

## Historical Facts

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Philosophers and historians often use the word 'fact' and cognate expressions with the unselfconscious expertise that we all share. For example, when Kitson Clark writes "he (Macaulay) was blinded by the fact that he was an optimistic, self-confident, wing of the first half of the 19th century"<sup>1</sup> none of us would pause to wonder what he meant by 'fact'. Why is it, then, that when philosophers and historians address themselves to the questions 'what is a fact?' and 'what is an historical fact?' they flounder so badly? Their answers range from the uninformative to the downright incomprehensible. I shall argue in this paper that the concept of a 'fact' is a purely epistemological one, that to call something a fact is to comment on its epistemological status, and that the floundering is due to treating the concept as ontological, to thinking that a fact is some sort of entity.

As an example of the uninformative, consider E. H. Carr's remark that an historical fact is a fact that has been elected by the corpus of historians a member "of the select club of historical facts".<sup>2</sup> Aside from the fact that this is like telling us that a bishop is anyone who has been appointed to a bishopric, the remark is unenlightening because Carr has not told us what gives something the status of fact in the first place, and hence of being a candidate for election to the club. Examples of the second genre, the unintelligible, are frequent especially in Idealist writings: one will suffice. Carl Becker tells us that historical facts exist here and now in the minds of historians, an incomprehensible conclusion to which he finds himself forced by the pertinacity with which he tries to answer three illegitimate questions: 'What, when, and where is the historical fact?'<sup>3</sup> I call his questions illegitimate and his answers incomprehensible because that is precisely what they are, and I shall argue for this position later; but I certainly do not wish to deny that Becker was wrestling with a serious and difficult problem. My complaint is that by pos-

<sup>1</sup> *The Critical Historian* (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> "What are Historical Facts?" in H. Myerbaum (ed.), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York: Anchor, 1959), pp. 120-37.

ing this problem as one about the existence and nature of historical facts he has greatly hampered his attempt to solve it.

The genuine problem is an epistemological one of a familiar kind. Historians make statements about the human past ranging in scope from 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' to Gibbon's assertion that the fall of the Roman Empire was due to the triumph of barbarism and Christianity: one of the philosopher's tasks is to set out and examine the criteria for accepting or rejecting such statements. Can historians ever establish the truth of what they tell us beyond reasonable doubt? If so, how? This is not a question about how they *discover* what they do, but about how their conclusions are supported by evidence and argument. But puzzling over the existence and nature of facts in general and of historical facts in particular is, I shall argue, an unfruitful way of approaching the philosopher's task. Why, then, have so many of us, philosophers and historians alike, slipped into adopting this approach?

The answer to this last question is, I believe, a very simple one: we are the victims of an unconscious line of argument which has only to be brought out into the open to be seen to be spurious. In our self-conscious moments, when we *use* the word 'fact' without reflecting on our use of it, we say such things as that 'it is a fact that Lincoln was assassinated' or 'that Lincoln was assassinated is an established fact'. It follows that there must be such things as facts; and if there are such things as facts, it must be reasonable to ask what facts are, what sort of entities they are, and then to ask what distinguishes historical facts from facts of other sorts. If, returning to Kitson Clark's impeccably lucid statement about Macaulay, we try, so to speak, to put pressure on the word 'fact', we might try to put the fact of Macaulay's being a whig on some sort of ontological map. We might ask what sort of entity 'being a whig' is, whether such entities are basic entities to which we have an ontological commitment or whether they are reducible to entities of other sorts in the way in which numbers are (perhaps) reducible to classes; or we might ask whether being a whig is the sort of entity that is able to cause someone to be blind to something. I have no wish to deny the value and importance of such conceptual cartography: my point is that these questions arise about the *concept* of 'being a whig' or about Macaulay's having been one, *not* about the *fact* (if it is a fact) that he was one. My thesis is that such questions, which *must* be askable if facts are entities of some sort, are in fact idle and serve only to confound confusion. But it is time to argue for this thesis.

First the train of thought which starts from the legitimacy of statements of the form 'it is a fact that *p*' and issues in perplexed discussion about the nature and ontological status of facts is clearly mistaken if it happens to be the case that expressions involving the word 'fact' are *illocutionary* in the sense that they are not to be con-

strued in accordance with their surface grammar. From 'it is a fact that Lincoln was assassinated' we can no more infer the existence of facts than from 'it is the case that Lincoln was assassinated' we can infer the existence of cases. The word 'fact', like other epistemological words, often has a parenthetical use. Just as 'I know that Ottawa is the capital of Canada' could often (but not always) be re-written as 'Ottawa is, I know, the capital of Canada', so 'it is a fact that Lincoln was assassinated' could be re-written as 'Lincoln was, in fact, assassinated'. Such idioms are used to express what the speaker takes to be a well-founded confidence in the truth of the relevant statement. But, while reflection on such idiomatic uses may take us some way towards resisting the temptation to think of facts as entities, it cannot take us the whole way. As John Searle has pointed out<sup>4</sup> the illocutionary force of an expression does not always exhaust its meaning. The word 'fact' in a sentence of the form 'if it is a fact that *p*, it must also be a fact that *q*' carries no illocutionary force.

Secondly, speculation as to what sort of entities facts are must be idle for the following reason. If we try to place them on some ontological map we run into the difficulty that their place will be everywhere and nowhere. There have been and still are things, persons, qualities, times, places, and so on through the Aristotelian or any other list of categories: but facts cannot constitute a distinct category because there are facts in every category. It is a fact that Socrates was a man, lived in the 5th century *b.c.*, was snub-nosed, was married to Xanthippe, and so on. But are these really facts? When I say that they are, my utterance has an illocutionary force: I am claiming to have good grounds for asserting whatever it is that I do assert about Socrates, that the truth of the assertion is beyond reasonable doubt. But the illocutionary force of the phrase 'it is a fact that' does not exhaust its meaning, since if Socrates was not married to Xanthippe I should have been mistaken however well supported by evidence or argument my assertion was. (*Any* historical statement may be untrue; and to say that is only to say that historical statements are not *a priori* truths.) However, being false is not the only way in which my assertion may be, to use Austin's word, "unhappy". If we discovered that the belief that Socrates was married to Xanthippe was founded on nothing better than idle gossip, though the belief might still be true, it would be improper for anyone to go on referring to Socrates' being married to Xanthippe as a *fact*.

The third point is the most important. 'Fact' is a *contrast* word typically used to contrast questions or matters of fact with questions or matters of a number of other kinds, among which are fiction, law, value, opinion, theory, and interpretation. Failure to keep this fact in mind is, I believe, responsible for much of the puzzlement over the

<sup>4</sup> *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

nature of facts. This is so because something that is undoubtedly a fact in terms of one of these contrasts may very well not be a fact in terms of one of the others. It is, for example, a fact in terms of the fact/opinion contrast that Mr. Pickwick was fat, but not in terms of the fact/fiction contrast. So, forgetting that the meaning of the word 'fact' will vary with the contrast we have in mind, we are inclined to say that something both is a fact and is not a fact, and contradictory inclinations are the stuff of which philosophical pseudo-problems are made.

It is undoubtedly a fact, in terms of the fact/opinion contrast, that contributory negligence of plaintiff will normally bar recovery of damages in a negligence suit, and any lawyer advising a client will tell him so flatly. Yet the proposition 'contributory negligence etc.' is not a proposition of fact but a proposition of law. The lawyer will call it a fact to inform his client that it is a *well-established* proposition of law, so that if his client's negligence in any way contributed to the damage he sustained he had better drop his case.

When facts are contrasted, not with beliefs or opinions, but with theories, a theory is always thought of as something larger than a fact, something which encompasses or explains many facts or collects them into some significant whole. This being so, it is not surprising that the difference between fact-as-opposed-to-theory and fact-as-opposed-to-opinion tends to pass unnoticed, since it will normally be the case that the theory is less well-established than the facts which it encompasses. Hence to refer to something as a theory will usually be to suggest that the set of statements which together constitute the theory have not been established beyond reasonable doubt. But from this, of course, it by no means follows that the theory *cannot* be established beyond reasonable doubt. Avogadro's hypothesis can become Avogadro's law without there being any change other than in the status accorded to it by chemists. As far as the logic of 'fact' and 'theory' go, it could be the case that the entire Marxist theory of historical change could achieve the status of fact in terms of the fact/opinion contrast.

A discussion of the fact/theory contrast would, however, take us into the epistemology of the natural sciences, that being the place where the word 'theory' has its natural home. In history, facts are more commonly contrasted, not with theories, but with *interpretations*. Leo Gershoy, dissatisfied with the standard account of the character and conduct of Bertrand Barère which derives from Macaulay, undertook a re-examination of the evidence and produced a very different one.<sup>5</sup> In July 1793 Barère took the lead in the impeachment of the Girondin leaders with whom he had formerly been

associated, and Macaulay accuses him of doing so in order to save his own skin. Gershoy's account of Barère is that he was a "reluctant terrorist" who impeached the Girondin leaders because he thought it essential to do so save France from its internal and external enemies. Anyone who accepts Gershoy's account as proven by documentary evidence will say that it is a fact that Barère impeached the Girondins for the reason that Gershoy gives — in terms of the fact/opinion contrast, meaning thereby that, in his view, Gershoy has made out his case beyond reasonable doubt. But in terms of the fact/interpretation contrast what Gershoy offers us is clearly not a fact, but an interpretation of Barère's conduct.

An interpretation of Barère's conduct? Or an interpretation of the evidence? The word 'interpretation' leads a double life in the philosophy of history and this leads to trouble even within the fact/interpretation contrast itself. All claims to historical knowledge rest, obviously, on the interpretation of documents, of traces that the past has left behind. Now since these documents are the only data (*données*) from which an historian can start and by reference to which everything he tells us must be substantiated, it is natural that we should come to identify documents with facts. For the documents are the only things of which the existence is beyond doubt. (Why it should be thought that the present existence of something perceptible can be established beyond doubt while the occurrence of past events cannot is never made clear. But that is another story.) Whatever else an historian may be able to doubt he cannot, it is said, doubt that what he has before him is, for example, "paper over the surface of which ink has been distributed in certain patterns".<sup>6</sup> Items of this sort, then, are the only things that, strictly speaking, may be called facts, so that whatever an historian tells us about Barère's conduct must be on the 'interpretation' side of the fact/interpretation contrast. From the true premise that an historian's thesis is based on the interpretation and criticism of documents idealist philosophers arrive at the conclusion that Barère's conduct is an interpretation of documents.

Explicit identification of facts with documents is rare in English writers, perhaps because the type-fallacy jars one's sensibility. But it is to be found in the following sentence of Croce: "what were narratives or judgements before are now themselves facts, 'documents' to be interpreted and judged".<sup>7</sup> Croce is making the valid point that a judgement or narrative written at the time of an event or later can only be treated by a subsequent historian as a document, something to be interpreted. And it would be unduly severe to press the

<sup>5</sup> *Bertrand Barère: A Reluctant Terrorist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), ch. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Croce, *Theory of History*, p. 12.  
<sup>7</sup> Croce, *Theory and History of Historical Thought*, ed. Douglas Armstrong (London: Harvill, 1921), p. 12.

identification of documents with facts if it were not the case that this identification is one of the foundations of his entire philosophy of history. It is responsible, in part, for his view that all history is contemporary history, that real, 'live' history is "the history that one really thinks in the act of thinking"<sup>8</sup> and so forth.

But for the most part historians, even when they are reflecting on the concept of a 'fact', do not use the fact/interpretation contrast in this way at all. For an historian who is not wholly convinced by Gershoy and thinks that, after all, Mearsday might have been right, or who offers a new interpretation of Barere's conduct, will certainly say that it is a *fact* that Barere *did* impeach the Girondins, for all that that proposition too is something that has to be established by the interpretation of documents. It is in this sense that Kitson Clark refers to the "framework of fact" around which historians weave interpretations. 'Fact' here cannot mean, as it does for Croce, 'document' since the example that Kitson Clark gives of a fact is the fact that the battle of Waterloo was fought on Sunday, 18 June 1815, and neither the battle itself nor the assertion that it was fought on that date could possibly be called a document. His reason for calling this a fact is clear: "If the common opinion ... was wrong then most of the history of Europe in the 19th century would be inexplicable, and a great many contemporary records ... would have to be rejected as spurious."<sup>9</sup>

Now if the philosophizing historian sometimes thinks of historical facts as the documents which constitute his data and sometimes thinks of them as what has been established beyond reasonable doubt by inference from these data and if this duality in the reference of the phrase 'historical fact' is not noticed, it is hardly surprising that he ties himself in knots. Becker provides a very clear example. He first insists, correctly, on distinguishing the *fact* that Lincoln was assassinated, which is still a fact here and now, from the *event*, Lincoln's assassination, which occurred more than a century ago and is not now occurring. But he goes on to ask about the historical facts questions which, while appropriate enough when asked about events, make no sense at all when asked about facts. "When and where was Lincoln assassinated?" are questions which are readily intelligible and, as it happens, easily answered. He was assassinated on the 14th of April, 1865, in Ford's Theatre in Washington. But these questions make no sense if asked about the fact that Lincoln was assassinated, since facts exist nowhere and nowhen. And this is not because they are timeless entities not located in space, but because they are not entities at all. To say that Lincoln's assassination is a fact is simply to say that it cannot reasonably be doubted that Lincoln was

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 13.  
<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 41-2.

fact even established

assassinated; and the reason why it cannot be doubted is that if we took seriously the hypothesis that he was not assassinated at that time and place most of the subsequent history of the United States would be inexplicable and a great many contemporary records would have to be rejected as spurious.

The sceptical thrust of Becker's essay is due to his very proper realization of the fact that to establish an historical proposition beyond reasonable doubt is no easy matter when we get beyond the Lincoln-was-assassinated stage: like others of his generation he was familiar with the way in which revisionist historians could undermine the most solid-seeming historical structures, and he was led to believe that historical knowledge was impossible. But he was hampered in his attempt to come to grips with the problem posed by revisionism by raising questions which, when asked about facts, are literally incomprehensible. Confidence in historical theses can wax and wane, and the more ambitious the thesis, the greater the probability that re-examination of the evidence, the availability of new types of evidence, and new uses of old evidence will cause it to be modified or rejected. When an historian refers to something as a fact, he expresses the view that it has been established beyond reasonable doubt and signals his intention to treat it as such. Since historical propositions are contingent, there is always, perhaps, a possibility (of some sort) that he may be mistaken; but since that possibility is in some cases negligible he is fully entitled to speak of a 'framework of fact'. Nor need he be deterred by the fact that the probability of error is a continuum, that there is no mechanical way of distinguishing the sheep-facts that will never lose their status, from the goats. To be worried about this absence of a criterion is like suggesting that we can never be sure that So-and-So is bald or not bald. Historical knowledge is no worse off in this respect than most other kinds of knowledge.

I know that in some quarters the remarks that I have made about the idiomatic use of English expressions are thought to be trivial and to have no philosophical point; but they are neither trivial nor pointless if they serve to clear the air. In this instance, one point is to enable philosophers to get on with their proper job, which is to characterize and to assess the cogency of historians' claims to knowledge. (In effect, this boils down to answering questions about the relation between an historian's conclusions and the evidence for them.) Another is to assuage the anxieties of historians who may, from time to time, be held up by the philosophical-looking question 'What is a fact?'

Fact et événement

l'absence d'extériorité du déterminé A