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The Construction and Use of the Past: A Reply to Critics

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IV. Abstract

This paper elucidates aspects of a post-empiricist humanism within the human sciences. It makes three main arguments. First, a rejection of naïve empiricism implies that we necessarily construct the past in part using our theories, where these theories always have, at least implicitly, a normative force. Second, the logical theories we deploy to construct the past ought to allow for agency in that they should not postulate social contexts as defining or limiting the beliefs an individual can express in an utterance or action. Finally, while we can construct the past to serve any number of purposes, these purposes always have epistemic content, albeit that this content is not always historical.

The Construction and Use of the Past: A Reply to Critics

I found the comments of Mark Erickson, Austin Harrington, and Andreas Reckwitz most interesting, and I am grateful to them for their considered engagement with my work. One interesting feature of their comments is the extent to which we all share similar positions. Perhaps the most obvious similarity is our concern to think through the implications of a rejection of naïve empiricism. Because we cannot have pure experiences, our understanding of the world, including the past, is necessarily in part something we construct on the basis of our theories to serve our purposes. A rejection of naïve empiricism has thus lead all of us to reflect on the ways in which we can and should construct the past and on the ways in which we can and should use the past.

A concern with the construction and use of the past is by no means the only position we share. Another is an engaged but critical stance toward structuralism and its legacy. Like many others, we are sceptical of the scientific pretensions that characterised structuralism at its height: indeed, we appear to share a commitment to the non-naturalist belief that the human sciences are qualitatively different from the natural sciences – the forms of explanation or concepts of causation at work in the natural sciences are inappropriate to the human sciences. While an engaged but critical take on structuralism is almost ubiquitous in the human sciences today, we are perhaps less usual in seeming to share an open stance towards some sort of humanism. Post-structuralists typically retain the anti-humanist bias of much structuralism: they turn to a disembodied concept of language or discourse to account for social patterns, and even ascribe the origins of change to the internal, quasi-structural properties of such a reified language. In contrast, we all grapple with concepts tied to the creativity

of the individual subject – concepts such as agency, intentionality, and intuition. So instead of reducing the construction and use of the past to the normalising effect of discourse, we remain alive to our capacity to recapture the past using what Erickson describes as “skill and intuition”, and perhaps even to do so for what Harrington describes as “our existential purposes”.

In replying to Erickson, Harrington, and Reckwitz, I want to reflect further on our construction and use of the past given in the context of post-empiricist humanism. More specifically, I want to argue that we cannot avoid normative theory, that a normative logic for the human sciences must incorporate human agency, and that the study of the past always has an epistemic dimension to it.

Constructing the Past: Normative theory

To reject naïve empiricism is to suggest that our experiences depend in part on the theories we bring to bear upon them – we partly construct the past through our concepts. The Logic of the History of Ideas offers an analysis of the concepts, and theories of justification and explanation, appropriate to intellectual history and the human sciences generally. Its analysis is normative in that the theories it defends are offered as appropriate ones with which to construct the past. However, the normative force of its conclusions clearly rests on readers sharing the relevant concepts and finding compelling its analysis of them. If readers do these things, they will conclude that concepts and beliefs they hold require them to conceive and practice the human sciences in accord with the forms of reasoning defended in the Logic. For example, my analysis of meaning invokes a “procedural individualism” such that utterances can only have meaning for specific individuals: when we say an utterance meant x, we must be able to specify for which person or group of people it did so. If a reader holds

a concept of meaning of which they find the details of this analysis compelling, then when they practice the human sciences, they will postulate meanings only as properties of individuals.

In Erickson's view, all normative accounts, including mine, exhibit a number of pitfalls. I have a two-pronged response to this view. To begin, I want to suggest any attempt to engage in the human sciences, or to reflect on the nature of the human sciences, necessarily entails, at least implicitly, a normative account of the sort I offer. In so far as the pitfalls to which Erickson refers thus beset all attempts to engage in the human sciences, to point to their appearance in the Logic cannot itself be a criticism. To be effective, the criticism must be that these pitfalls take an especially malign form in the Logic. In addition, therefore, I want to suggest that the Logic exhibits these pitfalls in a benign form.

All works in the human sciences adopt, at least implicitly, logical theories. A study of anything – whether British government or family life in Amazonia – must embody theories about the nature of the objects being studied and the forms of description or explanation appropriate to such objects: if it did not, it could not postulate the very objects it seeks to study, let alone offer an account of these objects. The Logic just makes explicit, and argues for, theories of this sort, that is, theories about the nature of meanings and the forms of explanation and justification appropriate to them. Because Erickson rejects naïve empiricism, he too allows that all works in the human sciences rely on logical theories to construct their objects. The contrast motivating his criticism is one between, on the one hand, explicitly normative works, such as the Logic, which argue for the theories they defend, and, on the other hand, works in the human sciences that embody theories without explicitly advocating them. However, this contrast is spurious. If somebody writes an account of British

government or family life in Amazonia that relies on a particular set of theories, then presumably they believe, at least tacitly, in the adequacy of those theories, in which case intellectual honesty commits them to advocacy of the relevant theories against incompatible alternatives. So, even when logical theories are left implicit within a work, they still have a normative force – they are still theories that are being offered, to the exclusion of rivals, as appropriate to the study of the relevant material.

Erickson suggests that ideal types avoid the pitfalls of normative accounts. In contrast, I think ideal types, like all other work in the human sciences, embody logical theories that have normative force. Erickson sees ideal types as portraying the central rationality of objects. To do so, though, ideal types must rely on theories about both the sorts of objects that exist in the world and the appropriate ways of discussing these objects, and these theories will be normative ones in the way I have described. For example, the leading “ideal type” of British government – the Westminster model – characteristically embodies logical theories that suggest political scientists should study institutions in relation to their “central rationality” rather than as the products of a decentred set of beliefs and actions lacking any such rationality (Bevir and Rhodes, 1999). Erickson also ties ideal types to an interpretive practice he describes as investigating and collating cases without engaging in the legislative practice he takes to characterise normative accounts. Once again, however, this distinction is spurious. Because any interpretive practice must embody logical theories about the nature of the objects being interpreted and the ways in which they can be described, interpretation is legislative: it has systematically to defend its theories in contrast to incompatible ones. So, the postmodern interpretive practice Erickson advocates seeks systematically to oppose, and thus, in his terms, to exclude, not only the sort of legislative projects against which he defines it but also rival theories of interpretation.

Because all work in the human sciences embodies logical theories that have a normative force, to point to pitfalls that beset normative accounts cannot be to criticise them. The criticism must be that the pitfalls are notably pernicious in the case being considered. In fact, though, the pitfalls Erickson highlights take a particularly benign form in the Logic. Erickson worries that normative accounts both exclude people who use different concepts and discourage the emergence of new voices. Of course, like everyone else, I hold beliefs that are incompatible with, and so exclude, alternatives. Nonetheless, my beliefs, as evidenced in my analysis of objectivity in the Logic, allow for, and even encourage, research programmes other than that I advocate. Contrary to what Erickson implies, we can believe in one research agenda without believing incompatible agendas should be excluded or prevented from coming into being. In place of Erickson's spurious distinction between legislators and interpreters, then, I would offer one between those normative theories, whether explicit or implicit, that allow space for diversity and disagreement, and those that do not. Erickson's pitfalls become malignant only in the latter.

Constructing the Past: Intentions and traditions

Once we allow that we construct the past in part through our theories – theories possessing a normative force – we raise questions about the content we should give to these theories. Many recent attempts, both explicit and implicit, to prescribe content to these theories have adopted apparently stark but often logically ill-defined analyses of the subject (Bevir 1999a; Bevir 1999b). Often these analyses point toward a virulent anti-humanism in which the individual is apparently portrayed as a mere dupe of language, discourse, or power/knowledge, lacking any capacity to reflect on, let alone innovate within, the iron constraints of such social contexts. In

the Logic, in contrast, I argue that although individuals are not autonomous – so they necessarily adopt beliefs and perform actions against the background of a tradition or social inheritance that influences them – they are agents who can reflect, consciously, subconsciously, and unconsciously, on the beliefs and practices they inherit and thus deploy and modify them for reasons of their own, that is, for reasons that make sense to them given their existing beliefs.

Although Erickson, Harrington, and Reckwitz all sympathise with something akin to the return to the subject I advocate, they still raise questions about the nature and extent of the space we should ascribe to creative agency. Harrington focuses on my intentionalist theory of meaning. In my view, meanings are intentional, where, as Harrison suggests, my concept of intention differs from that which will immediately spring-to-mind for many people. My concept of intention does not refer to the prior purposes an agent has for doing or saying something, but rather, following Husserl, to the property some objects have of being in or for the mind. So, if a poet sets out, with the prior purpose, of writing a sad poem, but during the act of writing it comes to think of it as joyful, the nature of the intentional meaning of the poem, in or for the mind of its author, will be joyful. Harrington then goes on to suggest, however, that I move too quickly from a general intentionalist thesis – that texts cannot mean anything in themselves without subjects in or for whose mind they mean something – to the specific thesis that the meaning of a text corresponds to the intentions of specific authors.

As I do not want to defend the specific thesis to which Harrington refers, I think my best strategy here is briefly to elucidate the positions I do want to advocate. In the first place, I unpack intentionalism in terms of a procedural individualism that corresponds to Harrington's general thesis. According to procedural individualism,

texts only have meanings for specific individuals, so whenever we say a text means something, we should be prepared in principle to say for whom it does so. Procedural individualism is, I think, well worth insisting on given the extent to which people still are inclined to think and write as if a text had a meaning in itself, or as if conservatism had a core set of principles, or as if languages or social discourses could be conceived of as disembodied entities defined by the relationships between their abstract units. In the second place, I allow, contrary to Harrington's specific thesis, that readers attach original, intentional meanings to texts so the meanings a text might have need not correspond to the intentions of its author. Still, I cannot quite agree with Harrington's way of putting the matter since whereas he appeals to "the meanings of specific texts" as capable of being other than those author's intend, I take the principle of procedural individualism to preclude the idea that texts themselves have meanings as opposed to meanings for people. In the third place, moreover, I argue that even when we want to say a reader attached a meaning to text-X, we can do so only on the basis of a reading of a text-Y authored by that reader in which he or she says how he or she understands text-X; thus, our interest even here will be in the authorial intention associated with text-Y.

Reckwitz appears untroubled by my intentionalism, but he does challenge my analysis of the relationship of an individual's beliefs to his or her social context. In my view, whatever word we use to refer to the social context – discourse, language, scheme, tradition – we should recognise that it only ever influences as opposed to defining, or even limiting, the beliefs individuals come to adopt and so the actions they attempt to perform. Reckwitz, in contrast, suggests that we lose something if we thus give up the idea that "culture is able to exercise a limiting or constraining effect on action".

While there might be a difference between us, I want to emphasise how much of Reckwitz's position fits within the framework of the Logic. For a start, to argue, as I do, that the social context does not constrain beliefs is not to say it does not have a limiting effect on actions. What actions we can perform successfully, as opposed to the beliefs we can hold or the actions we can attempt to perform, generally depends on how others act, so the actions of others, which are part of the social context, clearly can limit those we can succeed in making. In addition, contrary to what Reckwitz implies, I see no reason to unpack the concept of belief as "propositional knowledge", so I am quite happy to include background understandings within my analysis of an individual's beliefs. Consider here Bourdieu's account of the upper class distinction between the nobility of pure form and the contaminated nature of substance. For Bourdieu, this scheme is a system of classification that appears in judgements about all sorts of things, including food, the arts, and fashion. On my account, this scheme is a part of the inter-subjective beliefs of the upper class: typically they make judgements that lead us to ascribe to them as a background belief the distinction elaborated by Bourdieu. We can unpack schemes as inter-subjective, background beliefs in this way, then, without implying that constrain individuals in quite the way Reckwitz, let alone Bourdieu, suggests. Finally, while I defend the capacity of the individual for agency, as I said earlier, I explicitly reject the idea of the individual as autonomous, insisting instead that individuals only ever can come to hold beliefs or perform actions against the background of a social tradition that influences them. Even with respect to beliefs and the actions we can attempt to perform, therefore, I allow that we often gain what Reckwitz calls "heuristic advantages" from appeals to schemes or traditions. Indeed, I suggest that appeals to traditions are integral to adequate explanations of beliefs.

What is at issue here is thus not whether or not we can appeal to concepts such as “tradition”, “scheme”, or “discourse”. Rather, it is what logical content we should ascribe to such concepts. Now, no matter how great the heuristic merits of an appeal to “tradition” or “scheme” as a way of aggregating beliefs, these merits cannot provide a reason to unpack the concepts of “tradition” and “scheme” in a way that vitiates our commitment to the human capacity for agency. In contrast, our use of folk psychology to order our everyday lives gives us a reason to respect the concept of agency that it embodies: after all, while we might want to devise other languages, to accept these other languages we would have to make them compatible with those we already hold true, so as Reckwitz acknowledges, we would have to be able to translate them into folk psychology complete with its concept of agency. Hence, we can certainly go on using terms such as “discourse”, “scheme”, and “tradition”, but we should do so in the knowledge that these are simply aggregate concepts based on the contingent beliefs of individual agents.

Using the Past: Non-epistemic purposes

So far, I have suggested that we inevitably construct the past, and especially our explanations of it, in relation to a normative logic, and I have defended an analysis of this logic consisting of terms such as agency, intention, and tradition. In doing so, I have been operating with the assumption that the role of such a logic is epistemic: that is to say, we should adopt particular concepts and forms of reasoning in the human sciences because they seem to accord with our notion of how best to reach an adequate understanding of the world. Harrington, in contrast, introduces the possibility that we use the past for all sorts of non-epistemic purposes, which are better served by a range of different logics. He thereby suggests that no matter how adequate the Logic might

be as an account of the forms of reasoning we should adopt if our interest in the past is epistemic, it fails to cover all ways we might approach the past if we seek instead, say, aesthetic edification.

Although we undoubtedly draw on relics from the past for a diverse range of purposes, I want to argue that all these purposes embody an epistemic aspect that needs to be unpacked in relation to the Logic. To make this argument, I want to start by offering a generic version of the sorts of uses of the past to which Harrington draws our attention. I take it that any such use of the past would entail a claim of the form: “we can construct the past as X in order to serve purpose Y”. So, to go through some of the examples Harrington briefly mentions: the Nietzschean case can be unpacked as, “we can authentically appropriate the past as X to serve the life of the self”: that of Barthes makes the claim, “we can open ourselves to the past as X to be aesthetically edified by the play of language in texts”; and that of Gadamer unravels as, “we can listen to history as X in order to gain existential insight”. In all such cases the view taken of the past is at best indirectly connected with what we might call the epistemic concern of the historian, that is, to have the best knowledge we can of the past as it was. One response to Harrington is thus to say that if people are not interested in trying to understand the past as it was, they are not doing history but something else, and all that is needed is for them and us to be clear about this difference. In addition to this response, however, I want to say something about how what they are doing would have to relate to whatever logical theories we take to be appropriate to history.

Harrington’s concern is with uses of the past that have no direct link to the epistemic concern of the historian. Nonetheless, the generic claim “we can construct the past as X in order to serve purpose Y” still entails the epistemic claims, first, that understanding the past as X really will serve purpose Y, and, second, that Y is a valid

purpose. So, the Nietzschean case makes the epistemic claims that appropriating the past as X serves the life of the self and that the life of the self is a reasonable purpose, while the Barthean case likewise has built into it the epistemic claims that listening to the past as X is aesthetically edifying and that aesthetic edification is a purpose. Now, while these epistemic claims might not be historical, they still have to be made to fit with whatever logical theories we take to govern historical concerns. For example, the Nietzschean case surely can make epistemic claims about an interpretation of the past serving the life of the self only in the context of logical theories about the self, where these theories clearly would have to coincide with the logical theories about the self – intentionality, agency, and the like – with which we construct the past. Again, the Barthean case can make epistemic claims about interpretations of texts being aesthetically edifying only in the context of logical theories about textual meaning, where these theories clearly would have to coincide with the logical theories about meaning with which we construct the past. In general, because all uses of the past have an epistemic aspect, they all fall under those aspects of the Logic that address the relevant epistemic issues. In this sense at least, the epistemic realm covered by the Logic is one that covers, or at least has implications for, all our uses of the past.

Conclusion

In replying to Erickson, Harrington, and Reckwitz, I have raised three main points about how we construct and use the past. First, a rejection of naïve empiricism implies that we necessarily construct the past in part using our theories, where these theories always have, at least implicitly, a normative force. All work in the human sciences thus presupposes some sort of engagement with the issues explored in the Logic. Second, the logical theories we deploy to construct the past ought to allow for

agency in that they should not postulate social contexts as defining or limiting the beliefs or weak intentions an individual expresses in an utterance or action. We should construct the past in accord with concepts, such as tradition and dilemma, which suggest that while individuals are always socially embedded, they are still capable of creative innovation and local reasoning. Finally, while we can construct the past to serve any number of purposes, these purposes always have epistemic content, albeit that this content is not always historical.

I am immensely reassured that Erickson, Harrington, and Reckwitz have brought these particular issues to the fore. My expectation was, in today's intellectual climate, that the Logic would be pitted against, on the one hand, naïve empiricists who did not recognise the ineluctable role we investigators play in both constructing and using the past, and, on the other, structuralists, post-structuralists, and other quasi-structuralists anxious to avoid ascribing agency as well as autonomy to individuals. To have found interlocutors who avoid both these positions is a delight. I can only hope that the Logic continues to bring together people interested in debating just how we might flesh out the details of a post-empiricist humanism.

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