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## 4 Objectivity in the Human and Behavioral Sciences

### 4.1 ‘Hempel’s Demand’ and its Critics

### 4.2 The Debate over Historical Objectivity

#### 4.1 ‘Hempel’s Demand’ and its Critics

We noted in the Introduction that objectivity has been an essentially contested concept.

Contentious debate has played out in the ‘science wars’ generally, but perhaps nowhere has the possibility and value of objectivity been more controversial than in respect to the social sciences and historiography, the writing of history. Most of the individual social sciences took shape and became academic disciplines during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the issue of differences between studying humankind and studying the natural world goes back at least this far as well. How should we understand the relationship between the human and natural sciences? Do the human and natural science share a common methodology, or are they quite dissimilar? If the “sciences of man, of society, and the state,” as Dilthey called the social sciences, try to emulate the physical sciences in their methods, will they perhaps miss what is distinctive about human existence? On the other hand, if these disciplines require their own distinctive methods, then, is

there really sufficient continuity of aims and methods between, say, physics and history, or biology and economics, to describe them all as sciences?

Questions such as these were initially debated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, during what is called the *methodenstreit* (or debate over method). Many of its issues were amplified in the first half of the twentieth century, especially through the demand of the logical positivist Carl Hempel, a former member of the Berlin Circle of scientist-philosophers. What we will call Hempel's demand on the social sciences and history, as laid out in "The Function of General Laws in History" (1942) was that they follow a prescribed scientific goal of explaining particular events by placing them under one or more known general laws. This view of scientific method as explanation by placing particular events under general causal laws is known as the "covering law" or D-N model of explanation (for deductive-nomological, *nomos* being the Greek term for law). Lisa Bortolotti (2008) explains, "The [D-N] model is 'deductive' because the explanation has the form of a deductive argument; and it is called 'nomological' because the explanans [that which does the explaining] must contain at least a law of nature. [On this model] a singular event E is explained if and only if a description of E is the conclusion of a valid deductive argument, whose premises involve a law-like statement and a set of initial conditions... the law-like statement and the initial conditions explain the event which is described in the conclusion of the argument, but they also predict it".<sup>1</sup> Let's look closer at Hempel's demand upon social studies to adopt this causal-explanatory goal and method if they are to qualify as scientific enterprises.

Hempel's philosophy of science presupposes a strong unity-of-science thesis. It is scientific method that unifies the sciences and demarcates science both from non-science and

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<sup>1</sup> Bortolotti (2008), 72.

from pretenders, or pseudo-scientific enterprises. The influence of positivism is evident in the hierarchical view that any field that would claim scientific status should emulate the hard sciences in their methods. The positivists' expectation was that the objectivity of the method of science produces clear "demarcation criteria" between science and pseudo-science. The methodological unity of the sciences that positivism endorsed would have come as something of a shock to earlier thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey, who drew a sharp distinction between the natural and human sciences, or what he called *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. It seems to have been a kind of a priori premise for Dilthey that reality can be divided into separate or autonomous sectors with each sector being the *magisteria* or realm of exclusive expertise of one or the other type of science. A gulf between the natural and the human sciences, we might say, was for Dilthey an ontological or metaphysical gulf.

For reasons such as these, Popper characterized those who reject Hempel's demand as non-naturalists, and those who accept it as naturalists. These associations are debatable, however. Probably everyone agrees that there are some important differences between studying human agency or behavior, and studying physical objects, since people have feelings, emotions, intentions, thoughts, and beliefs, customs, institutions, etc. Those who hold that human behavior and "social facts" (values, cultural norms, and social structures) must be examined in terms of meaning, purpose, or interpretation, in contrast with explanation in terms of causal relations or laws of nature, are typically led to find significant discontinuity between the methodologies and aims of natural and social sciences. The description of those who reject Hempel's demand as non-naturalists does appear fitting for Dilthey and his followers, who drew a sharp distinction between the sciences in terms of subject-matter, and grounded that difference ontologically. For Dilthey its ontological grounding was a still-more fundamental distinction between the realms of

‘nature’ and of ‘human spirit’ (the traditional meaning of geist being spirit or soul-stuff). It seems correct to say that philosophic naturalism resists priori or empirically ungrounded separations, and thus has no use for mind/body dualism or for associations of Geist with spirit or Cartesian immaterial substance. But it be that important differences between studying humans and studying the natural world can be recognized without assuming the metaphysics of mind/body dualism. Whether the demand for unity of method is equivalent to naturalism (or is instead a doubtful understanding of what naturalism demands) has also been challenged by social scientists and philosophers of social science.

One such purported uniqueness of social facts as the object of scientific methods of inquiry is the centrality of intentionality, that is, of intensions, beliefs, desires, values and purposes, as a determinant of human action. This manifests the differences between intentional human actions and mere motor-reflex movements in response to a stimulus, say a doctor tapping a patient’s knee. Another difference is the problem of reflexivity: when we attempt to provide a description or explanation of a social fact we are not placed outside that fact, but find ourselves embedded within it. For instance, making a prediction about a physical event like a chemical reaction presumably will not have an effect on that event, whereas making a predication about a human action can have a profound effect upon the action predicted.

We find further purported asymmetries between the natural and human sciences when we move from the question of differences due to the nature of the objects studied to differences due to the nature of the methods appropriate to those objects. To be sure, most social scientists view their fields as scientific in the sense of focusing on questions and problems-for-theory that can be studied empirically. Textbooks in cognitive, social, and personality psychology emphasize how crucial to research scientists in these and other fields collection of observational and

experimental data. The design of social psychological studies, for example, and the processing and utilization of quantified data from those studies can often be quite as formal and rigorous as in physical science. Many of the social sciences are “hard sciences” in the sense of operating under strong communal norms of experimental design and standardized statistical methods. This does not mean however that practicing scientists accept Hempel’s demand, or that those who reject it are adopting a non-naturalistic stand. It is quite true, of course, that naturalism resists empirically and philosophically unmotivated dualisms. But this does not mean that naturalism is best understood as a form of reductive monism about explanations, descriptions, aims, methods, etc. Naturalism’s commitment is to conforming method to the nature of the objects of knowledge, without presupposing from the outset the essential nature of the objects of scientific study. On this view naturalism, which we can call pragmatic naturalism, if it clashes with some more metaphysical doctrine, the naturalist resists unmotivated reductionism as well as dualism; it is open to acknowledging a plurality of different objects of knowledge, and of aims and methods of scientific research. Thus naturalism as here understood supports scientific pluralism as an alternative both to non-naturalistic explanatory dualisms and the reductionism of the positivists’ unity of method thesis. As the editors of a recent collection explain Scientific Pluralism explain,

Philosophers of science have begun to advance pluralism at the metascientific level, most notably with respect to epistemic virtues. A variety of views regarding the role, status, and identity of scientific or epistemic virtues has been advanced in the philosophical literature...[some pluralists claim] that what which virtues should hold

what degree of regulative status in any given research project is a function of features specific to the problem and of the particular aims of the research.<sup>2</sup>

Hempel's demand is strongly related to what we earlier saw was Carnap's hierarchical model of the sciences as sources of knowledge. This is because asking social scientists to accept the scientific method essentially demands that they accept their place on that hierarchy, where the epitome of proper method is basic experimental physics. But we've already raised challenges to such a hierarchical model. It is also worth pointing out that the most philosophically useful distinction between kinds of science might not be the natural and social/human/behavioral sciences, nor even that between hard empirical and soft theoretical/interpretive research. Another proposed suggested way to categorize the sciences that may better reflect scientific pluralism is by way of a distinction between reductive and integrative sciences. On this model the integrative sciences may be either natural or social, but are essentially "soft." They build upon "hard," empirical sciences without either aiming to imitate them or to do something fundamentally different. This proposal has the advantage of accounting for how integrative studies typically draw upon a variety of different empirical sciences, rather than only the empirical research in their own discipline. The reductive sciences aim at explaining by way of utilizing a specific

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<sup>2</sup> S. Kellert, H. Longino, and C. K. Waters (2006), ix. According to Thomas Nickles (1992, 126), whose work combines pragmatism with a naturalized or empirical view on problem-solving in science, "this means that methodology no longer will be a single, unitary subject but will, at the more interesting levels of detail, breakdown into domain and context specific rules, practices, and advice."

causal hypothesis to establish a cause and effect relationship. The integrative sciences—for instance political science, if the title is not merely honorific—use evidence-based approaches to understand and propose strategies for addressing complex social problems. Their aim is typically to model the multiple influences or determinants of complex social facts, rather than test a hypothesis, and so they often draw from multiple influences or determinants and expand our theoretical understanding of interactions between such factors.

The diversity among research problems even within one field—for example economics, or political science—is another reason there are so many different reactions to Hempel’s demand. Some research programs might hold themselves willing and able to meet the demand, and some might see it, along with its H-D method, as not directly relevant to their research. Let’s look at debates about history writing as a closer example. Some respond that social sciences can and should meet the demand, and that history can as well. Others respond that social sciences can and should, but history cannot meet the demand, indicating that history should be seen as a humanities discipline and not as a science. Then there are other dissenters who reject Hempel’s demand even for fields uncontroversially classed as social sciences, like psychology and sociology. But within these traditional titles, some particular research programs are more theoretical and interpretive; some are descriptive and probabilistic; and some aim to be causal-explanatory. The descriptive, explanatory, and theoretically unifying are not three different views of what science should be, to be objective, but simply different approaches to methodology within the sciences that different research programs might take.

The degree of contingency and variability found in the social world is one major source of concerns about the viability of Hempel’s claims. Due to this variability. One might argue that in sociology the procedure of generalizing from particular facts to universal laws or regularities

in nature does not work; sociology studies circumstances peculiar to one historical moment or to one society. It deals with particulars, which it must in order to recognize how the objects of its inquiry has changed over time. But with large-scale events like civil wars as one's chosen object of study, whatever explanatory generalizations might be offered are going to be diverse, and quite incomplete. Generalizations about group behavior are especially difficult. To explain "civil wars" as one thing might be just too loose a focus, and have no real answer. But political science, economics, sociology, social psychology, etc. might all have theoretical perspectives on it. The causes of civil wars, or at least a particular one. In any case, it involves the behavior of groups. Social scientific explanations, whether dealing with individuals or groups are likely to be partial and exception-laden as a result of the special difficulties of understanding human behavior. Recognizing the complexity of social facts leads to recognizing the social scientific claims are very different than those mean respect to liquids, metals, or proteins.

Hempel's elevation of explanation over description, and the study of the universal over the particular, demands acceptance of the positivist hierarchical model of the sciences, in which physics is taken as the foundational science that all other fields should seek to emulate. His demand in a sense, makes Hempel the 'bulldog' for acceptance of that model. It implied that the social in contrast to the natural sciences remain at best immature sciences until such time as they conform to the methods of hard science by taking the same basic aims and employing the same basic D-N method. If what is tacitly assumed in the positivist's strong unity-of-method thesis is that social scientific explanations should ultimately be reducible to more basic physical processes of chemistry and physics, then these claims about what social scientific methodology should be is only as justified as the fundamental physicalist or materialist metaphysic that it presupposes.



Even if counter-examples to the covering law model are rare in the natural sciences, they appear to abound in the social sciences and history. Salmon (1989) makes the case that the covering law model of explanation is both too weak and too strong as a characterization of the goals and methods of the sciences. To show it too weak he offers the example "Why did that man not get pregnant?" and notes that the D-N model indicates nothing to forbid as the explanans the observation, "Because he took birth control pills" (if in fact he took them). We seem to have a case of proper D-N explanation since it is a universal regularity that men do not get pregnant. So the example suggests that the D-N model is too weak to characterize scientific method since it allows us too easily to confuse causation with spurious relations like the "fact" that men who take birth control pills do not become pregnant. The D-N model offers a plausible necessary condition of a causal explanation—successful prediction. But it cannot provide sufficient conditions of causal explanation if it does not specify a reliable way to filter for relevancy of hypothesized causes of an event.

But equally a problem for Hempel's account of explanation is the objection that it is in other ways too strong. For there appear to be kinds of explanation that scientists do accept as satisfactory, which nevertheless do not have the D-N form. Rosenberg discusses a case from history: The explanation of why Britain entered the First World War against Germany. The D-N model demands starting from a law that both predicts and explains the target—in this case, Britain's entering into this war. But a satisfactory explanation does not seem to involve any laws: We cannot profitably imagine someone framing the war such as 'whenever Belgian neutrality is protected by treaty and is violated, then the treaty signatories declare war on the violator.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg (2011), \_\_\_.

The question we have thus far examined is whether the positivist's covering law model fits or ill-fits the method appropriate to the social or human sciences. But let us pause to notice the objection that this model overgeneralizes the goal and methods even of the natural sciences. A sound account of causal relations between an explanandum and explicans should be able to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant causes, but the D-N model, which construes explanation merely as a logical relation between statements, seems to allow form-fitting 'explanations' that are not always truly explanatory and that do not fit scientific practice. Must scientific explanations always be causal? For example, functional explanations, which appeal to the functions that a structure or system has, are widely applicable in evolutionary biology ('the heart functions to circulate blood') as well as in sociology, psychology, and anthropology. But such explanations are typically not thought to be causal explanations as D-N demands. Quantum mechanics and other fields provide further examples where explanation seems to proceed without necessarily providing information about causal processes.

If Salmon is correct, the D-N model constrains too strongly the form that a satisfactory scientific explanation can take, privileging causal explanation as indicative of genuine science but ill-fitting a good deal of science as actually practiced. Some writers have generalized this by saying that explanation even in the natural sciences unavoidably involves the pragmatic. Positivists expected that the matter of explanatory relevance could be reduced to a question of objective relations between statements, but post-positivist philosophy of science takes more seriously the idea that what counts as a satisfactory explanation depends in part on the contexts and purposes in which explanations are requested and provided.

A related concern is that theory plays a more prominent role in the very definition of the objects of study in the social science than it does in the positivist view of hard science, where the

thought was that theoretical terms should all be defined by way of observable things and their properties. Martin Hollis discusses different views about the extent of “poverty” in a certain country or region. One might begin by defining poverty in terms of subsistence: an income threshold below which basic necessities are not, or not regularly met. Or one might start from a basic needs conception of poverty, highlighting essential services provided by the community at large, such as safe drinking water, sanitation, and public health. Or one might begin from a relative deprivation conception, where people are in poverty if their resources do not allow them to meet the social demands of membership in their society. It is not easy to say which of these three approaches to “poverty” is more objective, or whether some other model different than all three would be more objective still. These competing conceptions also have very different implications for what counts as poverty as well as for what explains it. Some of them introduce a kind of relativism, insisting that comparison is the only way that poverty can be defined objectively. Still other theories challenge the assumption that one can discern poverty just by scrutinizing individuals, even in this comparative fashion. Each theoretical approach to poverty likely suggests the need for different strategies to ameliorate (relieve) it.

These examples serve to show that in the social sciences especially there is rarely if ever a one uncontroversial answer to the question of how or why some event or group action occurs. However we understand explanation in the natural sciences, in the human sciences it clearly is not merely a matter of discovery. The satisfactoriness of explanations is integrally tied to a theory that informs the very definition of key terms, and to the explanatory and oftentimes also the ameliorative interests of actual researchers. Failure to realize elements of value-judgment involved in defining and explaining such contested concepts as poverty only seems to confound

further the debate over which definitions of terms, and which explanations of events are to be rationally preferred.

### **The Debate over Historical Objectivity**

The status of history as a discipline is reflected even in the different choices universities make to place their history department in an appropriate college. Views about its most appropriate fit can depend the methods that history faculty prefer in the perception of the discipline from those outside the field. History is typically placed either alongside the social sciences, or in a college of the humanities. The humanities, including literature, philosophy, interdisciplinary studies, cultural studies, and rhetoric, includes fields that are highly theoretic or interpretive, but not highly scientific in their methods. Those schools that tend to understand history as a descriptive and empirically-based field of research are more likely to classify it as a social science, while those that take history-writing as primarily narrative interpretation will tend to number it with the humanities. These issues and related distinctions like those between description-interpretation and explanation–understanding, as we'll see, are also debated among historians themselves. For nowhere has the debate over “historical objectivity” been as volatile as over discussion of Hempel’s demand. Hempel writes:

It is a rather widely held opinion that history, in contra-distinction to the so-called physical sciences, is concerned with the description of particular events of the past rather than with the search for general laws which might govern those events. As a characterization of the type of problem in which some historians are mainly interested, this view probably cannot be denied; as a statement of the theoretical function of

general laws in scientific historical research, it is certainly unacceptable. The following considerations are an attempt to substantiate this point by showing in some detail that general laws have quite analogous functions in history and in the natural sciences, that they form an indispensable instrument of historical research, and that they even constitute the common basis of various procedures which are often considered as characteristic of the social in contradistinction to the natural sciences.<sup>4</sup>

So is a field of study scientific only if it is founded on general laws, or produces explanations based upon such laws? When Hempel speaks of a “widely held opinion” running contrary to his own he is referring back to the *methodenstreit* debates of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These debates involved such pioneers of philosophy of social science as Dilthey, Weber and Windelband, although their positions actually diverged significantly from one another. Although they each divided the natural and human sciences in a somewhat different way, these three thinkers are typically seen as part of a hermeneutic tradition. We have mentioned Dilthey’s distinction between two kinds of science distinguished by their object, these being something like nature and spirit. But Weber’s distinction between causal explanation and *verstehen* or

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<sup>4</sup> Hempel (1942), from Gardiner (ed.) (1959), 344-345. See also Megill (2007), 84. Hempel allows probabilistic explanation and sees it as nomological, but as differing from its D-N counterpart by being inductive rather than deductive. Statistical law statements are the source of probabilistic explanation while universal law statements undergird D-N.

interpretive understanding, and Windelband's division between nomothetic and ideographic sciences, are based primarily upon methodological concerns.

Weber defines sociology as ". . . a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects."<sup>5</sup> This statement indicates that he did not strictly contrast verstehen with causal explanation, but found them compatible. According to Windelband's way of marking the distinctions, natural sciences employ a nomothetic or generalizing method, since they seek general properties and relationships, and try to discover law-like relations. Social or cultural sciences by contrast employ an ideographic or individualizing procedure, since they study non-recurring events and particular or unique aspects of any social phenomenon. This nomothetic/ideographic distinction, arguably the most influential among historians, has often been assimilated with the distinction between explanatory and descriptive purposes. For Windelband, both kinds of studies were sciences (*wissenschaft*), whereas Hempel is rejecting this view: Description is tied to the merely particular, but for Hempel all genuine science aims at the universal, and hence for him, the explanatory. We also see from the quoted passage above that Hempel concedes that many historians in actual practice do not try to explain particular events in terms of general laws of history, he is rather dismissive of those who do not. By calling these studies "unacceptable," he presumably means that what they are doing should not be called science. For he clearly commits himself to "the theoretical function of general laws in scientific historical research."

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<sup>5</sup> Max Weber (1949), 88.

But are there, anyway, "laws" of revolution, civil unrest, or ethnic cleansing? Some of the grand metaphysical philosophers of the 19th century such as Comte, Hegel, and Marx were committed to universal historical laws, but this idea had already fallen out of favor by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A history, say, of civil wars, or of psychological illness, might be less scientific rather than more, by ignoring details and differences, and instead trying just to classify all such wars under a limited number of posited causal factors. To focus on particulars leads to a descriptive project, while a causal-explanatory project appears far more ambitious even if it starts from a base of descriptive fact. Given the positivists strongly anti-metaphysical position it should seem surprising if not also self-contradictory for a positivist to endorse the notion of historical 'laws' waiting to be discovered. But on a closer reading this is not what Hempel intends us to understand by "general laws in scientific historical research." It isn't necessarily historical laws or regularities that particular events are to be explained as instances of. Rather, "Many of the universal hypotheses underlying historical explanation, for instance, would commonly be classified as psychological, economical, sociological, and partly perhaps as historical laws; in addition, historical research has frequently to resort to general laws established in physics, chemistry, and biology".<sup>6</sup> This qualification, if it works, distances Hempel's position from one that invites so-called grand metanarratives of human history. But his demand that history (and social science generally) be causal-explanatory, as we will see, still asserts functions and methods of historiography that many or most historians themselves reject.

Philosophers of history have often been keen to examine how historical objectivity has been elaborated, modified, challenged, and defended. In *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity*

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<sup>6</sup> Hempel (1942), 47.

Question' and the American Historical Profession, Peter Novick holds that studying the practice of history-writing reveals that "'historical objectivity' is not a single idea, but rather a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and antipathies". The 'objectivist creed' holds that the historian's role is that of "a neutral, or disinterested, judge [and] must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist".<sup>7</sup> Objectivist views and the historiographic projects they spawn begin with a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence with that reality; this presupposes the now familiar separations between knowers and the known, and between fact and value. Objectivity qua neutrality, and neutrality qua disinterested reason value-free description, however, is often routinely criticized and rejected by historians as part of a discredited 'view from nowhere.'

The distinction between causal explanation and a more purely descriptive historiographic project isn't the only or primary contrast debated in philosophy of history, but it is easy to see why it has been an important one. Where does this leave us? Novick thinks of this conception of objectivity as a noble but unrealizable dream, and his book reflects a degree of skepticism that the "objectivity question" is even a coherent one for historical scholarship.<sup>8</sup> But there exists a range of views that reject the aforementioned objectivist creed but nevertheless hold that historical objectivity serves important functions as a norm of research and should not be

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<sup>7</sup> Novick (1988), 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> According to our initial taxonomy, this objectivist creed is focused on Objectivity 2B, *Value free objectivity, which is not appropriate for narratives, since narratives are a second-person rather than a 3<sup>rd</sup>-person type of enterprise.*



abandoned but rather reconstructed. Some historians see history writing a rigorous and empirically-based, yet only descriptive project. Hempel by contrast insisted that “to explain the phenomena in the world of our experience, to answer the ‘why?’ rather than only the [descriptive] question of ‘what?’ is one of the foremost objectives of empirical science”).<sup>9</sup>

Allan Megill points out in *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error* (2007) that some of the very earliest history writers in the Western tradition insisted that they were concerned with recounting what really happened, and so tried as best they could to distinguish facts from “the unreliable streams of mythology” (muthodes, meaning legendary or fabulous). We all know why we should value objectivity with respect to historical events. It is embodied in the truism that ‘Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.’ We know it is also important to stand up against ideologues, demagogues, and conspiracy theorists who propound revisionist historiography. Denials of wartime atrocities are examples of common tools of “whitewashing” the past. In the case of post-WWII Holocaust denial this whitewashing revisionism follows upon Hitler’s own earlier revisionist history which helped him rise to power through blaming the Jews for much of Germany’s defeat and humiliation during WWI.

Thus norms of historical objectivity lead us to applaud Germany’s continuing commitment to display the photographic and other documentary evidence of the Holocaust. The collective memory of German Nazism is likely no less painful to them than the collective memory of Japanese Imperialism and wartime atrocities during the Invasion of China are to the Japanese. But there has been a stronger collective will to remember and document the past in post-WWII

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<sup>9</sup> Hempel and Oppenheim (1948) from Megill (2007), 83. See also Megill (ed.)(1994).

Germany than in Japan, where history textbooks have often drawn international criticism for minimizing or distorting the evidence of atrocities during the Invasion of China in 1937.

Revisionist historiography is disguised advocacy, advocacy of some favored ideology or of the actions of a favored person, group, or nation. Yellow journalism, or war mongering, and selectively leaving out of account important truths such as military or civilian casualties during war-coverage, are other self-serving rhetorical ploys of historical revisionists.<sup>10</sup>

The achievement that objectivity represents, and that other terms like “neutral”, and “value free”, fail to capture, partly explains the enduring value of the ideal. In the human sciences especially, the objectivity of one’s research arises not out of adherence to a set or formal method, nor out a test against pure facts, but rather a careful, reasoned comparison with rival theories. Standing up for historical fact against the rhetoric of revisionism requires only forms of objectivity such as these. It does not require what Douglas calls objectivity 2b, the value-free notion, or a strong version of objectivity 2c, objectivity as complete neutrality. But we should not forget to notice that description and classification in history are not value-free. The selective focus on concepts like “genocide” and events like the “Holocaust” indicates classificatory schemes and research-guiding values. Perhaps purely descriptive projects are more common and more useful in social sciences like sociology and anthropology than in histories. For these fields

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<sup>10</sup> This of course connects with journalistic ethics as well. We have already looked to some extent at how media can distort historical facts or confuse facts and opinions, and at the idea that a strong and independent journalism is considered a vital backbone of democracy. Journalistic ethics especially reflect norms of objectivity 2A and 2C.

of study often discover previously unknown facts about humans and human societies, whereas many history-writers have described themselves as starting from the body of known fact about certain historical events, and then interpreting it in order to reveal its meaning(s) for contemporaries like ourselves. Both disciplines have uses for factual descriptions, but as one recent author points out, “whereas the former aim, explanation, can be advanced by observation of regularities and generalizations, the latter aim, understanding, requires imagination and empathy.”<sup>11</sup>

Let us return to the largest of all of the alleged differences between hard and soft science, the differences between explanation and interpretive understanding, in order to see how it bears upon debates over the value and mode of objectivity in historical writing. Some historians and philosophers of history who are decidedly post-positivist insist that historians should not suppose a deep gulf between explanation and interpretation but should rather combine them. Good historical research needn't be governed by Hempel's D-N model but it can still supply an “explanatory sketch.” Thomas Haskell argues in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality* that historians should not shy about assigning causal responsibility to individuals or institutions.<sup>12</sup> Historians can appropriately pass judgments of praise, blame, responsibility, liability, deliberateness, etc. Haskell like Bernard Williams asserts that all judgments of responsibility “ride piggyback on perceptions of cause and effect”. This view allows that there is a substantial role of causal

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<sup>11</sup> Haskell (2000), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Haskell (2000), 12.

reasoning in history, as in everyday life.<sup>13</sup> But Haskell also finds that practicing historians are often deeply confused about the role of causal reasoning in the writing of history. Their own avowed skepticism about the language of causes in historical narratives leads them sometimes not to assign responsibility even where the evidence is clear, or to express ambivalence about doing so. This confusion or ambivalence about assigning causes Haskell thinks is in no small part the result of the “polarizing dynamics of the contest between narrativists and Hempelians”. Haskell is highly critical of the assumption “that narration and causation are polar opposites” and that “in spite of all appearances to the contrary, causal reasoning plays only a peripheral role in history”. These assumptions, which he thinks many historians have accepted as the take-away lesson from the debates over historiography and objectivity, in fact only feed further polarization over methodology. They lead to the ill-considered stance that “what we want from history is not explanation, but something entirely different, ‘understanding.’”<sup>14</sup>

To counter-act the gulf-creating effect of these assumptions and to provide a better response to Hempel’s demand, Haskell argues that not all causal inference is characterized by the Hempelian notion of subsumption of the particular event under a nomological or law-like regularity. An in-depth study of the “interest-laden” character of intentional explanations should lead historians and social scientists to reject the assumption that all talk of causes must fit the D-N model, as Hempelians suppose. The artificially strong ‘unity of science’ thesis that motivates Hempel’s insistence that history could be no exception to the search for general laws falls apart. But it finds the historian’s lack of concern with inferring responsibility or appropriating the

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<sup>13</sup> Haskell (2000), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Haskell (2000), 13-14 & 17.

language of causes. Instead it collapses because of how interest-dependent the notion of explanatory salience itself is.

Haskell's approach maintains strong connections between historiography and social science. Although narration is needed to link historical happenings into ordered and meaningful sequences, narration he thinks typically invokes an explanatory scheme. History writing therefore is not an exception to, but only an "especially supple form" of causal reasoning. But the "narrativists" Haskell criticizes tend to think that history is not science but should be classified with literature, rhetoric, and philosophy, which is to say, among the humanities. One of the strong narrativists that Haskell criticizes, Hayden White, holds that there are clear reasons why history cannot be rendered a science without losing its identity as history. These reasons have directly to do with an author's rhetorical strategizing and with the impossibility of excising the "imaginative element" from historical writing, as it might be excised in some other types of academic writing.

While some historians try to overcome historical distance by using rigorous methods, others, especially those influenced by postmodernist trends, embrace the idea that there is an unbridgeable gulf between facts and narratives. For White there is no possible way of bridging the distances between past and present or between historical facts and historians' narratives. History writing is narrative, and narratives have themes, lessons to be learned. Some things of the past are selected, emphasized, or "sharpened" while all other things are ignored, neglected, or "flattened." One ever-present worry is the temptation to what Herbert Butterfield described as Whig interpretation of history: the tendency in many historians to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which glorifies or triumphantly justifies the present. Another constant worry is that since so much historical work is biographical, it focuses on a

small number of outstanding individuals. Conceiving of history-writing as a clash of narratives serving persuasive purposes, with little hope of mediation, seems to follow from White's approach. On analogy with rhetorical "tropes" or persuasive strategies associated with the ancient skeptics and sophists, White characterizes historical writing as "more tropological than logical in kind." There is "an ineluctable poetic-rhetorical component" necessary to the construction of its narratives."<sup>15</sup> He continues, "Thus, a tropological approach to the study of historical discourses seems imminently justified if not required by the differences between historical and scientific discourses, on the one side, and the similarities between historical and literary writing, on the other."<sup>16</sup>

Megill like Haskell wants us to avoid the polarizing dynamics of the long-standing debate between narrativists and Hempelians. These groups both, we have seen, tend to assume that history has one main task, though they disagree radically on what that task is. In challenging this reductionistic assumption, Megill (2007) might be seen as extending Haskell's approach. History-writing he argues has not one, but four main tasks: description; explanation; argument, or justification; and interpretation. "From the perspective of historical epistemology, the most important point is that historians cannot simply assert that such and such claims are true about the past. Rather, they must put forward arguments and evidence that justify our agreeing that the claims in question are true."<sup>17</sup> Hypothesis and speculation are acceptable in works of history—

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<sup>15</sup> H. White (2000), 391.

<sup>16</sup> H. White (2000), 393-394.

<sup>17</sup> A. Megill (2007), xii

indeed Megill finds them unavoidable. “But hypothesis and speculation must be so identified, and we need good intellectual reasons for their presence. Anything else is hype.”<sup>18</sup>

In presenting evidence for an historical thesis, Megill highlights a conceptual distinction between historical traces and historical sources: “A trace is anything remaining from the past that was not made with the intention of revealing the past to us, but simply emerged as part of normal life. A source, on the other hand, is anything that was intended by its creator to stand as an account of events.” Something as seemingly mundane as a central European train schedule, or a record made during World War II, can be strong evidence of the Holocaust. The historian can make inferences from records or traces like of these that have little dependence upon anyone's interpretive testimony. “Here it is not memory but the inadvertent remnants of the past that stand as the ‘raw material’ of history”.<sup>19</sup> Memory and testimony—what he calls sources—are also valued, and at times historians and others have made dramatic efforts to preserve memories against the threat both of intentional and unintentional distortion or loss. The extensive efforts by filmmaker Steven Spielberg to record the recollections of aged Holocaust victims and to preserve and archive them are prime example (50,000 testimonies in the Spielberg archive alone). But memory, individual and collective, can be distorted by time, social pressure, or a variety of known biases including those of leveling and sharpening. While he accepts both kinds of evidence, Megill argues that traces such as train schedules are often a more objective foundation

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<sup>18</sup> A. Megill (2007), 13.

<sup>19</sup> A. Megill (2007), 25 – 26.

for historical knowledge than is either individual or collective memory. Dependence upon memory and forms of testimony that draw upon memory, he thinks, lacks the objectivity that traces qua ‘inadvertent evidence’ possess, for those who have the skill to recognize their value. Memory-oriented historiography he thinks is often affirmative (Whiggish) historiography, historiography imbued with a kind of piety or sacralizing tone.

It is clear that history-writing for the narrativist is much more an art than a science, and they are likely to see “historical truth” as a matter of which narratives we accept, rather than as something independent, to which written histories must try to be true. White, then, seems to serve as an example of Haskell’s claim that many historians concede the language of causation to science, and conceive their own discipline in radical distinction from the concerns of science. Strong narrativism in this way is often associated with constructivist and relativistic viewpoints. Whether such a conclusion is warranted or whether is it one more example of the ‘relativistic boomerang effect’ discussed earlier, where relativism springs from accepting and then reversing (rather than exposing and rejecting) a dichotomy that is vital to objectivism, I must leave to the reader to decide. But the contrast of White’s narrativism and Haskell’s explanatory pluralism allows us to see how varied are the purposes for which historians write, and how formidable are the stumbling blocks facing Hempelians or other would-be scientizers of the field of history.

We have seen from Haskell and Megill the view that good historical research should supply an “explanatory sketch.” The four tasks that Megill sees as characteristic of good history-writing are still elements of narrative. This claim does not deter him from holding that historians are therefore bound by epistemic norms of argument and evidence. But it leads us to the fourth of Megill’s four tasks of historiography, interpreting the past, which draws attention to the fact that histories are narratives, and as such are selective in what character traits, actions, settings, and



happenings they choose to emphasize and deemphasize. This is why numerous histories can be written on the same subject or time period, without necessarily contradicting one another.

The debate focused upon in this chapter is primarily about how sharp the distinction is between natural and social or human sciences is, and what the proper objects of study, goals, and methods of the social sciences are. But this debate was perhaps the first round in a broader one that continues to this day, a debate between objectivist thinkers and historicists, feminists, post-modernists, and others who challenge still more deeply the ‘truth to nature’ and ‘universality’ connotations of objectivity. The next chapter will address a variety of considerations about the possibility and value of objectivity coming from some of its sharpest critics. In conclusion to the present chapter, most historians reject Hempel’s demand and the scientized version of historical research that it prescribes, yet still adhere to and endorse norms of objectivity deemed suitable to their own subject-matter.

Historians and philosophers of history have been especially critical of certain senses or associations of objectivity deemed inappropriate for the functions that historiography serves. “Neutrality” of perspective (Douglas’ objectivity 2b) and guiding assumptions that are “value-free” (objectivity 2c) are for reasons we have explored often criticized as a poor way to characterize the struggle for historical distance or perspective, and so also for historical objectivity. But as Haskell argues, “Objectivity is not neutrality because some measure of commitment is necessary if we are to ‘see’ the historical object at all (thus [for example], gender issues in history were not ‘seen’ until some historians developed a commitment to feminism)”.<sup>20</sup> So on the approach we have taken, the distinctions between academic fields or subjects do not

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<sup>20</sup> Haskell (2000), 111.

represent hard bounds of necessity, but more simply revisable centers of intellectual interest. On such a view, there is no need to distinguish sharply between causal-explanatory and interpretive fields, although the distinction between reductive and integrative sciences still resonates. We can maintain a good deal of fluidity and continuity between different sciences, while still acknowledging that theory virtues in each subject or discipline can vary and be quite specific.

Within certain fields like history, where the reasons for writing can span from popular to documentary, and from strongly narrative to factually-detailed, there is even as we've seen from the historians we've discussed, a good deal of intra-disciplinary diversity as well. Methodology, and hence also what is implied by disciplinary objectivity, should not be seen as a single, unitary subject but as one that is most interesting where it breaks down into domain and context specific methods, rules, and standards.