

## What Do Historians Mean When They Say That One Cause is More Important Than Another?

by ROSS EAMIAN  
Carleton University

Students of history have been duly warned by Cantor and Schneider that "a passionate interest in the problems of the philosophy of history can actually inhibit the historian's craft by making him so painfully self-conscious about the theoretical nature of his work that he is unable to write a line of historical prose."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the question of what is involved in attributions of causal significance in historical writing is worth considering for practical as well as philosophic reasons. Although the longstanding debate about the nature of causal explanation in historical studies has not noticeably changed the explanatory modes employed by historians, there is reason to believe that future students of the past could benefit from clarification of the processes whereby the major causes of an event in history can be distinguished from the minor ones in a meaningful way. At the same time, this kind of analysis could also stimulate a rethinking of the general nature of causal relations by clearing away certain misconceptions which have arisen over the years. In particular, it should make evident that analyses of causation offered by R. G. Collingwood, Curt Ducasse, and H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, among others, are actually descriptions of specific criteria of causal importance rather than accounts of causality itself.

In *Experience and Its Modes*, Michael Oakeshott writes at one point that "every historical event is necessary, and it is impossible to distinguish between the importance of necessities."<sup>2</sup> This statement can be interpreted in two ways, depending upon whether one has logical or causal necessity in mind. In terms of logical relations, it is quite correct to say, for example, that the birth of Napoleon, the growth of a state called France, and so forth, were necessary conditions for the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire. Indeed, in the same

<sup>1</sup> Norman F. Cantor and Richard L. Strassler, *How to Study History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from "Historical Continuity and Causal Analysis" in William H. Dray (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis and History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 196.

way that the sun's rising is a necessary condition for the sun's setting, the rise of Napoleon's Empire was necessary for its fall. (One could not, however, normally say that Napoleon's birth or the growth of France "caused" the collapse of that Empire. In terms of causality, the kind of thing that would be considered as having been necessary for the collapse of the Empire would be the failure of Napoleon's continental system to work as intended, or his disastrous Russian campaign, or perhaps even certain flaws in his character. While any given historian might well reject one or more of these suggested causes as not having been operative in point of fact, he would not do so on the same grounds that he would dismiss Napoleon's birth as being causally unrelated to the collapse of his Empire. The failure of a neo-mercantilist economic strategy or an unsuccessful military campaign would at least be regarded as the kind of event that might conceivably cause the collapse of an empire, whereas the birth of its creator clearly would not.

Although the concern of this paper is with causality rather than logically necessary conditions, it should be noted that a clear distinction between the two would require a full explication of the concept of causality. As a rule of thumb, we can regard one event as being *only* logically necessary for the occurrence of another event if we cannot conceive of the first event (or an event of its type) as happening at the same time as the second event (or event-type). On this basis, Napoleon's birth could be rejected as a cause of the collapse of his Empire. At the same time, however, there would still be certain logically necessary conditions for the event in question which this would not enable us to rule out, such as the continued existence of the state of France. Moreover, to avoid dismissing a number of causally related conditions, it would be necessary to keep in mind the distinction between direct and indirect causal relations, the latter involving an intervening causal factor between the stated cause and effect. In the final analysis, causally necessary conditions can only be distinguished from logically necessary conditions by seeing the "causes" of an event as being identical with the "elements" which comprise that event. For example, we can say either that the disastrous Russian campaign of 1812 was one of the causes of the collapse of Napoleon's Empire or, what amounts to the same thing, that the declining fortunes of his Empire continued with the devastation wreaked upon his *Grande Armée* while in Russia. But we cannot say that the rise of the Napoleonic Empire was an element of or in any way involved in its fall.

While an identity account of causality in history has been anticipated by Daleshott, Collingwood, and most recently by Maurice Mandelbaum, the task remains to develop it fully. The purpose of this paper is in part to smooth the way for the fulfillment of this task, for it can be accomplished more readily by first considering what is in-

involved in claims about causal importance in history. On the surface, of course, it would seem absurd to suggest that among the necessary conditions for the occurrence of an event, some were more necessary than others. This is certainly the case with logically necessary conditions and it would appear to apply to causally necessary conditions as well. Yet as any perusal of historical literature makes clear, historians frequently attempt to provide some indication of the relative importance of the several causes of an event which they are concerned to explain. For example, after noting a number of conditions contributing to British military security in Canada in 1760-61, Hilda Neatby asserts that "the *essential condition* for the security of the army was the establishment of just and orderly government of the civilian population."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the course of explaining the failure of the revolution of 1848 in Germany, A. J. P. Taylor argues that "the refusal of the National Assembly at Frankfurt to go with the masses, the failure to offer a social programme, was a *decisive element* in the failure of the German liberals." Even at that, it is not thought to be the most critical factor involved, for two sentences later he tells us that "there was another, and *even more important* cause of failure, a disastrous mistake which Marx, Engels, and most German radicals shared!" This mistake, according to Taylor, was to support the weakened Prussian and Austrian armies in their nationalist struggles against the Czechs, the Poles, and the Danes.<sup>4</sup>

There is no need to multiply examples of cases where historians have assigned varying degrees of importance to the causes of an event. It is common knowledge that historians not only seek a plurality of causes for events which they wish to explain but also try to avoid what David Hackett Fischer has called the fallacy of indiscriminate pluralism, which "appears in causal explanations where the number of causal components is not defined, or their relative weight is not determined, or commonly both."<sup>5</sup> What is not clear either in Fischer's discussion or in the works of historians generally are the grounds upon which claims of causal importance are made. It may be that in some cases such claims are based upon purely subjective considerations, such as a desire to attribute moral responsibility for a particular deed or to provide support for some theory concerning human affairs. But closer scrutiny of the matter reveals that there are a number of reasonably objective criteria of importance which could conceivably be used depending upon the type of event being consid-

<sup>3</sup> Hilda Neatby, *Quebec: The Revolutionary Age, 1760-1791* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill and Stewart, 1960), p. 21. My emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London: Methuen, 1961), pp. 79-80. My emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 175.

ded. It also suggests that use of these different criteria is quite compatible with the notion that the causally necessary conditions for an event are all equally necessary.

By way of illustrating some of these criteria of importance, let us briefly consider the immigration movement to Canada during Laurier's tenure as Prime Minister and the Crimean War of 1854, both of which indicate the value of using two or more criteria when assessing the causes of a complicated event. In the first case, a relatively straightforward quantitative criterion could be used initially, on the basis of which the economic opportunities perceived to exist in the Canadian West would probably be considered as more important than the persecution of certain religious groups in Europe and Russia. It is likely, however, that in the course of determining that more people were motivated by the former than the latter, one would realize that some immigrants were affected by both factors and that people did not emigrate in as large numbers before 1896 as after, even though both factors were present in the earlier period. On the basis of what might be called a "new factor" criterion of importance, therefore, emphasis might be placed instead on the decline of economic opportunities in the American West, the completion of the C.P.R., or the immigration policy of Clifford Sifton. It has been suggested by Ducas that the last of the necessary conditions for an event to be fulfilled is the one that we consider to be the cause. But the argument of this paper is that isolating the new factor is just one of many ways of making a judgment about causal significance. It is not that historians consider that among the necessary conditions for an event, there is one (and only one) that may be called the cause; it is rather that historians assume that among the causally necessary conditions for an event, some are more important than others from the standpoint of any given criterion of importance.

Apart from being applicable to an immigration movement as a whole, the new factor criterion could be used to assess the relative importance of the incentives affecting particular groups or individuals within the movement. But in such cases a more appropriate criterion would perhaps be one distinguishing between goals pursued as means to an end and goals pursued as ends in themselves. If, for instance, economic wealth was sought by a group or individual only insofar as it contributed to religious freedom, then a desire for the former could be said to be less important in this sense than a quest for the latter. It is quite possible, of course, that a cause which is regarded as primary in terms of the new factor criterion of importance would be considered as secondary in terms of the means-end criterion of importance. This does not mean, however, that the resultant interpretations are incompatible. Differences of interpretation or emphasis can be reconciled if it can be shown that they are the result of employing different criteria of causal importance. It is likely, indeed, that many historiographical

confrontations could be eliminated if historians were to make such criteria more explicit.

In contrast with the broad range of event-types to which a means-end criterion could be applied, use of what might be called a "conflict resolution" criterion would be restricted to events such as the French Revolution or the Crimean War. According to this criterion, the most important cause of a conflict between social groups or states would be the one that transformed an initial state of tension or friction into outright conflict or warfare and that would, therefore, have to be removed before there could be a return to the initial state-of-affairs in question. For example, although conflicting economic interests have been regarded by some historians as an important cause of the Crimean War of 1854, the removal of such differences was not actually necessary to put an end to armed conflict in the Crimea. It is true that economic considerations go further to explain the outbreak of war than the religious dispute that arose over the rights of Christians in certain Holy Places in the Ottoman Empire. But from the standpoint of the crisis resolution criterion of causal importance, the most important cause was probably the difference of opinion that arose between the Great Powers as to whether the so-called Concert of Europe, applied to Turkey; whereas Britain, supported by France, maintained that the conference system should extend to Turkish affairs, Russia believed that she had a right to deal unilaterally with the Ottoman Empire since it lay outside the sphere in which the principles of the Concert were operative.

In his chapter entitled "Fallacies of Causation," Fischer was forced to conclude that "historians do different things when they attempt to construct causal explanations."<sup>6</sup> He would have us believe, indeed, that there are eight different bases upon which historians could attribute causal efficacy to one or more antecedent conditions considered necessary for the occurrence of an event. If we are not to commit yet another fallacy, however, it is essential to distinguish between criteria of causal importance and features of causality itself. Most of the things listed by Fischer are actually criteria of causal importance rather than criteria for the existence of a causal relation as such. This is the case with R. G. Collingwood's notion of controllable antecedents as set forth in *An Essay on Metaphysics*. According to Collingwood, we sometimes understand the cause of an event to refer to that "event or state of things which it is in our power to produce or prevent, and by producing or preventing which we can produce or prevent that whose cause it is said to be."<sup>7</sup> Given its obvious irrelevance for phenomena like sunspots or earthquakes, this

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 296.

cannot be a criterion for the existence of a causal relation *per se*, although it may help us to make a causal identification in human affairs. Rather it is yet another possible criterion for assessing causal significance. The same is true of the claim of H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré in *Causation in the Law*<sup>8</sup> that the causes of an event are to be distinguished from the "mere conditions" for it by virtue of the abnormality of the former and the normality of the latter. If the analysis of Hart and Honoré were to be accepted as stated, historians would be forced to conclude in many instances that an event had no cause but only "mere conditions." For there are many cases, such as the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire, in which the notion of abnormality, no matter how well defined, would either be inapplicable or else constitute a denial of the essential historicity of human development.

The question which remains is how the existence of various criteria of causal importance is compatible with the notion that the causally necessary conditions for the occurrence of any particular event must all have been equally necessary. The answer lies in making a further distinction between two kinds of causal necessity. On the one hand, there are causal conditions which are necessary for the occurrence of the general type of event indicated by the label (for example, "revolution," "migration," "inflation," and so forth) which has been applied to a given event. On the other hand, there are causal conditions which are necessary for the occurrence of the specific or peculiar elements by which the given event may be distinguished from other events of the same type. For example, it could be argued that the mid-eighteenth century attacks upon the Christian religion by the *philosophes* were not a causally necessary condition for a revolution in France beginning in 1789 or therabouts, but that they were a causally necessary condition for the revolutionary de-Christianization movement which was an intrinsic element of the French Revolution which actually transpired. That no such movement was embodied in the revolutions in France in 1830 and 1848 is proof enough that it is quite possible to have a revolution in France without an attempt to eliminate the Christian religion. Nonetheless, any explanation of the French Revolution of 1789 which failed to consider this particular element would be incomplete, regardless of whether this ingredient was considered to be of much significance.

This distinction between what is causally necessary for a certain kind of event to occur and what was causally necessary for the occurrence of certain unique elements or features of a particular event may itself be used as a criterion of causal importance. To make use of it, however, the historian must draw upon either his own general experience regarding the nature of event-types or the generalizations

## The Athenaeum Theory of Historical Facts

by PAUL LANGHAM  
University of New Brunswick

It seems perfectly simple and non-problematic to draw a distinction between history and historiography: history comprises all those events that have happened in the past, while historiography represents attempts to reconstruct what happened in the past. There are, however, a number of views that militate against this distinction, views which hold that historical facts are not in the past at all or that, even if they are, they are so bound up with the present as to make the history-historiography distinction untenable. "Ogni storia," writes Croce, "è storia contemporanea."<sup>1</sup> Collingwood and Popper expand on this point in almost identical fashion. "[E]very age must write history afresh. Everyone brings his own mind to the study of history, and approaches it from the point of view characteristic of himself and his generation."<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere Collingwood, like Popper, even maintains that history, as the course of events itself, does not exist.<sup>3</sup> Such comments have often been taken to signal the collapse of traditional ideas of history and historiography. They have even been taken as implying that objectivity in history is never possible. It has been asserted, moreover, that the view is sanctioned by commonsense. Marrou, for example, assures us that:

[E]n dehors des moments où la pensée du logicien se fixe volontairement sur cette distinction, le génie du langage, exprimant (comme il arrive souvent) la sagesse implicite des nations, se refuse à l'interdire.<sup>4</sup>

Although the epistemological positions suggested, *inter alia*, by Collingwood and Popper may require us to reevaluate traditional approaches to history, several authors have offered dangerously oversimplified and misleading treatments of historical facts which

<sup>1</sup> Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> R. G. Collingwood, "The Philosophy of History," reprinted in *Essays in the Philosophy of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 138; cf. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), Vol. II, p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> R. G. Collingwood, "The Limits of Historical Knowledge," *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 99; cf. Popper, *ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>4</sup> Henri-Léoné Marrou, *De la connaissance historique*, 5th rev. ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 39.