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Historical Fact and Truth



4.1 Questions

1. What is truth in history? To that extent do correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth explain the problem of truth in history?
2. Explain the following theories of truth and how they apply to history
 - Correspondence theory
 - Coherence theory
 - Pragmatic theory
3. What is truth in history? To what extent do the three theories of truth explain the problem of truth in history?
4. Explain the following theories of truth and how they apply to history?
5. Outline and evaluate any three theories of truth in history.
6. Discuss the validity of the view that in history facts do not speak for themselves it is the historian who must make the facts to speak.

4.2 The Concept of Historical Fact

Although the past is not accessible to direct inspection, it has left ample traces of itself in the present in form of document. It is upon these that the historian builds his reconstruction that is historical evidence (direct or indirect). Historical facts have to be established, they are never simply given. Facts are the material about which statements are made. It is the degree of reliability, centered examination of historical evidence and reconstruction of the past.

4.3 The Concept of Historical Truth

Is obtaining what is reliable knowledge in any given phenomenon. It is the criteria for measuring truth. Do historians report truly? Or they imprisoned by the illusion of the epoch and of class? Until a valid reconstruction and synthesis of perspectives have been concluded, history “itself” is beyond our knowledge. Truth is obtaining what is reliable knowledge in human intellectual development nothing appears more elusive than the attainment of widely accepted falsity and truth.

Correct methods of research guarantee arrival at true statements about the past. The plane of reference is facts and not the authors trustworthiness the ideas commonly accepted by historians (truths). Austin posits that a statement is said to be true when the historical state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it refers) is of a type with the sentences used in making it, is correlated by the descriptive conventions.

4.4 Truth in History

What is an historical fact? How does one determine a historical statement whether it is false or true?

- The most striking thing about history is that the fact it purports to describe are past facts; and past facts are no longer accessible to direct inspection.
- Historians cannot test the accuracy of historical statements by simply seeing whether they correspond to a reality which is independently known.

- How can we test them?
- The answer which any practicing historian would give to this question would be that we do so by referring to historical evidence.
- Although the past is not accessible to direct inspection it has left ample traces of itself in the present, in the shape of documents, buildings, coins, institutions, procedures and so forth.
- And it is upon these that any self-respecting historian builds his reconstruction of it; every assertion the historian makes, he would say, must be supported by some sort of evidence, direct or indirect.
- So called historical statements which rest on any other basis (for example, on the historian's unaided imagination) should be given no credence. At their best they are inspired guesses, at their worst mere fiction.
- This certainly gives us an intelligible working theory of historical truth; the traces of the past which are available bear neither their meaning nor their authenticity on their face.
- Thus when an historian reads a statement in one or other of the 'original sources' for a period he is studying, he does not automatically accept it.
- His attitude to it, if he knows his job, is always critical; he has to decide whether or not to believe it, or again how much of it to believe.
- History proper, according to R. G. Collingwood cannot be looked on as a scissors and paste affair; it is not made up by the historian's taking bits of whole series of authorities that is the historian merely repeats what his

“authorities” tell him, where he forces his “authorities” to answer the questions he puts in to them, is not always quite clear.

- Historical facts have in every case to be established they are never simply given.
- And this applies not merely to the finished products of the historical thinking, but to the statements from which he starts as well the historical refers some of the statements as having a far higher degree of reliability than others.
- It can summoned of that if is the duty of the historian to base all his statements on the available evidence and to further decide what evidence is available.
- Historical evidence in other words is not an ultimate datum to which we can refer to test truth of historical judgments.
- To what may any judgments, or proposition, or statement express the nature of reality or states facts?
- This is concerned with skepticism about whether human beings can ever reach truth or state fact.
- It is necessary to enquire into certain general difficulties about the historian’s abilities to do what he says he is doing, namely reconstructing the past, and this enquiry will involve us in a critical examination both of what it is to be an historical fact and of the nature of historical evidence.

4.5 Theories of Truth in History

There are three types of theories that could be applicable in history namely; correspondence coherence and pragmatic theories. Correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth fit quite nicely to different areas of inquiry that is to be near to the truth in their reconstruction. They balance objectivity and subjectivity and try being near to the truth.

4.6 Correspondence Theory

- A statement is true if it corresponds to the facts, and conversely, if it corresponds to the facts it is true.
- Truth and correspondence with fact thus seem to be interchangeable terms, and the theory simply consists in stressing their equivalence.
- Truth this means correspondence with fact, so that no statement which does not so correspond can be true.
- Question-what is fact?
- They exist whether or not anybody thinks about them.
- They are described as “hard”, “stubborn”, or again, as “given”, “well grounded”, “securely based”.
- The work of theory is to “explain”, “do justice to” or “cover” the fact.
- Therefore theories take the form of judgments, or propositions asserted or denied or spoken, written, or implied statements.

- Facts are the material about which statements are made or judgments formulated.
- It follows that the destruction between fact and theory in correspondence theory cannot be absolute.
- Hence an account of truth in terms of correspondence with fact can it best be a partial one.

4.6.1 Correspondence Theory of Truth

States that the “truth consists the agreement of a proposition with a fact there has been much debate about the meaning of terms agreement and fact in this context.” Prof. Mandelbann says in correspondence theory of truth view, objectivity is seen as a one to one correlation between the account and the actual event in this view, the confrontation and with history this is out of the question.

4.6.2 Correspondence Theory

Proponents are Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Russell, Austin and Wittgenstein. The theory holds that truth consists in the following if the object referred to by the names of an elementary proposition have the same configurative as those names have in the proposition – if in other words, there is a state of affairs corresponding in components and structure with that proposition then the proposition is true. Elementary propositions are in fact attempts to picture reality; they say how things are by picturing or modeling reality.

A picture represents a possible situation in logical space. A picture agrees with reality or fails to agree, it's correct or incorrect, true or false. The agreement or disagreement of its sense with reality constitutes its truth or falsity.

Corresponding to one-to-one correlation between two sets of things as for example, when we say that the rank of general in the army corresponds to that of admiral in the navy.

Correspond with is the kind of correspondence which involves the matching or mirroring relationship for example when we say that one form edge of a piece of paper corresponds with the form edge of another Wittgenstein.

Austin's position seems the better version of the correspondence theory in requiring only that true propositions have facts which they corresponds to rather than with.

4.6.3 Correspondence Theory of Truth

The theory state that truth consist the agreement of a proposition with fact objectivity is seen as a one to one correlation between the account and the actual event. Practices reality that is a picture argues with reality of fails to agree. Correspond to one-to-one two sets; corresponds with: matching or mirroring relationship; correspondence theory – assumes that discovery the truth or falsity of a proposition simply involves company it directly with the facts with reality. Truth thus is correspondence with facts. History can utilize the theory. Facts which bear no relation to present evidence must be unknown. Historians should reconstruct the past in correspondence with evidence available.

4.6.4 History and Correspondence

History as a record of past events must correspond to history presently. If it does not then it is not history. Although the historian thinks he is talking about a past which is over and done with, everything he actually believes about the past is a function of the evidence at present available to him and of his own skills in

interpreting it. The facts do present conclusions arrived at after processes of thinking. Facts which bear no relation to present evidence must be unknown and whether then have any significance for the historian is irrelevant. The correspondence theory stakes everything on the notion of a past which is at once over and done with and capable of being reconstructed in some degree at least.

The past, consisted of a series of separate events and it is the historians job to reconstruct the series, or part of it, as fully as he can how is the job done? Some events were recorded as they occurred, and that all we have to do is read the records (truly divided) whose records can accordingly be taken as providing a basis of hard fact round which the historian can build the rest of his narrative.

Consequently, historical truth on this account depends on our accepting certain primary authorities as wholly authentic authorities. To suggest that historian who knows his job would be ready to accept a statement as true just because it is recorded by such an authority is absurd. Therefore an historian must submit all his evidence to some skeptical scrutiny, building his facts out of it, rather than taking it for fact with question.

4.7 Coherence Theory

- Truth as a relation between one statement and another.
- A statement, it is maintained, is true if it can be shown to cohere, or fit in with, all other statements we are prepared to accept.
- No statement is made entirely in isolation; they all depend on certain presuppositions or conditions and are made against a background of these. E.g. every belief we have is bound up with other beliefs in the sense thus it is part or the whole of or ground for accepting them.

4.7.1 Examples: Tomorrow will be Wet and Stormy

- Science of meteorology.
- High cirrus cloud in the sky.
- The sunset today has a certain appearance.
- According to coherence theory, fact is rather the cohesion of process of thinking.
- Here facts here must be established and not apprehended as in correspondence theory.
- A fact is simply a theory which has established itself, a theory about whose reliability serious doubts no longer exists.
- Supports of coherence theory argue that truth is attained only so far as I suppress my private self and allow my thinking to be guided by objective principle, universally valid.

4.7.2 Coherence Theory of Truth

Proponents are Hempel, Neurath, Hegel and Bradley. This states that truth cannot be asserted of one proposition in isolation from others; truth belongs to a system of proposition that is a set of propositions which cohere with each other.

Coherence theories claim that truth simply is coherence with the system. Coherence means logical consistency. There are two theories that have brought coherence theory to disrepute. The doctrine of internal relations which holds that the relationships in which things stand to one another are part of the very nature of those things, so that to change any one of those relations is to change

the very things themselves. If anything changes, then all other things change with it. For example its change must change some of their relations to it and so their relational qualities.

A relation must at both ends affect and pass into the being of its terms. The model for this thesis is the nature of numbers. For its change must change some of their relations to it, for example numbers such as, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. The number 7 for example is what it is because of its relation with the number 6 and the number 8, indeed with all other numbers. The doctrine is closely associated with the notion of reality's intelligibility and the very nature of coherence itself. Degree of truth doctrine – maintains that all individuals' propositions are partly false, that they involve misrepresentations of the facts. Only the whole system of propositions expresses the truth as such and anything less must therefore express falsehood. It has often been pointed at that this involves on the face of it, confusion between the notion of expressing all the truth and expressing only the truth. Clearly the doctrine would express less than the whole truth. But then the doctrine would be unexciting too.

4.7.3 History and Coherence

According to coherence theory all truth is essentially relative it depends upon the presuppositions and conceptual scheme with which we set out and on the rest of our belief in the field in question. If this theory is applied effectively, it will prevent a buildup of historical truth.

In coherence theory, it leaves the structure in the air, with the result that we have no effective criterion for distinguishing between real and imaginary. Coherent theory is not enough as an account of historical truth. It compare an historians procedure with that of a detective – a detective investigating a case begins by deciding what he can regard as undisputed fact, in order to build his

theories around that as a framework. If the theories work out the framework will be declared to have been well founded. But if results are not forthcoming, a stage may be reached at which it is necessary to go back to the beginning and doubt some of the initial “facts” of the case.

The historian should also be prepared to doubt even his foremost beliefs. Coherence theory of historical truth believes that as Croce – all history is contemporary history (no historian can accept this) i.e. nonsense to an historian. Historian – out knowledge of the past must rest on evidence which is present. Coherence the past is the present. The present evidence used by historians does not refer to the present, but to the past. We may conclude that the coherence theory, at least in its normal form, will not apply to history. Thus a synthesis of the two theories is necessary.

4.8 Pragmatic Theory of Truth

According to this, as belief is true if it ‘works’ in practice if it has a practical utility or usefulness. It was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the American philosophers Charles Pierce, William James and John Dewey. The theory equals truth with success; a proposition is true if it comes in practice, if it has a practical utility of usefulness. Success is equated with successfully conforming to the facts. If the proposition satisfies the needs or wants of the individual it is true. (God exists) practical usefulness in satisfying the need of the behavior.

4.8.1 Objections to the Theory

If belief in god satisfy you but not me, then this is true for you but not for me. Truth however is the objective matter par excellence. That is true is true for

everyone (universal assent). If god exists, then it is true independently god exists, and then it is true just as much for the atheist and the behavior. The thesis makes truth a time – dependent attribute, since it is clearly possible for a behavior to become dissatisfied with his belief. If John becomes filled with remorse about his past sins, and fears to meet his maker, the belief in god becomes false for him where it had been true before. On the pragmatic theory, of course, John needs no longer reef the consequences of his sin.

The correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth – can be recognized by a simple expedient. If they are treated as theories concerning the criteria we use for deciding whether a proposition is true, rather than theories about the nature of truth itself, they fit quite nicely to different areas of inquiry. Logic and mathematics offer a good home for the coherence theory, since truth is rarely judged in terms of their consistency with other propositions. The sciences in general use pragmatic tests for truth. And ordinary empirical judgments are judged true by their correspondence to fact.

