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ANTIREALISM ABOUT THE PAST

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1. Introduction

Antirealist philosophers of historiography who are sometimes called *constructionists* claim that historiography is not a representation of the past, but a construction of it in the present (*Goldstein 1976*, *1996*). Constructionists regard historiography merely as something historians produce. The construct of historians need not be arbitrary, it can be an interpretation of present evidence. Since the past is inaccessible and statements about the past cannot be fully asserted, all we have is what historians tell us; further ontological assumptions about the past are to be taken at one's own risk. By contrast, *historiographic realists* claim that historiography is a representation or reflection of history; historiography is thus the largely true account of the events of the past.

There can be three types of antirealist constructionisms: *determined constructionism* regards historiography as having established a consistent family of theories and methods for the interpretation of evidence. Consistent application of these methods yields determined interpretation of evidence according to strict professional norms. Determined constructionists would balk at making any ontological claims about the past; they deny that determined historiography is a true representation of the past or anything more than the most plausible interpretation of the evidence. Historiographic realism and determined constructionism agree in their epistemic descriptive analysis of historiography

and on the determined relations between historiography and evidence; but they disagree in their ontological interpretation of the relation between historiography and history. Second, *underdetermined constructionism* holds that there are several historiographic methods of interpretation of evidence. Though different interpretations may lead to inconsistent results, there are no independent criteria to decide among them. Inconsistent historiography cannot be a representation of history because historical reality must be consistent. Third, *skeptical constructionism* holds that there is no privileged set of historiographic propositions because they are all equally indeterminate. Historiography is thus ontologically and epistemically indistinguishable from literary fiction.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, it will be interesting to see how antirealism in the philosophy of langage interacts with the different kinds of constructionism briefly sketched.

In the last forty years of the twentieth century, antirealism has come to the fore of philosophical discussion largely as a result of the work of Michael Dummett. I'll take for granted here that antirealism consists in a cluster of general semantic theses about meaning and truth that apply in particular to the historical past. My main objective is to assess the prospects of antirealism about the past, when the past is taken to be the proper topic of historiography, or when historiographic studies in their various aspects are taken to yield objective truths. In particular, I shall consider antirealism in the context of a denial of the possibility of historical objectivity.

2. Realism *vs.* antirealism in the semantics of mathematical language

Contemporary philosophical antirealism was formed and, indeed is at its strongest, as an interpretation of mathematics. Therefore, before embarking on an examination of an antirealist interpretation of historiography, a few words about the origins of antirealism in the philosophy of mathematics are appropriate. A realist about a class of mathematical statements, say of

arithmetic, must hold two theses. First, that their truth or falsity are independent of our abilities to either prove or disprove them, and that their meaning consists in their truth-conditions. If, furthermore, the realist endorses the (admittedly controversial) idea that a theory of meaning for a language is a theory of what the speakers' understanding of that language consists in, he must also be ready to argue that to understand or grasp the meaning of statements couched in the language of arithmetic amounts to a knowledge of the conditions which must be fulfilled for such statements to be true. Dummett's challenge to realism then comes to this: the realist is urged to show that the two-fold claim about meaning, truth and understanding holds, even when we are *not* able to recognize whether the truth-conditions of statements of arithmetic obtain or not, i. e. when these statements are *pro tempora* undecided.

Although it has been much refined and amended in recent years in the work of Crispin Wright (*Wright 1987*, *Wright 1992*) and Neil Tennant (*Tennant 1997*), the antirealist position championed by Dummett and his followers is provisional. The antirealist proposes that until a non question-begging argument has been provided in favour of the idea that mathematical truth may transcend our abilities to find, or construct, proofs for mathematical statements, we should replace *truth-conditions* by *provability-conditions* as the central concept of a theory of meaning for the language of mathematics. Therefore an antirealist interpretation of mathematics is the most plausible. (For an exposition and critical discussion of these issues, see *Hale 1997*.)

3. Antirealism about the empirical realm and in particular about the past

According to the Dummettian perspective, verifiability-conditions are the most likely sources of meaning for any language we may use to express claims about the natural world, other minds, or the past. These will be the conditions which must be fulfilled so that the users of the language will be able to verify, or check, or justify in some appropriate way, the truth of their claims. This implies

that, contrary to the truth-conditions of a realist semantics, verifiability-conditions will not be transcendent or inaccessible. Eschewing the notion of truth and replacing it with epistemic assertibility or verifiability, should guarantee that speakers are able to recognize that the assertibility or verifiability-conditions of their claims obtain when they do.

When we attempt to justify claims or beliefs about the past, whether or not we are successful, we resort to evidence in the form of documents, testimonies, and memories, private or collective. Justifications or warrants for the occurrence of past events share their characteristic properties with warrants for other kinds of empirical claims, e.g. claims about the occurrence of secondary qualities such as colours and textures: they are gradual, partial and defeasible. We may be *more or less* justified in claiming that a past event, or chain of events occurred at a certain time, typically because the scope of evidence that increases their likelihood may be broader or narrower, or become broader or narrower in the course of research. It may also turn out that further contrary evidence will lead us to retract our claim or that stronger new evidence for alternative claims will decrease our degree of belief. It could also be that the available positive evidence will weaken to the point where it cannot increase the probability of the original belief. Secondly, the evidence we possess to justify a claim may be relevant only for a particular aspect of the past event or chain of events. Thirdly, whatever historiographic claims we make about what happened in the past turn out to be better confirmed when we are able to check them against as many different, independent and varied sources of evidence as possible. Such variety, or *consilience*, in the origin and nature of our warrants is an epistemic virtue, and the incremental nature of empirical warrants is a function of consilience and independence.

These features, either individually or combined, cast doubt on any *in*defeasible certainty concerning any contingent or empirical statement. Past tensed statements constitute one privileged class that will always fall short of the

standards of conclusive verifications. Such statements will not be "superassertible" in Wright's sense (*Wright 1987*: 295-302). Their assertibility will not be stable following reassessments of our knowledge of the past, or further accretions to that knowledge.

The warrants we may gather for or against the occurrence of past events do not form a coherent class. Memories, which historians rarely use, are psychological events or states. Documents, which historians use in most cases, are physical objects, varying in kind, from private papers to official or legal records, and statistical data. Hearsay might also come in handy. It is one thing to suspect that something happened in the past, quite another to believe it took place on the basis of strong evidence. A coherent story based on reports may be sufficient for detaining a suspect, but a much higher standard of evidence is required for actual conviction, and the degrees of belief required for accepting historiographic hypotheses are more similar to those in civil law than to the considerably higher degrees in criminal law.

4. Historical significance and historical insignificance

From what has been said so far, it might seem that an antirealist interpretation of historiography stems from the rather trite and mechanical application of broad semantic theses about meaning and truth to the specific case of statements pertaining to the various historiographic disciplines. It is important to show that it is not so, that antirealism of the sort discussed here may be sensitive to some of the specific features of historiography. It should play a role in a discussion of the merits and limits of the various positions sketched in section 1.

Suppose we have sufficient evidence to believe that Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 50 B.C. and pronounced the famous words "*Alea jacta est* !" One might remark that, although this sequence of events is ontologically on a par with any other as far as being in the past is concerned — comparable to, say,

yesterday's raining and somebody's uttering the uninspiring words "It was raining", it still remains that historical events possess properties the second sequence falls short of having, namely historical significance, importance, relevance or 'meaning' (obviously, in a sense quite distinct from the one we have used in the characterization of realism, perhaps in a sense close to Dilthey's "value" or "purpose").

No matter how precise and 'scientific' we may have been in securing warrants for statements about past events and sequences of events, when these claims are isolated, they lack historical weight, relevance and even interest. What counts, once we've gathered the gradual, partial and defeasible evidence that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, is *not* the individual event which took place, or rather most probably took place, but its historical origins and consequences, its place in an interconnected network of events. The historian wants to establish that a past event bears specific relations to *other* events and sequences which occurred earlier or later. One possibility is that the event was the cause, or one of the many converging causes, of further events which would have themselves become part of the past by the time the historian considers them. The historian does not look just for warrants in favour of past events, but also for warrants in favour of *causal relation*s holding between them, for example in order to build a strong case for the conjecture that Caesar's decision to cross the border between Italy and Gaul in 50 B.C. led to his march on Rome, which itself led to a civil war, and to the military victories in the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa and Spain, which eventually secured the building of an empire. The historian may also want to establish the existence of general historical patterns, or to secure nomic generalizations. Philosophers of history may even try to ground grand scale truths about history, e.g. to show that every major social change has been preceded by an advance in knowledge and a change in opinions and modes of thinking, in the manner of Comte or Mill ; but this is a different type of endeavour altogether, which concerns the way very large historical sequences

interact within the framework of the overall history of mankind. (See, on this point, *Mill [1843] 1987*, especially ch. 10, sect. 7.) A view *about* historiography, about what historiographic studies should achieve as a scientific discipline yielding a rational discourse in the market for truth, is at stake here. An antirealist of the kind considered in the preceding sections must take a stand with respect to the generality of historiography and the objectivity of the kind of knowledge obtained by historians.

Both issues matter to the antirealist because they pertain to the way historians *justify* their claims, and whether, in doing so, they may argue beyond the particular. Moreover, at the core of the antirealist's concern, is the problem of determining whether historiographic statements, general or particular, are true or false, i.e. whether the semantic principle of bivalence applies to them. Suppose they are genuine truth-bearers. Could they also bear truth beyond all possible verification, i.e. be true in the sense *rejected* by the antirealist?

5. Generality and holistic explanations

Some philosophers deny that historiography may reach beyond the particular. Historiography then is largely an account – to quote Aristotle – of what individuals such as Alcibiades did and how they suffered. This may be judged a serious drawback, and even serve as a ground for denying that history could ever be the subject of scientific study. Descartes' view was precisely that historiographic judgments and reports, concerned as they are with the contingent and particular, amount to a confused heap of memories, gossip, tales, and even fables: there simply aren't any clear and distinct elements of the historical past which could be subjected to general laws, or to rules of inference, and from which firm and irrefutable conclusions could be rigorously attained. From the Cartesian point of view, which is deeply anti-Hempelian, the work of the historiographer – in the Oxford English Dictionary's primary sense of the term,

of compiler or chronicler – is *not* in the market for truth. Historiography, certainly of the somewhat literary type of Tacitus, Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay, or Michelet, does not meet the minimal requirements for rationality.

Some deny that historiographic reports of occurrences of individual past events have a cognitive content, or status, independently of a larger holistic historiographic background — such is Hegel's contention that consciousness of a *telos* or purpose, in any given community, is a necessary condition for its objective history to exist at all. Under this conception of how general claims may be handled, the business of the historian is *not* to give a linear account of past events which will be true to the past facts and the temporal order in which they occurred, but to draw parallels, to compare particular cases, to assess structural similarities. Accordingly, his reasoning will be holistic throughout. Others have claimed on the contrary that there are no laws, or warranted empirical generalizations, in historiography. As Hume pointed to long ago, universal judgments cannot be verified in the narrow inductive sense. But even if there are no laws and no genuine predictions (either retrospective of projective) based on our knowledge of the past, there may be an "interconnected tissue of generalizations", part of which may be deductively connected locally (see *Berlin [1960] 1978* : 115-122). At stake is how far an antirealist would be willing to go with regard to the recognition of the "interconnected tissue" of historiographic generalizations.

Suppose we believe that we possess warrants justifying the claim that the new political system resulting from Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon shaped the content of Roman law and, from there, thanks to the Christianization of the Roman Empire, that of canonical law. When and where will it be advisable to stop looking for interconnections and parallels? At some point, we shall eventually be committed to some form of open-ended holism, and this will affect the way in which we shall be looking for warrants in favour of particular and general statements alike. There will be no limits to the *size* of the warrants

which will confirm (or disconfirm) any conjecture or hypothesis regarding past events and their relations. For any potentially true historiographic statement we set out to establish, there will be auxiliary hypotheses, or new available evidence, the possibility of which may never be ruled out in advance.

The antirealist about the past cannot countenance such an unbounded holism in relation to historical evidence: it is incompatible with the requirement of finitude. Our scheme of historiographic explanation may not refer, either directly or indirectly, to any past event or fact we would construe in such a way that it will end up playing the role of warrant. Only a finite number of evidential warrants for historiographic facts, events and relations may play a genuine justificatory role.

6. The objectivity of historiography

It is often claimed that the realist about the past is trying to describe the world from an atemporal position, that he helps himself to the epistemological standpoint of a cosmic exile (see *Dummett [1964] 1978*, *Dummett [1969] 1978* and, more recently, *Dummett 2006*: ch. 4, 5). From that standpoint, the realist considers (or believes he has the right to consider) any series of temporal positions he chooses, in such a way that the past, the present and the future tenses are all fixed. However, past, present and future tenses cannot *permanently*, or absolutely, characterize moments or events. Whatever will have happened in the future, will later become the past. The realist who attempts to describe events from an atemporal position must therefore consider that temporal positions are only *relatively fixed*.

An antirealist can argue against this view by trying to make it clear that true statements about the past must have some relevant evidence *now*. An antirealist *solely about the past* allows the truth of a statement in the present tense which reports the occurrence of a state of affairs which will be part of the past at a later

time, e.g. "Caesar crosses the Rubicon", to be independent of its recognition by us. The *global* antirealist, on the other hand, holds a stronger position, according to which the truth of "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" is constrained by, or depends upon the available evidence, so that there is *no* difference in truth-value between "Caesar crosses the Rubicon" and "Caesar crossed the Rubicon." The conception of the past which emerges from this view is that reports of past events were, are, or will be true, at any time t, just in case we can, at such a time t, acknowledge either that there is at t, or will be in the future at t+1, some recognizable warrant in its favor. Our understanding of the meaning of *all* tensed statements amounts to our capacity to recognize either the present, or the future availability of a warrant, and to establish a truth-value link thesis holding for all tensed statements.

It might seem that if our only *bona fide* conception of the past is one which is constrained by whatever warrants we are able to establish, or recognize as being available in the future, at some given point t in time, the reality of the past will turn out to be relative to us in some strong, constitutive sense. The global antirealist would then be committed to rejecting historiographic objectivity.

Any argument to the effect that one cannot establish truths about history from outside history is indeed an argument against any form of metaphysical realism about the past, in particular about the historically significant past. It would be illegitimate, though, to jump to the conclusion that since there is no neutral, atemporal or non historical point of view, historiography is nothing over and above our subjective interpretation of the past from a point of view shaped by our present concerns, say in terms of some current political or ideological agenda, or perhaps an all-encompassing *Weltanschauung*, i.e., nothing over and above, in the last analysis, the result of a social construction. A strong version of this standpoint yields the view that history is meaningless, that it is nothing but a random collection of interpreted events. This is, by and large, the post-modernist

outlook defended by Lyotard (*Lyotard 1979*) and, to some extent, by Rorty (*Rorty [1980] 1984* and *1984*).

Even if one version or other of constructivism is correct and the historiographic model of the past must be constructed rather than found, it doesn't follow that *any* construction will do, or that *none* is acceptable. There is no reason to conclude than an anti-realist will have to deny the possibility of objective truth about history. On the contrary, whether or not a statement is justified, is, from the antirealist point of view, an objective matter. The notion of justification being cognitive, warrants for historiographic claims must be objectively sound and grounded (see, e.g., Dummett's answer to similar questions about ethical claims in *Pataut 1996*).

Goldstein argued that an ideal observer (a cosmic exile in Dummett's sense), who would be dealing in some privileged way with a fixed and immutable past, would *not* be dealing with the constructed past of historiographic enquiry. The historiographic image of the past changes as new evidences and warrants emerge, and new perspectives of study are opened (see, e.g., *Goldstein 1996*: 130-131 and *O'Sullivan 2006* for a good discussion of this point). Historiographic statements do not describe a corresponding past reality, which would be permanently fixed independently of its epistemic access to us. The evidence which constrains historical truth is not evidence *simpliciter*, but only evidence relative to a hypothesis, or theory. Just *which* facts would make up, say, the Roman Empire, is something which is itself open to discussion. Thus the immediate, primary, subject matter of historiography is evidence and not events. Accordingly, historiography uses theoretical and technical language just like other sciences that use evidence rather than direct observation of events to infer unobserved realities (*Goldstein 1976*: xviii, 11, 26-27).

> [P]hilosophical writers have virtually ignored […] problems concerning the emergence or constitution of the historical past

> in the course of historical inquiry […] because the history books they tend to read, full blown accounts of much-studied periods, tend to obscure them. [W]riters of philosophical essays on history […] may note […] that the historian's account must […] be based upon evidence, but […] have not the slightest idea of precisely how. […] It is very easy, indeed, on the basis of [their] reading[s], to take the historical past for granted in some realistic way and treat it as something there to be described and explained.
>
> (*Goldstein 1976*: 50-51)

Goldstein (*1996*: 9-10, 135 ff) argued that, usually, historiographic evidence can be recognized by virtue of its relation to historiography, that historiographic evidence *confirms* historiographic hypotheses and that the hypotheses *explain* the evidence. Still, confirmation and explanation require more than historiography and evidence; they require theories that connect historiography with evidence and identify the evidence as such in the first place. Whether such theories about evidence, about the transmission of information in time from event to evidence can be interpreted as consistent with an anti-realist approach to historiographic theories is a topic Goldstein did not discuss.

7. Conclusion

The historiographic discourse bears the external and recognizable marks of any discourse that expresses claims that may be judged objectively true or false. Statements in the past tense may be negated, taken and used as hypotheses, embedded within propositional attitude ascriptions ("X believes it was the case that *p*"), and so on. If their assertoric content is in part guaranteed by surface syntax, and in part by constraints pertaining specifically to the historiographic sciences, then there is room for what Wright calls "cognitive command" for their claims (*Wright 1992* : ch. 4). This means that : (*i*) a particular point of view about the nature and reality of the past ought to be held, (*ii-a*) the failure to hold it is the result of a cognitive shortcoming, (*ii-b*), this failure of rationality may

itself be assessed as a failure to build objective arguments in favour of the position it is rational for everyone to hold.

The important philosophical task before us, then, is to identify the conditions of historiographic objectivity. The vulgar yet common association or even identification of the kind of semantic antirealism discussed here with the relativism commonly linked with postmodernism and related forms of irrationalism is deeply flawed. On the contrary, it is mandatory for an antirealist to draw a distinction between claims which are acceptable and those which are not, *given an epistemologically constrained conception of truth*. Global antirealists, i.e. antirealists with respect to all tensed statements, do not have to discriminate between objectionable and unobjectionable historiographic claims *from outside* the temporal and historical process in which they themselves are embedded. This is a virtue anyone wishing to deny the possibility of objective knowledge of history should be able to appreciate.

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