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1

Introduction: Seeing things their way

'Facts alone are wanted in life', Mr Gradgrind assures us at the start of *Hard Times*.[1] Many historians appear to share Mr Gradgrind's sentiment, but some of the most powerful voices in recent philosophy have questioned whether there are any indisputable facts to be acquired. I am concerned in the chapters that follow with three principal aspects of this sceptical challenge. I shall mainly be writing as a practising historian reflecting on the task in hand. But I shall nevertheless have the temerity to suggest that there are good reasons in each instance for joining the sceptical camp.

One assault on the world of facts was launched some time ago from the direction of the theory of knowledge. This campaign was primarily waged by those who aimed to discredit the empiricist belief that our world consists of sense data capable of being directly perceived and uncontentiously described. It would not be too much to say that by now this particular dogma of empiricism has fallen into very general disrepute. Scarcely anyone nowadays believes in the possibility of building up structures of factual knowledge on foundations purporting to be wholly independent of our judgements.

I seek in chapters 2 and 3 to explore some implications of this post-empiricist critique, implications that seem to me of special relevance for practising historians. My aim in chapter 2 is to reconsider the familiar view that our goal as historians should be to assemble all the facts about a given problem and recount them as objectively as possible. I try to show that this approach is untenable, and to sketch an alternative and more realistic vision of the relationship between historians and their evidence.

In chapter 3 I turn to examine a more specific question about the world of facts. The issue here is one that cannot be evaded by anyone interested in understanding the beliefs of alien cultures or earlier societies. When we

[1] Dickens 1985, p. 47.

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examine such beliefs, we often find that they are not merely unfamiliar but appear in many cases to be obviously false. What role should our sense of their truth or falsity play in our attempts to explain them? One influential answer has been that, since false beliefs point to failures of reasoning, we need to begin by considering the truth of the beliefs we study as an indispensable guide to explaining why they were held. My aim in chapter 3 is to demonstrate that this approach, although frequently recommended, is fatal to good historical practice, and I defend the view that the concept of truth is irrelevant to the enterprise of explaining beliefs.

Besides being assailed by epistemologists, the world of facts has been undermined in recent times by developments within the theory of meaning. The cardinal assumption of positivistic philosophies of language was that all meaningful statements must refer to facts, and thus that the meanings of sentences must be given by the method of verifying the assertions contained in them. Quine cast doubt on this whole approach with his insistence that there is no such 'unvarnished news' to report. So did Wittgenstein when he first emphasised the multifarious ways in which languages are actually used, and went on to argue that we should stop asking about the 'meanings' of words and focus instead on the various functions they are capable of performing in different language games.

These powerful critiques were subsequently extended in two related directions. J. L. Austin, John Searle and others proceeded to examine in detail what might be meant by investigating the uses as opposed to the meanings of words. Isolating the concept of a speech act, they pursued the implications of the fact that, whenever we use language for purposes of communication, we are always doing something as well as saying something. Meanwhile H. P. Grice and a number of theoretical linguists went on to reconsider the concept of meaning at issue when we ask what someone may have meant by saying or doing something. This related contribution likewise had the effect of shifting attention away from 'meanings' and towards questions about agency, usage and especially intentionality.

I attempt in chapters 4, 5 and 6 to explore the relevance of these developments for historians of philosophy and intellectual historians more generally. When I originally wrote the article republished here as chapter 4, I was working against a backdrop of assumptions about the importance of the 'perennial issues' in the history of Western thought. It was widely agreed that the question of whether the so-called classic texts remain worthy of study depends on the extent to which they can be

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shown to address these perennial issues in a 'relevant' way. I protested that this approach is insensitive to the possibility that earlier thinkers may have been interested in a range of questions very different from our own. More specifically, I objected that, by appropriating the past in this fashion, we leave ourselves no space to consider what earlier philosophers may have been *doing* in writing as they wrote. I began, in other words, to invoke some insights derived from the theory of speech acts to criticise prevailing practices and to plead for a more historically-minded approach to the history of ideas.

My resulting discussion was mainly polemical, although I should add that, in reprinting this early article, I have softened the polemics as well as excising some clumsy formulations and repetitious arguments. While this essay remains more a critique than a programme, it already adumbrates the view of textual interpretation I go on to develop in chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 5 I engage in a ground-clearing exercise, looking for a pathway through the tangled debates about intentionality and the interpretation of texts. In chapter 6 I lay out my own approach to interpretation, attempting at the same time to protect it from a number of misunderstandings and to respond to a number of objections that have subsequently been levelled against it. As I have already intimated, the nerve of my argument is that, if we want a history of philosophy written in a genuinely historical spirit, we need to make it one of our principal tasks to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing in writing them. My aspiration is not of course to enter into the thought-processes of long-dead thinkers; it is simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way.

As will be clear from my stress on the need to recapture what past writers were doing, I mark a strong distinction between what I take to be two separable dimensions of language. One has conventionally been described as the dimension of meaning, the study of the sense and reference allegedly attaching to words and sentences. The other is perhaps best described in Austin's terms as the dimension of linguistic action, the study of the range of things that speakers are capable of doing in (and by) the use of words and sentences. Traditional hermeneutics has generally concentrated almost exclusively on the first of these dimensions. I concentrate at least as much on the second, as will become clear to any reader of volumes 2 and 3 of the present work. One way of summarising my approach would thus be to say that I try to take seriously

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the implications of the contention that, as Wittgenstein expresses it in his *Philosophical Investigations*, 'words are also deeds'.[2]

Reflecting on the idea that speech is also action, I came to the conclusion that the theory of speech acts might have something to tell us about the philosophy of action more generally, and in particular about the role of causality in the explanation of behaviour. I originally explored this suggestion at the end of the article reprinted here as chapter 4, but soon came to see that my argument was seriously confused. Later I decided to try again, and the outcome was the article that appears here (in a much revised and truncated form) as chapter 7. The thesis I defend is that, even if we agree that motives function as causes, there can nevertheless be non-causal explanations of action. This conclusion still seems to me tenable, and certainly represents a big improvement on my original argument. This being so, I have deleted from chapter 4 the section in which I initially tried to mount this case.

Having stumbled into studying the philosophy of action, I found myself confronting yet further questions that seemed to me of great importance for practising historians. What exact role is played by our beliefs in explaining our behaviour? What does it mean to speak of our beliefs as rationally held? What role should be assigned to assessments of rationality in the explanation of beliefs and behaviour? I first tried to broach these questions at the end of the article reprinted here as chapter 7, but again my initial effort was a failure. Here too I decided to try again, and eventually wrote the more extended treatment of these issues to be found in chapters 2 and 3. These discussions supersede my original account, so I have truncated and rewritten the closing sections of chapter 7 in which I first tried to address these themes.

The approach I follow in these chapters reflects my acceptance of the kind of holism we encounter in the philosophies of Quine, Davidson and especially the later Wittgenstein. One of my principal aspirations is to point to the relevance and importance of this movement in post-analytical philosophy for the interpretation of texts and the study of conceptual change. I seek to elucidate concepts not by focusing on the supposed 'meanings' of the terms we use to express them, but rather by asking what can be done with them and by examining their relationship to each other and to broader networks of beliefs. I assume in turn that the question of what it is rational to believe depends in large measure on the nature of our other beliefs. I attempt to interpret specific beliefs by

[2] Wittgenstein 1958, para. 546, p. 146.

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placing them in the context of other beliefs, to interpret systems of belief by placing them in wider intellectual frameworks, and to understand those broader frameworks by viewing them in the light of the *longue durée*.[3]

So far I have been speaking of post-empiricist theories of meaning and knowledge and their role in destabilising the positivistic world of facts. I next want to consider a third way in which our traditional view of language as a vehicle essentially for expressing and communicating our thoughts has of late been extended and rendered more complicated. One of the most salutary achievements of post-modern cultural criticism has been to improve our awareness of the purely rhetorical aspects of writing and speech, thereby heightening our sensitivity to the relations between language and power. As we have increasingly been made to see, we employ our language not merely to communicate information but at the same time to claim authority for our utterances, to arouse the emotions of our interlocutors, to create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and to engage in many other exercises of social control.

I proceed in chapters 8, 9 and 10 to address some questions about these textual strategies. It goes without saying that there is much more to be said and done along these lines. My own contribution is confined to the study of one particular range of rhetorical techniques, those concerned with exploiting the power of words to underpin or undermine the construction of our social world. Chapter 8 attempts, by reference to a specific historical example, to illustrate the dependence of social action on the normative descriptions available to us for legitimating our behaviour. This chapter is largely new, although the germ of it can be found in an article I published as long ago as 1974.[4] Chapter 9 presents a typology of the strategies available for redescribing our social world in such a way as to re-evaluate it at the same time. Chapter 10 investigates in greater detail the specific rhetorical techniques by means of which these ideological tasks are capable of being performed.

Critics have persistently complained that my approach to the history of philosophy robs the subject of its point. If we cannot learn from the perennial wisdom contained in the classic texts, what is the value of studying them? To many of my critics it seems that, by treating these texts as elements in a wider discourse, whose contents change with changing

[3] This means that, when I read in Bevir 2001, p. 188 that the holism espoused by Quine and Wittgenstein 'has had little impact on the philosophy of history', I feel that I have lived in vain. I imagine that colleagues such as James Tully must feel the same.

[4] See Skinner 1974, pp. 289–301.

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circumstances, I leave them bereft of anything except 'the dustiest antiquarian interest'.[5] I foresaw this depressingly philistine objection and originally tried to counter it at the end of the article reprinted here as chapter 4. My response was far from sufficient to satisfy my critics, however, and I therefore tried to spell it out in greater detail at the end of the article reprinted here as chapter 6. But even that was not enough, and the objection that my work is purely historical, and that nothing can be learned from it, continues to be made.[6]

Perhaps it may be worth trying to restate my argument in a more forthright style. It is true that my work is as historical as I can make it. But it is nevertheless intended at the same time as a contribution to the understanding of our present social world. As I have elsewhere argued,[7] one of the uses of the past arises from the fact that we are prone to fall under the spell of our own intellectual heritage. As we analyse and reflect on our normative concepts, it is easy to become bewitched into believing that the ways of thinking about them bequeathed to us by the mainstream of our intellectual traditions must be *the* ways of thinking about them. Given this situation, one of the contributions that historians can make is to offer us a kind of exorcism. If we approach the past with a willingness to listen, with a commitment to trying to see things their way, we can hope to prevent ourselves from becoming too readily bewitched. An understanding of the past can help us to appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present ways of thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds. This awareness can help to liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonal account of those values and how they should be interpreted and understood. Equipped with a broader sense of possibility, we can stand back from the intellectual commitments we have inherited and ask ourselves in a new spirit of enquiry what we should think of them.

There is also much to be learned from reflecting on what we uncover when we begin to investigate the texture of moral, social and political thinking as it was actually carried on in the past. We encounter endless disputes about the application of evaluative terms; we witness continual struggles to win recognition and legitimacy; and we gain a strong sense of the ideological motivations underlying even the most abstract systems

[5] Tarlton 1973, p. 314; Gunnell 1982, p. 327.
[6] See, for example, Wokler 2001, pp. 156–7. But for a more sympathetic appraisal see Hampsher-Monk 2001, pp. 168–74.
[7] I draw in this paragraph on the discussion in Skinner 1998, pp. 116–17.

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of thought. We find, in short, that philosophical argument is often deeply intertwined with claims to social power.

As I indicate in chapter 10, there are several implications one might feel inclined to draw from this spectacle. One is that the principles governing our moral and political life have generally been disputed in a manner more reminiscent of the battlefield than the seminar room. (Or perhaps the moral is that seminar rooms are really battlefields.) A further and connected implication is that it may be right to view with a certain irony those moral and political philosophers of our own day who present us with overarching visions of justice, freedom and other cherished values in the manner of dispassionate analysts standing above the battle. What the historical record strongly suggests is that no one is above the battle, because the battle is all there is. A final moral to be drawn is perhaps that agency deserves after all to be privileged over structure in social explanation. Language, like other forms of social power, is of course a constraint, and it shapes us all. As I try to show in chapters 8 and 9, however, language is also a resource, and we can use it to shape our world.

There is thus a sense in which the following chapters, far from reflecting a depoliticised stance,[8] may be said to culminate in a political plea. The plea is to recognise that the pen is a mighty sword. We are of course embedded in practices and constrained by them. But those practices owe their dominance in part to the power of our normative language to hold them in place, and it is always open to us to employ the resources of our language to undermine as well as to underpin those practices. We may be freer than we sometimes suppose.

[8] The progressive depoliticisation of the professional study of political theory over the past two generations is the theme of Wokler 2001.

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2

The practice of history and the cult of the fact

I

British historians are notoriously suspicious of philosophical reflections about the nature of their craft. The charge is no doubt exaggerated, but it is hard to deny that they have sometimes gloried in presenting themselves as straightforward empiricists for whom the proper task of the historian is simply to uncover the facts about the past and recount them as objectively as possible. Despite the inroads of post-modernist culture, this characterisation continues to hold good for many practitioners,[1] and lately their outlook has been defended anew in recent theoretical work.[2] Among those who have not only adopted this stance but have offered a theoretical justification of it, by far the most eminent in recent times has been Sir Geoffrey Elton, who always combined his large and distinguished output as an historian of early-modern Europe with a forthright willingness to reflect on the nature of historical enquiry, a topic on which he published no fewer than three books.[3] While this readiness to come forward as a philosopher of history was unusual, Elton's actual philosophy was a reassuringly familiar one: he presented himself at all times as an unashamed exponent of the cult of the fact.[4] Elton's theoretical writings may thus be said to offer a particularly illuminating means of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, and it is accordingly on his vision of the historian's task that I shall concentrate in what follows.

This chapter is a revised and extended version of an article that originally appeared under the title 'Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 7 (1997), pp. 301–16.

[1] A point well emphasised in Roberts 1996. For the analogous place of what Peter Novick has called 'hyperobjectivism' in the American historical profession, see the fascinating details in Novick 1988, esp. pp. 573–629.
[2] See, most notably, Evans 1997, esp. pp. 75–102.
[3] For the three main statements of Elton's creed see Elton 1969a, Elton 1970 and Elton 1991.
[4] I owe this phrase to Liam Hudson, who originally applied it more generally to the methods of British social science. See Hudson 1972.

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II

If we begin with Elton's first and fullest consideration of the methods and purposes of historical study, his book entitled *The Practice of History*, we find a revealing metaphor running through the argument. The aspiring historian is pictured as an apprentice – at one point specifically as an apprentice carpenter – who is aiming to produce a first piece of work to be inspected and judged by a master craftsman.[5] Elton repeatedly speaks of the need for the young scholar to undergo 'a proper apprenticeship'. He must acknowledge that 'his life is that of an apprentice learning a craft'; that he needs to 'train himself to his trade'; and thus that he needs to be 'instructed, guided, and trained'.[6]

One assumption worth noting is that both teacher and pupil are always assumed to be male. A further and pivotal assumption is that teachers and writers of history are best viewed as practitioners of a *techne*, as craftsmen who have mastered a distinctive set of skills and are thus in a position to pass on what Elton describes as 'the truths of practice and experience'.[7] This commitment is strongly reinforced by the authorial voice we hear throughout Elton's writings on historical method. The tone is very much that of someone who has rules to impart, rules that an apprentice will do well to read, mark and learn if he is to be 'thoroughly and properly trained'.[8]

The first important lesson that the apprentice learns from the opening chapter of *The Practice of History* is that 'history deals in events, not states; it investigates things that happen and not things that are'. From this it is said to follow that historians must think of their analyses 'as steps in a chain of events, as matters explanatory of a sequence of happenings'. They must therefore 'concentrate on understanding change, which is the essential content of historical analysis and description'.[9] Subsequently this activity is equated with providing explanations of events. The historian's basic duty is 'to consider and explain change', and this ability is identified with the process of 'deducing consequences from disparate facts'.[10]

I am not sure how much headway we are to imagine that the apprentice may already have made in his historical studies. But he will not need to have read very much to know that all these contentions are highly debatable. Suppose he has at least turned the pages of some works in the

[5] For the aspiring historian as an apprentice, see Elton 1969a, pp. 34–5, 144, 159, 216; as an apprentice carpenter, p. 214.
[6] Elton 1969a, pp. 103, 113, 213, 221. [7] Elton 1969a, pp. 15, 19, 160, 187.
[8] See Elton 1969a, p. 219, and for the theme of teaching more generally cf. pp. 178–221.
[9] For these quotations see Elton 1969a, p. 22. [10] Elton 1969a, pp. 37, 128–9, 166.

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history of art or philosophy. In that case he will know that by no means all historians are preoccupied with explanation, especially if by that process we mean (in Elton's formula) the deducing of consequences. Some are instead concerned with the provision of interpretations, and thus with the process of placing texts and other such objects within the fields of meaning from which their own individual meanings can arguably be inferred. If, in addition, the apprentice has read any religious or economic history, he will know that even historians concerned with explanation are by no means always interested in explaining events. Some are interested in accounting for such matters as the prevalence of particular belief-systems or the ways in which past systems of production and exchange have worked.

I suppose we are not to imagine that the apprentice will have read any works in the philosophy of history. Certainly he will not have done so if he has been following the lessons of the master, for Elton explicitly assures us in the Preface to *The Practice of History* that 'a philosophic concern with such problems as the reality of historical knowledge or the nature of historical thought only hinders the practice of history'.[11] Nevertheless, our imagined apprentice might surely be a sufficiently reflective person to wonder how it can possibly be the case that, as Elton maintains, the way in which historians explain events is by 'deducing consequences from disparate facts'.[12] It is true that a knowledge of consequences may sometimes lead an historian to reconsider the significance of an event. But the result of doing so will not be to explain it; it will merely be to re-identify what stands to be explained. When it comes to explanation, the historian surely needs to focus not on the outcome of events but on the causal conditions of their occurrence.

These considerations might lead one to conclude that Elton must simply have made a slip at this point, and that what he must have meant to write was that historians explain events by way of assigning their causes. Since he insists, however, that 'to suppose that causal relationships are the main content of history is an error', he apparently has no wish to be rescued in this way.[13] But in that case I cannot make sense of his view of historical explanation, simply because I cannot see how the act of tracing the consequences of an event has any bearing upon the explanatory task of giving an account of why it occurred.

If we turn, however, to Elton's second book on the study of history, we encounter a more sophisticated and extended analysis of historical

[11] Elton 1969a, p. vii; cf. also p. 129, where the theoretical literature on historical explanation is dismissed as 'quite remarkably barren and irrelevant'.
[12] Elton 1969a, p. 129. [13] Elton 1969a, p. 23.

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