

W.B. Gallie's "The Historical Understanding"

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W. B. Gallie was a historian concerned with the idea of history as narrative or "story". In the exposition of the text, Gallie discusses how the historian conceives of the task of writing history as "a certain kind of story", wherein there is not always a linear course of development leading towards a conclusion (Gallie, 72). Gallie makes the distinction between science and history -- "if it is true that in the physical sciences there is always a theory, it is no less true that in historical research there is a story" (72). In the following passage, Gallie demonstrates that historical understanding is very different from the scientific because there is no clear-cut way in arriving at such a story. Science has guiding principles and properties which provide explanations to events, but history is subject to the continual flux of the thread of narrative not free from "successive assessments, interpretations, and criticisms" (72). Human interest is the foundation for historical interest. He defends the idea that historical understanding involves a vested interest in or appreciation of human actions and valuations, as carried out by individuals. History for Gallie retains this humanistic quality which renders it so interesting and storylike, as opposed to the sciences that are seemingly abstracted away from humanity, such as economics -- "the importance of human history is reduced more and more, sometimes to a vanishing point" (86).

Moreover, the presentation of history is a topic that he devotes much attention to, particularly in how a historian chooses to represent events. The fact that a historian chooses to tell one story or narrative does not preclude the existence of other narratives. The topic of contingency -- a future event or circumstance which is possible but cannot be predicted with certainty -- is a main facet of his work. Gallie argues that history is not governed by the same

principles or theorems of causal and logical necessity that underlie the physical sciences and natural phenomena. The historian may choose to represent events as they see fit, while staying true to historical fact but also being privy to the fact that contingencies may arise or exist within narrative. Gallie goes on to make the distinction between Nominalism and Realism. Nominalism is the idea that historical events or trends are “logically reducible to, or totally explainable in terms of, the following of individual thoughts and actions” (77). This is contrasted with the view of Realism, which rejects the premise that only individual things or persons exist -- rather, according to the tenets of Realism “characteristic human actions are performed and interpreted as expressions of generally accepted institutions, beliefs, routines and norms”. Realism is able to reconcile the significance Nominalism places on individual dispositions and actions, but it also takes into account the networks that individuals are entrenched in. Moreover, this distinction goes to show the ability for historians to craft narrative in a manner that is followable and interesting, even if individuals aren’t referred to directly. This can be achieved through the use of synecdoche, wherein reference to a whole subsumes its parts -- “the nation, ‘public opinion’” and so on (79). These differing ways of approaching the transcription of history are choices exercised by historians -- this is done with the hope and goal of elucidating history through narrative, as well as filling in gaps within it. Nominalism provides the promise of specificity in the aim of the preservation of the truth within the historical record, meanwhile Realism provides a richer way of contextualizing mankind as it relates to institutions. It is the job of the historian to provide followable and acceptable accounts of the doings of human beings and their relations to processes.

The purpose of historical narrative is to stay true to the facts pertaining to an event and to follow them “to a known conclusion, for the sake of events themselves and their direct human

interest” (84). A historian can help to contextualize an event in the grand scheme of history, but the process of explaining events is an entirely different one, one that is perhaps better suited for the aims of the physical sciences. This is the point where the theme of historical contingency becomes most salient. One can hope that through reading history, the events are illustrated clearly and enticingly enough that one begins to “follow” the event -- “in the same broad sense of which we follow a game or story” (90). In addition, much like in how surprises are central to storytelling, the reader expects to be confronted with contingencies in the process of understanding history and its conclusions, and perhaps have them explained (89). Gallie argues that explanations are governed by a different methodology than is appropriate or achievable for historical understanding -- after all, understanding/followability are different from explanation. The historian may not be able to explain an event in terms of any physical law or form of logical necessity -- many lines of development can and do occur in the course of history, and the standards of acceptability differ for narratives. The onus is on the historian to provide a plausible account of history which accounts for the various forms of foreseen and unforeseen developments in order to comprise the historical whole. The existence of contingencies within historical narratives gives room for the possibility of the development of an event -- as being “followed as a part of a still developing whole” and is thus not grounded in finality (90). This is contrasted with the sciences, as their primary goal is to explain and predict events using deductive methods, but the job of the historian is to provide narratives which yield “optimum understanding (on the evidence available)” which are intelligible and acceptable (90). Explanations in history serve a different function than in science -- they serve to contextualize events in the grand scheme of history, rather than attribute a purely deductively valid mode to

explanation. Contingency leaves room for the imagination and accounts for the ever-shifting force of a moving and revisable history.

I find Gallie's illustration of the parallels between storytelling and historical narrative to be alluring, incisive, and fun. I can appreciate what he has to say regarding the followability of stories, our search for answers to produce a merited conclusion and how this same way of thinking can apply to historical study. His humanistic approach to the study of history is persuasive, because he does not merely boil down the processions of history to theoretical abstractions aimed at elucidating (albeit unsuccessfully at times) the causal and social hodgepodge that is history. He is probably right when he articulates the notion of human interest influencing one's proclivity to be enamored by disciplines which are preoccupied with understanding what humans do that is just so special and exciting. His (seemingly Hegelian) continuous invocation of totality within the narration of events is commendable, because historical completeness is worth striving for. I think that his points regarding the inability of applying governing scientific principles to the study of history are well-taken, because they are in line with my own views regarding human society and historical explanation and causality -- because there are a plurality of explanatory models that can be factored in to the narration of an event, it is nearly impossible to parse out totalistic explanations and logically-deducible and guaranteed series of events yet. Gallie seems to regard history in an optimistic manner, imbuing the historian with a degree of agency by emphasizing narrational choice and plausibility, the framing of narrative while having reverence for the facts and record -- a form of storytelling in its own right.

At times, the dichotomization of the pursuits of science with the pursuits of history seem too extreme, however -- in an age where positivism continues to have considerable reign and the

sciences have subsumed the social, the application of scientific principles and trends to the study of human interaction seems more possible than ever before, with the existence of the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and economics. This begs the question, are contingencies really as historically and narratively omnipresent as they seem? Perhaps it is the case that some historical events could follow a similar pattern as physical, empirically-observable events with nearly as much of a degree of probability as a natural or physical phenomenon guaranteed to occur with certainty, depending on the predictive tools we have at our disposal. But an even more radical view could be that of hard determinism, where every event is regarded as being causally determined to the point of the elimination of the occurrence of alternative events, besides the one leading up to the present event. Such an explanation would guarantee that every event has a complete explanation, an idea that comes into direct conflict with Gallie's contingency theory. Could it be that we just don't understand the patterns of historical phenomena yet and their predictability or the fundamental nature of history in order to ascribe totalistic and objective explanations for events? Before humans understood the principle of gravity, we had to progress from the mere perception and understanding of observable events to being able to prove, or explain the phenomenon in terms of its nature. Perhaps we haven't yet reached the point in history as we've reached in some sciences where there are fundamental rules governing a discipline probing into the nature of the thing. Perhaps history will never get to this point. But this does not preclude this possibility.

At times, Gallie seems to not place enough weight on the explanation of history, because to him, historical events are one of those things that cannot be easily traced to one line of development and explained accordingly, with certitude. Contingency within narrative accounts precisely for what it cannot. But at the end of the day, isn't history for the people, and isn't

explanation equally if not more useful for the determinations of historical significance as it pertains to events? Ideally, explanations can equip human beings with the predictive and preventative knowledge necessary to proceed historically. Is there a way to better reconcile a mere understanding of history and the explanation of it within the framework of Gallie's philosophy?