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The Logic of the History of Ideas

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II. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mark Bevir is a member of the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. His recent publications include The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a short summary of Mark Bevir, The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Logic stands here as a subset of Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy as a matter of the grammar of our concepts. It studies the forms of reasoning appropriate to a discipline, rather than the material of that discipline. Hence, the logic of the history of ideas considers the nature of meaning, the way we should justify our knowledge of past meanings, and how we should explain things such as the existence of meanings, the beliefs people held, and conceptual change.

KEYWORDS: belief, hermeneutics, history, ideas, philosophy, Wittgenstein

The Logic of the History of Ideas

I. THE TOPIC

Patterns of family life, debates in politics, religious observances, technological inventions, scientific beliefs, literature, and the arts - all of these things are aspects of human culture. Typically we define a broad concept of human culture in contrast to physical and biological processes. One key feature differentiates the cultural even if the precise boundaries between it, the physical, and the biological sometimes remain blurred: cultural phenomena convey meanings, and they do so because cultures are composed at least in part of beliefs. Students of culture concentrate on the meanings conveyed by patterns of behaviour, forms of social organisation, economic systems, and technical inventions. To study the history of ideas is to study such meanings, and so culture, from an avowedly historical perspective. But surely the study of culture is always parasitic on history? Although scholars can evaluate cultural phenomena morally, epistemically, and aesthetically, they cannot evaluate what they do not know, and the only way they can acquire knowledge of cultural phenomena is through historical studies. Hence, any theory of culture relies at least implicitly on an analysis of the nature of the history of ideas.

The meanings or beliefs that constitute cultural phenomena enter into almost every area of historical scholarship. When people act, they do so in accord with their conscious, preconscious, or unconscious beliefs, so the historical study of actions, and also practices and institutions, always involves the history of ideas, albeit alongside historical explorations of desires, physical movements, and natural phenomena. Even when historians concern themselves with the consequences of actions, as is common in economic history, they cannot explain these consequences apart from by reference

to the meanings that informed both the actions and the ways in which other people understood these actions. Hence, almost all historical studies rely at least implicitly on an analysis of the nature of the history of ideas.

Historical and cultural studies alike must embody a series of philosophical views about the history of ideas. The Logic of the History of Ideas attempts to bring the relevant philosophical issues to the fore so as to reflect upon them (Bevir 1999). It answers questions such as: what is a meaning? What constitutes objective knowledge of the past? What are beliefs and traditions? How can we explain why people believed what they did? How do concepts change over time? In doing so, it ranges over issues and theorists associated with post-analytic philosophy, postmodernism, hermeneutics, literary theory, political thought, and social theory. By exploring the philosophical issues, it elucidates the theoretical concepts pertinent to the history of ideas and the human sciences more generally. It proposes at least a starting point for a theory of culture and so any adequate account of social life.

II. THE APPROACH

A philosophical study of the history of ideas can inform almost all aspects of historical scholarship as well as the study of human culture in general. How, though, should we conduct a philosophical inquiry into the history of ideas? My analysis of logic is an attempt to answer this question. Few people today would ascribe to the Hegelian view that objective reason or spirit defines the actual way in which ideas unfold through history – we cannot read-off actual historical processes from a logical analysis. Rather, philosophy unpacks and elucidates the theoretical commitments that should inform our attempts to recover actual historical processes. Logic analyses the forms of reasoning appropriate to a first-order discipline: it does not examine the

acceptability of particular conclusions in a first-order discipline. So, for example, a literary critic might ask if Hamlet is reasonably or unreasonably irresolute, a literary historian might ask whether Shakespeare intended to portray Hamlet as reasonably or unreasonably irresolute, and a philosopher might ask whether these two questions are the same. Moreover, the philosopher can debate the third question as a conceptual puzzle without first answering either of the questions of literary and historical fact. The third question centres on the abstract relationship between our concept of the meaning of a work and our concept of the intentions of the author.

No doubt some historians will object to philosophy playing the role just described. They will insist on the absolute priority of their material, arguing that theoretical commitments preclude a proper receptivity to what the past has to say to us, or even that the validity of theory must derive from its ability to illuminate their material, not from philosophy. I find such arguments unconvincing because as a postfoundationalist I do not believe in the given facts, or receptivity to the past, uninformed by prior theoretical commitments. Postfoundationalists believe that theory necessarily enters into our historical material – so it matters that we get the theory right. Moreover, because the theory is in the material, we cannot sort good theory from bad solely in relation to this material – we must turn to philosophy.

To reject given historical facts is thus to ascribe a key role to logic. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein, I elucidate the logic or forms of reasoning appropriate to history through a study of the grammar of the concepts operating in the discipline. Against the background of any web of beliefs that we currently accept as true, we can come to accept additional things not only by further investigations of the world but also by exploring the implications of the beliefs we already hold true. Wittgenstein's account of philosophy as the grammar of our concepts can suggest wrongly that his interests

are linguistic, not conceptual. My use of the word ‘logic’ serves to remind us that Wittgenstein typically unpacked the categories or theories and the intuitions or facts embedded in our concepts. Philosophical insights are true for us purely by virtue of meaning, that is, purely by virtue of being implied by the concepts with which we make sense of the world. They are not self-evident in a way that postfoundationalists must reject; after all, someone who did not share our concepts would not accept them. Equally, however, they are true for us simply because they are entailed by other things we hold true.

Because the logic of a discipline consists of the forms of reasoning appropriate to it, and because the practitioners of a discipline might not reason appropriately, any logic must focus on what the practitioners ought to do, not what they actually do. For example, philosophers cannot decide if the meaning of a literary work corresponds to the intentions of its author by seeing whether literary historians actually have equated the question of whether Hamlet is reasonably or unreasonably irresolute with that of Shakespeare’s intentions. Of course, exemplary instances of historical scholarship can provide philosophers with examples for their logical studies. Yet a description of exemplary instance followed by exemplary instance will degenerate into a mere list unless it is accompanied by a philosophical elucidation of the features that make these instances, and not others, exemplary. Thus, when we analyse the logic of history, we provide a normative account of an ideal type of reasoning; we do not describe the historical, social, or psychological processes involved in an actual type of reasoning.

My logic is a normative account of the forms of justificatory and explanatory reasoning appropriate to the history of ideas. The characterisation of this logic relies on analysis to clarify the concepts of our everyday descriptions and scholarly accounts of the objects studied by historians. When I put forward this logic, I seek to enhance

our understanding of reality by exploring the grammar of a refined set of the concepts we share. The logical implications I draw out from these concepts constitute theories about the world - for example, that human beings are agents who typically possess reasons for holding the beliefs they do. These theories about the world then provide us with grounds for identifying certain forms of reasoning as appropriate to the history of ideas.

III. THE ARGUMENT

When we study the logic of the history of ideas, we undertake a second-order study of the reasoning appropriate to a discipline. The first chapter of The Logic of the History of Ideas fills out this analysis of logic. The second chapter analyses the concept of meaning, since meanings constitute the objects studied in the history of ideas. Here I distinguish the hermeneutic meanings that are of concern to historians from both semantic meanings, understood in terms of truth conditions, and linguistic meanings, understood in terms of conventional usage. In addition, I argue that the occasion of an utterance enters into its hermeneutic meaning only indirectly by way of the understanding of the speaker, not directly as a result of how things are. We are thus led to an intentional analysis of hermeneutic meaning: the hermeneutic meaning of an utterance derives from the intentions of the author in making it. This defence of a weak intentionalism differs significantly from its stronger counterparts. Whereas strong intentionalists regard intentions as conscious and prior to utterances, a weak intentionalism allows for the unconscious and for changes of intent during the act of making an utterance. Weak intentionalism thus consists of little more than a principle of procedural individualism according to which hermeneutic meanings exist only for

specific individuals, whether authors or readers. Weak intentions are just individual viewpoints.

In chapter three, I turn to the problem of objectivity in the history of ideas. How can historians defend their claims that a work has a particular meaning? I begin by arguing that objectivity cannot rest on either a particular method or on vindication or refutation. We cannot justify historical knowledge either by reference to a method we used to reach it or by tests against pure facts designed to identify true theories or to exclude false ones. Instead, we must develop an anthropological epistemology based on appeals to shared facts, a critical attitude, and the possibility of comparing rival webs of theories. Once we do this, we can relate our concept of objectivity to truth by means of an anthropological turn that appeals to the nature of our being in the world. Finally I defend the application of this anthropological epistemology to the history of ideas, thereby countering both post-modern sceptics, who argue we cannot have objective knowledge of any meaningful work, and phenomenological sceptics, who argue we cannot have objective knowledge of the past.

Chapter four returns to the intentionalist theory of meaning. A weak intention, defined in terms of procedural individualism, is an individual viewpoint composed of expressed beliefs. To say this is to eliminate from meanings both pro-attitudes and illocutionary forces. Historians of ideas study works in order to recover hermeneutic meanings conceived as expressed beliefs. They do not study works to recover actions conceived as expressions of pro-attitudes as well as beliefs. Having reduced weak intentions to beliefs, I proceed to highlight the conceptual priority of sincerity over deception, conscious beliefs over unconscious ones, and rational beliefs over irrational ones. In doing so, I define the conscious to include the preconscious, and rationality in terms of consistency rather than objectivity or an appropriate means to

any subjective end. The conceptual priority of sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs implies that we should distinguish a dominant form of explanation appropriate to such beliefs from those forms of explanation appropriate to distorted beliefs.

In chapter five, I begin, therefore, to analyse the form of explanation appropriate to sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs. How can historians account for the meanings they reconstruct from the relics of the past now available to them? Here we should reject all forms of scientism, including physicalism understood as the claim that we can reduce matters of beliefs to physiology, and social positivism understood as the claim that we can discuss beliefs using the scientific concept of causation. So, I propose a synchronic form of explanation that makes sense of a belief by locating it in a wider web of beliefs, and that makes sense of these wider webs of belief by relating them to intellectual traditions. Because beliefs relate to one another in webs, we can elucidate a belief by describing the web to which it belongs. Similarly, because people reach the webs of belief they do against the background of inherited traditions, we can begin to explain a web of beliefs by relating it to the tradition out of which it arose.

Synchronic explanations cannot cover changes of belief or developments in traditions. In chapter six I thus propose a diachronic form of explanation that makes sense of ideational change by reference to the impact of specifiable dilemmas on webs of belief. Dilemmas arise for individuals when they accept as authoritative a new understanding that, merely by virtue of being new, poses a question for their existing web of beliefs. Dilemmas explain changes of belief because when people accept something as true, they have to extend their existing beliefs to accommodate the newcomer. We cannot reduce the concept of a dilemma any further since we cannot identify an area of experience that possesses a privileged status as an influence on our beliefs. On the contrary, dilemmas can arise from, and so affect, all areas of human

life, including politics, work, and faith. A rejection of scientism raises the question of how we should conceive of the link between antecedent and consequent in synchronic and diachronic explanations of belief. Because these forms of explanation presume rationality, they work by uncovering the conditional links between various beliefs. Conditional links are neither necessary, as are those defined in terms of the scientific concept of causation, nor arbitrary, as are those defined in terms of pure chance. Rather, they are those we postulate when we explain beliefs by highlighting the themes that linked them to one another.

In chapter seven I turn to the forms of explanation appropriate to distorted beliefs. Deception, self-deception, and irrationality should all be analysed in terms of rogue pro-attitudes, that is, pro-attitudes that exercise an illegitimate influence on the beliefs people express. Deception occurs when a rogue pro-attitude leads someone to express beliefs other than their actual ones. Self-deception occurs whenever a rogue pro-attitude acts as a censor, screening out actual, unconscious beliefs that contradict the expressed, actual ones. Irrationality occurs whenever a rogue pro-attitude prompts rogue beliefs that contradict the main web of beliefs. Pro-attitudes, whether rogue ones or not, can arise from any one of a need, desire, or reason. After arguing this, I return to the link between antecedent and consequent in explanations of beliefs to suggest that pro-attitudes are tied to the actions they inspire by volitional connections. Volitional connections too are neither necessary nor arbitrary. Rather, they are what a will creates whenever it makes a decision and then issues a corresponding command.

The Logic of the History of Ideas thus provides a full analysis of the forms of justificatory and explanatory reasoning appropriate to the discipline in a way that has clear implications for several related issues. Historians should adopt: first, the form of justification provided in the discussion of an anthropological epistemology; second,

the form of explanation for sincere, conscious, rational beliefs provided in the analysis of webs of belief, traditions, and dilemmas; and, third, the form of explanation for deception, self-deception, and irrationality detailed in the discussion of the operation of rogue pro-attitudes.

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