

## CHRONOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE GERIATRICS OF FACTS

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I would like to begin by making a broad distinction between the problem of the nature of historical accounts, and the problem of the effect that time has on any account. The nature of historical accounts is the central problem in the philosophy of history, and the efforts to answer it are listed under the familiar "isms" of historiography. The effect that the passage of time may be said to have on any report, account, or record of an event is the subject that here will be called chronological perspective.

We begin, then, with an event, an account of that event, the factor of time, and the assumption that whatever philosophy of history is presupposed, the account is intended to be an accurate one. The question to be answered is: "What effect does the passage of time have on the nature of such an account?"

Perhaps the most obvious answer, or at least the answer most in keeping with common sense, would be that the accuracy of the account of any particular event varies inversely with the time between the event and the account. The greater the interval, the less accurate the account. For this reason journalists are encouraged to record events as they are happening. The ultimate in such first-hand accounts would be the running commentary.

The view that time diminishes accuracy is shared by many students of history. A. L. Rouse in his biography of Shakespeare treats the contemporary, though indirect, mention of Shakespeare by Robert Greene as more reliable than the explicit account by John Aubrey, who wrote before 1697, but who was not contemporary with the events he reports.<sup>1</sup>

A more amusing example is provided by C. S. Peirce. In his essay "On Vitally Important Topics," he criticizes the historian Edouard Zeller because Zeller refused to believe that Pythagoras had a golden thigh in spite of the testimony from the best minds of the ancient world.<sup>2</sup> All else being equal, the ancients are said to have a better chronological view of Pythagoras than the moderns because they were closer.

A number of reasons may be given to support the opposite claim that increased chronological perspective contributes to a more accurate understanding of events. First, there is the view that regards time an antidote to bias. A disinterested observer is thought to be more reliable than one who is involved in the events he reports. At the personal level, involvement may be emotional. Fear or excitement often causes a witness to report more or less than he observed. It is only in retrospect, after the

emotions have passed, that judgment can be corrected. The moral for historians is, of course, write in haste, repent at leisure.

Bias may be of a subtler, more complex kind. Even a detached observer cannot avoid the influences of his culture and of these presuppositions that are so much a part of the way of looking at things that the most inquiring mind would not think to question them. George Boas has written at length on "Some Assumptions of Aristotle."<sup>3</sup> The assumptions he discusses are those that Aristotle took for granted—regarding them as self-evident, if he thought of them at all. Professor Boas adopts the thesis "that assumptions of this type can be discovered by examination of philosophical texts." He maintains that one need not and should not try to imagine what the authors of such texts must have assumed; one must on the contrary see, where it is possible, what they actually did assume.

Such knowledge is possible because our experience has altered with the passage of time, so that things that seemed self-evident to Aristotle we no longer take for granted. Belief in an unchanging reality is a kind of "metaphysical pathos" from which our greater chronological perspective has freed us. We can now see what was hidden from Aristotle and many of his followers because the passage of time has dissociated us from the subtler, more complex biases of that period.

Of course, our own time must have its assumptions, which will be discovered only in retrospect. But this fact does not entail a historicist attitude. In so far as judgments concerning the assumptions of a period derived from texts alone, they would be independent of whatever assumptions presently prevail. As Professor Boas puts it, "Where a writer has left a copious body of writings, it might even be possible to untangle most of his assumptions from his inferences and lay them out like the axioms in a formal system for the scrutiny of others."<sup>4</sup>

A second argument for the benefit of increased chronological perspective is based on the necessary incompleteness of any first-hand account. Even the best informed government official cannot be aware of all the things that happen within his department at a given time, and even the most astute journalist will not have access to all the possible sources of information concerning a given event. As time passes, however, the interested student of that event will be able to bring together information from a variety of sources that could not be available to the most determined first-hand observer. Granting that our student is objective, he will produce a more complete, and therefore more accurate, account of the events than any single contemporary observer could do.

In his book, *The Crime of Galileo*, Giorgio de Santillana describes how the account of Galileo's troubles with the Church was altered by the publication in 1870 of a document discovered in the archives of the Holy

Office.<sup>5</sup> The document indicates that Galileo was not prohibited from teaching or discussing his astronomical theories in 1616, although in 1633 he was charged with violating just such an injunction. Some authorities chose to regard the document as a forgery. It was not until 1927 that the document was established as authentic by X-ray and ultraviolet tests. The opening of the Vatican sources and the development of testing techniques as well as the passing of religious controversy gives Professor de Santillana a distinct advantage over his predecessors, and even over Galileo's contemporaries. As a result, his account is more nearly complete than any first-hand account could hope to be.

The premise that more information is available sometime after an event suggests an interesting possibility. Certainly, the scholar has an advantage over the eyewitness because the scholar can tap many sources, and have the benefit of many points of view. As we have seen in Galileo's case, though, not all the sources are available immediately following the event: they become available gradually over a period of time.

But time, like Shelley's West Wind, is both creator and destroyer. Witnesses die or disappear; documents are lost or destroyed, memory fades. If we allow that these processes are not uniform, it seems plausible to suppose that for any given event there is a moment of optimum historical opportunity. That is, there is some one time when available sources of information concerning a particular event are at their maximum. Prior to that time all the sources were not yet available, the exact nature of the event not yet clear. After the imagined moment the attrition of sources would render any complete account impossible.

Unfortunately, there is no way to tell what sources are available except by doing historical research. And, no matter how much research is done, there is always the chance that new resources will be found. The moment of optimum historical opportunity must remain, therefore, a mere theoretical possibility—something for historiographers to match against the physicists' quark at faculty lunches.

A third argument that might be offered in favor of a long chronological perspective is based on the concept of time as a filter. This argument has two versions. In the first version the passage of time is regarded as simply reducing the number of sources available to the historian. This has the advantage of relaxing the criteria of selection.

As W. H. Dray has observed, "It is a commonplace of historical inquiry that a historian cannot include all he knows about his subject matter in his finished account."<sup>6</sup> Thus some standard of selection is essential. However in cases where time has diminished the number of available sources the problem of selection is less acute. The guidelines can be more loosely drawn, and doubtful cases may be included rather than excluded. The

likelihood that an available important source will be omitted because its importance is not immediately recognized is greatly reduced. Consequently, the historians value judgments are less likely to effect the nature of his report by influencing the selection of its contents. According to this line of reasoning, we can justify the seemingly paradoxical claim that, historically, Shakespeare is a better known figure than, say, Winston Churchill, because our knowledge of sources regarding Shakespeare is more nearly complete, and so less likely to change as chronological perspective increases.

The second version of the time-as-filter argument is more specialized in its scope. It applies mainly in the arts, and is most often encountered as a last-ditch explanation of selection of some works as classics, and the rejection of others as inferior. A kind of Darwinism is supposed to be at work among artifacts. As more and more works compete for attention, lesser works are forgotten. Those that have survived longest are the most valuable. The ultimate criterion of classic stature is the capacity of a work to attract attention over a long period of time. Chronological perspective, therefore, is essential to the certain recognition of a work as a classic.

A fourth argument in favor of a long chronological perspective is based on the assumption that an event cannot be fully understood until its effects are known. The nature of an event is not necessarily that attributed to it by first-hand observers. Even though they observe carefully and report their observations accurately, their accounts become significant only in the light of later events.

A first-hand account, on this view, may be quite correct, and yet it also may be an account of something very different from that which it purports to be about. The ordinary locution for describing this state of affairs is, "They didn't know what they were seeing." It is this kind of chronological perspective that makes it possible for us to say, for example, that Erasmus did not fully understand what he was doing when he wrote *In Praise of Folly*; that Seward did well to overpay the Russians two-million dollars out of mistaken gratitude, and that William Blake was a great man, while Dr. Mesmer was not. In each case, greater chronological perspective produces a more accurate account of the original events.

A fifth and final argument for the positive effects of increased chronological perspective may be derived from the practice of employing the passage of time as a means of ascertaining the probability of an original account. A single report of a unique event may be regarded as decreasing in probability as time increases.

To take a trivial example, if in a private audience one heard the Pope utter a single, gratuitous obscenity, and there were no repetition of the event during that or subsequent audiences, and no reports of similar

occurrences from other observers, one might come to doubt that the original event had ever occurred.

Reasoning similar to this appears in Hume's argument against the possibility of miracles. He asks us to "Suppose for instance, that the fact, which the testimony endeavors to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and marvellous; in that case, the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less usual."<sup>7</sup> In other words, as more time passes since the last reported miracle, the credibility of earlier reports diminishes. When we doubt our senses, or someone else's, we wait and see. Many of us are still waiting to see if there is indeed a monster in the loch, or saucers in the sky. At some point, however, our chronological perspective may be great enough to judge that both are probably non-existent.

Under the general heading of chronological perspective we have considered some of the ways in which the passage of time may effect our present understanding of the records of past events. If the concept of chronological perspective implicit in the above discussion is a tenable one, at least two possibilities for further development present themselves.

First, there may be a significant problem in the theory of history regarding the status of first-hand accounts. On one hand such accounts are valued on the assumption that the more immediate the record, the less likely it will be distorted by memory, later interpretation, or natural processes. On the other hand, the adequacy of a historical work may depend, not on getting closer to the event in time by the use of first-hand accounts, but upon attaining some degree of distance. There is, in other words, some question as to what attitude the historian should adopt toward time itself.

Second, in the search for the differentia of history, that is, in the attempt to specify what it is that distinguishes history from other disciplines, the concept of chronological perspective may be a useful device. The effect of time on the record of past events may be regarded as an objective phenomenon, and the effect of time is certainly prior to any historian's narrative. Therefore, if those effects could be isolated and described in a more systematic manner than we have attempted here, the concept of chronological perspective would serve to define a problem that is implicit in any historical inquiry: what is it that distinguishes history from other disciplines?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A. L. Rowse, *William Shakespeare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, A. Burks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), vol. I, pp. 339-41.

<sup>3</sup> George Boas, "Some Assumptions of Aristotle," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (1959) vol. 49, part 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 261-74.

<sup>6</sup> W. H. Dray, "History and Value Judgment," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Co. and the Free Press, 1967).

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 113.

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