

HISTORIANS' FALLACIES

Toward a Logic of Historical Thought

by David Hackett Fischer

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CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Introduction	xv
PART I INQUIRY	
Chapter I Fallacies of Question-Framing	3
Chapter II Fallacies of Factual Verification	40
Chapter III Fallacies of Factual Significance	64
PART II EXPLANATION	
Chapter IV Fallacies of Generalization	103
Chapter V Fallacies of Narration	131
Chapter VI Fallacies of Causation	164
Chapter VII Fallacies of Motivation	187
Chapter VIII Fallacies of Composition	216
Chapter IX Fallacies of False Analogy	243
PART III ARGUMENT	
Chapter X Fallacies of Semantical Distortion	263
Chapter XI Fallacies of Substantive Distraction	282
Conclusion	307
Index	319
Index of Fallacies	337

INTRODUCTION

When we run over libraries persuaded of these principles,
what havoc must we make?

-David Hume

This book begins with three related premises: first, that there is a tacit logic of historical thought; second, that this logic can be raised to the level of awareness; and third; that historical thinking itself can be refined by *its* intelligent and purposeful application.

The logic of historical thought is not a formal logic of deductive inference. It is not a symmetrical structure of Aristotelian syllogisms, or Ramean dialectics, or Boolean equations. Nor is it precisely an inductive logic, like that of Mill or Keynes or Carnap. It consists neither in inductive reasoning from the particular to the general, nor in deductive reasoning from the general to the particular. Instead, it is a process of *adductive* reasoning in the simple sense of adducing answers to specific questions, so that a satisfactory explanatory "fit" is obtained. The answers may be general or particular, as the questions may require. (History is, in short, a problem-solving discipline. A historian is someone (anyone) who asks an open-ended question about past events and answers it with selected facts which are arranged in the form of an explanatory paradigm. These questions and answers are fitted to each other by a complex process of mutual adjustment. The resultant explanatory paradigm may take many different forms: a statistical generalization, or a narrative, or a causal model, or a motivational model, or a collectivized group-composition model, or maybe an analogy. Most commonly it consists not in anyone of these components but in a combination of them. Always, it is articulated in the form of a reasoned argument.!

1. In this book an *event* is understood as any past happening. A *fact* is a true descriptive statement about past events. To *explain* is merely to make plain, dear, or understandable some problem about past events, so that resultant knowledge will be useful in dealing with future problems. An explanatory *paradigm* is an interactive structure of workable questions and the factual statements which are adduced to answer them.

To argue that there is a tacit logic of historical thinking is to assert that every historical project is a cluster of constituent purposes, and that each of these purposes imposes its own logical requirements upon a thinker who adopts them. Whether the purpose at hand is to design a proper question, or to select a responsive set of factual answers, or to verify their factuality, or to form them into a statistical generalization which itself becomes a fact, or whatever-it always involves the making of purposive and procedural assumptions that entail certain logical consequences. Every historian must learn to live within the limits which his own freely chosen assumptions impose upon him. These assumptions may differ radically from one historian to the next, but always they exist, and a historian must learn to respect them. If he does not, then he will pay a penalty in a diminution of the degree to which his purposes are attained. No man is free from the logic of his own rational assumptions-unless he wishes to be free from rationality itself.

Assuming that this logic of historical thought does tacitly exist, the next question is how to raise it to the level of consciousness. In the opinion of some intelligent men, this task is not merely difficult but impossible. Michael Polanyi has suggested that scientists do indeed proceed by a logic of tacit inference-but one which is only learned through personal experience and can never be articulated. "Any attempt to gain complete control of thought by explicit rules," he flatly declares, "is self-contradictory, systematically misleading, and culturally destructive."²

Polanyi's caveat would surely be correct if the object were to gain *complete* control of thought. But maybe a more humble attainment is

By *adduction* I do not mean what Charles Sanders Peirce appears to have intended by *abduction*. Peirce distinguished three kinds of reasoning. *Deduction* he understood in an ordinary way as "necessary reasoning" which "starts from a hypothesis, the truth or falsity of which has nothing to do with the reasoning." *Induction* he defined in a special sense as "the experimental testing of a theory," and *abduction* as "the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis." Of the latter, he wrote, "It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis. Deduction proves that something *must* be; Induction shows that something *actually* is operative; Abduction merely suggests that something *may* be." *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, 1931), V, 142, 145, 170-172. The processes which Peirce calls abductive and inductive are combined in what I call adduction-as in fact I believe them to be inseparably joined in historical thinking.

2. Michael Polanyi, "The Logic of Tacit Inference," *Philosophy* 41 (1966): 18; and *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, 1958), *passim*. I am indebted to Polanyi's work for the idea of a tacit logic and for many other things, though I disagree with him on this point.

possible. Perhaps one might refine (not control) some kinds of thinking by a partial articulation of some parts of this tacit logic. It seems reasonable to expect that a man who learns much from his own experience can also learn a little from the experience of others.

Still, the problem of locating a logic of historical thinking defies a direct approach. Every attempt (there have been many) to storm the citadel by a conceptual *coup de main* has failed of its objective. But if a frontal assault is impossible, maybe the problem can be outflanked and taken from behind. A historian has written suggestively that "our present state of knowledge is one of mitigated ignorance. In such situations, the honest enquirer always has one consolation-his blunders may be as instructive as his successes."³

Such is the perversity of human perceptions that a blunder is apt to be more visible than a success. This psychological fact suggests a crude and eccentric method, which is adopted in this book. If there is a tacit logic of historical inquiry, then one might hope to find a tacit (illogic as well, which reveals itself in the form of explicit historical errors. On this assumption, I have gone looking for errors in historical scholarship, and then for their common denominators, in the form of false! organizing assumptions and false procedures. These common denominators are called fallacies in this book. A fallacy is not merely an error itself but a way of falling into error. It consists in false reasoning, often from true factual premises, so that false conclusions are generated.⁴

The object in the following chapters is not to compile a definitive catalogue of historians' fallacies, which is obviously impossible. A logician, Augustus de Morgan, wisely observed that "there *is* no such thing as a classification of the ways in which men may arrive at an error: it is much to be doubted whether there ever *can be*."" Surely, there can be no conclusive and comprehensive classification. Nevertheless, a list of common fallacies-however crude and incomplete-may serve a useful purpose in two respects. First, it may clearly indicate a few mistaken practices that are not sufficiently recognized as such. Second, it might

3. Alan Simpson, *The Wealth of the Gentry, 1540-1660* (Chicago, 1961), p. 21.

4. This definition of fallacy conforms to the third meaning of the term in Alfred Sidgwick, *Fallacies* (London, 1883). It should be clearly distinguished from several others. The literal Latin meaning of *fallax* suggests a deliberate deception. This, of course, does not apply to any of the following fallacies, all of which are self-deceptions. A fallacy has also been defined, in Jeremy Bentham's phrase, as a "vulgar error," or a common misconception. This is too broad for our purposes. Sometimes, fallacies are also understood as violations of the formal rules of deductive inference. But this is irrelevant here.

5. Augustus de Morgan, *Formal Logic*, 1847 (London, 1926), p. 276.

operate as a heuristic device for the discovery of a few constructive rules of reason.

The reader might protest that this method is like telling a traveler how to get from Boston to New York by describing in detail the roads which won't take him there. If this were in fact our purpose, the project would be absurd. But it is something different. The object is not to describe the ways in which a traveler *might* get lost, but rather to identify a few common ways in which others have *actually* gone wrong. For a traveler from Boston to New York there are an infinity of wrong routes and a plurality of right ones. But real travelers who actually get lost tend to do so in a few finite ways. The Public Roads Commission does not need to put up signs everywhere but only at the doubtful intersections.

So it is with historical travelers, who set out toward a certain destination. There are many intersections along the way. Some are simple forks in the road. A few are baffling interchanges. The traveler's difficulties are compounded by the fact that well-meaning people have put up many mistaken signs for the convenience of passers-by. The signs say, "A, this way, seven miles," but point squarely to *not-A*.

The purpose of this book is, first, to pull down some of these wrong signs. The fact that it cannot pull down *all* wrong signs, or that pulling down is a destructive act, cannot be an argument against it. Second, the object is to put up a few crude but hopefully more correct markers at some of the simple forks in the road. Third, it is to explore some of the baffling interchanges in a preliminary way.

The object is emphatically not three other things. It is not to put up signs everywhere—there isn't enough lumber and paint in the world for that. Nor is it precisely to survey the road, which cannot be done until we have a rough sense of its location, and which will not be done until historiographical surveyors become a little more expert in the use of theodolites and trigonometry. Most important, the object is not to play traffic policeman or magistrate: it is not to flag down erring travelers and take away their licenses. In the republic of scholarship, every citizen has a constitutional right to get himself as thoroughly lost as he pleases.

The only purpose here is to indicate, in an advisory spirit, a few wrong turnings which have actually been taken, and to extract from these mistakes a few rough rules of procedure.

Somebody once asked Thomas Edison about his rules of procedure and received a rude reply: "Rules!" said Edison, "Hell! There ain't no rules around here! We're tryin' to accomplish sump'n." A good many historians, particularly of the present permissive generation, which has

made a cult of flexibility in its procedures, seem to have formed the same idea of their own discipline. I believe that they are wrong. There are some very strict tautological rules of historical scholarship, which are rather like the rules of chess. When a chess player sits down to a game, he must respect a rule which requires him to move his bishops on the diagonal. Nobody will arrest him if he doesn't. But if he refuses to play that way, then he isn't exactly playing chess.

There are other kinds of rules in chess, too-rough experiential rules of thumb, such as one which urges a beginning player always to seize the open file. He can violate this rule with impunity, if he is very lucky, or very good. But most players, in most situations, are properly urged to respect it.⁶

I hope that a study of the tacit logic of historical thought will yield rules of both these types. But even if not, a more precise understanding of error itself might serve a serious and constructive scholarly purpose. Karl Popper has suggested that science develops by a sequence of "conjectures and refutations." He has written that "the way in which knowledge progresses, and especially our scientific knowledge, is by unjustified (and unjustifiable) anticipations, by guesses, by tentative solutions to our problems, by *conjectures*. These conjectures are controlled by criticism; that is, by attempted *refutations*, which include critical tests."

The fallacies in the following pages might be useful as some of these "critical tests" to which conjectures are submitted. As the pace of intellectual innovation continues to accelerate, we must develop devices which distinguish sound innovations from unsound ones. As we become more experimental in our thoughts and acts, we must find a way to deal with experiments that fail. In historical scholarship, the progress of interpretative revision requires a degree of critical rigor that is conspicuously absent today.

Historians must, moreover, develop critical tests not merely for their interpretations, but also for their methods of arriving at them. Today, there is a good deal of hostility against method among historians, who are apt to be contemptuous of other disciplines in which this interest is more highly developed. Among my colleagues, it is common to believe that any procedure is permissible, as long as its practitioner publishes an essay from time to time, and is not convicted of a felony. The resultant condition of modern historiography is that of the Jews under the Judges: every man does that which is right in his own eyes. The fields

6. I have shamelessly stolen this simile from Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry* (San Francisco, 1964).

7. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York, 1962), p. vii.

are sown with salt, and plowed with the heifer, and there is a famine upon the land.

It ought to be immediately apparent that some historical methods are not as good as others, for purposes at hand. And a few methods in common use are simply no good at all, for any purpose. An investigation of fallacies in historical scholarship may provide criteria by which some of these deficiencies can be discovered and put right.

But if there are some ways in which a study of error can help historical scholarship, there are others in which it can hurt. Popper's first stage of knowledge-conjecture-in its earliest and most important phases is not presently susceptible to rational analysis. There is no logic of creative thought. Creativity makes its own rules. Genius transcends them. The aboriginal act of inspiration remains utterly mysterious to human understanding. We know when it happens, but not how or why. It would be a very grave mistake to apply a logic for the testing of conjectures to conjecturing itself.

Equally important, though logic can distinguish error from truth and truth from truism, it cannot distinguish a profound truth from a petty one. A good many historical arguments are objectionable not because they are fallacious but because they are banal, shallow, or trivial. As a remedy for these failings, logic is impotent. Indeed, as I collected material for this book, I quickly discovered that errors of the sort I was looking for were most easily found in the work of the best and brightest historians who are writing today. Many mindless monographs call to mind Davy Crockett's critique of an effusion by Andrew Jackson—"It don't even make good nonsense." There can never be a logic of grunts and grimaces, nor a logic of the great clouds of conceptual confusion which swirl around the heads of some historians. The thoughts of many historians are neither logical nor illogical, but sublogical. To their work, this book will be irrelevant.

Another qualification is also worth keeping in mind. Logical and methodological techniques are not ends but means. It would be unfortunate if historians were to become so obsessed by problems of how to do their work that no work could ever get done. Abraham Kaplan was warned against the "myth of methodology," the mistaken idea that "the most serious difficulties which confront behavioral science are 'methodological,' and that if only we hit upon the right methodology, progress will be rapid and sure." This attitude is not merely unproductive, but potentially destructive.

By pressing methodological norms too far [Kaplan writes] we may inhibit bold and imaginative adventures of ideas. The irony is that methodology itself may make for conformism-conformity to its own favored recon-

structions. . . . And the push toward logical completeness may well make for "premature closure" of scientific conceptions. The situation in science is not unlike that in the arts: the critic with his standards discourages daubers, but he also becomes the mainstay of the Academy, and art eventually passes by him.⁸

No method exists independently of an object. None can be vindicated except in its application; none can be proclaimed to the world as The Method; and none is other than a useful tool, or more than an approximate tool. No historical method is in any sense an alternative to heavy labor in historical sources. None can serve as a substitute for creativity.

Conscious methodologies are not an indispensable prerequisite to substantive success. Max Weber has written that

Methodology can only bring us reflective understanding of the means which have *demonstrated* their value in practice by raising them to the level of explicit consciousness; it is no more the precondition of fruitful intellectual work than the knowledge of anatomy is a precondition for "correct" walking. Indeed, just as a person who attempted to govern his mode of walking continuously by anatomical knowledge would be in danger of stumbling, so the professional scholar who attempted to determine the aims of his own research extrinsically on the basis of methodological reflections would be in danger of falling into the same difficulties.⁹

But in historical scholarship, these are distant dangers. Most historians are far removed from methodological obsessions—too far removed, for the good of their discipline. Indeed, in a strict sense, academic history today sometimes seems to be not a discipline at all, but a means of teaching and writing without one. Among my professional brethren, there is even a band of methodological *Nullbruder*, who flaunt their intellectual poverty as if it were a badge of grace, and flourish all the rusty instruments of ignorance in the face of every effort at reform.

The work of too many professional historians is diminished by an antirational obsession—by an intense prejudice against method, logic, and science. In their common speech, "scientism" has become a smear word, and "scientific history" is a phrase which is used merely to condemn the infatuation of an earlier generation. In the process of this reaction, historians have not merely severed their ties with the natural sciences, but have also turned away from science in the larger sense of a structured, ordered, controlled, empirical, rational discipline of thought.

History, it is said, is an inexact science. (But in fact historians are

8. Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry* (San Francisco, 1964), pp. 25-26.

9. Max Weber, "The Logic of the Cultural Sciences," in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (Glencoe, Ill., 1949), p. 115.

inexact scientists, who go blundering about their business without a sufficient sense of purpose or procedure. They are failed scientists, who have projected their failures to science itself. Nothing could be more absurd, or more nearly antithetical to the progress of a potent discipline.

CHAPTER IX

FALLACIES OF FALSE ANALOGY

The chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies.

-James Bryce

For epistemological puritans, analogies are not precisely explanations at all. They are devices for discovering explanations. But given our loose pragmatic everyday definition of explanation-i.e., "making clear, plain, or understandable"-analogies are very useful explanatory tools. The word "analogy," in modern usage, signifies an inference that if two or more things agree in one respect, then they might also agree in another. In its most elementary form, an analogy consists in a set of propositions such as the following:

A resembles *B* in respect to the possession of the property *X*.

A also possesses the property *Y*.

Therefore, it is inferred that *B* also possesses the property *Y*.

The same thing can be said more succinctly in symbols:

$$AX : BX :: AY : BY$$

An unknown fourth term, *BY*, is thereby inferred from three known terms, on the assumption that a symmetrical due ratio, or proportion, exists.

Analogical inference plays an important, and even an indispensable, part in the mysterious process of intellectual creativity. Many great innovating minds have, in the words of Jean Perrin, a French philosopher

of science, "possessed to an extraordinary degree, a sense of analogy."¹ The isochronous motion of a pendulum presented itself to Galileo in the analogous behavior of a lamp swinging on its chain in the Pisa cathedral. Recent scholarship has reinforced the legend of Sir Isaac Newton and the great analogous apple. Benjamin Franklin operated by an analogy between electricity and a liquid; Huygens, by an analogy between ocean waves, sound, and light; Van't Hoff, by an analogy between gases and solids in solution; Lord Kelvin, by an analogy between electricity and heat; and Maxwell, by an analogy between light and electromagnetism.

Analogies are equally useful and ornamental in the articulation of ideas. They can do so in an internal way, by promoting an unconscious or inchoate inference into the realm of rationality within a single mind.² And they also operate externally, as a vehicle for the transference of thought from one mind to another. Analogies can brilliantly reinforce a reasoned argument. They suggest and persuade, inform and illustrate, communicate and clarify. They are versatile and effective pedagogical tools. The great popularizers of science, from Voltaire to George Gamow, could scarcely have operated without them.

Historians use analogies widely both as heuristic instruments for empirical inquiry, as explanatory devices in their teaching, and as embellishments in their writing. Often, analogies are used unconsciously—a metaphor is an abridged form of analogy. Without analogies, creative thought and communication as we know it would not be merely impracticable but inconceivable. The many uses of analogy, however, are balanced by the mischief which arises from its abuse. Let us begin by examining a few of them.

☞ The *fallacy of the insidious analogy* is an unintended analogical inference which is embedded in an author's language, and implanted in a reader's mind, by a subliminal process which is more powerfully experienced than perceived. The mistake is a simple one, but serious in its effects; for analogies are widespread in historical thought and important in the shaping of its content. Whenever a historian uses a metaphor, he draws an analogy. And he uses metaphors all the time. George Santayana perversely believed that all human discourse is metaphorical, which is surely an overstatement. But much more of our discourse is metaphorical than we are apt to realize. And the metaphors we

1. Quoted in Maurice Dorolle, *Le Raisonnement par analogie* (Paris, 1949), p. 61.

2. John Williamson, "Realization and Unconscious Inference," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 27 (1966): 11-26.

use to describe an object also determine the quality of our understanding of it. Whenever an analogy is unconsciously used, so as to be dysfunctional to that understanding, the fallacy of the insidious analogy results.

Historians instinctively employ many insidious analogies without a second thought-or maybe even a first one. All of the following examples have caused trouble: Addled Parliament, Augustan age, avant-garde, Axis, Babylonian captivity, Barnburners, blank check, Boxer, Bloody Assizes, brinkmanship, Bubble Act, cameralism, capitalism, Carbonari, Cold War, cordon sanitaire, Croix de Feu, Dark Ages, Depression, Digger, doughface, Enlightenment, Fabian, Fauve, Federalist, feudalism, filibuster, Founding Father, Fronde, gag rule, gentlemen's agreement, Good Neighbor Policy, Grand Peur, Guelph, Hats and Caps, Heavenly Kingdom, imperialism, Industrial Revolution, Ironsides, Jacques, jazz, jeremiad, Judas, Know-Nothing, Kulturkampf, Lebensraum, Leveller, Loco-foco, logroller, Methodism, mother country, the Mountain, muckraker, mugwump, New Light, Old Believer, Open Door, papacy, Pact of Steel, puppet ruler, purge, Puritan, Quaker, quisling, Reconstruction, Renaissance, revolution, Rump Parliament, Roi de Soleil, Sea-Beggar, Spartacist, squatter, Take-Off, trust, Tory, the Sick Man of Europe, underground, university, utopia, vernacular, vigilante, Village Hamden, wobbly, Whig, Xanthippe, yahoo, yellow-dog contract, zambo, Zouave, Zionist.

Each of these terms contains within it an insidious analogy which has served to distort our understanding of the object it is supposed to describe. It would be absurd to suggest that any of these terms should be stricken from the lexicon of history. They have been beaten into our heads by many generations of well-meaning schoolmarm and driven so deep they could not be removed even if we wished to do so. One might, abstractly, wish to have a Jeffersonian revolution every nineteen years in our historical vocabulary, to avoid becoming captives of our language. But a more practicable solution would be for historians themselves to search out the metaphors in their language and raise them to the level of consciousness, where they can be controlled.

Other proper names are used in laymen's language as the *first* terms in an analogical inference, with equally serious effects, of an opposite nature. The common and customary meanings of Aristotelian, Benthamite, Ciceronian, Freudian, Jeffersonian, Machiavellian, Marxian, and Platonic have diminished our understanding of the thought of these men. Many a monograph on the Puritans has been motivated by a determination to demonstrate that the common metaphorical meaning of "puritanical" is seriously inaccurate as a description of the Puritans proper. We are beginning to see a similar scholarly phenomenon with

respect to the term "Victorian." And yet, so powerful are these metaphors that even the monographs which seek to correct them become captives, too, and commit the fallacy of the counterquestion by merely reversing the objectionable implication.

There are still other insidious analogies in the verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and even prepositions that historians conventionally use. Revolutions tend to "break out," as if they were dangerous maniacs, locked in a prison cell. Governments are overturned, like applecarts. Economies boom and bust, like a cowboy on a Saturday spree. Cultures flower and fade like a garden of forget-me-nots. Jefferson and Hamilton, or Pitt and Fox, tend to "thrust and parry" through the history books, like pairs of gentlemanly duelists. But Kennedy and Khrushchev, or Churchill and Hitler, bash and bludgeon like Friar Tuck and Little John.

Analogies of this sort are catching. And they serve to control conceptualization. In histories of relations between Asia and the West, door analogies are fashionable, as in Commodore Perry and the closed door of Nippon, and the American Open Door Policy in China. In a recent work on the history of China by an excellent Australian scholar, one learns that "The Westerners banged heavily on the barred door of the Chinese world; to the amazement of all, within and without, the great structure, riddled by white ants, thereupon suddenly collapsed, leaving the surprised Europeans still holding the door handle."B Such analogies as this suggest that Asia is all structure and the West is all function. They communicate a sense of clear and active purpose in the latter and of mindless passivity in the former. Moreover, it is sometimes assumed that China should swing freely before Western pressure, or else it is slightly unhinged.

In the historiography of Poland, a different set of analogies is customary. One is the traditional idea, deeply rooted in Polish literature, that Poland is the "Christ among nations," a noble, transcendent being which has suffered for the sins of all humanity, betrayed by the Jews and crucified by the Romans. The result of this humbug is that history becomes, in Namier's phrase, a visit of condolence. The Polish people have been encouraged by their historians to develop a self-righteous sense of persecution with few equals in the modern world. Every national misfortune becomes a measure of the depravity of mankind—all mankind, that is, except the martyr nation, whose citizens are Poles apart. This myth is profoundly dysfunctional to any constructive and statesman-like attempt to deal with complex and critical diplomatic problems of Eastern Europe.

Other studies of Polish history tend to adopt a very different kind of analogical imagery. It is historiographically conventional to compare Poland to a bird—all feathers and fragile bones, big-beaked and small-brained, beautiful but slightly weird, and sometimes a little sinister. Stanley L. Sharp, a collector of many picturesque examples, declares that "Ornithological comparisons seem traditional with reference to Poland." He notes that

The ardent Polish nationalist Stanislaw Mackiewicz wrote in his critical study of Beck's foreign policy, "Poles, like certain beautiful birds, are apt to lose sight of their own surroundings, enraptured by their own song." . . . The romantic poet Juliusz Slowacki once called Poland "the peacock and the parrot of nations." The British writer John W. Wheeler-Bennett described Poland's policy as that of "a canary who has persistently but unsuccessfully endeavored to swallow two cats."

Sharp titled his own book, by the way, *Poland, White Eagle on a Red Field*.⁴

The complaint, in all of this, is not that analogies are used, but that they are used insidiously, and that many absurd biases are bootlegged into historical interpretations. An able scholar can, however, convert an offense into an opportunity. He can study the analogies and metaphors which he instinctively invokes and thereby learn much about the biases buried in his own mind, below the level of his consciousness.

We will never have historical writing without analogies. The next generation of historians may perhaps learn to communicate with more accuracy and precision by the use of mathematical symbols (unless they are reduced by a nuclear catastrophe to a primitive exchange of grunts and grimaces). But in either instance, there will still be analogies and metaphors in historical discourse. Let us hope that they will be developed with clarity, caution, and conscious reflection.

☞ The *fallacy of the perfect analogy* consists in treating a partial resemblance between two entities to an entire and exact correspondence. It is an erroneous inference from the fact that *A* and *B* are similar in some respects to the false conclusion that they are the same in all respects. One must always remember that an analogy, by its very nature, is a similarity between two or more things which are in other respects unlike. A "perfect analogy" is a contradiction in terms, if perfection is understood, as it commonly is in this context, to imply identity.

4. (Cambridge, 1953), p. 150.

This sort of error often appears in attempts at evaluation by analogy, in arguments such as the following.

A and *B* are analogous in some respects.
A is generally a good thing.
 Therefore, *B* is generally a good thing.

This set of propositions is structurally fallacious, for it shifts the analogy from a partial resemblance to an identity, which is implied by the holistic value judgment. If *B* were existentially analogous to *A* in respect to *X* and *Y*, then it might be fairly though not conclusively inferred that it is evaluatively analogous in the same limited sense. But it can never be inferred that *B* is equivalent to *A* in either an existential or an evaluative way.

Two examples of invalid historical analogies of this sort have appeared in debates over American intervention in Vietnam. Spokesmen for the United States government have tended to find an analogue in Munich. A critic of the administration and its Vietnam policy, Arno J. Mayer, has accurately criticized this unfortunate comparison, which is, I think, not merely a rhetorical device, invoked by Washington policy makers to justify their acts, but rather an operating assumption, upon which their acts are based. Mayer protests that

By its proponents, the Munich analogy is designed to stress the identity, not the similarity, of Hitler and Mao; of the Nazi German and the Communist Chinese political systems and foreign policy objectives as well as methods; and of externally incited subversion as well as the strategic significance of Czechoslovakia and South Vietnam. The ensuing lesson is presented as self-evident: no self-respecting American should want in the White House a Chamberlain or Daladier, who by surrendering South Vietnam to the Chinese-controlled North Vietnamese and Vietcong would encourage Peking to activate its timetable for aggressive expansion into Southeast Asia and beyond.⁵

Mayer proceeds to summarize the differences between Munich and Vietnam: the disparity between the Vietcong and the Sudeten Germans; the difference between the Czech government and the Saigon regime; the difference between the strategic significance of Czechoslovakia and Vietnam; the difference between the intentions of Nazi Germany and Communist China; the difference between the military capability of Anglo-French forces in 1938 and American power in the late 1960s. Mayer also challenges the assumption that Hitler would have changed his aggressive plans in any significant degree had the

5. Arno J. Mayer, "Vietnam Analogy: Greece, Not Munich," *The Nation*, March 25, 1968, pp. 407-10.

allies stood their ground at Munich, and suggests that the only effective deterrent would have been an effective alliance between Soviet Russia and the Western nations, with rights of transit for Soviet troops through Rumania and Poland. Such an alliance, he believes, was inconceivable, given the intense and obsessive anti-Bolshevism of the Western powers. Finally, Mayer denounces all "allegedly scholarly" historians and political scientists who have "accepted, legitimized and propagated the cold war eschatology according to which Nazism and Bolshevism were essentially identical totalitarian systems bent on unlimited expansion by a crude blend of outright force and externally engineered subversion."

Many details of Mayer's thesis are doubtful, as to his understanding of both the Czechoslovakia crisis and the war *in* Vietnam. But his protest *is* surely sound. There probably cannot be any sustained analogy which will stretch from Munich to Saigon without breaking down. But more important, there can never be an identical analogy, such as Cold Warriors customarily draw between the 1930s and their own predicament.

But Mayer is not done. He believes with E. H. Carr that the "current era *is* exceptionally history-conscious" and that "today's citizen has that pronounced need for and *is* peculiarly susceptible to analogies." On this assumption, he concludes that a historian's duty consists not merely in knocking over bad analogies but in setting up good ones, in order to provide "the citizen with alternate historical *sign* posts." His alternative to the Munich-Vietnam analogy is a Greece-Vietnam analogy, in which parallels are drawn between the "reticent role" of Stalin and Mao; between indigenous Greek guerrillas and the Vietcong; between Tito and Ho Chi Minh; between English retrenchment in Greece and the French retreat from Vietnam; between the temporary military and political weakness of Russia vis-a-vis the United States in the late 1940s and the temporary weakness of China twenty years later; between the domino theory of the Truman Doctrine and similar assumptions in what might be called the Johnson Doctrine for Southeast Asia. Mayer suggests that American policy-which includes containment of Communism, ordered modernization, and gradualist reform-*is* similar *in* Greece and Vietnam. He *implies* that *it* has failed in Greece and that *it* will fail in Southeast Asia as well. Moreover, "Not only Greece-as the recent coup demonstrates-but also many of the developing countries lack the political integration, the social cohesion, and the economic sinews to sustain gradual and ordered modernization and refOIID, even with considerable foreign aid."⁹

But Mayer has refuted one bad argument only to replace *it* with a worse one. In his Greek analogue to Vietnam he commits the same

fallacy that others have done by analogizing from Munich to Southeast Asia. Mayer concedes that there are "specific dissimilarities" between Greece and Vietnam, but nowhere in his article does he specify them. Instead, he tends to leap from analogy to identity, in the manner of his opponents.

There are, of course, many major differences which he does not take into account. Ho Chi Minh's concern with South Vietnam is of a very different order from Tito's interest in Greece. The political culture of Vietnam is far removed from that of Greece. The British presence in Greece was of a different nature from the French regime in Indo-China. American assistance to Greece was unlike our intervention in Vietnam, both in quantity and in quality. Most important, international political, military, and economic conditions have changed radically from the late 1940s to the late 1960s. Vietnam is a painful and difficult dilemma for the United States precisely because there is nothing in our recent or distant past (or anybody else's) which is more than incidentally and superficially similar.

Many analogues to Vietnam have been suggested—not merely Munich and Greece, but the Mexican War, the Philippine Insurrection, the Korean War, the insurgency in British Malaya, guerrilla warfare in German-occupied Europe, the American Revolution, the Spanish rising against Napoleon. In each of these instances, the analogy is very limited, if indeed it exists at all. And there is surely no identity between any of these happenings and the situation which American policy makers face in Vietnam. That problem must be studied and solved in its own terms, if it is to be solved at all. There are many particular historical lessons which might be applied, in many limited and special ways, with due allowance for intervening changes. There are restricted and controlled analogies which might suggest hypothetical policy commitments for possible use. But there are no comprehensive analogies which serve as a short cut to a solution. A satisfactory historical approach to the problem will not be oriented toward a search for an analogue but rather toward a sense of enviroing continuities and changes within which the present problem in Vietnam exists; combined with a keen and lively sense of treacherous anachronisms and false analogies such as have deluded so many well-meaning architects of American policy—and their critics, too.

There are many other examples of the identical analogy, a few of which might be briefly noted. Ranke supported his government in the Franco-Prussian war with the flat assertion that "We are fighting against Louis XIV." This is a classic case of the abuse of historical knowledge. A sophisticated sense of history consists not in the location of analogues

such as this but rather in an ability to discriminate between sound analogies and unsound ones.

Another quaint example, by an able historian who ought to have known better, is the following assertion by Richard Pares: "It does help us if we can realize that Charlemagne was just like an enlightened American millionaire, for this recognition brings him into a class about which we may know something."⁶ This curious comparison may tell us more about the extraordinary ideas which one British historian entertained on the subject of enlightened American millionaires. And as it stands, it is a false inference from resemblance to identity. Charlemagne mayor may not have been like an enlightened American millionaire in some respect-though I cannot think of one, and Pares mentioned none in particular. But he was surely not "just like" an American millionaire. Therein lies a fallacy.

☞ The *fallacy of the false analogy* is a structural form of error which occurs when the analogical terms are shifted from one analogue to another. Consider the following cases:

1. $AX : BZ :: AY : BY$
2. $AX \quad BX \quad AY \quad BY$
3. $AZ \quad BZ \quad AY \quad BY$

The second and third analogies are structurally sound. But the first example is a false analogy in that there is an inconsistency between *X* and *Z*.

This form of error is often exceedingly difficult to recognize, because it is often hidden in semantical ambiguity, or buried in some of the things which the author doesn't tell us. Let us consider an actual example of this fallacy, perpetrated by Richard Morris. In an essay called "Class Struggle and the American Revolution,"⁷ Morris addresses himself to the sticky question of whether or not the War for Independence was, by the design of its agents, a social revolution. He argues that it was not directly, integrally, and aboriginally so, but rather engendered-indirectly, incidentally, and gradually-a set of revolutionary social and economic changes which were not among its "avowed objectives." This argument is sustained by an analogy between the War of Independence and the First World War.

6. Richard Pares, *The Historian's Business and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1961), p. 8.

7. *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser. 19 (1962): 3-29.

An analogy might be fairly drawn to World War I [Morris writes]. Perhaps the greatest change which came in the wake of that conflict, so far as America was concerned, was the emancipation of American women, an extraordinary phenomenon which liberated women from the home and thrust them into the factory. The revolutionary impact of this social upheaval on postwar life, politics, marriage, morals and the family is incalculable. And it never would have happened so fast had it not been for the manpower shortage during the war. But we have usually been taught that we went to war with Germany over her renewal of unrestricted submarine warfare or because the House of Morgan had floated loans to the Allies. I never realized that when Woodrow Wilson called upon the Congress to declare war he really intended to free American womanhood from the shackles of housework. Now within certain limitations [unspecified by M.], I think the analogy to the American Revolution is eminently fair. We did not declare our independence of George III in order to reform the land laws, change the criminal codes, spread popular education, or separate church and state. We broke with England to achieve political independence, freedom from external controls, emancipation, if you will, of the bourgeoisie from mercantile restraints.⁸

Morris's analogy seems to reduce itself to the following four propositions. The first three are factual. The fourth is an analogical inference.

1. World War I was a war which engendered revolutionary social change in the United States.

2. The American War for Independence was a war which engendered revolutionary social change in the United States.

3. Americans did not fight World War I to engender revolutionary social change in the United States.

4. Therefore, it is inferred that Americans did not enter the War for Independence to engender revolutionary social change in the United States.

This looks structurally sound, on first inspection. But a closer look suggests trouble. World War I was not the same kind of war as the War of Independence—it was a total war, in which the nation was enlisted with a degree of commitment which did probably not appear in any eighteenth-century war, and certainly not in the American War for Independence. And the engendering of revolutionary social change in World War I is functionally connected to its total aspect. Moreover, different processes of social change developed in the two cases. Morris's first two propositions are disparate, in that they describe two different things. They are to each other as *AX* is to *BZ*, rather than as *AX* is to *BX*. Therein lies a fallacy.

8. P.26.

☞ The *fallacy of the absurd analogy* is another structural form of analogical error, in which an inference is extended between two nonrelated characteristics. Consider two hypothetical examples:

This rubber ball and that apple are both
red, round, smooth, and shiny.
That apple is very good to eat.
Therefore, this rubber ball will be very good to eat.

Secondly:

This rubber ball and that apple are both red, round,
smooth, and shiny.
That apple looks pretty in a Christmas stocking.
Therefore, this rubber ball will look pretty in a Christmas
stocking.

The first of these analogies is patently absurd. But the second, given certain aesthetic assumptions, is correct. The difference between them is that the qualities of the ball and the apple described in the first terms of the analogy are functionally relevant to aesthetics but not to edibility. There is, in short, a rule of relevance in analogizing, which must always be respected. In our elementary form:

$$AX : BX :: AY : BY$$

There must be a relationship between X and Y if there can be an analogy between A and B .⁹

The English historian G. M. Trevelyan recalls in his autobiography a character named Edward Bowen, an "eccentric genius" of "somewhat ascetic habits" who was Trevelyan's housemaster at school. But Bowen's genius did not consist in a talent for analogical inference. Trevelyan remembered that "He once said to me, some years after I had left school, 'O boy, you oughtn't to have a hot bath twice a week; you'll get like the later Romans, boy.'"¹⁰

☞ The *fallacy of the multiple analogy* is a structural deficiency which occurs when a second analogy is bootlegged into the main analogy so as to undercut the basis of comparison. Consider the following hypothetical example, which comes from the work of an English phil-

9. For a suggestive discussion, see C. Mason Myers, "The Circular Use of Metaphor," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 26 (1965-66): 391-402.

10. G. M. Trevelyan, *All Autobiography and Other Essays* (London, 1949), p. 11.

osopher, Alfred Sidgwick: "The growing size of London bodes evil to England because London is the heart of England and a swollen heart is a sign of disease."¹¹

This statement might be broken down into three parts:

1. London is analogous to a heart (presumably in the sense that both perform a vital circulatory function).
2. A swollen heart is a sign of disease.
3. The growth of London bodes evil to England.

But between the second and the third statements, two other analogies are tacitly added:

- 2.1 Swelling is analogous to growing.
- 2.2 A sign of disease is analogous to that which bodes evil for England.

Assuming that an analogy is merely a partial resemblance and not an identity, neither of these two tacit pairs of analogues is interchangeable. There is, therefore, no continuity from proposition two to proposition three. The trouble is papered over by semantical ambiguity in the original statement, an ambiguity which serves to camouflagé the additional analogies.

A historical example appears in George Rudé's *The Crowd in History*, in which the author solemnly asserts that "Thus, beheaded, the sans culotte movement died a sudden death; and having, like the cactus, burst into full bloom at the very point of its extinction, it never rose again."¹² This statement combines three disparate analogies. It is objectionable on both stylistic *and* substantive grounds. As a mixed metaphor, it is a literary monstrosity. As a multiple analogy, it is a logical absurdity. Many amusing examples appear from time to time in *The New Yorker*. The major complaint to be entered against these excrescences is not aesthetic but analytical. Vulgarity can coexist with empiricism; illogic cannot.

☞ The *fallacy of the holistic analogy* is, I think, the fatal fallacy of metahistory, as it has been practiced by Spengler and Toynbee and a host of others. It is an attempt to construct an analogical inference from some part of history-to the whole of history. All metahistorians have built their interpretations upon a metaphor, for there is nothing else at hand. Empiricism is impossible if the object is to tell the whole

11. Alfred Sidgwick, *Fallacies* (London, 1883), p. 179.

12. P. 106.

truth. Only some nonempirical method of inference, such as analogy, can be used.

A close student of analogy, Harald Hoffding, has observed that

if analogy is employed metaphysically or cosmologically, it is not a *single* realm of Being serving to illuminate another *single realm*; it is a single realm that is used to express Being as a totality. This symbolism is of a different kind and has a different validity from that brought to bear on particular fields. It cannot be carried out to its full consequences and it cannot be verified. . . . In these respects, cosmological and metaphysical symbols are different from scientific ones. . . . Religious symbols share the fate of the metaphysical. In both cases the attempt is made to create absolutely valid final concepts; the only difference lies in the motive.¹³

The behavior of analogy in cosmology, metaphysics, and religion is the same as its behavior in metahistory. But in the latter, claims to empirical accuracy are entered. Empiricism fails, however, in the face of holistic problems, and the analogy alone is left to carry the weight. Arnold Toynbee has been fairly and fully criticized by many reviewers for this mythological use of analogy in *A Study of History*. He has entered a plea of guilty, but only to certain "excesses." The criticism, however, cuts deeper than that: it alleges that Toynbee's method is fundamentally analogical, and his analogies are fundamentally unsound, because they cannot be put to the test. To this, of course, Toynbee does not plead guilty, for he cannot, without repudiating the work of a lifetime.¹⁴

☞ The *fallacy of proof by analogy* is a functional form of error, which violates a cardinal rule of analogical inference—analogy is a useful tool of historical understanding only as an auxiliary to proof. **It** is never a substitute for it, however great the temptation may be or however difficult the empirical task at hand may seem.

Humanity appears to have made a little progress in this respect. A student of Renaissance culture has written, "While modern thought is fully aware of the tentative nature of analogical reasoning, earlier thought tended to consider an analogy as an end in itself and to rest content in an aesthetic and essentially poetic awareness of the feeling of understanding the analogy brought."¹⁵

13. Harald Hoffding, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York, 1913), p. 121; and *Der Begriff der Analogie* (Leipzig, 1914), passim.

14. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 12, *Reconsiderations* (New York, 1961), pp. 30-41.

15. Joseph A. Mazzeo, "Analogy and Renaissance Culture," *JOURNAL of the History of Ideas* 15 (1954): 299-304. See also, Thomas De Vio, Cardinal Cajelan, *The Analogy*

But the progress is incomplete. So successful are analogies in creating the illusion of sense and certainty that they are widely used as a method of proof in their own right. I have heard a sociologist argue that, though an analogy never affords a "rigorous demonstration," it may nevertheless provide an "appreciable coefficient of affirmation," which can be cast in terms of probability. This is solemn nonsense. Analogical probability is altogether as elusive as analogical certainty, in the absence of an empirical test. The accuracy of that empirical test may be cast in probabilistic terms with precision, but not the analogy itself, which has finished its work after the empirical level is reached.

An example of this fallacy, in which an analogy is not transcended, is a controversial essay on slavery and Negro personality by Stanley Elkins—a work of which we have taken note several times.¹⁶ Elkins establishes an analogy between two different institutions—plantation slavery in Anglo-America and concentration camps in Nazi Germany. The latter have been studied by many psychologists who were interested in the personality patterns the camps caused in their inhabitants. Elkins argues that the camps and slavery were analogous in several respects and that slavery created a "Sambo" personality which is comparable to the "old prisoner" mentality which some psychologists have found in the concentration camps.

Elkins's argument is plausible and highly persuasive. His analogy operated effectively as a heuristic device in his own inquiry and as a rhetorical instrument in his presentation. It suggests much **but—it** proves nothing. One might argue that his analogy is structurally imperfect in a variety of ways, and that the institutional parallels between slavery and concentration camps tend to dissolve on close inspection. But there is a more serious complaint to be made against Elkins's work. He does not move beyond his analogical insight to establish empirically the existence of the Sambo personality pattern. There are only a few causal snippets of impressionistic evidence, much of which is secondary or tertiary. Elkins has insisted that he did not mean to prove his argument by analogy, but he nevertheless does so implicitly in his book.

In my opinion, there is an important truth in Elkins's thesis. Many other historians seem to think so, too. The argument, analogy and all, is beginning to work its way into the textbooks, and even into historical novels, such as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which appears to owe a special debt to Stanley Elkins and which may serve

of Names (1498), trans. E. A. Bushinski (Pittsburgh, 1953), a systematization of the so-called Thomistic theory of analogy.

16. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, rev. ed. (New York, 1963).

to popularize his thesis. One of Elkins's students has even ground out a monograph, which echoes the master's expectations in the spirit of Sambo himself. But everything still hangs precariously upon an analogy, which, even if it were the best analogy in the world, would be insufficient to sustain it.

☞ The *fallacy of prediction by analogy* occurs when analogy is used to anticipate future events—as it often is, in the absence of anything better. H. W. Fowler observed that analogy "is perhaps the basis of most human conclusions, its liability to error being compensated for by the frequency with which it is the only form of reasoning available."¹⁷

The trouble with futurist analogies is not that they might be wrong, but rather that they must be utterly untestable and inconclusive. The problem is not that there is a probability of error within them, but that there is an indeterminacy of probability. It is not possible to distinguish a true historical analogy from a false one without an empirical test of its inference. As long as one of those parts remains in the future, the analogy is untestable.

A historiographical case in point is a collection of quasi-historical essays edited by Bruce Mazlish and published as *The Railroad and the Space Program: An Exploration in Historical Analogy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965). Mazlish and his colleagues seriously attempted to estimate the future effect of the space program upon American society by means of an analogy with the past effects of the railroad in nineteenth-century America. The contributors were able scholars all, and their essays uniformly reached a high level of sustained and sophisticated cerebration. But with respect to the future consequences of the space program, they might as well have hired a gypsy to study the palm of Werner von Braun or invited an astrologer to contribute a paper to their project. Their conclusions about the space program are either tenuous in the extreme, or truistic, or else Delphic utterances of the sort which confidently predict with considerable semantical confusion that maybe *X* will happen, or maybe it won't.

The work of Mazlish and his colleagues, in short, is not very useful for serious students of the space program. But, significantly, the book is highly suggestive for students of the railroads. Most contributors devote much of their interest to the latter. The hypothetical heuristic construct provided by the space program has a stimulative effect in historical

17. H. W. Fowler, *Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 1926), p. 20.

inquiry, which is altogether independent of its truth value with respect to the space program itself. It provides many suggestive hints and hypotheses which might be put to an empirical test by an economic historian, with the possibility of new and important insights into economic development in the nineteenth century. In short, the Mazlish volume demonstrates explicitly a truth long implicit in the operations of historians—namely, that an analogy is a useful device for a sort of retrodiction of past events and for the generation of hypothetical interpretations which can be put to the test. One can reason from an idea of the future (however mistaken it may prove to be) to an insight into the past, and put the latter to the test. But the process is not reversible.

Mazlish might reply that there are no empirical ways of knowing the future. But this, I think, is a mistake. Two other methods are employed with increasing accuracy in a wide range of Held-in meteorology, economics, and demography. These methods are both historical in nature. One of them consists in the discovery of past trends and their extrapolation into the future, in some cases with determinable degrees of probability. The other is a kind of theoretical knowledge, or conditional knowledge, which takes the form of "If, then" propositions—empirical propositions which are tested by reference to past events. Forecasting of this sort can work—indeed, it does work—even with respect to events which are partly determined by willful acts of reasoning agents.

But a prediction by analogy is useless in itself. Sometimes the analogizer covers himself in the fashion of Mark Twain's weather forecaster: "Probable nor'east to sou'west winds, varying to the southard and westard and eastard and points between; high and low barometer, sweeping round from place to place, probable areas of rain, snow, hail, and drought, succeeded or preceded by earthquakes with thunder and lightning."¹⁸

Nothing else can improve his accuracy.

☞ The misuses of analogy are many and complex, but all fallacies in this chapter can be divided into two groups. First, there are structural fallacies of analogical inference—analogies which are imperfect in their form. Second, there are functional fallacies, in which sound analogies are applied to inappropriate purposes.

Any intelligent use of analogy must begin with a sense of its limits. An analogical inference between *A* and *B* presumes that those two

18. Quoted in D. S. Halacy, *The Weather Changers* (New York, 1968), p. 30.

objects are similar in some respects but dissimilar in others. If there were no dissimilarities, we would have an identity rather than an analogy. Analogical inference alone is powerless to resolve the critical problem of whether any particular point is a point of similarity or dissimilarity. It can never *prove* that because *A* and *B* are alike in respect to *X*, they are therefore alike in respect to *Y*. Proof requires either inductive evidence that *Y* exists in both cases, or else a sound deductive argument for the coexistence of *X* and *Y*. If either of these attempts at proof is successful, then the argument becomes more than merely analogical. If neither is successful, there is no argument at all.

In common practice, some deductive inference as to the connection between *X* and *Y* is commonly drawn. In empirical inquiry, an attempt must also be made to establish the existence of *X* and *Y*. Galileo, in the example of the analogy between the chain lamp and the motion of a pendulum, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, immediately advanced beyond analogy to empiricism, by means of an experiment which he cleverly contrived on the spur of the moment. He timed the swings of the cathedral lamp by his own pulse beat. In the same fashion, Newton and Franklin and the others quickly proceeded to put their analogies to the test.

The psychological power of analogical explanation is dangerous both to logic and to empiricism. Many bad ideas have had a long life because of a good (effective) analogy. If analogy is used to persuade without proof, or to indoctrinate without understanding, or to settle an empirical question without empirical evidence, then it is misused. Sometimes the results are not merely disagreeable but downright dangerous. In the formation of postnuclear public policy, nothing is quite as lethal as a faulty prenuclear analogy. Fallacies of this sort are apt to be failures not of will but of understanding. In public questions of nuclear policy, they may be the last thing a well-meaning statesman ever intends to commit—the very last thing.

CONCLUSION

History is not only a particular branch of knowledge, but a particular mode and method of knowledge in other branches.

-Lord Acton

Any serious attempt to answer the question "What is good history?" leads quickly to another-namely, "What is it good for?" To raise this problem in the presence of a working historian is to risk a violent reaction. For it requires him to justify his own existence, which is particularly difficult for a historian to do-not because his existence is particularly unjustifiable, but because a historian is not trained to justify existences. Indeed, he is trained not to justify them. It is usually enough for him that he exists, and history, too. He is apt to be impatient with people who doggedly insist upon confronting the question.

Nevertheless, the question must be confronted, because the answer is in doubt. In our own time, there is a powerful current of popular thought which is not merely unhistorical but actively antihistorical as well. Novelists and playwrights, natural scientists and social scientists, poets, prophets, pundits, and philosophers of many persuasions have manifested an intense hostility to historical thought. Many of our contemporaries are extraordinarily reluctant to acknowledge the reality of past time and prior events, and stubbornly resistant to all arguments for the possibility or utility of historical knowledge.

The doctrine of historical relativism was no sooner developed by historians than it was seized by their critics and proclaimed to the world as proof that history-as-actuality is a contradiction in terms, and that history-as-record is a dangerous delusion which is, at best, an irrelevance to the predicament of modern man, and at worst a serious menace to his freedom and even to his humanity. A few of these people even believe, with Paul Valery, that

History is the most dangerous product which the chemistry of the mind has concocted. Its properties are well known. It produces dreams and drunkenness. It fills people with false memories, exaggerates their reactions, ex-

acerbates old grievances, torments them in their repose, and encourages either a delirium of grandeur or a delusion of persecution. It makes whole nations bitter, arrogant, insufferable, and vainglorious.¹

These prejudices have become a major theme of modern literature. Many a fictional protagonist has struggled frantically through six hundred pages to free himself from the past, searching for a sanctuary in what Sartre called "a moment of eternity," and often finding it in a sexual embrace.²

In Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, Mr. Propter is made to say, "After all, history isn't the real thing. Past time is only evil at a distance; and of course, the study of past time is itself a process in time. Cataloguing bits of fossil evil can never be more than an ersatz for eternity." In the same author's *The Genius and the Goddess*, John Rivers compares history to a "dangerous drug" and dismisses it as a productive discipline of knowledge:

God isn't the son of memory. He's the son of Immediate Experience. You can't worship a spirit in spirit, unless you do it now. Wallowing in the past may be good literature. As wisdom, it's hopeless. Time Regained is Paradise Lost, and Time Lost is Paradise Regained. Let the dead bury their dead. If you want to live at every moment as it presents itself, you've got to die at every other moment. That's the most important thing I learned.⁴

Some entertaining errors of the same sort appear in John Barth's splendid picaresque novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, where, in sixty-five chapters, Clio is ravished as regularly as most of the major characters. In an epilogue, the author writes,

Lest it be objected by a certain stodgy variety of squint-minded antiquarians that he has in this lengthy history played more fast and loose with Clio, the chronicler's muse, than ever Captain John Smith dared, the Author here posits in advance, by way of surety, three blue-chip replies arranged in order of decreasing relevancy. In the first place be it remembered, as Burlingame himself observed, that we all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest. . . . Moreover, this Clio was already a scarred and crafty trollop when the Author found her; it wants a nice-honed casuist, with her sort, to separate seducer from the seduced. But if, despite all, he is convicted at the Public Bar of having forced what slender virtue the strumpet may make claim to, then the Author joins with pleasure the most engaging company imaginable, his fellow fornicators, whose ranks include

1. Paul Valery, *Regards sllr le Monde Actuel* (Paris, 1949), p. 43.

2. Jean Paul Sartre, *The Reprieve* (New York, 1947), p. 352.

3. Aldous Huxley, *After Many a Slimmer Dies the Swan*, Harper & Rowed. (New York, 1965), p. 81.

4. Aldous Huxley, *The Genills and the Goddess*, Bantam Books ed. (New York, 1956), p.4.

the noblest in poetry, prose and politics; condemnation at such a bar, in short, on such a charge, does honor to artist and artifact alike.⁵

Other literati have set their sights on historians, rather than history. Virginia Woolf asserted, "It is always a misfortune to have to call in the services of any historian. A writer should give us direct certainty; explanations are so much water poured with the wine. As it is, we can only feel that these counsels are addressed to ladies in hoops and gentlemen in wigs—a vanished audience which has learnt its lesson and gone its way and the preacher with it. We can only smile and admire the clothes." Similar sentiments are cast as characterizations of historians in Sartre's *Nausea*, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, George Orwell's 1984, Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay*, Wyndham Lewis's *Self-Condemned*, Anatole France's *Le Crime de Silvestre Bannard*, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Stanley Elkin's *Boswell*, and Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. "It's so seldom that Clio can aid the other muses," says one character in the latter work. "Bloody fools, these historians," growls another.⁷

The antihistorical arguments of our own time have infected historians themselves, with serious results. Historical scholarship today is dominated by a generation (born, let us say, between 1900 and 1940) which has lost confidence in its own calling, lost touch with the world in which it lives, and lost the sense of its own discipline. Historians have failed to justify their work to others, partly because they have not even been able to justify it to themselves. Instead, when academic historians explain why they do history, there is a narrow parochialism and petty selfishness of purpose which surpasses rational belief. I have heard five different apologies for history from academic colleagues—five justifications which are functional in the sense that they permit a historian to preserve some rudimentary sense of historicity, but only at the cost of all ideas of utility.

First, there are those who claim that history is worth writing and teaching because, in the words of one scholar, "It is such fun!"⁸ But this contemptible argument, which passes for wisdom in some professional quarters, is scarcely sufficient to satisfy a student who is struggling to master strange masses of facts and interpretations which are suddenly dumped on him in History 1. It is unlikely to gratify a graduate student,

5. John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Grosset and Dunlap ed. (New York, 1964) p.793.

6. Virginia Woolf, "Addison," *Essays*, 4 vols. (London, 1966), 1:87.

7. Angus Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (London, 1956), pp. 11, 364.

8. Fritz Stern, ed., *Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York, 1956), p.30.

who discovers in the toil and loneliness of his apprenticeship the indispensable importance of a quality which the Germans graphically call *Sitzfleisch*. It will not be persuasive to a social scientist who is pondering the pros and cons of a distant journey to dusty archives. It cannot carry weight with a general reader, who is plodding manfully through a pedantic monograph which his conscience tells him he really ought to finish. Nor will it reach a public servant who is faced with the problem of distributing the pathetically limited pecuniary resources which are presently available for social research. And I doubt that it has even persuaded those historiographical hedonists who invoke it in defense of their profession.

For most rational individuals, the joys of history are tempered by the heavy labor which research and writing necessarily entail, and by the pain and suffering which suffuses so much of our past. Psychologists have demonstrated that pleasure comes to different people in different ways, including some which are utterly loathsome to the majority of mankind. If the doing of history is to be defended by the fact that some historians are happy in their work, then its mass appeal is likely to be as broad as flagellation. In all seriousness, there is something obscene in an argument which justifies the pedagogic torture inflicted upon millions of helpless children, year after year, on the ground that it is jolly good fun for the torturer.

Another common way in which historians justify historical scholarship is comparable to the way in which a mountain-climbing fanatic explained his obsession with Everest—"because it is there." By this line of thinking, history-as-actuality becomes a Himalayan mass of masterless crags and peaks, and the historian is a dauntless discoverer, who has no transcendent purpose beyond the triumphant act itself. If the object is remote from the dismal routine of daily affairs, if the air is thin and the slopes are slippery, if the mountain is inhabited merely by an abominable snowman or two, then all the better! If the explorer deliberately chooses the most difficult route to his destination, if he decides to advance by walking on his hands, or by crawling on his belly, then better still! By this convenient theory, remoteness is a kind of relevance, and the degree of difficulty is itself a defense.

This way of thinking is a tribute to the tenacity of man's will but not to the power of his intellect. If a task is worth doing merely because it is difficult, then one might wish with Dr. Johnson that it were impossible. And if historical inquiry is merely to be a moral equivalent to mountaineering for the diversion of chairborne adventurers, then historiography itself becomes merely a hobbyhorse for the amusement of overeducated unemployables.

A third common justification for history is the argument that there are certain discrete facts which every educated person needs to know. This view has been explicitly invoked to defend the teaching of required history courses to college freshmen, and to defend much research as well. But it is taxonomic in its idea of facts and tautological in its conception of education. What it calls facts are merely the conventional categories of historians' thought which are reified into history itself. And what it calls education is merely the mindless mastery of facts—a notion not far removed from the rote learning which has always flourished in the educational underworld but which no serious educational thinker has ever countenanced.

There are *no* facts which *everyone* needs to know—not even facts of the first historiographical magnitude. What real difference can knowledge of the fact of the fall of Babylon or Byzantium make in the daily life of anyone except a professional historian? Facts, discrete facts, will not in themselves make a man happy or wealthy or wise. They will not help him to deal intelligently with any modern problem which he faces, as man or citizen. Facts of this sort, taught in this way, are merely empty emblems of erudition which certify that certain formal pedagogical requirements have been duly met. If this method is mistaken for the marrow of education, serious damage can result.

Fourth, it is sometimes suggested that history is worth doing because it is "an outlet for the creative urge."g Undoubtedly, it is such a thing. But there are many outlets for creativity. Few are thought sufficient to justify the employment of thousands of highly specialized individuals at a considerable expense to society.

Tombstone rubbing is a creative act. So is the telling of tall stories. If history is to be justified on grounds of its creative aspect, then it must be shown to be a constructive, good, useful, or beautiful creative act. Most people who use this argument seem to be thinking in aesthetic terms. But if aesthetic principles become a justification for history, then surely 99 percent of the monographs which have appeared in the past generation are utterly unjustified. Most historians publish a single book in their lifetime—usually their doctoral dissertation. I cannot remember even one of these works which can be seriously regarded as a beautiful creative act. There have been a good many manifestoes for creative history in the past several decades, and more than a few essays which fulsomely describe the potential of history as art. But the number of modern histories which are worth reading on any imaginable aesthetic standard can be reckoned

9. Norman Cantor and Richard I. Schneider, *How to Study History* (New York, 1967), p. 3. For a more extended argument, see Emery Neff, *The Poetry of History* (New York, 1947).

on the fingers of one hand. Painful as the fact may be, historians must face up to it-literary history as a living art form is about played out. In an earlier generation, it was otherwise. But today this tradition is either altogether dead or sleeping soundly. An awakening has been confidently predicted from time to time, but with every passing decade the anticipated date has been postponed. Historians, for the past several generations, have been moving squarely in the opposite direction. There is nothing to suggest a change, and there are a good many hints of continuity in years to come. Until there is a reversal, or some sort of revival, or even a single serious and successful creative act, history as it actually is today, and as it is becoming, must be justified by another argument.

A fifth justification for history is cast in terms of the promise of future utility. I have heard historians suggest that their random investigations are a kind of pure research, which somebody, someday, will convert to constructive use, though they have no idea who, when, how, or why. The important thing, they insist, is not to be distracted by the dangerous principle of utility but to get on with the job. It is thought sufficient for an authority on Anglo-Saxon England to publish "important conclusions that all Anglo-Saxonists will have to consider."lo If enough historians write enough histories, then something-the great thing itself -is sure to turn up. In the meantime we are asked to cultivate patience, humility, and pure research.

This argument calls to mind the monkeys who were set to typing the works of Shakespeare in the British Museum. So vast is the field of past events, and so various are the possible methods and interpretations, that the probability is exceedingly small that any single project will prove useful to some great social engineer in the future. And the probability that a series of random researches will become a coherent science of history is still smaller.

A comparable problem was studied by John Venn, some years ago. He calculated the probability of drawing the text of *Paradise Lost* letter by letter from a bag containing all twenty-six signs of the alphabet-each letter to be replaced after it is drawn, and the bag thoroughly shaken. Assuming that there were 350,000 letters in the poem, Venn figured the odds at 1 in $26^{350,000}$, which if it were written out, would be half again as long as the poem itself.

This operation is in some ways analogous to the method of historians who hope to construct a science of history by reaching into the grab bag of past events and hauling out one random project after another. The analogy is not exact-the probability of success in history is even more

remote than Venn's. If A is the number of possible methods (a large number), B is the number of possible topics (even larger), C is the number of possible interpretations (larger still), and D is the length of a sufficient series, then the odds are 1 in $(ABC)D$. Now D may be as small as 1, but A , B , or C may equal infinity. If anyone of them does, then the odds are infinitely improbable, in the sense of an infinite regression toward zero. In this context, infinite improbability will serve as a working definition of practical impossibility.

A series of researches can be expected to yield a coherent result only if they are *not* random. If a historian hopes that his work will promote some future purpose, then he must have some idea of what that purpose might be. The question cannot be postponed to another day. It must be faced now. And yet historians who justify their work as "pure research" deliberately avoid it. Their lives are wasted in aimless wanderings, like those which Bertrand Russell remembers from his childhood. "In solitude," he writes, "I used to wander about the garden, alternately collecting birds' eggs and meditating on the flight of time."¹¹ When grown men carry on in this way, the results are not amusing but pathetic.

All five of these justifications for history are functional to historical scholarship, but only in the sense that they serve to sustain a rough and rudimentary historicity in the work of scholars who have lost their conceptual bearings. But these attitudes are seriously dysfunctional in two other ways. First, they operate at the expense of all sound ideas of social utility. Secondly, they stand in the way of a refinement of historicity, beyond the crude level of contemporary practice.

Academic historians have been coming in for a good deal of abuse lately, and with a great deal of justification. There is a rising chorus of criticism which is directed principally against the sterility and social irrelevance of their scholarship. Only a few professional pollyannas would assert that these complaints are without cause.

But the reform proposals that accompany these protests are worse than the deficiencies they are designed to correct. Historians of many ideological persuasions are increasingly outspoken in their determination to reform historical scholarship, and often exceedingly bitter about the willful blindness of an alleged academic establishment which supposedly stands in their way. But these reformers are running to an opposite error.

Historians are increasingly urged to produce scholarship of a kind which amounts to propaganda. There is, of course, nothing new in this

11. Bertrand Russell. *All'obiografy*, 1872-1914 (Boston, 1967), p. 14.

idea. It appeared full-blown in the work of James Harvey Robinson and other so-called New Historians more than fifty years ago.¹² There was much of it after the Second World War, in the manifestoes of conservative anti-Communist scholars such as Conyers Read,¹³ and in the monographs of liberal activists during the 1950s. There is still a great deal of it today in Eastern Europe, where more than a few historians imagine that they are "scholar-fighters," in the service of world socialism. Today, in America and Western Europe, this idea is being adopted with increasing fervor by young radical historians, who regard all aspirations to objectivity as a sham and a humbug, and stubbornly insist that the real question is not whether historians can be objective, but which cause they will be subjective to.

These scholars^H are in quest of something which they call a "usable past." But the result is neither usable nor past. It ends merely in polemical pedantry, which is equally unreadable and inaccurate.

There have always been many historians who were more concerned that truth should be on their side than that they should be on the side of truth. This attitude is no monopoly of any sect or generation. But wherever it appears in historical scholarship, it is hateful in its substance and horrible in its results. To make historiography into a vehicle for propaganda is simply to destroy it. The problem of the utility of history is not solved but subverted, for what is produced by this method is not history at all. The fact that earlier generations and other ideological groups have committed the same wrong does not convert it into a right.

Moreover, the "usable" history which is presently being produced by historians of the "New Left" is not objectionable because it is substantively radical but rather because it is methodologically reactionary. Radical historians today, with few exceptions, write a very old-fashioned kind of history. They are not really radical *historians*. A good many new procedural devices are presently in process of development—devices which may permit a closer approximation to the ideal of objectivity. But one rarely sees them in radical historiography, which is impressionistic, technically unsophisticated, and conceptually unoriginal—old conceptions are merely adjusted in minor respects.

If history is worth doing today, then it must *not* be understood either in terms of historicity without utility, or of utility without historicity.

12. James Harvey Robinson, *The New History* (New York, 1912).

13. See above, p. 86.

14. For a discussion of their work, see Irwin Unger, "The 'New Left' and American History," *The American Historical Review* 72 (1967): 1237-63. For a sample, see Barton J. Bernstein, *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1968).

Instead, both qualities must be combined. The trouble with professional historians is that they are not professional enough-and not historians enough. If they are to be useful as historians, then they must do so by the refinement of their professional discipline and not by its dilution.

(History can be useful, as history, in several substantive ways. It can serve to clarify contexts in which contemporary problems exist—not by a presentist method of projecting our own ideas into the past but rather as a genuinely empirical discipline, which is conducted with as much objectivity and historicity as is humanly possible. Consider one quick and obvious example—the problem of Negro-white relations in America. It is surely self-evident that this subject cannot be intelligently comprehended without an extended sense of how it has developed through time. Negro Americans carry their history on their backs, and they are bent and twisted and even crippled by its weight. The same is true, but less apparent, of white Americans, too. And precisely the same thing applies to every major problem which the world faces today. Historians can help to solve them, but only if they go about their business in a better way—only if they become more historical, more empirical, and more centrally committed to the logic of a problem-solving discipline.

Historical inquiry can also be useful not merely for what it contributes to present understanding but also for what it suggests about the future. A quasi-historical method is increasingly used, in many disciplines, for the purpose of forecasting—for establishing trends and directions and prospects. Historians themselves have had nothing to do with such efforts, which many of them would probably put in a class with phrenology. Maybe they should bear a hand, for they have acquired by long experience a kind of tacit temporal sophistication which other disciplines conspicuously lack—a sophistication which is specially theirs to contribute.

Third, history can be useful in the refinement of theoretical knowledge, of an "if, then" sort. Econometric historians have already seized upon this possibility, and political historians are not far behind. What, for example, are the historical conditions in which social stability, social freedom, and social equality have tended to be *maximally* coexistent? No question is more urgent today, when tyranny, inequality, and instability are not merely disagreeable but dangerous to humanity itself. This is work which a few historians are beginning to do. Maybe it is time that more of them addressed such problems, more directly.

Fourth, historical scholarship can usefully serve to help us find out who we are. It helps people to learn something of themselves, perhaps in the way that a psychoanalyst seeks to help a patient. Nothing could be more productive of sanity and reason in this irrational world. Histo-

rians, in the same way, can also help people to learn about other selves. And nothing is more necessary to the peace of the world. Let us have no romantic humbug about brotherhood and humanity. What is at stake is not goodness but survival. Men must learn to live in peace with other men if they are to live at all. The difficulties which humanity has experienced in this respect flow *partly* from failures of intellect and understanding. Historical knowledge may help as a remedy—not a panacea, but a partial remedy. And if this is to happen, professional historians must hold something more than a private conversation with themselves. They must reach millions of men, and they will never do so through monographs, lectures, and learned journals. I doubt that they can hope to accomplish this object by literary history or by the present forms of popular history. Instead, they must begin to exploit the most effective media of mass communication—television, radio, motion pictures, newspapers, etc. They cannot assign this task to middlemen. If the message is left to communications specialists, it is sure to be garbled in transmission. All of these uses of history, as history, require the development of new strategies, new skills, and new scholarly projects.

In addition to these four substantive services which historians can hope to provide, there is another one which I regard as even more important. Historians have a heavy responsibility not merely to teach people substantive historical truths but also to teach them how to think historically. There is no limit to the number of ways in which normative human thinking is historical. Nobody thinks historically all the time. But everybody thinks historically much of the time. Each day, every rational being on this planet asks questions about things that actually happened—questions which directly involve the logic of inquiry, explanation, and argument which is discussed in this book.

These operations rarely involve the specific substantive issues that now engage the professional thoughts of most historians. They do not touch upon the cause of the First World War, or the anatomy of revolutions, or the motives of Louis XIV, or the events of the industrial revolution. Instead, this common everyday form of historical thought consists of specific inquiries into small events, for particular present and future purposes to which all the academic monographs in the world are utterly irrelevant.

Historical thought ordinarily happens in a thousand humble forms—when a newspaper writer reports an event and a newspaper reader peruses it; when a jury weighs a fact in dispute, and a judge looks for a likely precedent; when a diplomat compiles an *aide-memoire* and a doctor constructs a case history; when a soldier analyzes the last campaign, and a statesman examines the record; when a householder tries to remember

if he paid the rent, and when a house builder studies the trend of the market. Historical thinking happens even to sociologists, economists, and political scientists in nearly all of their major projects. Each of these operations is in some respects (not all respects) historical. If historians have something to learn from other disciplines, they have something to teach as well.

The vital purpose of refining and extending a logic of historical thought is not merely some pristine goal of scholarly perfection. It involves the issue of survival. Let us make no mistake about priorities. If men continue to make the *historical* error of conceptualizing the problems of a nuclear world in prenuclear terms, there will not be a postnuclear world. If people persist in the *historical* error of applying yesterday's programs to today's problems, we may suddenly run short of tomorrow's possibilities. If we continue to pursue the ideological objectives of the nineteenth century in the middle of the twentieth, the prospects for a twenty-first are increasingly dim.

These failures-failures of historical understanding-exist everywhere today. Frenchmen, in pursuit of their venerable vision of Gallic grandeur, combine a *force de frappe* with the fallacy of anachronism-a lethal combination. Arabs cry up a *jihad* against the infidels, as if nothing had changed in nine hundred years but the name of the enemy. On the other side of the Jordan River, Jews nurse their bitter heritage of blood and tears, without any apparent sense of how the world has changed. In Moscow and in Washington, in London and in Bonn, in Peking and New Delhi, statesmen and citizens alike are unable to adjust their thoughts to the accelerating rate of changing realities.

That people will learn to see things as they are-that they will understand the world as it is, and is becoming-that they will become more rational and empirical in their private thoughts and public policies -that these things will come to pass, is not what Damon Runyon would have called a betting proposition. He might have figured the most favorable odds at six to five, against. But if people continue to commit their fatal fallacies at something like the present rate, the odds for their survival will become a long shot.

Responsible and informed observers have estimated that by the 1990s as many as forty-eight nations may possess nuclear weapons.¹⁵ As the number of these arsenals increases arithmetically, the probability of their use grows in geometric ratio. Biological and chemical weapons of equal destructive power and even greater horror are already within the reach of most sovereign powers, and many private groups as well.

15. Sir John Cockcroft, "The Perils of Nuclear Proliferation," in Nigel Calder, ed., *Unless Peace Comes* (New York, 1968), p. 37.

Natural scientists have helped to create this deadly peril; now it is the business of social scientists to keep it in bounds. Here is work for historians to do-work that is largely educational in nature-work that consists in teaching men somehow to think reasonably about their condition. Reason is indeed a pathetically frail weapon in the face of such a threat. But it is the *only* weapon we have. To the task of its refinement, this book has been addressed.

Historians' Fallacies. 25 likes. Book.Â Historians' Fallacies. Book. 25 people like this topic. Want to like this page? Sign up for Facebook to get started. Sign Up. It's free and anyone can join. Strictly speaking, the Fallacy Fallacy is committed only when a conclusion is rejected as false because an argument for it is fallacious, that is, commits a logical fallacy. Since a logical fallacy is a mistake in reasoning that is common enough to be named, not just any bad argument will do. If an argument for a conclusion does not commit a fallacy, but is invalid or uncogent for some other reason, then rejecting the conclusion as false commits the more general Bad Reasons Fallacy, rather than the Fallacy Fallacy.