

Chapter 1

Metaphysics and Epistemology

This chapter deals with the nature of historical knowledge. It is generally agreed that history does yield some form of knowledge, and that historians believe that their works tell the truth. In view of the fact that the past persons and events that history deals with no longer exist, the question of how historical knowledge is possible requires an answer. I discuss here several proposed answers to that question: those of Representative Realism, Constructionism, AntiRealism, and Justificationism. The position I will defend is that of Constructionist Realism.



History, understood as a form of knowledge, is an account of what existed and happened in the past and why it happened. This is not the only meaning of the term *history*, which sometimes refers to past events themselves rather than our knowledge of them, but it is the appropriate one if our interest is in the knowledge of the past and how we acquire it. So conceived, history seems to assume that there is a past to be known. The metaphysical question is whether or not that past is real; the epistemological question is how we know the past and its contents. These two questions are not independent, but they are conceptually distinct.

The commonsense view—the view embraced by most historians—is that obviously the past is real; even the question will strike most historians as ridiculous. But what is obvious often turns out to be obscure. Where does our notion of the past come from? The answer, again obviously, is from our own memories. It is just a fact that we do remember what has happened in our own pasts. Even young children remember what happened yesterday, or last week. No doubt for the child the most compelling evidence of the past is its personal memory, but that is soon extended by the memories of others. The child hears its elders talk about times before it can remember and learns that events occurred even before the child's birth. And in due course, the child comes to

share in a vast stock of memories held by members of its community. That there is a real past is thus for all of us undeniable. But, still, there are problems about the past that are not thus solved.

One is the limited character of the past known from memory. The memories of one's neighbors go back only a short time; what happened before that? There are, of course, traditions, myths, legends, and memory chains, where what one generation has told to the next is passed on to its progeny, and so on. These sources can be useful, particularly when they are institutionalized in social structures designed to ensure their accuracy. But they still take us only a short way. Anthropologists tell us of societies where there is little knowledge of or interest in what lies beyond living memory; the deep past is referred to as a "dream time" or "the time before," but little is known about it.¹ But Western cultures are interested in the deep past, and it is quite clear that our knowledge of the Roman Empire or Periclean Athens or the Old Kingdom of Egypt is not based on memory alone. Perhaps the clearest case of all is Sumer; even the existence of Sumerian civilization had been completely forgotten until archaeologists began to unearth Sumerian artifacts.

The second problem is that our memories are not always true. We discover that what we think happened did not happen or did not happen as we remember it. Others disagree with our accounts; their memories contradict ours, or we find that our own memories contradict each other, or we find a record that shows our memory is wrong. We are thus forced to recognize that memory, even our own, is not infallible. How, then, do we sort out which memories are true and which are false?

We cannot in this case go back and compare what we remember with what actually happened. The past event is forever gone; there is nothing to compare our memories to. We can require that our own memories be consistent. C. I. Lewis proposed that we should require them to be "congruent," meaning that the probability of any one memory is increased if the others are taken as premises. But, as Lewis noted, this is not enough. There are consistent formal systems, such as Lobachevsky's geometry, that are not true. Lewis's answer is that we must give *prima facie* credibility to our own memories; just the fact that we remember something gives that memory an initial, if a small, probability. This will allow any particular memory to be impeached, but not all of our memories at once, and, together with the requirement of congruence, it is enough to guarantee credibility to our memorial knowledge. But it must be emphasized that credibility is not certainty. The initial credibility of memories, just because they are memories, is small. Any given memory, or set of memories, may well turn out to be

false. Granting initial credibility to our own memories gives us a place to start in assessing our memorial knowledge; it is no more, but no less, than that.²

Why should we grant such initial credibility to our memories? Lewis's answer is Kantian; without veridical memory, we can have no knowledge at all. Even to recognize that something is, for example, a tree assumes that our present sensory image can be compared to past experiences of trees and their likenesses noted. If I had no veridical memory, then I would have no basis for classifying my immediate experience; I would be faced with a shifting phantasmagoria of light and sound of which I could make no sense. The choice is therefore between initial credibility for memory or total skepticism of the moment.³

But the initial credibility I grant my own memories does not extend to the memories of others, nor do they extend a like courtesy to me. I remember seeing Franklin Roosevelt; for me that memory is indelible. But to anyone else, it is just what I say—my testimony as to what happened long ago. They do not remember it, and they need not believe me. Similarly, what others remember is for me simply their testimony, and like any testimonial evidence, it must be evaluated in terms of the competence of the witness, an opportunity to observe the events reported, motives, and bias, and all of the usual factors that go into the evaluation of testimonial evidence. I must give my own memories initial credibility, or I can know nothing, but I need not give such credibility to the memory reports of others.

Memory, therefore, can give us assurance that some past events and persons are real, but it does not carry us back very far. What about the reality of the deep past—the past beyond the reach of living memory? What most historians do is accept the reality of the deep past as a metaphysical postulate and go on from there. Little in the way of justification is ever given for this postulate beyond what seems to them to be common sense. After all, if memory assures us of the reality of the recent past, then why should we not assume the reality of the deep past too? But this position, reasonable as it may seem, involves serious problems. First, it should be noted that ideas about the extent of the deep past have varied wildly over time. Until 1859, almost all educated Americans believed that the world was created as the Bible says it was, and so that human history was only a few thousand years old, and a great many people in this country, and others, still believe that. Only after James Hutton did geologists begin to push the age of the earth farther and farther back, and it was Charles Darwin's incomparable achievement to have shown that human history was far deeper than

anyone had previously believed possible. Only in the twentieth century, with Edwin Hubble's discovery that the universe was expanding, did astronomers begin to grasp how long ago the universe began. We still do not know just when *Homo Sapiens* first walked the earth, and the tale of his ancestry is still confused. The extent of the deep past, human and cosmological, has proven very difficult to determine.

But the most complex problems raised by this metaphysical view are epistemological. If we begin with the assumption of a real deep past, then how do we know that our ideas about it are true? The usual answer to this question is Representative Realism. In its standard form, Representative Realism holds that

1. there is a real world,
2. we have access to that world through sensory experience,
3. on the basis of such experience, we can construct a theory about the real world,
4. our theory about the real world is approximately true as far as it goes, though it may be incomplete, and
5. alternative theories are possible, but further data can be found that will decide among them.

This leaves us with a correspondence theory of truth and no way to prove that the correspondence actually obtains. Restating this position in terms of the past, consider the following:

1. There is a real deep past, with real people and events.
2. We can access that past through sensory experiences of documents and artifacts that survive to us.
3. From these data, if they are adequate, we can reconstruct what happened in the past.
4. Our reconstructions may be incomplete, but given adequate data, they are approximately true.
5. Alternative interpretations of the data will be possible.

The last point calls for a particular comment. Most historians regard alternative interpretations of the data as simply a fact of life. This conviction rests upon the fact that the body of data regarding any historical question is limited, and that unlike natural scientists, historians cannot

expand their database at will. Given any fixed, finite body of data, it is always possible to invent alternative theories that can explain the data. But it does not follow that those alternative theories will be equally good at explaining new data as they are discovered.

The other propositions raise problems as well. Historical events and actions no longer exist; we have no sensory access to them. Can we in fact access these past factors through surviving remains? And, if so, just how is that done? Most critical of all, how do we know our “reconstructions” are true about the real people and events of long ago? We have again a correspondence theory of truth with no way to prove that the correspondence obtains. It is not surprising that under these conditions history became a favorite subject for Idealists, who believed that—somehow—we could share the thoughts of people of long ago.

If the Metaphysical (i.e., Representational) Realist position described earlier is unsatisfactory, then what are the alternatives? The two that will require discussion are Constructivism and AntiRealism. The former is also a realist position, while the latter is not. We will look first at Constructivism, which is the position I wish to defend, and then at two versions of AntiRealism—van Fraassen’s and Dummett’s.

Whatever are to serve as historical data must be objects that are observable to us now.⁴ We cannot observe historical events directly, as they no longer exist. Even in the case of memory, we have only our present memories of what once occurred. For reasons already discussed, we must grant our own memories initial credibility, but no such requirement holds for other data, including the testimony of others. What we actually confront are various objects, which may be documentary or nondocumentary, about which we pose such questions as: Where did this come from? Why is it here? What is it for? These objects are all that remains to us from the past and are our only contact with the deep past. Whatever we can know about that past must be based on the observation of these currently existing objects.

Viewed in these terms, our historical accounts are hypotheses to account for present data. If we wonder why a particular building is so hideous, then we construct an account of when, why, and by whom it was designed and built that will explain why it looks the way it does. Such an account is an explanatory hypothesis to account for our observations. Again, if in Aunt Tilly’s attic we find a letter dated June 3, 1840, and signed “Henry Livingston,” and we want an explanation of it, then we try to construct an account of who Henry Livingston was and why this letter should have been in that attic. The function of such accounts is explanatory; the accounts tell us why what we now observe is as it is.

Historians usually think of their accounts as both descriptive and explanatory; What constitutes an adequate description of an event includes a description of what they take to be the chief causal factors involved. Thus an account of Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga will emphasize Howe's abandonment of the original plan that called for him to drive up the Hudson to meet Burgoyne and his attack on Philadelphia instead, Burgoyne's problems of supply, the mobilization of the colonial forces, and so on. A historian writing about a particular event wants his readers to understand what happened, and part of understanding what happened is understanding why it happened.

Historians usually think of themselves as explaining historical "facts": Why did the French Revolution occur? Why did McKinley win the 1896 election? Why did Burr shoot Hamilton? Historians are not wrong about what they do, but what needs to be noted is that historical "facts" are themselves constructs to account for present data. We cannot observe the French Revolution or the election of 1896 or the duel. That these events ever occurred are hypotheses to explain data that we have now. The electoral records, newspaper accounts, journal accounts, campaign literature, campaign buttons, and so on that remain today from the 1896 election are the data on the basis of which we say that the election took place and that McKinley won; that claim explains the data that we have. We will of course ask why McKinley won over Bryan, which is a question about how matters relate within our hypothetical account, but whatever the answer we give, it must also rest on and account for present data. Historical knowledge is a theoretical construct to account for presently observable data.

This point requires some elaboration. When a historian embarks upon an investigation, he rarely thinks of himself as explaining the existence or the characteristics of a datum. Such studies do occur—witness the controversy over the Vinland map—but usually the historian seeks to explain such things as why the Civil War occurred, why the French Revolution occurred, or why Woodrow Wilson won in 1912. That is, the historian usually undertakes to explain facts in terms of other facts, but doing so obviously takes the existence of these facts for granted. Yet as we have seen, none of those "facts" are observables; that there was a Civil War in 1861 or a Revolution in France we only know on the basis of certain presently observable data. We account for that data by hypothesizing that the Civil War occurred and the French Revolution occurred; only then does it make sense to ask about why they occurred. Thus if one views our historical knowledge as a whole, it is a complex structure. At the base are our observations of the data themselves, and upon that base rests the claims of what persons and facts existed.

Then we have the questions of how past facts and persons relate. An explanation of why the Civil War occurred is also an explanation of a mass of data from which the facts are inferred. One can see why the classical historiography should have thought the facts were established first and then interpreted. But the classical historiography was wrong. Facts are part of the theory; they are as much postulates to account for the observable data as are the relations among them that classical historiography considered to belong to the “interpretation,” that is, to the theory. Even the distinction between fact and theory is unclear. That the Civil War occurred is a fact. But how do we know that? We know it because we have masses of data—documents, legends, artifacts, myths—the existence of which is best accounted for by postulating that the Civil War occurred. If the data were sparser, then we would be less certain of the fact. Did Samson really thrash the Philistines in the Le Hi Valley? We are less certain that this is a fact because we have only one documentary source for it. Or consider the following case. In eastern Nebraska there is a stream called the Weeping Water. The name translates an equivalent Indian name that was established before Lewis and Clark reached the area and comes from an Indian legend that two Indian tribes fought a battle at what is now the headwater of the stream in which all of the warriors on one side were killed. When their widows and daughters reached the battlefield, they wept over the fallen, and from their tears came the stream.⁵ Is it a fact that such a battle took place? The occurrence of the battle would explain why the stream was given the name it bears. Yet although the legend exists in several forms, all of which agree on the occurrence of the battle, I think no historian would consider the evidence (data) sufficient to assert that the occurrence of the battle is a fact.

It may seem odd to refer to historical accounts as theories, but here I follow Quine in holding that one’s theory about something is the set of sentences about that thing one holds for true.⁶ In an obvious sense, historical accounts have to be theoretical, since they postulate the existence of objects and events that are not observable and so must be indirectly confirmed. But does it really make sense to say that the existence of Abraham Lincoln is a theoretical postulate? In such a case, the amount of data is so overwhelming that it seems absurd to question Lincoln’s existence. But to get a sense of what is involved, consider cases where the amount of data is not overwhelming. Take, for example, Samson, Abraham, and Moses. We do have data to support the hypotheses of their existence, namely, the Bible. Yet I think only biblical literalists believe that Samson was a real person. The question of Abraham is more difficult. The Bible is the *only* evidence that

supports the claim for his reality, just as it is for Samson's, and it is unlikely that any other evidence will ever come to light. Whether or not he ever existed remains an open question. The case of Moses is the most complicated. With Abraham, the nature of the biblical story, if true, makes it unlikely that there is any other source but the Bible. This is not true of Moses. Given the Egyptian captivity of the Jews, the events the Bible describes concerning Moses, the Exodus, and so forth, one might predict that there would be both Egyptian records and archaeological data supporting the biblical account. None of these have been found. The events described in the Bible involved the highest levels of the Egyptian state, yet no Egyptian record mentions any of them. Worse, according to the Bible, a large population of Jews resided in Egypt for an extended period of time. One would think that there would be some archaeological evidence of such a community, yet the search for such evidence has thus far been fruitless. Given the centrality of Moses and the Exodus to Jewish history, one hesitates to say that Moses never existed, and that the Exodus never occurred, but we have only the biblical evidence to support that claim, and none of the corroborating data that might have been expected have been found. Since the Egyptians rarely recorded events that were unflattering to themselves, one can try to explain away the lack of Egyptian records, but the lack of archaeological data from the Jewish settlement is troubling. Here the postulational character of historical reconstruction is obvious.

Some may object that if we can only postulate the existence of the past and its contents to account for present data, then vast stretches of the past will be left empty. There is something to this objection, but not much. It should be a truism that we can only know what we have evidence for; if there is no evidence for something, then we have no reason to believe in it. Of course this means that our theories about the past must be incomplete. Consider Stonehenge. There is virtually no chance that we will ever know the individual identities of the builders of Stonehenge, but we do know that it was built by people, and we can form some reasonable hypotheses about its purpose. Or consider the Northeast Woodland Indians before the coming of the Europeans. We know they were there because we have evidence of it—chiefly archaeological. We will never know their names or the details of their lives, but we can construct reasonable theories about how they lived from the data that we do have. In these cases, our theories are incomplete, but that does not make them false. One can know some things truly about a subject without knowing everything about it.

A further objection is that past persons are postulated to be human beings, and human beings, considered as a natural kind, are the sort of

entities that are observables. To say that past persons are not observables therefore seems to involve a contradiction. But what this objection overlooks is the relative character of the terms *observable* and *observed*. To say that x is observed is to say that x stands in the relation “___ is observed by ___” to some y , which for present purposes we may take as a variable ranging over some set of present-day human beings. Similarly, to say that x is observable is to say that x stands in the relation “___ can be observed by ___” to some y . Observability therefore depends upon the characteristics of the observer as well as those of the thing observed. When a chemist says that a carbon molecule is observable, he does not mean that it is observable to anyone, but to anyone who has the necessary training and equipment. Thus for x to be observable does not mean that any y can observe x , but that certain y 's having certain characteristics can observe x . The same obviously holds true with respect to unobservability. Consider colors. Certainly colors are observable if anything is, but they are not observable for the blind. Moreover, in this case they cannot be made observable to the blind. This is not a case of acquiring certain training and equipment, as in the case of the molecule; the disabling factor of the blind is such that it is impossible for it to be remedied, and so for those unlucky folk color is not only unobservable but unobservable in principle (i.e., such an observation is for them physically impossible). Now consider the case of stars. Usually stars as a kind are taken to be observables. But if inflationary theories of the universe are correct, then there are stars we can never see, since they are so far away from us that the light they emit can never reach us. It is true that if we could travel to different regions of space than the one we occupy, we could observe them, but for us to reach those regions of space would require us to travel faster than light, which is physically impossible. Such stars, assuming they exist, are therefore for us not only unobservable but unobservable in principle, since for us to observe them would involve the violation of the laws of nature. The analogy to the case of historical persons is exact. Historical persons, such as Moses, and historical events, such as the Exodus, no longer exist and are not observable by us. The temporal distance between us and those people operates like the spatial distance in the example of the stars. It is perhaps true that we could have observed Moses had we lived in his time and place (assuming of course that he really did exist), but we cannot observe him now. And since time travel is an impossibility, we cannot go back to his time to observe him, nor can he come forward into our time where we can observe him. Moses is therefore not only unobservable for us but unobservable in principle. Thus being a member of a kind the members of which would be observable if they were

present in our time and space does not imply that members of that kind not present in our time and space are observable, or even that they are observable in principle.

Moritz Schlick⁷ held that a sentence was cognitively meaningful if it was verifiable, that is, if its verification was logically possible. Many things are logically possible that are not physically possible. Granted that observations of past persons and events are not physically possible, are they logically possible? There are well-known arguments that they are not. Suppose a scientist—call him “Quinn”—invents a time machine that allows him to travel back in time to the year after his grandfather was born. This supposition involves a contradiction, since if Quinn travels back before the date of his own birth, he would not exist and therefore could not travel to the year after his grandfather’s birth. However, let us assume for the moment that Quinn’s machine somehow allows him to travel in time without changing his own age. Then it would be physically possible for Quinn to murder his grandfather while he was still an infant. Therefore, Quinn cannot exist. So we have the contradiction that Quinn both exists and does not exist. Further, A. J. Ayer has shown that time travel is *logically* impossible. Suppose that Quinn, being a careful type, writes his will before he climbs into his time machine and zips back to September 1, 1750, where he stays for one week before returning to his own time—let us say 2005. Then Quinn’s trip and his experiences in the eighteenth century occurred after he wrote his will. But his experiences in 1750 must have occurred before he wrote the will, since 1750 is before 2005. But no event can occur both before and after a given time unless the event is continuous, which in this case it obviously was not. Hence Quinn’s trip involves a logical contradiction. Time travel is not only physically impossible but logically impossible. Thus Ayer has shown that direct observation of past persons and events is logically impossible and therefore impossible in principle.⁸

Ayer goes on to say, “From the fact that one cannot now observe an event which took place at an earlier date, it does not follow that the event itself is to be characterized as unobservable.”⁹ But this statement does not mean quite what it seems to mean, for Ayer says

in dealing with statements about the past, we remarked that their analysis was not affected by the fact that they were expressed at times when it was no longer possible to observe the events to which they refer. The requirement that they should be verifiable was not held to entail that any particular person . . . should in fact be capable of verifying them. If one is to have any reason

for believing them one must, indeed, have access to some evidence in their favour, but such evidence need only be indirect. It is not required that one should perform the impossible feat of returning to the past.¹⁰

Ayer's point is that to make a statement such as "Vicksburg was captured on July 4, 1863" is verifiable, is to say that it *could have been* verified by direct observation at the time it occurred. The contrast Ayer is making is between something that no one could ever observe because it is self-contradictory, such as a spherical cube, and an event such as a battle that could be observed by a suitably positioned observer. But Ayer's argument implies that it is logically impossible for an observer now to observe a past person or an event, since that could only be done through time travel. The event in question was observable in its own time, but to claim that it is observable now involves a contradiction. To a present observer, it is therefore unobservable in principle.

One caveat should be entered here. Given the finite velocity of light, when we observe a distant star we are actually observing light that left that star a long time ago. In cases such as that, it seems to make sense to say that we are observing things in the past. But we are not; what we are observing is light emitted by that star long ago but only reaching us now, owing to the finite velocity of light. This case has no analogy to our observation of persons or events in the past of the earth. There is no medium with finite velocity reaching us from the Battle of Austerlitz.

But are the events and objects postulated to exist in historical theories real? Since the theory says they existed, they are real if the theory is true. But is the theory true? One cannot claim in any field of knowledge that one's theory is certainly true. What one can say is that if one's theory explains all of the known data about its subject, is consistent with all related theories, continues to explain novel data as they are found, and performs these functions better than any alternative theory, then it may provisionally be held as true—that is, as our best current estimate of the truth. As is true in every field, any given theory may turn out to be wrong, but our best-confirmed theories provide the best explanations that we have for the data time has left us. Furthermore, this sort of Constructivism does not involve a correspondence theory of truth. The real is what a true theory says is real; there is no metaphysical object lurking beyond that to which our theory must answer. Truth depends on the relation of theory to data, not correspondence. We thus avoid the problems of Representative Realism, yet we retain a realistic theory of the past.¹¹

There is a further point to be made here. As applied to history, or science, Representative Realism gives us a dual standard of truth: the theory must copy reality, and it must be the best explanation of the data. It is possible that a theory meeting one standard might not meet the other. One can imagine a case in which a demon so selected the data we have that the theory that best accounts for them would not copy reality. But this sort of problem assumes that we somehow know what the reality is independently of the data we have. The difficulty is that we have no access to the reality except through the data. That being the case, the reality can only be what our best explanation of the data says it is. It follows that in a fairly trivial sense, our constructionist theory does provide a correspondence theory of truth, since our theory obviously corresponds to the world it describes. Unless there is some way of knowing the real that is independent of our data, the postulation of such an independent reality leaves us with an unknowable *ding-an-sich*. As an empiricist, I do not believe there is any way of knowing reality except through the theory that best explains our data, and I see nothing to be gained by the belief in an unknowable metaphysical entity.

But the question of biased data is not to be dismissed. In any body of data from a past society it is almost always the case that those who were wealthy will be overrepresented. Knowing this, the historian can stratify his set of data by wealth, weight the strata by the proportion of the population in the strata, and then proceed with his account. This requires a knowledge of the size of the past population and of the distribution of wealth within it, neither of which is easy to come by. But rough estimates of these should normally be sufficient, and such estimates can be devised from a variety of sources. For example, if the rich and the poor lived in different sections of the city, then estimates of the number of people in each section can be used. Or if, as in early Philadelphia, the rich lived on the main streets and the poor in the alleys, then again estimates can be made. Similarly, in farming areas the land quality varies from place to place. The rich will have the good land, and the poor will have what is left. And if one is very lucky, there will be documents such as the U.S. Census which is a gold mine of information of the sort needed.

Much of the skepticism promulgated by postmodernists such as Foucault apparently rests on the assumption that all Realism is Representative Realism. Having recognized that the metaphysical reality so assumed cannot be accessed by our investigations, they have retreated into some form of linguistic idealism according to which all that we can know is our own language. But this view is false. First, as lately shown, not all Realism is Representative Realism; the Constructivist Realism outlined

earlier is not subject to these problems. Second, it denies the obvious fact that language refers to an external nonlinguistic world. This oversight may be due, at least in part, to the influence of Saussure, whose linguistic theory deals only with the relation of signs to concepts and ignores reference, but it leads to absurdities, such as taking texts to refer to themselves. Linguistic Idealism is no more credible than the other forms of Idealism, and considerably less so than Absolute Idealism.

The Constructivist Realism I outlined earlier is strongly contested by the AntiRealists. But the application to history of AntiRealist theories, such as van Fraassen's, raises some very interesting points. Van Fraassen holds that with respect to any scientific theory, we should believe as true those statements of the theory that refer to present observables only. He has no hesitation in using theories, such as those of quantum mechanics, that postulate the existence of unobservable entities in order to derive statements referring only to observables, but he holds that we have no basis for believing that any portions of these theories that involve unobservables are true, or that the entities they postulate are real. Thus to van Fraassen, scientific theories are black boxes that take as inputs only statements regarding present observables and have as outputs only statements regarding present observables; these we should hold to be true. But the contents of the black box—the theories themselves, with their claims for the existence of unobservable entities—we should consider merely instrumental, and no truth claims for them are legitimate.¹²

How does AntiRealism fare when applied to history? Consider, for example, the U.S. Constitution. It is generally accepted that this document was written in 1787 by a convention held in Philadelphia, and the names of the men who attended that convention are well known. How would the van Fraassen-type AntiRealist deal with the Constitution? On his theory, all talk of the Constitutional Convention, of Washington, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, and so on, is merely instrumental; we must not believe that they are, or ever were, real, or that statements about them are true. We can talk about the document that is observable now, but we have no explanation of who wrote it or why. We can observe their signatures on the document, but since the men themselves are unobservable, we cannot explain how these inscriptions came to be there. Since an unreal cause cannot have real effects, we are left with no explanation at all of where the document came from, or why it is as it is. In fact, the AntiRealist faces a very interesting problem in dealing with history. Since the past people and events do not now exist, they are not observable, and therefore the AntiRealist cannot believe they are, or ever were, real, or that statements about them are, or ever were, true.

Now the AntiRealist will doubtless answer that whether the Founding Fathers are now observable or not, they are (were) the sorts of things that would be observable if they were present now, and therefore are observable in principle. But aside from this use of counterfactuals, which poses a problem for an AntiRealist, he is wrong in this conclusion. The Founding Fathers *are* unobservable *in principle*. They do not now exist. Since time travel is both physically and logically impossible, we cannot now go back to the eighteenth century to observe them, nor can they travel into our time where we can observe them now. It makes no more sense to talk of observing the Founding Fathers than it does to talk of observing quarks. It is impossible *in principle* that such observations as the AntiRealist demands can now be made of these men. For us, they are theoretical constructs whose *epistemological* status is not different from that of quarks. Thus the AntiRealist finds himself committed, in the case of history, to the unreality of the whole of the historical past.

The AntiRealist position of the van Fraassen type is, I believe, a position that is untenable. It would deny the reality of the deep past and leave us adrift in time, with no knowledge of how we got here, no sense of the cumulative experience of humankind that undergirds our beliefs, and no foundation for the standards and loyalties that inform our lives. It would rob historical accounts of any explanatory power, since the causes of real effects cannot be unreal, and leave us with a world that came to be we know not how, with practices the origins of which we could not explain, with objects such as Independence Hall that for all we know might have fallen from the sky, and documents such as the U.S. Constitution that might have arisen by spontaneous generation.

Van Fraassen's AntiRealism is an extreme form of empiricism that denies reality to anything not directly observable by us with our unaided senses. Michael Dummett's AntiRealism is a very different position. He views the Realist as being committed to a truth condition theory of meaning and to bivalence—the doctrine that every statement is true or false on the basis of some state of affairs. In an article published in 1978, Dummett held that with respect to statements about the past, the Realist is committed to the existence of states of affairs for the existence of which no effective decision procedure is possible. For if every statement is true or false, then regardless of whether or not we can determine its truth or falsity, we are compelled to assume the existence of a state of affairs that makes the statement true or false, even though we have no evidence for the existence of that state of affairs. Accordingly, he held that AntiRealism must be adopted.¹³

In his recent Dewey lectures, now republished and expanded in book form, Dummett says that he was not happy with his 1978 ar-

ticle and has been perplexed by the problem of the reality of the past ever since. He now tries to resolve this perplexity by rejecting extreme AntiRealism about the past. If such AntiRealism about the past were true, Dummett says that only statements supported by present evidence could be affirmed, and this he holds would mean that large portions of the past would vanish as evidence concerning them is lost or destroyed. "This conception," he says, "though not incoherent, is repugnant."¹⁴ Indeed, Dummett holds that if the past and its contents are theoretical constructs based on presently existing evidence, then the past cannot be real; nothing would then exist but the present. Statements about the past could not refer to any real person or events, since none of these would be real. Such a position he regards as intolerable, and it is his intention to show, in these lectures, that what he calls a "justificationist" position can legitimate statements about the past without adopting Realism.

Dummett's theory of meaning is based on the intuitionist view of mathematics, which holds that a mathematical statement is meaningful only if there is an effective means of constructing a canonical proof for it. For empirical propositions, Dummett holds that meaningfulness requires that the statement either is or could be verified, where "verification" is widely construed as "having grounds sufficient to warrant asserting the statement." With respect to statements about the past, Dummett asserts his conviction that the truth of such statements is independent of whether or not there is present evidence for them. What is required for the truth of such a statement is that had someone been present at the relevant time and place in the past he could have observed the events referred to by the statement. That is, it is sufficient on the justificationist view of meaning that the statement could have been verified if an observer had been there to make the observation.¹⁵

Dummett holds that on the justificationist view of empirical statements, there is a "gap" between what the statement says is the case and what verifies the statement. Thus the statement "People in Afghanistan are starving" refers to the condition of people in Afghanistan, but it does not say how the statement is to be verified. The existence of this gap leads Dummett to introduce the distinction between what can be directly verified and what can be indirectly verified. Direct evidence for this statement would require eyewitness reports from Afghanistan on the situation there; indirect evidence could be obtained from data on death rates, food production, and so on. Both types of evidence can verify a statement, either together or singly. Thus some statements can be verified solely by indirect evidence.¹⁶

Applying this to history, Dummett holds that the truth of a statement referring to events for which we have no direct evidence can be

affirmed by the use of a conditional: "If someone were to have been at hand at the relevant time, he could have observed an event of that kind."¹⁷ Hitler's suicide was not an observed event. But the criterion for the truth of "Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945" is that had an observer been present in the right time and place in Hitler's bunker on April 30, 1945, he would have observed Hitler shooting himself.¹⁸

Dummett strongly emphasizes the fact that our knowledge, like our language, is not an individual possession but the common property of a community. Since he holds that all languages are intertranslatable, he takes this community to include all people. Much of what we know comes not from our own observations, but from reports of the observations of others. I may not go to Afghanistan to observe conditions on the ground, but others do, and their reports of their observations serve as direct evidence for me. But Dummett extends the boundaries of the community to encompass not only the living but the dead. Records of what people did observe in the past, memories of past events, and even memories passed down through a succession of generations are equally good evidence as the testimony of a living informant. The dead are as much members of our community as the living, and the observational reports of the dead are direct evidence for the truth of statements concerning the past events. But suppose no observer was present when a given past event occurred (e.g., Hitler's suicide). "Indirect evidence for the truth of a statement about a place where no observer was present must show that a suitably located observer could have made observations giving direct grounds for its truth: that is how indirect evidence must be related to direct evidence."¹⁹ Given the sort of event that a suicide by shooting is, what is known about Hitler's bunker, and so on, we can hold that if an observer had been in the right place in the bunker at the right time, he could have observed Hitler's suicide.

Dummett notes that his justificationist position represents a step toward realism, but it does not go the whole way. Specifically, it does not legitimate bivalence; it cannot be assumed that every conditional whose antecedent is unfulfilled is either true or false. Such an assumption would be equivalent to assuming the world to be determinate independently of our experience. That, Dummett holds, is a realist position, and one that a justificationist cannot accept.²⁰

There are several points on which Dummett's position seems to me to fail. First, he makes a great point of the degree to which to be observable means to be observable by some members of our community. This is, of course, true, but the claim requires qualification—it is not the case that all members of the community can be regarded as equally qualified observers. Hilary Putnam pointed out that our society, like

every other, has people who are regarded as experts on certain subjects and whose testimony on those matters is awarded more weight than the testimony of others.²¹ Reports of observers are testimony, and they must be evaluated by the usual rules for evaluating testimony—was the observer competent, did he or she have adequate opportunity, was he or she biased, and so on. In our society we simplify this problem by establishing institutionalized methods of certifying the competence of observers and criticizing the testimony they give. Chemists can speak with authority on chemical matters, but they are subject to review by other chemists. Reports on conditions in Afghanistan by President Bush's supporters will very likely not be accepted as direct evidence of anything but administration policy. The observations of all observers are not equal, and Dummett entirely ignores the myriad problems of evaluating evidence by assuming that they are.

Second, the extension of the community to include the dead is a mistake. Communications from the dead, particularly the long dead, are not addressed to those now living but to those who were the contemporaries of the dead. Those people were not members of our community, but of past communities, and much of our problem is to reconstruct just what those communities were, how their members communicated, and what those communications meant. Their writings involve terms and are based on conceptual schemes that are not ours, and the longer ago they died, the more likely are such sources of misunderstanding. No aspect of Kuhn's writing on the history of science is more admirable than his demonstration that past scientists were members of communities who believed in worldviews different from ours and whose observations were based on premises we now reject and in some cases report phenomena we are unable to reproduce. The same holds true for past communities in general; the New England Puritans saw the world in terms very different from ours. Anyone who reads the accounts of the Salem witch trials must be impressed by the fact that those people believed in and testified to the existence of things we do not believe ever existed. The literature of the past is filled with testimony of observations of witches, demons, angels, miracles, and all types of supernatural events that we find it impossible now to believe were real. To accept as true all of the observations reported by everyone in the past would leave us with a mass of contradictory claims. That is why in dealing with past observers, it is necessary to treat the artifacts that remain from them as data to be explained by devising hypotheses about them that account for these data. Thus, for example, if one looks at the statements regarding the beauties of slavery made by Southern writers such as Fitzhugh, the question is not just whether they are true or false but why they were made—what

purpose did the pro-slavery writer intend them to promote? The chief significance of a statement by a historical figure may not lie in its truth value but in what it tells us about the situation in which it was made and the beliefs and desires of the writer.

Third, Dummett holds that if the past and its contents are constructs created to explain present evidence, then neither the past nor its contents can be real.²² Since this position is precisely the opposite of that for which I argued earlier, it is important to see just where the issue is. Dummett holds that one who regards the past as a construct from present evidence is wrong. The mistake, as Dummett sees it, lies in confusing the means of verification available to an individual with those available to the community. The individual is indeed limited to presently existing data, but since the community includes the dead as well as the living, evidence that exists in the past is equally available as a basis for verification. Since the past observer is a member of our community, in Dummett's extended sense of "community," his observation should be accepted by us as direct evidence, just as those are of a contemporary observer. But how do we, individually or collectively, now know what someone in the past observed? We can know this only by having available to us now a document that we interpret as a record of those observations. But to interpret the document is to hypothesize that an observer existed at a given time and place, made those observations, and recorded them. This hypothesis may be false; some stories about Lincoln were presumed to be based on direct observation, but they have turned out to have been invented by the so-called "public man."²³ To accept the document as recording correct observations truly made at the time in question is to adopt a hypothesis that accounts for the creation and characteristics of the document. But there is nothing in this view to show that the past and its denizens are not real. In fact, the view of our knowledge of the past as a construct based on present evidence is inherently realistic, since it takes past persons and events as explaining the existence and characteristics of present artifacts, and the cause of a real effect must itself be real. None of Dummett's arguments will refute this.

The root problem here is the extent of the community of observers. Dummett wants the community to include all who have lived; at least he assigns no temporal boundary to his community. But the existence of people in the deep past and of their observations are historical hypotheses that have to be verified, and he presents no way of doing that that would not involve a regress—that is, to confirm that observer A existed and made observation X, we would need observer B to observe what A does, and similarly for B, and so on. Further, people in the deep past operated with conceptual schemes often so different from

our own that to accept their observations as on a par with ours would result in a mass of contradictions that would make any coherent history impossible. It is therefore not possible to accept Dummett's definition of the community.

But what about Dummett's argument that if history is a theoretical construct postulated to explain present evidence, then as evidence vanishes over time so must portions of the past? Dummett is quite right, in the sense that, should evidence for some events in the past vanish, we would have no grounds for hypothesizing that those events ever occurred. Not only is he right, but it is easy to point out cases where this has occurred. Sumer is a prime example of a civilization lost to history but fortunately later recovered. Until the discovery of the Rosetta stone, much of Egyptian history was lost, since no one could read hieroglyphic writing; the same was true of the Maya, whose writing has only recently been decoded, and in the case of the Indus Valley civilization, we still cannot read their writing. There are indeed many cases where we know that past events must have occurred, but we have no way of knowing what they were. Human history before the invention of writing is precisely such a case. We know from archaeological investigations that people lived in certain regions, and we have some artifacts from which we can construct a few statements about their culture, but although their actions were observable at the time they occurred, and were observed by members of their own communities, we will never know what they were. These are simply facts about our knowledge of the past, and to raise them as objections to a particular view of historical knowledge is like cursing the wind.

Fourth, Dummett states his criterion for the truth of statements about unobserved events, as "if someone were to have been at hand at the relevant time, he could have observed an event of that kind." Thus consider the statement

(A) Hitler shot himself in his bunker on April 30, 1945.

According to Dummett's criterion, (A) would be true if the following contrary-to-fact conditional were true.

(B) If an observer had been present at the right place and time in Hitler's bunker on April 30, 1945, he could have observed Hitler shooting himself.

The problem of counterfactuals is not new and is still hotly debated. Yet I think no historian would hesitate to say that (B) is true. The reason

is that we already know from other evidence that Hitler did shoot himself in his bunker on April 30, 1945, and shooting oneself is an observable type of event. Our willingness to affirm (B) thus rests upon our knowing that an event of the required sort did take place. How do we know that? Dummett says, "Indirect evidence for the truth of a statement about a place where no observer was present must show that a suitably located observer could have made observations giving direct grounds for its truth; that is how indirect evidence must be related to direct evidence."²⁴ Hence to affirm (B), we must already be able to affirm on the basis of other evidence that

(A) Hitler shot himself in his bunker on April 30, 1945.

(C) Shooting oneself is an observable type of event if done in the presence of an observer.

and

(D) The layout of Hitler's bunker was such that a suitably placed observer could have observed his suicide.²⁵

But the truth of (A) cannot depend on the truth of (B) if the truth of (B) depends upon the truth of (A). Dummett's argument is circular. More generally, his claim that the truth of a proposition about the past requires that, had an observer been present at the appropriate time and place, he could have observed the event, either requires that we already know when and where the event took place and its character, or it leads to nonsense. Suppose I conjecture that aliens from outer space landed on earth on August 1, 9000, B.C. on the tip of Cape Cod. Surely had an observer been there at that time, he could have observed that event. But does that make the supposition true? I presume that Dummett meant his criterion to apply only to events that actually happened, and that means that we must already know that an observable event took place at a specific time and place.

In the expanded version of his lectures, Dummett has added a new argument. He considers four models of the relations of past, present, and future: (1) Only the present is real; (2) The future is real, but the past is not; (3) The past is real, but the future is not; (4) The past and the future are both real.²⁶ He then says:

On model (2) proper, it is acknowledged that the past has left traces, including our own memories. But . . . these traces,