Mining, Merchant-Banking, and Venetian Commerce, 1470-1540*.

Falls in the ratio of foreign to Irish wages and in the proportion of Irish-born people living abroad have been argued to have led to a decline in emigration from Ireland in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

### 5.2.3.2.2 Reasons for actions

The Duke of York's strongly-worded complaints to the King against the Duke of Somerset have been explained as motivated by Somerset's surrender of Rouen to the French in 1449 without putting up much of a fight. This had serious implications for York's honour as captain of the town, as well as leading to the loss of York's estates in Normandy.<sup>30</sup>

Frederick the Great's reasons to occupy Saxony in 1756 have been given as the need to have a defensive buffer against the Austrians, the logistical advantage that control of the Elbe would confer, and the opportunity to exploit the wealth of Saxony to sustain the Prussian war effort.<sup>31</sup>

Robert Peel has been argued to have shifted to a position on the basis of which he advocated repeal of the Corn Laws because of his observation of the effects of his earlier reforms, rather than because of what economists were saying on theoretical grounds.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hatton and Williamson, *The Age of Mass Migration: Causes and Economic Impact*, page 83.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, "Somerset, York and the Wars of the Roses", pages 301-307.

<sup>31</sup> Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, pages 260-263.

<sup>32</sup> Irwin, "Political Economy and Peel's Repeal of the Corn Laws", section 4.

### 5.2.3.2.3 Features of environments

Complex networks of land ownership, administration and rights to receive homage, along with ambitions to put dominion on a firm footing, have been seen as essential features of the environment within which there started a conflict that was retrospectively regarded as the beginning of the Hundred Years War.<sup>33</sup>

Constitutional arguments about the rights of the British state over its colonies have been seen as an important feature of the environment within which the American Revolution took place. Awareness of those arguments can help historians to see in some detail how the Declaration of Independence arose out of the tensions of the time, even though some compromise that allowed local self-government would have been possible.<sup>34</sup>

The psychology of the Emperor Franz has been seen as an important feature of the environment within which Metternich adopted his careful and less than straightforward approach to arguing for governmental reform in 1811.<sup>35</sup>

### 5.2.3.3 Distinguishing between types of connection

We have mentioned different types of connection between events, actions and features of environments. We shall now note reasons for drawing these distinctions, and a reason why one boundary may be hazy.

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<sup>33</sup> Le Patourel, “The Origins of the Hundred Years War”.

<sup>34</sup> Greene, *The Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution*, chapter 4.

<sup>35</sup> Radvany, *Metternich’s Projects for Reform in Austria*, chapter 4.

To start with the distinction between causal and reason-giving connections, reason-giving talk is more appropriate than causal talk when setting out the antecedents of human decisions. When someone makes a decision, that stage in the course of events is not to be explained causally so long as it is characterized as a human decision, rather than as a result of psychological or neurological forces. Even when it is appropriate to say that some event strongly provoked someone to take action, the consequences of that strong provocation depended on processes of thought and decision. In legal work, it is normal not to trace lines of causation through deliberate human actions but to see those actions as creating breaks in causal chains.<sup>36</sup> In history too, it is appropriate to consider instances in which events encouraged people to act in certain ways under the heading of connections of giving reasons, rather than under the heading of causal connections. Exceptions are likely to involve the behaviour of large groups of people. The actions of individuals are averaged out, their individual motives and choices are not discussed, and it then makes sense to talk of the causes of overall developments.

Turning to claimed connections between features of environments and events or actions, this category recognizes two types of situation. In the first type it is not appropriate to claim a single cause or reason, or a small number of causes or reasons, but historians can still see that features of an environment, perhaps including features that had causal or reason-giving influence, were such as to make certain developments unsurprising. In the second type specific causes or reasons may be claimed, but it is the description of features of an environment that makes it clear why those claimed causes would have had their effects or why those claimed reasons would have been strongly motivating.

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<sup>36</sup> Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*, second edition, page 44.

The boundary between causal connections on the one hand, and connections from features of environments to events on the other hand, is a hazy one. Some features of an environment could easily be regarded as causes. It is indeed noticeable that a distinction between causes and features of environments is often not made. When the task is to show how various factors led up to some significant event, a sophisticated historian is likely to refer to the origins of the event, rather than its causes. She may weave a rich tapestry of immediate events and features of an environment, rather than trying to set out a causal chain.<sup>37</sup>

### 5.2.4 The value of coherence

We shall now consider why positive relationships between claims are a good sign. This will show that there is good reason to include our third requirement for respectability, with its being read as calling for engagement and not merely the absence of conflict between claims.

What we say here will be concerned with positive relationships of the types that we discussed in section 5.2.3.1. The value of inferential relationships that exist independently of those positive relationships rather than being reformulations of them has been amply discussed by other epistemologists, and we shall let their work support inclusion of the third requirement to the extent that it relates to those independent inferential relationships.

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<sup>37</sup> For the identification of causes and the uses of such identifications in historical work see Hewitson, *History and Causality*, chapters 3 and 4.

#### 5.2.4.1 What relationships can show

The presence of positive relationships of the types that we discussed in section 5.2.3.1 will amount to at least some parts of an account fitting together. This will indicate, although it will not prove, that the account is grounded in historical reality. It will do so because the different parts of reality automatically fit together as parts of a single world in which there are connections, whether between causes and effects, reasons and actions, or features of environments and either events or actions. If an account is grounded in historical reality, it is likely to be straightforward for the account to reflect those connections by making claims that stand in positive relationships with one another. Conversely, if the claims in an account stand in positive relationships with one another, then the most likely explanation is that it is grounded in historical reality, the parts of which automatically fit together and in which there are appropriate connections. This supports the imposition of our third requirement. The engagement of positive relationships, along with a lack of conflicts, really does show something.

(There is an additional premise at work here. This is that the general principles on the basis of which we claim connections reflect the way the world works. But we can support that premise by saying that if our general principles did not meet that condition, it is most unlikely that they would be useful in leading our lives. And if they were not useful, they would have been discarded. We shall return to the topic of general principles in section 5.2.4.2.)

The second most likely explanation for claims in an account standing in positive relationships with one another would be that the account had been contrived to allow this, but that would be contrary to scholarly norms. It would also be

a difficult task, for the following reason. An account that did not make frequent reference to evidence would immediately be seen as implausible. It would therefore be essential to refer to evidence. But that evidence would be given independently of the formulation of the account, not contrived to fit the account. A contrived account would therefore have to be linked to evidence that would sometimes not provide the required support, and might even undermine the account. It is true that evidence could be interpreted, but such interpretations would have to be reasonable. It is likely that at least some unreasonable interpretations would be needed to accommodate a contrived account.

If on the other hand an account suffers from a lack of positive relationships of the types that we discussed in section 5.2.3.1, such a lack will lead to a suspicion that the account does not show what was really going on in the period studied. A reader could reasonably suspect that the past had been misrepresented, because that would explain the inability to set out plenty of connections between events, actions and features of environments.

We have given examples of relationships between claims within an account. But the same approach of seeking positive relationships could equally well be applied to claims in different accounts. If claims within an account that was the immediate object of interest not only enjoyed positive relationships with one another but also enjoyed positive relationships with claims in background accounts, that would give some assurance that the first account was grounded in the same historical reality as the background accounts. If the first account were not so grounded then it would be quite a coincidence for claims within it to be able to make positive connections with a range of claims within background accounts. And it is unlikely that several background accounts could all succeed in being linked to



the first account if they were not themselves grounded in historical reality. If they were not so grounded, they would pull in different directions unless they were all grounded in the same imaginary world.

#### 5.2.4.2 The need for general principles

There will need to be some general principles which can be used to assess claims that events, actions and features of environments were connected, as well as their being used to guide historians when they are writing accounts and looking for connections to claim. Without such principles, assessment would be undisciplined and the conclusions reached about connections would have little value. The principles will be independent of specific accounts and could underpin the assessment of claims of connection in many different accounts. Support for their use will come from their effectiveness across a broad range of applications.

The general principles may include folk-psychological principles that people of certain characters, in situations of given types, will tend to act in certain ways. Thus for example a reason that has been given for the willingness of Philip Melanchthon to seek a quiet accommodation over the bigamy of Philip of Hesse rather than issue an outraged condemnation was the perceived need to keep Hesse on the Protestant side.<sup>38</sup> The principle that people will often not put achievement of their most important goals at risk even if that means compromising their conscience shows that this claimed connection between reason and action is entirely

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<sup>38</sup> Mullett, *Martin Luther*, second edition, pages 312-317 (pages 231-235 in the first edition). For an alternative account that portrays Luther, who joined Melanchthon in consenting to the bigamy, as acting in accordance with sincere beliefs and not merely out of expediency see Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, pages 358-361.

plausible. This in turn places the claim of this connection between reason and action in positive relationships with the claims that recount Melanchthon's concerns and his decision.

Another possible source of principles is well-supported economic theory. Thus the immediate impact of the Black Death in reducing the supply of labour has been connected to the longer-term changes of an increase in wages and a changed balance of power between different elements in society.<sup>39</sup> Economic principles of supply, demand, prices and market power come into play to show that it is appropriate to claim these connections. This in turn places the claim of causal connection in positive relationships with claims that recount both the immediate impact of the Black Death and the longer-term changes.

As these examples indicate, the required general principles will largely be found in background accounts. We should however distinguish two different functions which accounts that supply general principles perform. The first function is to supply tools with which to identify likely connections and formulate the corresponding claims. This function relates to coherence in a positive sense. The second function is to check the plausibility of accounts. Plausibility is indicated both by engagement between claims and by the absence of conflicts between an account of immediate interest and background accounts that supply general principles. This function relates to coherence in both a positive and a negative sense.

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<sup>39</sup> Bateman, *Markets and Growth in Early Modern Europe*, pages 22-25.

### 5.2.4.3 Characterization

We should not simply rest content with a view that the existence of positive relationships is a good sign. We must look at how historians characterize events, actions and features of environments. This is something they must do if there is to be any prospect of showing how these things are connected. Reinhart Koselleck has made the point that historians use general concepts to characterize historical entities in ways that allow connections to be claimed, so that histories can be written.<sup>40</sup>

Historians may for example characterize a disturbance as a rebellion, or the writing of a letter as the betrayal of a secret, or a river as a means of communication, so that appropriate general principles which can both facilitate and regulate the claiming of connections can be brought to bear.

We need to ask whether the process of characterization might go wrong, whether it is adequately controlled, and whether it might be influenced by the claiming of connections that it facilitates.

#### 5.2.4.3.1 Inappropriate characterizations

We must consider the risk of inappropriate characterizations, because they might allow connections to be claimed when they should not be. This is one form of a widespread worry about coherentism when the goal is to substantiate the truth of claims. A picture of the world may be thoroughly coherent but mistaken. It is also a worry that

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<sup>40</sup> Koselleck, “Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur”, section 4, translated as “Representation, Event, and Structure”, section 4. Koselleck does however say this in the context of a particular argument about historical reality and our contact with it.

we may have even if we think there is some objective way the past was that historians could in due course discover, giving rise to some one way to tell history by connecting events, actions and features of environments.<sup>41</sup> If there were such a single way to tell history, there might be some very limited range of characterizations that would allow historians to claim connections which were acceptable by reference to that single way. Any characterizations which allowed them to do so would then be appropriate and all others which did not allow them to do so would be shown to be inappropriate. But historians are far from actually knowing how any such objective way the past was would require them to characterize events, actions and features of environments, so they would still have to decide how to characterize those things. And they would have no certainty that they were doing so appropriately.

#### 5.2.4.3.2 Controls over characterizations

Fortunately, characterizations are not uncontrolled. Events, actions and features of environments cannot be characterized in any way that takes a historian's fancy. They must be characterized in ways that fairly reflect the documents, material remains and other sources of information that have come down to us. Failure to do so is what we mean by inappropriate characterization.

Another control is that characterizations must allow the claiming of connections, so that coherent accounts can be given. The claims must be acceptable by reference to appropriate general principles. Claims of causal connection

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<sup>41</sup> For discussions of the possibility of there being an accessible objective way the past was see Roth, "Narrative Explanations: The Case of History"; Levine and Malpas, "'Telling It Like It Was': History and the Ideal Chronicle"; Roth, "The Object of Understanding".

and claims of connection from features of environments to the efficacy of causes must be acceptable given the principles that determine what causal powers would in general have been available in an appropriate context (for example, an economic or technological context), and what conditions for causes to be effective would in general have applied in that context. Likewise, claims of connection from reasons to actions and from features of environments to the impact of reasons must be acceptable given the principles of a folk psychology that would have been appropriate to the people studied.

This might seem to be an odd control to identify. A need to claim connections would seem to encourage inappropriate characterization. If some set of characterizations offered an easy route to claims of connection, it would be tempting to seize the opportunity and overlook any failures to reflect the available evidence fairly. But a need to claim connections can be a control, as well as a temptation.

It can be a control for the following reason. Appropriate characterizations will tend to reflect the actual state of the world, and the general principles we use are ones that on the whole reflect the way the world works. (As we noted in section 5.2.4.1, if they did not, they would not be useful and we would have discarded them.) If there are some inappropriate characterizations in an account, along with some appropriate ones, it is likely to be difficult to claim connections between events, actions and features of the environment characterized inappropriately and those characterized appropriately while still respecting the general principles. An inappropriately characterized event is unlikely to be a plausible effect of its supposed cause, a plausible cause of its supposed effect, or a plausible reason for the action it supposedly prompted, where the corresponding supposed cause, effect or action

has been characterized appropriately. There is likely to be a mismatch. The same would go for inappropriately characterized features of environments. They would be unlikely to be plausible enablers of causal connections between appropriately characterized events. They would also be unlikely to help make sense of appropriately characterized actions. Finally, an inappropriately characterized action is unlikely to have been plausibly motivated by appropriately characterized reasons for it that may be offered. So if it is difficult to claim connections, that will be a warning that some inappropriate characterizations may have been used.

That much relates to inappropriate characterizations alongside appropriate ones. But the same argument could be made in cases in which everything was characterized inappropriately. If events, actions or features of the environment have all been characterized inappropriately, it is unlikely that the mistakes made would happen to match up so that connections that were permitted under the relevant general principles could be claimed.

This control over characterizations is by no means perfect. Inappropriate characterizations may obstruct the claiming of some connections, but not all of them. It may be that enough connections can still be claimed for an account to come across as satisfactory. And inappropriate characterizations will not obstruct the claiming of connections at all if the characterizations have been carefully crafted to facilitate that claiming, rather than their having been used by accident. Such conduct would however put a historian beyond the pale.

### 5.2.4.3.3 A reverse influence

There is a reverse influence of connections on characterizations, quite apart from the cases in which a presumed connection enters into a characterization itself (as when a political speech is characterized as revenge for an earlier speech by a rival).

The reverse influence arises as follows. Events, actions and features of environments are characterized and connections are then claimed. That in itself further characterizes the events, actions and features of environments. They come to be seen as causes, effects, reasons, motivated actions, or features that show why causes or reasons had their power or in some other way help to make sense of what happened. That might deter questioning of the supposed connections, because the events, actions, and features of environments were already seen as causes, effects, and so on.

To the extent that the claiming of connections follows initial characterization, reverse influences are likely to be quite weak. The main content of characterizations, as it existed before connections were claimed, is likely to remain both largely undisturbed and dominant.

We should however be aware that if a period of history has already been explored extensively, the possibilities for the claiming of connections that are presented by existing understandings of a period may have a heavy influence on characterizations. If for example a period is already seen as one of striking economic progress, there may be a tendency to characterize all technological changes as useful innovations even before they are fitted into a narrative of progress. The most conspicuous type of writing in which existing understandings encourage particular characterizations of events is Whig historiography, in which each political action is liable to be labelled as enhancing

or as hindering progress toward liberty under a sound constitution.<sup>42</sup> We may note this concern even without engaging in adventurous explorations of historical narration such as those that are found in the work of Paul Ricœur.<sup>43</sup>

#### 5.2.4.4 Overall patterns

##### 5.2.4.4.1 Things falling into place

Sometimes a historical account will present an overall pattern in which events, actions and features of an environment fall into place and make sense in relation to one another.<sup>44</sup>

A pattern will typically be structured by claimed connections between events, actions and features of an environment, whether causal connections, reason-giving connections, or connections by which features of the environment make certain developments unsurprising or show why causes or reasons had their power. We have already discussed the significance of claiming those connections. Now we shall focus on patterns themselves. We are here concerned with patterns that are revealed by individual accounts. We shall consider coherence with other accounts in section 5.2.5.

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<sup>42</sup> The classic criticism of this approach to history is Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*.

<sup>43</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit, volume 1 : L'intrigue et le récit historique*, part 2, chapter 1, "L'éclipse du récit" and part 2, chapter 2, "Plaidoyers pour le récit", translated as *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, chapter 4, "The Eclipse of Narrative" and chapter 5, "Defenses of Narrative".

<sup>44</sup> For examples of the presentation of large-scale patterns see Von Sivers, Desnoyers and Stow, *Patterns of World History, Volume One: To 1600 With Sources*, particularly the sections headed "Putting It All Together" at the ends of chapters.



The presentation of an overall pattern will amount to showing a form of coherence. This will in turn tend to promote the respectability of claims made in the account.

We must however consider what is involved in presenting an overall pattern. There may sometimes be reasons to restrain the natural impulse to see that achievement as promoting the respectability of claims made in the relevant account.

#### 5.2.4.4.2 Colligation

We may give some definiteness to the notion of an account's setting out how events, actions and features of an environment fall into a pattern by making use of the notion of colligation.

There are two sorts of colligation.

The first sort is making sense of events, actions or features of environments by seeing them as connected to other events, actions or features of environments. This sort of colligation falls within the scope of the claiming of connections that we have already discussed.

The second sort of colligation is the application of organizing concepts, such as that of the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution or globalization, in order to give shape to sets of events, actions and features of environments, to demarcate the members of each set from non-members, and to facilitate higher-level accounts that connect one set as a whole with another set as a whole (as when the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation are connected).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For the two sorts of colligation and the importance of distinguishing between them see Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation*, pages 16-20. Roberts himself uses the word "colligation" in the first sense. He also speaks of explanation rather than making sense, but he

Colligation of either sort may bring an overall pattern into view. And both sorts of colligation rely on the appropriate selection and characterization of events, actions and features of environments. We shall now consider these processes of selection and characterization, before moving on to how judgements as to whether patterns are compelling may be made in a disciplined fashion.

#### 5.2.4.4.3 Selection

Events, actions and features of an environment must be selected if a pattern is to be presented. Without selection, any pattern would be obscured by an excess of detail. But there are additional reasons why selection is needed.

In colligation of the first sort, where connections between individual events, actions and features of environments are claimed, a reason for selection is that only some such things can be seen as connected to one another. For example, only some events can be claimed to be causes of other events or reasons for actions that were carried out (rather than reasons for merely hypothetical actions). This sort of selection should not give rise to any concerns when we consider how the respectability of claims may be promoted by the presentation of patterns. The more comprehensive the pattern, the better that may be for the respectability of claims, but comprehensiveness or its lack will be a consequence of the fact that many or few events, actions or features of environments can be seen as connected to one another, rather than a consequence of the fact that selection has taken place.

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clearly has a broad notion of explanation in mind, one that would align reasonably well with our notion of making sense. For some hazards of colligation see McCullagh, “Colligation”.

In colligation of the second sort, where organizing concepts are brought to bear, selection is necessary in order to leave out events, actions and features of environments that would not fit within the scope of the organizing concepts. Here we may well have concerns. It may be that the impression that a pattern fairly represents the period studied is given only by omitting whatever does not fit the pattern.

If that is how a pattern comes to be set out, promotion of the respectability of claims made within the relevant account through showing coherence may turn out to be short-lived. Once reliance on selection is noted, the pattern may be discredited. Its coherence may then come to be seen as having no value. Claims might not lose their respectability when this happened. The requirements, including the third requirement, might be met in other ways. But the respectability of claims would no longer be promoted by the coherence of the overall pattern.

#### 5.2.4.4.4 Characterization

Characterization is needed in order to claim connections between events, actions and features of environments. Characterization is also needed to allow the second sort of colligation we have mentioned. Events, actions and features of environments must be appropriately characterized in order to bring them under organizing concepts.

There is a reverse influence on characterizations in both cases. We discussed the reverse influence of connections in section 5.2.4.3.3. We noted that it should be quite weak in that context, except perhaps to the extent that characterizations are made under the influence of existing studies of the relevant period. The use of organizing concepts is however quite likely to mediate the influence

of existing studies on the characterization of the events, actions and features of environments that are brought under those organizing concepts. Then the organizing concepts may appear to fit the details well, but that may be at least partly because the details have been characterized in a way that will tend to make a good fit apparent. This may even amount to a potentially innocent variation on the crafting of characterizations to allow connections to be claimed that we mentioned in section 5.2.4.3.2.

As with selection, promotion of the respectability of claims made within the relevant account through showing coherence may then turn out to be short-lived. Once reliance on characterization is noted, a pattern may be discredited. And in this case claims may actually lose their respectability. This is because the claims may turn out to rely on characterizations that are not supported by the available evidence, but only by the imposition of organizing concepts.

#### **5.2.4.4.5 Claimed compelling patterns**

It may be claimed that a pattern is an intellectually compelling one. If a pattern were indeed so, that would indicate both that the account which presented it had a high degree of internal coherence and that the account cohered well with background accounts to the extent that their role was to supply relevant general principles. How are claims that patterns are intellectually compelling to be judged?

There is little prospect of relying on the use of mathematical tools to identify patterns and supply their credentials, outside specific fields such as the analysis of economic data.<sup>46</sup> Even when such tools have been used, one should not assume that the rigour they impose extends to the drawing of conclusions about how patterns in quantified data are linked to other factors, such as general approaches to economic management.<sup>47</sup>

Attempts have been made to apply mathematical tools more widely, under the banners of cliometrics and cliodynamics. Cliometrics goes beyond traditional economic history. Cliodynamics holds out the promise of presenting patterns that repeat across events at different times and in different places. Such patterns, when presented in individual instances, might be seen as compelling because they could be seen as instances of established patterns and not as devised merely for the occasion. Work under these two banners has however been regarded sceptically.<sup>48</sup>

We may also be reluctant to rely on anything akin to the idea that success in interpretation (or in this context, success in presenting a pattern) can simply shine forth and be evident, along the lines indicated by Hans-Georg

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<sup>46</sup> There are many examples of the use of mathematical tools in books and articles on economic history. One convenient example is Chadha, Janssen and Nolan, “An Examination of UK Business Cycle Fluctuations: 1871-1997”.

<sup>47</sup> For an example of the drawing of conclusions see Romer, “Changes in Business Cycles: Evidence and Explanations”. Romer does not however claim any more rigour than she should.

<sup>48</sup> There is considerable activity under both banners, as may be seen from the journals *Cliometrica: Journal of Historical Economics and Econometric History*; *Cliodynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution*. For some views on the potential of cliodynamics see Turchin, “Arise ‘Cliodynamics’”; Spinney, “Human Cycles: History as Science”.

Gadamer.<sup>49</sup>

The main instrument of judgement as to whether patterns are compelling must be the well-trained good sense of historians. A judgement reached in that way may well be sound, especially when it is reached not only by the historian who presents a pattern but also by other historians. But the fact that the mechanism of the exercise of good sense is not exposed to view means we could not be sure of the soundness of any specific judgement that a pattern was compelling. We could at best conclude on the basis of a track record that a high proportion of such judgements were sound.

### 5.2.5 Background accounts

We shall now turn to the background supplied by other accounts, a background with which a claim and its own account should cohere.

Relevant accounts will include accounts of related historical periods or events. They will also include accounts of different sorts that cover the same period or events as the account in question, such as an account of the economic situation when the account in question concerns political events. Finally, they will include accounts that supply general principles to be used in making and assessing claims of connection, such as accounts of folk psychology and economic theory.

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<sup>49</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, volume 1, part 3, section 3(c), “Der universale Aspekt der Hermeneutik”, translated as *Truth and Method*, part 3, section 3(C), “The Universal Aspect of Hermeneutics”.

The coherence of an account with background accounts is something that coherentist epistemologists regard as significant. They may put it in terms of the coherence of a person's whole set of beliefs, encompassing not only the internal coherence of an account of immediate interest and its coherence with various background accounts, but also coherence within and between those background accounts themselves. That would go further than we need. We may restrict our attention to coherence between an account of immediate interest and background accounts. Coherence of a person's whole set of beliefs is however important in epistemology generally. It is a vital component of reflective equilibrium, which can in turn be made the centrepiece of a whole epistemology.<sup>50</sup> But we shall not enlarge our enquiry in that direction.

An account's cohering with a background has a positive aspect of engagement with background accounts that supply historical detail, alongside the negative aspect of the avoidance of conflict. An account should ideally be well-integrated with background accounts. For example, an account of political decisions may mention how things were beyond the political process. Features of the environment should not be limited to features of the political environment. An example is provided by events that led up to the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936, where the political process can usefully be seen against the background of social attitudes.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Elgin, *Considered Judgment*, especially chapter 4.

<sup>51</sup> Both the abdication and other developments are seen against that background in Williamson, "The Monarchy and Public Values 1910-1953".

# Chapter 6

## Indirect reassurance

### 6.1 The approach

Historians cannot start each piece of research from scratch. They must make extensive use of existing work. And it is not practical to check the respectability of more than a few of the claims that have been made by other historians.

Fortunately, reliance on the work of other historians can be supported without examining each claim individually. A historian can instead consider whether the historians who made the claims worked in the right ways, for example by making use of appropriate technical and other methods or by refusing to make claims that were not supported. The use of appropriate methods is likely to be made explicit in analyses of evidence. And the degree of care taken to find support may for example be indicated by the nature and extent of the references given in footnotes.



Such a consideration of other historians' ways of working is an indirect approach. Support for reliance on their work comes from the fact that while individual claims made by a historian who worked in the right ways might be ones that she should not have made, it is likely that the great majority of her claims would, if investigated, be found to be respectable. A subsequent historian might have the misfortune to rely on some claim for which the first historian had inadequate grounds, but the risk would be tolerably low.

We shall look at the ways in which historians come to make claims under three headings. In section 6.2 we shall consider both the use of reliable methods and epistemic virtues of a reliabilist kind. In section 6.3 we shall consider epistemic virtues of a responsibilist kind. And in section 6.4 we shall consider the consequences of the fact that historians work within epistemic communities.

An indirect approach does have its limits. Historians should not try to support assessments of the respectability of specific claims by looking at how the authors of the claims worked. Circumstantial evidence of respectability is not good enough in relation to specific claims. It can show only that it is likely that most claims made in a given work are respectable. This does set what we say here apart from what is said by those epistemologists who, when discussing reliability, responsibility and social epistemology, retain a close focus on the status of individual beliefs, whether as justified or as knowledge.

## 6.2 Reliability

### 6.2.1 Respectability and reliabilism

Our interest in the use of reliable methods to give reassurance as to the respectability of a historian's claims creates a link with the epistemic traditions that are grouped together under the name of reliabilism.<sup>1</sup>

Positions that may be identified as forms of process reliabilism pick out certain methods as reliable, and regard their use as important when arriving at beliefs. For example, a careful study of evidence and its credentials is a reliable method, so beliefs that are formed on the basis of such a study may be justified. On the other hand guesswork is not reliable, so beliefs that result from guesswork are not justified even if they happen to be correct.

There is also virtue reliabilism. This emphasizes the possession and application of competences that make the formation of beliefs more reliable. Possession and application of a competence together constitute an intellectual virtue. One example is the competence of analysing evidence well. Another example is the competence of setting out one's sources and arguments clearly.<sup>2</sup>

The boundary between process reliabilism and virtue reliabilism is a hazy one, and there is scope to see considerable overlap between the two approaches. But how one might analyse reliabilism does not matter for our purposes. We only draw attention to the connection between reliabilism as a whole and our project.

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey see Comesaña, "Reliabilism".

<sup>2</sup> For a survey see Greco and Reibsamén, "Reliabilist Virtue Epistemology".

## 6.2.2 What counts as a method?

Process reliabilism concentrates on reliable methods. Many different things may count as methods.

### 6.2.2.1 Specialized methods

Specialized methods are included. For example, palaeographic methods can be used to support an understanding of the history of documents and the attitudes of those who produced them.<sup>3</sup>

Specialized methods may be those of disciplines that are neighbours of history. For example, archaeological research that relies on the specialized methods of that discipline may be used to write political and social history.<sup>4</sup> A historian may however cite only the results of work in neighbouring disciplines, thereby hiding from the casual reader the fact that specialized methods have been used.

### 6.2.2.2 General methods

More general methods are also included. Examples of general methods are always checking any primary sources that are crucial to an argument rather than relying solely on secondary literature, reviewing the private correspondence of public figures to shed light on their public activities, and

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<sup>3</sup> Such use is for example made in Crick, “Historical Literacy in the Archive: Post-Conquest Imitative Copies of Pre-Conquest Charters and Some French Comparanda”.

<sup>4</sup> An example of the use of archaeology in the writing of a wide-ranging historical account is provided by Sage, *Ancient Sichuan and the Unification of China*.

reviewing accounts after drafting them to see whether they cohere with background accounts.

### 6.2.2.3 Lists of methods

We can envisage the construction of a list of reliable methods for historians to use, fitting in with the approach that is known as approved-list reliabilism.<sup>5</sup> There would however be scope for disagreement at the margins. The list would be incomplete, there would be debate about exactly what belonged on it, and methods listed would not be so well-defined that we could always tell whether they had been used properly.

### 6.2.3 A definition of reliability

We shall define the reliability of a method by reference to its propensity to increase the ratio of claims made and not retracted that are respectable to claims made and not retracted that are not respectable.<sup>6</sup> A method will deserve to be called reliable if it has a strong propensity to do this whenever its use might have a substantial effect on whether claims were made. For example, an effective method of checking the authenticity of documents would often have no effect, because documents would mostly be authentic, but on the occasions when documents were inauthentic it would have a substantial effect by deterring the making of claims that should only be made if the documents in question were authentic. It would therefore qualify as a reliable method.

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<sup>5</sup> Fricker, “Unreliable Testimony”, section 4.

<sup>6</sup> A very similar approach is applied to the identification of intellectual virtues in Sosa, “Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue”.

It will usually be clear whether a given method would qualify as reliable under this definition. Careful reviews of the evidence, effective checks of documents for authenticity, consideration of relevant details of the context, and reviews of secondary literature for alternative interpretations of evidence and of the people or events studied are obvious examples of reliable methods. The importance of the use of such methods is made clear by criticisms of historians who are, rightly or wrongly, argued not to have worked properly.<sup>7</sup>

The use of only one good method will not lead to acceptable results. Rather, a historian must combine methods in order to have much prospect of giving a satisfactory account. But any decent historian will do so. And the need to combine methods does not prevent us from assessing the reliability of methods individually, because there is no reason to expect that a method would improve the ratio of respectable claims to claims that were not respectable in the context of use of one set of methods but would worsen that ratio in the context of use of some other set. At least, that unfortunate result would only be likely to occur in contrived and unrealistic circumstances, such as when the second set included some obviously unreliable methods which would interfere with the reliability of other methods and which no sensible historian would use.

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<sup>7</sup> Examples include criticisms of several historians' work on the Merovingian military, set out in Bachrach, *Merovingian Military Organization 481-751*, chapter 6; criticisms of Lawrence Stone's work on marriage and the family, summarized in Howell, "The Properties of Marriage in Late Medieval Europe: Commercial Wealth and the Creation of Modern Marriage", pages 23-25; and criticisms of claimed errors of method and unsubstantiated assumptions in the work of Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman on American slavery, set out in David, Gutman, Sutch, Temin and Wright, *Reckoning with Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery*.

## 6.2.4 A risk of circularity

Our definition of reliability uses our concept of respectability. This means that we must not give the use of reliable methods a significant role in the definition of respectability. If we did so, circularity would threaten.

Fortunately, we do not fall into circularity. Our requirements for respectability focus on the claims themselves, on the evidence for and against claims, and on relationships between claims within accounts, between claims and accounts, and between accounts. We here propose paying attention to the use of reliable methods only as a secondary source of reassurance. And we envisage assessing the reliability of methods by reference to whether they would tend to lead historians to make or refuse to make claims, the individual respectability or lack of respectability of which could confidently and conveniently be established anyway, before allowing the use of methods that passed such a test of reliability to provide reassurance that it was likely that a high proportion of the claims made in a given work were respectable when assessment claim by claim would be impractical.

## 6.3 Responsibility

### 6.3.1 The virtues

We shall now turn to virtues of historians that embody attitudes rather than specific competences. These virtues include thoroughness, inquisitiveness, creativity, a sense of one's responsibility only to make claims when there is appropriate support for them, willingness to change one's

mind when that is appropriate, and the courage to maintain one's position when criticisms are inadequately supported.

Epistemic virtues such as these are discussed in the context of virtue responsibilism.<sup>8</sup> They also matter directly in our context because the exercise of such virtues should promote the making of respectable claims and reduce the likelihood of making claims that are not respectable. Since these virtues are relevant in the context of our project in the same way as the virtues of possession and application of competences, the fact that the boundary between the two sets of virtues is a hazy one need not concern us.

### 6.3.2 A risk of circularity

In section 6.2.4, we noted and dismissed a risk of circularity. The definition of reliability made use of our concept of respectability, so it was important not to give the concept of reliability a significant role in defining respectability. We should consider the same risk here, now that we are discussing virtues of attitude.

The risk is even lower here than it was in relation to reliability. Not only can we see that the virtues we identify here are beneficial by seeing that exercise of them does in fact tend to encourage the making of respectable claims and deter the making of claims that are not respectable, in cases where the respectability of the claims can be assessed independently of seeing whether the virtues were exercised. We can also see that these virtues are not at much risk of entering into the definition of respectability in some disguised form.

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<sup>8</sup> For a survey see Wright, "Virtue Responsibilism".

Moreover, these virtues are regarded as virtues in all academic disciplines. These include disciplines that use very different methods from those of history. This gives the virtues status as virtues that is independent of their benefits in history. So even if the identification of virtues had some influence on the definition of respectability, any influence on the other side of the circle, from respectability to status as virtues, would not depend on the specific requirements of historical work. That would help us to defend against any charge of circularity.

The same responses to charges of circularity could be made in relation to the virtues associated with work within epistemic communities that we shall discuss in section 6.4, and we shall not repeat the responses there.

## 6.4 Epistemic communities

### 6.4.1 Social approaches

Social epistemology studies ways in which progress toward having justified beliefs or toward having knowledge can be assisted, or occasionally impeded, by interaction with other people. Those other people may for example debate claims that have been made or provide testimony.<sup>9</sup>

If the participants in an epistemic community of historians exhibit appropriate virtues and their interactions involve suitable levels of discussion and criticism, this may help to give historians confidence that they can use work by members of the community without checking all of the work

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<sup>9</sup> For a survey of the field see the papers in Haddock, Millar and Pritchard (eds.), *Social Epistemology*.



in detail. We shall first consider relevant virtues in general, and then look specifically at testimony.

### 6.4.2 Communities and virtues

We have already noted some epistemic virtues of historians. We shall now draw attention to virtues that are significant when historians interact. We shall not be concerned as to whether specific virtues relate to competences or attitudes. As we noted in section 6.3.1, we do not need to draw a sharp boundary between the two categories.

There are several virtues to consider. Virtues of a historian who has produced a piece of work include transparency as to the contents and the worth of the evidence for and against claims, and openness about the processes of reasoning that led from evidence to claims. Virtues of someone other than the author include willingness to discuss the work and provide honest feedback, and openness to being influenced by the work so as to amend existing views or make future work well-directed. When a piece of work is debated, virtues of its author include two that we have already noted: willingness to change one's mind when that is appropriate, and the courage to maintain one's position when criticisms are inadequately supported.

### 6.4.3 Testimony

Historians have to rely on work done by others. A historian may cast a critical eye over what others have written, but she will usually not be able to check more than a modest proportion of the evidence that is cited in footnotes. What

are the implications of this inevitable reliance on testimony for the respectability of the claims that interest us?

We may start by considering that if the claims contained in testimony are respectable, that should increase the likelihood that claims made in reliance on the testimony will also be respectable. One reason why this should be so is that respectable claims contained in testimony will be supported by evidence, so use of those claims will allow the underlying evidence to give at least some support to the new claims. This will help the new claims to satisfy the first requirement. Another reason is that respectable claims contained in testimony will engage with other claims in their own accounts and some claims in those accounts will engage with claims in background accounts, making it likely that the claims in the testimony are grounded in historical reality. Then reliance on the testimony should in turn steer historians to make new claims that are themselves grounded in historical reality. So long as claims in the accounts that contain the new claims are in general grounded in historical reality, it is likely that the new claims will engage with other claims in their own accounts and that some claims in those accounts will engage with claims in background accounts. This will help the new claims to satisfy the third requirement.

In order to pursue this line in specific cases, one would ask whether the claims in the testimony were really founded on good evidence and whether they really engaged with other claims. When such a detailed examination of the support for testimony was impractical, one would seek comfort in evidence that the testifier had used reliable methods and had exhibited appropriate virtues. But evidence of the conduct of the testifier would only give secondary reassurance that it was reasonably safe to make use of the testimony. It would at best show that it was likely that a

high proportion of the claims contained in the testimony were respectable. It would not show that individual claims within the testimony were respectable, let alone that individual claims made in reliance on the testimony would be respectable.

Another line of enquiry differs from the first line because instead of focusing on the processes by which testimony was produced, it focuses on the process of transmission of testimony and on the relationship of trust that may exist between testifier and audience. Benjamin McMyler examines testimony in this way.<sup>10</sup> And Sanford Goldberg sees the process of forming beliefs on the basis of testimony as not limited to what goes on in the mind of the person who receives testimony, but as including the intellectual processes of the testifier.<sup>11</sup>

We can see this line of enquiry into the process of transmission as concentrating on the extent to which a specific virtue was exhibited by the testifier, the virtue of acting responsibly toward those who received or will receive the testimony (including, for written work, unknown future readers) by seeking to convey respectable claims and not to convey other claims. (The testifier would probably

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<sup>10</sup> McMyler, *Testimony, Trust, and Authority*, chapter 2. See in particular McMyler's comments on the speaker's acceptance of epistemic responsibility on pages 68-70. McMyler's approach is, as he sets out, particularly relevant to testimony that is given without providing argument in support of the testimony that would, if provided, allow the audience to bypass the role of the testifier and consider the argument directly (pages 58-59). This is not likely to be the precise position in our context, because historians will normally set out their arguments as well as their conclusions, but other historians who read those arguments are often unable to test the arguments in detail because the labour of going through all the sources cited would be too great.

<sup>11</sup> Goldberg, *Relying on Others: An Essay in Epistemology*, chapter 4, section 4.

prefer the terminology of correctness, but given that our requirements for respectability centre on evidence and coherence, the means to work toward the two goals of respectability and correctness would not differ except to the extent that a goal of making respectable claims would permit the making of contestable claims.)

The fact that the testifier could only seek to convey respectable (or correct) claims, and could not guarantee to do so, would mean that the claims contained in the testimony could not automatically be regarded as individually respectable and therefore as likely to promote the respectability of claims made in reliance on the testimony.

On that note, we shall end. The community of historians is both the source of requirements for claims to be respectable, and the body of people with a responsibility to do their best to meet those requirements.

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The terminology in references to journal papers has been standardized as “volume” and “number”. Volume, number and year are given. Months of publication sometimes vary as between online and printed editions, and some journals do not provide them at all. They are only given here when they would be of material assistance in obtaining papers.

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