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Truth and Explanation in History

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When historians raise questions about truth, they generally do so in the context of talking about beliefs, and more specifically when talking about statements or affirmations of belief. I do not imagine, however, that historians necessarily have anything very deeply philosophical in mind when they talk about the truth or falsity of the beliefs they encounter in the past. When, as an historian, I find myself confronting

some statement of belief, and when I say that I consider it to be true, I do not think that I am usually saying anything more than that I share the belief myself.

This is not to deny that a philosophically-minded historian might also have a theory of truth. Such an historian might have a view, that is, about what exactly they are committed to defending in saying of a statement of belief that it seems to them true or false. They may suppose that what makes a belief true is that it coheres with other beliefs. Or they may think that beliefs are rendered true by their correspondence to some facts about the world. Or they may not think that truth corresponds to anything at all. They may think that, when I say of a statement of belief that it seems to me true, and when I add that in saying this I only mean that I am disposed to affirm it myself, I may actually be enunciating a theory of truth.

I do not myself feel that, as an historian, I need to have any view about which of these theories of truth, if any, I should take to be the most illuminating one. However, as an historian of ideas I frequently find myself studying beliefs that people in the past affirmed to be true, and in examining these beliefs I cannot avoid noticing that, while some of them strike me as true, others strike me as obvious false and sometimes as completely incredible. Aristotle, for example, believed that bodies change quality whenever they change place; Thomas Aquinas believed that the sun circles the earth; John Locke believed that one can hope to observe stones growing in size. As any cultural historian knows, the list of such oddities is endless.

It is at this point, it seems to me, that one particular philosophical question about truth cannot fail to obtrude into the practice of the historian's craft. As historians, we are often interested in trying to explain why our ancestors held certain specific beliefs. The philosophical question we cannot avoid is then as follows: what role, if any, should be played in these explanations by our assessment of the beliefs we are studying as either true or false?

One answer that has lately been widely espoused by philosophers of history (and philosophers of social science more generally) has been that true beliefs need to be explained in a different way from false ones. Within the Anglophone philosophical literature, this view has been defended, for example, by Martin Hollis, Steven Lukes, Graham Macdonald, Philip Pettit, Charles Taylor and many others. The principal argument with which these philosophers have sought to uphold this commitment has been that the holding of a false belief points to some failure of reasoning, and that failures of reasoning require additional explanations of a kind that are not required in the case of true beliefs.

Consider, for examples, the discussion mounted by Macdonald and Pettit in their book *Semantics and Social Science*, in which they insist that judgements about truth and falsity cannot fail to enter into the explanations we give of the beliefs we encounter in past or alien societies. When a belief under investigation proves to be true, they maintain, no further explanation will be required. But when we encounter a belief which is 'manifestly false' or 'obviously incorrect', there is something further to be explained. We need, in particular, to consider what kinds of 'social function or psychological pressure' could have prevented the agent in question from recognising 'the mistaken nature of the belief'.¹

¹ Macdonald – Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science*, 9, 34, 42.

It is worth prising apart – more fully than Macdonald and Pettit have done – the two distinct claims being made here. One states that true beliefs furnish their own explanation: when an historian encounters such a belief, nothing more than its truth need be invoked to explain it. The other claim is that false beliefs require to be explained in distinctively and strongly causal terms: what the historian is looking for in this instance, according to Macdonald and Pettit, is some kind of pressure or psychological blockage that prevented or inhibited someone from seeing and getting at the truth.

These assumptions have been widely embodied in the work of practising historians of recent times. By this I do not mean that the historians in question have necessarily been reading the philosophers I have cited. In fact that seems to me highly improbable. Rather the way of proceeding I have been outlining appears to strike many historians as the most natural one to follow.

To take a distinguished example, consider the explanation that Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie gives in his classic study, *The Peasants of Languedoc*, for the upsurge during the era of the Reformation of beliefs about witchcraft. Ladurie begins by emphasising that the beliefs about witches held by the peasants were manifestly false, and were indeed little more than a product of what he calls “mass delirium”.² If we wish to explain why these beliefs nevertheless gained such wide acceptance, he goes on, we need an account of what might have caused such a serious breakdown in normal processes of reasoning, and thereby caused the peasant consciousness, as he puts it, to break loose from its moorings.³ The question, as he poses it, is what prevented the peasants from recognising the mistaken nature of their beliefs; what caused such an upsurge of obscurantism, such an epidemic of pathological beliefs.⁴

One element in the explanation offered by Ladurie is that, with the advent of the Reformation, the peasantry began to fear a loss of their traditional spiritual help. “Far from their priests, the peasants found themselves alone with their anxieties and their primordial fears – and abandoned themselves to Satan.”⁵ But Ladurie’s principal hypothesis is that the peasants felt a deep sense of frustration at the collapse of the social upheavals associated with the Reformation itself. With the failure of social reform, their continuing desire to improve their lot took on a “mythical dress”, and was forced to express itself in the “chimerical and fantastic revolt of the witches’ Sabbath, an attempt at demonic forms of escape”.⁶

I have now isolated two claims about the alleged importance of asking about the truth of beliefs in relation to explaining them, and I now want to comment on each in turn. The first states that, in the case of true beliefs, the historian need search no further for an explanation of why they are held. I have little to say about this argument,

²Ladurie, *Peasants of Languedoc*, 203–205.

³Ladurie, *Peasants of Languedoc*, 208.

⁴Ladurie, *Peasants of Languedoc*, 203–204, 206–207. Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 258 makes similar claims about witchcraft beliefs as nothing more than a ‘collective fantasy’.

⁵Ladurie, *Peasants of Languedoc*, 207.

⁶Ladurie, *Peasants of Languedoc*, 203.

however, for it strikes me as obviously untenable. To say that someone holds a true belief is not in the least to explain why they hold it, for they may have espoused it for reasons completely unconnected with its truth. They may, for example, have accepted it entirely on trust, as all of us are compelled to do with many of our empirical beliefs.

I mainly want to concentrate on the other claim I have isolated: that the espousal of false beliefs points to failures of reasoning that need to be explained in strongly causal terms. This is the principal argument put forward by the philosophers I have mentioned, as well as being the assumption governing Ladurie's explanation of witchcraft beliefs in his *Paysans de Languedoc*.

My own view – to state it at once – is that to follow this approach is nothing less than fatal to good historical practice. To do so is to assume that, whenever an historian encounters a belief which he or she judges to be false, the explanatory problem will always be that of accounting for a lapse of rationality. But this is to equate the holding of rational beliefs with the holding of beliefs that the historian judges to be true. And this is to exclude the possibility that, even in the case of beliefs that nowadays strike us as manifestly false, there may have been good grounds in an earlier historical period for holding them to be true.

It seems to me, in other words, that cultural historians need to operate with a strong distinction between truth and rationality. The reason is that, when we seek to explain beliefs that we judge to be irrational, it is at *that* juncture – and not at the point when we judge them to be false – that additional questions arise about how best to explain them. To equate the holding of false beliefs with lapses of rationality is therefore to foreclose – in advance of knowing whether this is appropriate – on one type of explanation at the expense of others. The causes of someone's following what are taken to be appropriate norms of reasoning will be of a different order from the causes of their violating them. It follows that, unless we begin by enquiring into the rationality of the beliefs involved, we cannot be sure of correctly identifying what needs to be explained, nor in consequence of directing our investigations along appropriate lines. If the belief proves to be one that it was rational for the agent to have held, we shall need to investigate the conditions of that achievement. If it was less than rational or palpably absurd to have held it, we shall need to enquire into the sorts of conditions that may have prevented the agent from following accepted canons of evidence and argument, or perhaps supplied the agent with a motive for defying them.

To illustrate the significance of these points, let me return to Ladurie's account of the beliefs about witches held by the peasants of Languedoc. He not only begins by noting that these beliefs were false, but his explanation presupposes that it could never have been rational to believe them to be other than false. Ladurie assumes, that is, that the falsity of these beliefs is enough in itself to show that they cannot have been rationally held. Operating on this assumption, he leaves himself no space to consider a quite different sort of historical explanation. He cannot allow that the peasants may have believed in the existence of witches as a result of holding a number of other beliefs from which that particular conclusion might reasonably have been inferred.

To consider only the simplest possibility, suppose that the peasants also held the belief – widely accepted as rational and indeed indubitable in sixteenth-century

Europe – that the Bible constitutes the directly inspired word of God. If this was one of their beliefs, and if it was rational for them to hold it, then it would have been the height of irrationality for them to have disbelieved in the existence of witches. For the Bible not only affirms that witches exist, but adds that witchcraft is an abomination and that witches must not be suffered to live.⁷ To announce one's disbelief in the existence of witches would thus have been to announce a doubt about the credibility of God's word. What could have been more irrational than that?

Ladurie excludes in advance the possibility that those who believed in witches may have done so as a result of following some such recognisable chain of reasoning. But this not only means that he puts forward an explanation of witchcraft beliefs which, for all he knows, may be completely irrelevant. It also means that he bypasses a range of questions about the mental world of the peasants which it may be indispensable to answer if their beliefs and behaviour are to be satisfactorily understood.

A much more helpful way, it seems to me, of trying to enter into the alien world of early-modern beliefs about witchcraft is the one to be found in such classic studies as Stuart Clark's *Thinking with Demons* and, above all, Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. These historians proceed by treating beliefs holistically, asking how far it may have made sense to believe in witches by way of relating those beliefs to other elements in a much broader network of epistemic assumptions and commitments. What makes these studies so illuminating is their recognition of what this project involves. As they make clear, it will never be sufficient to show that the beliefs of those who accepted the reality of witchcraft were consistent with their other beliefs. It is also necessary to show – to put it rather formally – that they adopted their ideas about witchcraft in the light of a certain attitude towards the formation and criticism of their own beliefs. This is not to demand, on pain of irrationality, that they must have held certain specific beliefs. But it is certainly to demand that, if their beliefs about witchcraft are to qualify as rational, it will be necessary to show that they were concerned with the kinds of coherence, and where appropriate the kinds of evidence, that gave them grounds for concluding that their ideas about witches could be justified.

This kind of historical enquiry can lead to a variety of different outcomes. The historian may emerge with the conclusion that, although sixteenth-century beliefs about witchcraft were patently false, it was wholly rational to have held them to be true at the time. Another possible conclusion might be that it was only rational for such beliefs to be held with a certain and perhaps fairly low degree of probability. A rather different conclusion might be that, although the question of truth was not fully pressed, this was not in itself irrational – somewhat as Paul Veyne sought to argue in his book on whether the Greeks really believed in their myths.⁸ Finally, the historian cannot I think exclude the possibility of concluding that the beliefs in question were not only false, but that there were no sufficient grounds for holding them to be true even at the time.

⁷See, respectively, Deuteronomy 13. 10–12; Galatians 5. 20; Exodus 22. 18.

⁸Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths*.

To insist on this last point is admittedly to tread on disputed ground. Stuart Clark, for example, argues that, once we uncover the inner acceptability of a given system of beliefs, we cannot fail to count it rational for the system to have been upheld.⁹ I do not myself see, however, why our interpretative charity need be so boundless. But this is not in the least because I believe, in the manner of such philosophers as Martin Hollis and perhaps Donald Davidson, that there is a trans-cultural notion of rationality that can be applied as a kind of template to the past.¹⁰ When historians stigmatise some particular belief as irrational, they need only be claiming that they have uncovered the prevailing norms for the acquisition and justification of beliefs in the community concerned, and that the belief in question was upheld in the face of, rather than in the light of, those norms themselves. They need not be claiming that the belief was irrational according to their own standards (still less *the* standards) of epistemic rationality. They need only be claiming that the agent in question fell short of – or perhaps abandoned, manipulated or in some other way deliberately defied – some accepted standard of epistemic rationality.

The essence of what I have been arguing is thus that, when cultural historians seek to explain the systems of thought prevailing in past societies, they should avoid even asking questions about the truth or falsity of the beliefs they investigate. The only point at which they should invoke the concept of truth is to ask whether our forbears had sufficient grounds for holding to be true what they believed to be the truth.

I am well aware, however, that anyone who argues in this way is bound sooner or later to be denounced (or commended) as a relativist, so I need to end by saying a word about whether I have indeed adopted a relativist stance. There is obviously a sense in which my argument is a relativist one. I have relativised the idea of ‘holding true’ a given belief. As I have suggested, it may well have been rational for the peasants of Languedoc to hold it true that there are witches in league with the devil, even if such beliefs no longer strike us as rationally acceptable. Furthermore, I have argued that all cultural historians need to be relativists in this limited sense. They need to keep before them at all times the thought that it is possible to hold a completely false belief with unimpeachable rationality.

Simon Blackburn argued in his keynote address that it is dehumanising to offer strongly causal explanations of people’s true beliefs. The point I have been adding, speaking as an historian, is that it is no less dehumanising to offer similarly causal accounts of our forbears’ false beliefs unless we are able to show in addition that those beliefs were irrationally held. Although their beliefs may not have been true, they may have had perfectly good grounds, by their lights, for holding them to be true.

⁹Clark, ‘Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft’, *Past & Present* 87 (1980) 98–127, at p. 100.

¹⁰See Hollis, ‘The Social Destruction of Reality’, 67–86; Davidson, ‘On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’, 83–98.

They may have imperfectly understood their world, but they may have been doing their very best to understand it.

It is a mistake, however, to suppose that cultural historians who espouse this position are embracing a thesis of conceptual relativism. Conceptual relativism is a thesis about the nature of truth: it contends that there is nothing more to truth than rational acceptability within a form of life. But this is not what I have argued. I have not asserted that it *was* true that at one time there were witches in league with the devil. I have merely affirmed that there may have been a time when it was rational to affirm it to be true that there were witches in league with the devil, even though such a belief nowadays strikes us as false. To put the point generally, I have merely observed that the question of what it may be rational for us to hold true will vary with the totality of our beliefs. I have never put forward the different and possibly self-defeating thesis that truth itself can vary in the same way.

I am not saying, in other words, that when Aquinas affirmed that the sun circles the earth, or when Locke affirmed that stones grow, these claims were (as relativists say) true for them although they are not true for us. I want to say that these claims were never true at any time. I am so far from being a conceptual relativist that I want to go much further and add that, as cultural historians, it does no harm, and may do a great deal of good, if we begin by focusing on such beliefs and the very fact of their falsity. False beliefs carry a special interest for cultural historians. For example, I find myself much more attracted to John Locke for knowing that he believed that stones grow. He must have been living, I begin to reflect, in a very different mental world, and it starts to seem a serious and worthwhile challenge to try to penetrate it.

Not only am I not a conceptual relativist, but I believe that the truth of conceptual relativism would be incompatible with the practice of cultural history. Unless there is some considerable overlap between what we believe to be true and what our forbears likewise believed to be true, and unless we additionally share with them some assumptions about how best to fit together our beliefs in order to construct arguments, then we shall have no means of gaining access to their world at all. The only point I have been making on the other side is that, in order to explain their world, we shall have to accept that they may have had good grounds for holding true a number of beliefs that we hold to be manifestly false. For example, that stones grow.