

THE (DISTORTING) MIRROR

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History is a fragile science. Its fragility lies above all in the indispensability for every cognitive approach relation fact-theory, or rather in the obligatory intermediary demanded by such a relation—the symbol. A unique bridge between two worlds, it may remain unperceived, lost, concealed or simply misunderstood. On the way across this bridge History's destiny often depends on the destiny of the symbol and thus it turns into a relation itself. Therefore I imagine it as a mirror. And that is but natural—it is above all our deeds which mould our image and their true value is only perceivable in the light of what they have brought, in the light of the time which they have impregnated, but regarding which they are but past. However, the mirror I have in mind is somewhat peculiar in that it not only reflects what is placed before it—in fact, in the reflected image one can also discern the features of its opposite. But in order to rise above the contradiction in this metaphor and grasp its meaning, let us now turn to what, according to me, makes it possible at all—the object of historical knowledge.

The first thing anyone attempting to comprehend the past will have to face is silence. The silence of the stone, of the page, of the unfamiliar language, of the sign, of meaning in itself. Its description, commensuration and evaluation, its location in the space-time and cause-effect continuum is the task of the investigator.

And whereas a natural scientist, for instance, would stop at this, for that constitutes the general cognitive approach required by an already determined and localized object, the historian, to the contrary, barely just begins. He must transcend the silence and find the meaning of another reality. The historian creates life. And here is the first paradox of the mirror—we place tangible, measurable objects before it, but see ideas. And that is how I understand Ortega y Gasset's observation. "Man has no nature—what he has is... history"¹. Made in a context where the accent falls upon the essence of man, it is equally relevant outside of it. "History" meant as "total, all-embracing being", yet an ideal one, because of its past-time characteristics is opposed to nature, to matter. However, if we should accept it as a cognitive approach and reduce the wider sense in which it is perceived by Ortega y Gasset, its place would be between the two extremes—it is as much materially determined, owing to its immediate object, as it is ideal, owing to its ultimate goal.

Such a view naturally raises the question whether History is a science, whether its findings are sustained by reason alone. For the quest for the reality behind the symbol will not be subject only to precise systematization and infallible criteria. All the more that we are dealing with a reality which is unique in its kind. Archimedes' law can be proved by anyone at all times, but when it comes

to the fall of the Roman Empire and the French Revolution, things are quite different. They are enclosed within the past which is irretrievably gone. The historical evidence might help us situate certain aspects of their reality but the rest will have to be left to the imagination. Indeed, scientific methodology allows a near approach, yet it is but an infinite approximation to values whose actual dimensions can never be attained. Neither can they be overstepped and that reinforces the position of reason in the historical quest. However conforming the latter may be with the laws of reason, the reflection called "historical truth" also bears certain imaginary features, the features of art. I would rather not take up the interminable discussion concerning the part of emotions in history—I regard the question as being settled in principle. The role of the guard in Plato's republic, who, like the dog, must develop a bivalent view on a world purely rationally determined as familiar-unfamiliar, is bound to be beyond the abilities of the historian. The irrational characteristics of what has been seen in the past are inevitable for one can never look that way impartially. "Both the expiatory sacrifice of the Jews and the many secret rites of the primitives are part of the present drama of my soul"² and that is a drama of wishes. They enact the meaning of life—however, not of past life, the reasonable reconstruction of which we are attempting, but of the present one, the one lived here and now, and thus reason ceases to be the sole imperative of the quest. That is also why historical knowledge, confined within the narrow frames of its being understood merely as a retrospection, is brought to a standstill. Generated by our current problems, our wish to get to know the past leaves their stamp upon the life behind the symbol and it starts throbbing with a rhythm which echoes theirs. And this makes the reverse possible as well—"the present drama of my soul" is part of the "expiatory sacrifice of the Jews and the many secret rites of the primitives" and that drama, contemporary, and what is more, personal, is present in every historical dissertation. That is why the aspiration after utter objectivity has always seemed paradoxical to me. If we were not subjectively motivated in turning our eyes away from present objects and in the direction of past times and realities, it would all be futile. The two "parts" should be comparable in meaning or else their integration into a whole would be impossible—they will be forever dissociated from the object or, the latter would simply remain inscrutable. Be that as it may, anyone headed for the past has made himself the starting point, he is standing in front of the mirror himself, and therefore, both in those who have already lived and in their deeds, he will seek, and possibly find, echoes of his own soul.

And so, current problems, having reached a level exceeding the possibilities for their solution available in actual reality, begin seeking their answers outside its frames. It is but natural to look for them in the past first. "Experience is the other name of history"³ and is alone in a position to provide the right answers to our questions.

Everything is stored up within it—what has been experienced and what has not, what has been done and what has not, and moreover—in an infinite number of versions. And that is why this common, collective experience so often replaces our own helplessness when faced with the demands of existence. However, it only resolves them on a theoretical level. Though not to the utmost, the past can be known but not experienced; from our point of view it is the realm of thought, not of action. This is why the way backwards traverses it only to proceed further on, to where what is “now” for us can actually be what we wish it to be—the future. To learn what it has in store for us, and to subject it to our will is a goal of far greater vital importance. “To decide whether life is worth living means to answer the main question of philosophy”⁴, and the meaning of the answer will necessarily be set out in the future as well. And there it is the meaning of actions. However, it is out of our reach and we can but guess as far as it is concerned. What lies ahead, both on an individual and on a social level can never be foretold with precision. And if the test for an action-oriented thought (whether aspiring after it or simply meaning to explain it) is the very action, certain parts of its elements inevitably remain beyond the scope of its actual time and place.

And thus we obtain the following picture: Past time, which can be known with great approximation, but cannot be experienced or, if we should put it in terms of the unity thought-action, this unity actually does not exist there, being disrupted to the advantage of the first element. And Future time, which can hardly be known, but can be experienced the unity is once again disrupted but to the advantage of the second element.

But let us turn back to the words of Camus. Here the link between existence and its justification is obvious. However, this link depends on the tense in which the answer will be given—if the “worth” should be put in the Future/Past, its assertion easily turns from thinking to wishful thinking. It blurs the limits between rational and irrational, between individual and social values, between the actual probability for a certain event to occur/to have occurred (truth) and the very wish for it to be that way (untruth). In fact, once again the present underlies our judgement, which depends on our ability to appraise the determinant factors in our life. When turned into an inability it opens the door to illusions, as often does an unwanted outcome of the appraisal.

In fact, thinking inevitably tends to be illusory, especially when aimed at reconstruction. Having left the here-and-now it parts with its function (and thus with the possibility to be verified in reality), and the further ahead or back from them it drifts, the more conspicuous the parting. The unity in the meaning of “living” and “answering” must, however, be preserved. It is also the unity between theory and fact. As regards the present, their natural order in the past is fact-theory, and in the future—theory-fact. That is the meaning of the functional humanitarian knowledge. The blurred limits and the irrelevant present-day action/(fact) break up the relation and rearrange its elements. This new order transforms the symbol which was our starting point, from goal-intermediary into means-intermediary. Thus the mirror becomes a distorting one and here there no longer is any paradox—we place ghosts before it and see ghosts as well.

References

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3. Toynbee, A. J., "Change and Habit", 1966, p. 3
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