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Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography

By AVIEZER TUCKER

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This is a welcome attempt to revive the largely moribund field of post-analytic philosophy of history. Tucker wishes to make a clean break with previous debate concerning the essential *form* of historiography—in particular, whether historical explanation requires covering laws, singular causal claims, or narratives. Tucker’s topic is rather the relation between present evidence and historiographical ‘hypotheses’. He asks whether such hypotheses are determined, underdetermined, or indetermined by the evidence. He argues that a large part of post-Rankean historiography is determined by the evidence, and should therefore be regarded as scientific. This historiographical development should be recognised as a significant achievement, indeed as a “third scientific revolution” (p. 260) (following Galileo and Newton). Some contemporary historiography is, however, underdetermined: this portion, together with all pre-Rankean historiography, is ‘traditionalist historiography’. It makes no epistemic difference whether the historiographical hypotheses are straightforwardly descriptive, explanatory, narrative, or colligatory.

In Chapter 1 Tucker presents an argument from historiographical consensus, which serves to ground the remainder of the study. The feature of historiography most likely to be indicative of historical knowledge is “consensus on historiographic beliefs in uncoerced, heterogeneous, and sufficiently large groups of historians” (p. 23). Indeed, this ‘knowledge thesis’ is demonstrably superior to any alternative sociological explanation of this sort of consensus, so long as the consensus group is sufficiently heterogeneous as to contain both members who do and members who do not possess the proposed sociological feature. (Though not acknowledged by Tucker, the structure of this argument is that of Mill’s Method of Agreement. Tucker is a methodological monist: the philosophical task is one not of analysis, but of explaining empirical data, in this case historiographical consensus.) The primary tasks for the remainder of the book follow: to explain how historiographical consensus arose (Ch. 2), to make explicit the underlying theoretical machinery behind the consensus (Ch. 3), to understand why there is historiographical disagreement as well as consensus (Ch. 4), to examine whether the form of historiography is relevant to consensus (Ch. 5), and to question whether the scope of consensus may be expanded (Ch. 6).

The historical account of the development of scientific historiography, presented in Chapter 2, is a highlight. A critical methodology was “imported wholesale to historiography from other disciplines—biblical criticism, classical philology, and comparative linguistics” (p. 46), and was subsequently exported from historiography to evolutionary biology. Detailed case studies are used to outline the key features of this critical methodology, while a more systematic account is presented in the following chapter. The historical sciences are distinguished from other sciences not by any peculiarity of subject matter (as has long been claimed by those of the idealist tradition), but by the fact that the historical sciences seek common cause tokens that best explain present evidence, while other sciences seek common cause types (p. 102). The major

achievement of the scientific revolution in historiography is revealed to have been the development and application of theories enabling historians both to judge the fidelity of information chains leading from the past to sources of evidence, and to discover 'nested' information in previously unexpected sources of evidence. Throughout his explication, Tucker formulates his claims in the Bayesian terminology of priors, likelihoods, and expectancies.

Two interesting claims stand out from the remaining chapters. The first arises from Tucker's examination, in Chapter 4, of the relation between historiography and broad scope theories, such as the Marxist or Weberian. Tucker rightly refuses to follow most previous discussion in reducing this issue to debate concerning the positivist 'Deductive-Nomological' theory of explanation. Broad scope theories are not applied by deduction, but are interpreted by historians in different ways dependent upon their particular evidence. Given that the theories in question are typically broad in scope only at the expense of being vague, this sort of 'ad hoc' interpretation is necessary, and historiographical fragmentation and disagreement is the likely result (p. 164). The second interesting claim is a practical recommendation. For historiography to become more scientific, historians must maximize the evidence available by developing scientific comparative historiography. This would require large group projects, and less division between academic departments. While historians may be temperamentally inclined to object to these changes, such resistance "is hampering scientific progress, much like similar attitudes in what used to be the Soviet bloc blocked innovation and led to stagnation, decline, and fall" (pp. 251–252).

Tucker does adopt certain positions that have attracted sustained and cogent criticism, criticism which he does not always attempt to rebut. The most clearly problematic is his reliance upon strict dichotomies: between historiographical knowledge and interpretation, between theory and ethical/ aesthetic value judgements (pp. 1–2, 11–12), between form and content. These dualisms become more troubling when applied to some of Tucker's own usage: 'Renaissance', for example, is implausibly treated as a theoretical term, hence aesthetically value-free (p. 138). Nonetheless, this is a cogent examination of the epistemic state of contemporary historical studies and its future prospects, and can be recommended.